

EXPERIENCE—CAROLE POWELL-HENRY, SILVER SPRING, MD. A LAST LESSON IN COMPASSION

This is a story about my mother, Lillie E. Smith, and her only child—me.

Although we never had a bad relationship, there seemed to be little interaction between my mother and me. I had been very close to my father for all my years growing up. Meanwhile, my mother always had her sisters and nieces around her, and everyone was happy with that. But later, after years of Buddhist practice—and after I had my own daughter, Tiffany—I understood that I needed a closer relationship with my mother.

I started to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in New York in 1973. In 1976, I chose to live on the small island of Antigua in the West Indies, where I stayed for 25 years. I had the wonderful fortune to start a British Model Primary School there with an Englishwoman who became a great mentor to me. The school was a joy to attend every day for 10 years.

Before 1995, when Hurricane Louis ripped through Antigua and destroyed many homes, including my own, I made a point of visiting my mother twice a year in Maryland. After that, because I was busy rebuilding, I sent Tiffany to live with her for a time. Tiffany repeatedly told me, "Mommy, you'd better go and see Granny, because she is not acting like herself." But each week when I phoned my mother, my aunt, who lived with her, said that everything was fine. Then, in June 1999, my cousin wrote me a disturbing letter about her mental health.

I decided to find out for myself how my mother was doing, so Tiffany and I packed our bags. It was also time to enter Tiffany in a U.S. high school. She had already completed secondary school under the British system in Antigua, but would need to graduate from a U.S. high school in order to attend college in the States. When we arrived in New York in August, we first got Tiffany into a drama magnet high school. Tiffany and I were feeling really excited and happy. I absolutely trusted my practice to the Gohonzon, and was praying deeply for Tiffany's protection in such a big place like New York.

I traveled on to Maryland, where I had grown up, to see my mother. It was immediately clear to me that she was not her usual, confident self, busy and ordering everyone around. She kept telling me that she was "not crazy," which made me aware that she was concerned about her condition but unsure what to do.

I chanted to the Gohonzon I had brought with me, sometimes as much as five hours a day. I postponed my return to Antigua and my school's opening. I stayed in Maryland through October, taking my mother for many tests and medical appointments. At the end of October, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Doctors gave her only one year to live.

I didn't know what to do. I prayed for the best situation for both my mother and for me. After many hours of chanting and studying *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, and writing and calling members for encouragement and guidance, I decided to take my mother home to Antigua. Since I had spent so much time living far away from her, I determined now to devote myself to caring for my mother. It was then that I remembered what I had written on my list of determinations three years earlier: to have a better relationship with my mother in this lifetime.

Now it was early in November 1999. My family insisted that my mother would never move so far away to the Caribbean. I asked her doctors if it would be OK for her to make

the trip, and they said that the climate would be the best thing possible for her — after all, there was nothing to be done medically. In Antigua, there is a very caring, reverent attitude toward the elderly, and I knew my mother would be treated well.

During the move, I existed solely on daimoku and my study of the Daishonin's writings. I wrote to SGI President Ikeda, who responded that I should take care of my mother, no matter what.

My mother, now in the late stages of Alzheimer's, was never even aware that she'd been on an airplane. When I told her that we were at my home in Antigua, she replied, "Way over there, no." I arranged to keep my mother at home and hired three wonderful ladies to take care of her in shifts. She was comfortable, content and happy. After her second week there, she no longer needed any allergy medication, a problem she had suffered from her whole life. We also found Dr. Frazer, who was qualified in geriatric medicine and came to examine my mother twice a week. Dr. Frazer explained in detail the stages of my mother's illness. It prepared me for what was to come.

Taking care of a parent with Alzheimer's can be an extremely difficult and painful experience. I did not sleep more than a few hours a night for months because of Sundowners Syndrome, which causes a patient to talk and yell through the night. I would sit in front of my altar, often late into the night, not always able to chant. And I still had to go to school every day and teach. In her more lucid moments, however, my mother would say things like, "Girlie, I don't know what I'd do without you." And she'd hug me and say "I love you" almost daily. She had not said that very often in my childhood.

Tiffany was wonderful. I brought her home five times during the school year, an expensive undertaking, but I needed her. She and I talked about the fact that we would not have Granny with us much longer, and Tiffany wanted as much time with her as possible, as they had been very close.

I continued to chant for my mother to enjoy her life to the end and for me to be able to bring her back to her own home before she died, so that she could have a big funeral at her church. This was important to her.

My mother chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo on several occasions during our time in Antigua. She would sit next to me and say it a few times and move on. I was the chapter women's leader, and when we had meetings at my house she would say, "Girlie, you had a lot of people tonight," or "Girlie, are they coming tonight?" (meaning members). She enjoyed sitting on the couch during meetings.

It was my deepest prayer to never be defeated by my mother's disease and to remain with her for what was left of her life. Tiffany and I brought her back to Maryland on Aug. 17, 2000. Three weeks later, she died in her own bed, without suffering, and with my aunt and me sitting on her bed. She was 82 years old.

This experience has been actual proof to me of the power of this Buddhist practice. Recently, I have been living in Maryland and practicing where I grew up near Washington, D.C. Sometimes as I took care of my mother, I wondered why I was going through such hardship. Recently, in D.C. and again during a visit to the Florida Nature and Culture Center last May, I met and talked with three women who were going through the same situation. I was so grateful to be able to share my experience and the guidance I received, with the hope of benefiting others going through similar difficulties. As I spoke, I experienced an even deeper appreciation for my mother's last lesson for me.