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The Story of Empowerment

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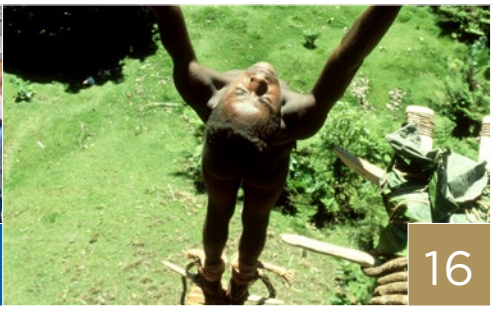

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SGI Quarterly
A Buddhist Forum for Peace, Culture and Education

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The Story of Empowerment

Girls perform a dance from the South African hit production *Sarafina!*, which is about the 1976 Soweto school uprising, in Soshanguve Township; the children are part of a program run by the Leseding Support Centre, which provides services to orphans and others in the community

Photo credit: © Eric Miller/Panos Pictures/Uniphoto Press

Empowerment is a concept that is central to the vision of the *SGI Quarterly*. That is to say, it is the intention of the editorial team for each issue to, in some small way, inspire hope in readers that the challenges we confront as a global society can be overcome and, at the same time, help encourage or invigorate individual action toward that end. The idea of an issue that focused specifically on empowerment therefore seemed a natural choice.

What quickly becomes apparent when one begins to examine the idea of empowerment is how ubiquitous the term is. As one contributor notes, empowerment has come to mean anything that is done with the intention of helping others. This vagueness can make it difficult to gauge the real effects of efforts to empower individuals or communities. Having a clearer idea of what constitutes empowerment enables those seeking to empower others to be more effective.

Empowerment is more than help and good intentions or feeling positive. It includes these elements, but goes beyond them and, in broadest terms, could be described as an internal or psychological shift that results in an actual positive change in one's circumstances.

Moving away from the definition of empowerment, what one observes is that empowerment seems to beget empowerment; when people become empowered, they open the path of empowerment for others. The writings of Nichiren, the founder of the school of Buddhism practiced by members of the SGI, contain a useful analogy in this regard: "The situation is like the joints in a piece of bamboo: if one joint is ruptured, then all the joints will split." Another characteristic of empowerment, along the same lines, is that it is deeply inspiring. The knowledge of someone breaking through obstacles and unfolding new aspects of their potential creates a deep resonance in the human spirit, in the lives of others. For this reason, narratives of empowerment are vital for our world. They help catalyze the chain reaction of empowerment that needs so urgently to be accelerated.

It is in that sense, then, that we hope you will find this issue of the *SGI Quarterly*, and all others, both inspiring and empowering. ❖

The Meaning of Empowerment and How to Facilitate It

By Lauren Bennett Cattaneo

Community worker assisting Arab-American women in New York; empowerment programs need to proceed from the needs and priorities of the communities they serve

Lauren Bennett Cattaneo is associate professor and director of clinical training at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Her research focuses on empowerment theory, the interactions between victims of intimate partner violence and the systems designed to help them and service learning as a mechanism for social change.

Efforts that are aimed at empowering others must rest on a clear understanding of what empowerment means, argues Lauren Bennett Cattaneo.

In my work in the area of intimate partner violence, I consult with law students who are representing victims in court for the first time. The students are smart, resourceful and energetic, and want very much to help their clients. They sometimes say, as do many organizations that work on behalf of this high-need population, that they aim to empower their clients.

I would like to make the case that they cannot do so. In fact, none of us can empower the clients, communities or loved ones we wish to benefit. What we can do is facilitate the process of empowerment in which people are already engaged. In some ways, this point is a matter of semantics. These law students in my example are doing good and helpful work—does it matter what we call it?

I believe that it does matter. Empowerment, in its truest sense, connects to social justice. It has the potential to be a profound and lasting change that goes beyond many forms of help, even when that help is necessary and effective. Empowerment is something more.

The Elusive Meaning of Empowerment

Empowerment is a compelling concept. It resonates with values of justice, self-determination and focusing on people's strengths rather than their deficits. Consequently, the term is ubiquitous across contexts. It is both appealing to think of one's work as empowering others and to think of oneself as empowered.

However, an Internet search quickly reveals how the attractiveness of this concept has muddied its meaning. In essence, empowerment has come to mean almost everything that is done with the intention of helping a person or community. In the area of intimate partner violence, I became frustrated with the lack of clarity of the term, which prevented clear research and evaluation

Photo credit: © Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

and provided little to guide practice: If those wishing to promote empowerment do not have consensus about what it is, how can we develop an understanding of best practices and share information? As I reviewed the foundational work on the topic, I discovered that this is a problem that extends far beyond my field. I developed a model that I hoped would help set the stage for clear and consistent use of the term across contexts.

The Empowerment Process Model

The model I developed and refined with colleagues defines empowerment as "a process in which a person or a group: sets intrinsically meaningful goals related to power; takes action toward those goals; and reflects on the impact of those actions, drawing on their community resources, self-efficacy, skills and knowledge."

Three key points emerge from this model:

1. Empowerment is about power, and therefore it is both psychological and social.

People have long understood that power is not a thing a person possesses privately; it is enacted socially. It is the ability to influence others, to be heard by others, to pursue one's own goals with the help of or despite others or to resist the demands of others. Empowerment, therefore, as a shift in power, requires something from the social world. If no one else knows about it, it is not empowerment.

At the same time, the ability to influence, be heard, pursue goals or resist social pressure has profound psychological impact. Therefore, empowerment is a bridge between the psychological and the social; it is a shift in both places.

The law students, for example, may work themselves to the bone advocating for their client, and their client may feel really good about that work; when the client enters the courtroom for her hearing, she may feel confident—she may even feel powerful. However, if those feelings do not translate into a shift in her social world—if the judge does not listen, if the abusive partner does not listen—these feelings will be short-lived, and the result may actually be disempowerment.

2. Empowerment is in service of goals that are intrinsically meaningful.

If it is to serve those who lack power, rather than perpetuating the existing power structure, empowerment must be consistent with the priorities and values of marginalized people.

Interventions that miss the mark in this vein are often well-intentioned. Service providers or activists genuinely believe they know what their clients or communities need. They may be right, but the Empowerment Process Model urges us to be sure. This aspect of the model suggests that we need to develop an insider's view of the priorities and values of those we mean to help, and we need to be responsive to those priorities whether or not it is convenient or fits within the culture of our particular professional vantage point.

For the law students, this point requires them to consider their clients' priorities that do not fit within the legal system's understanding of their problem and what it would mean to solve it. Research has shown that for many trauma survivors, involvement in the legal system is a way to gain leverage in their relationships; this leverage may or may not require actually going all the way through with the legal process as the system has set it up. Policies exist in many US states, however, that require the victim to stick with the legal process all the way through regardless of her priorities. Such policies have the potential to be disempowering.

3. Empowerment is a process.

As a faculty member in a clinical psychology doctoral program, I work with students learning to help people who are in significant distress. Like the law students, in their genuine zeal to help, they often mistake their chapter in their client's life as the beginning of the story—as in "I'm here. Let's get started!" In fact, the best starting place as a helper is understanding the larger picture of that client's story and then exploring the best way to facilitate her movement toward her own goals.

Empowerment is a process with fits and starts; failure to reach one's goals precipitates new thinking about those goals, new understanding of the limits one faces and new efforts to gain resources. This complex, many-chaptered process is the reason empowerment is not something that can be given as a gift. However, it can be facilitated or hindered in powerful ways. The better we understand where our clients or communities are coming from, and how they have struggled to reach their own goals before we entered the story, the more powerfully we will be able to play a positive role.

"Empowerment is a bridge between the psychological and the social; it is a shift in both places."

Facilitating Empowerment

Consistent with the multiple pieces of the process of empowerment (defining goals, taking action, considering impact, developing self-efficacy, skill, knowledge and community resources), it is possible to facilitate or hinder empowerment in many ways. In order to do work that facilitates empowerment, it is not necessary to target the entire process. It is necessary, however, to locate work within that broader context: How does the work facilitate both social and psychological change? How does it relate to goals that are intrinsically meaningful for clients or communities? How does it relate to the larger story of clients' or communities' journeys?

While this broader notion of the process of empowerment complicates the way we talk about work with vulnerable people and communities, it also has the potential to link good and effective short-term work with profound and lasting change that goes beyond the level of individual lives to the social structures that frame them. ❖

Desire: Awakening to Possibility

By Paolo Mecacci

Paolo Mecacci describes the importance of desires and social ties for living in the real world with a sense of the possible.

Some time ago, while analyzing data for the development of a social empowerment program related to young people and employment, I discovered what was for me a new social category: NEET. This stands for Not in Employment, Education or Training; in other words, people—particularly youth—who do not have a job, are not studying and are not in any kind of training or job seekers scheme. According to Eurostat and surveys by Youth Forum and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, this phenomenon is growing at a worrying rate in Europe and is considered to be a critical indicator of contemporary social, economic and cultural change.

In this article, I will approach empowerment through the back door; namely, by looking at non-empowerment.

The Gestation of Impossibility

In the 1970s, Professor Martin Seligman carried out research focused on what has been defined as the process of "acquired impotence": long-term exposure to critical circumstances in which people feel at a "dead end" and, therefore, "impotent." This increasing sense of uselessness blocks the will to mitigate or resolve difficult situations and leads people into a gradual abandonment of "a sense of the possible." This soon transforms into apathy, withdrawal, inactivity and a belief that events are out of their control. In effect, they abandon their sense of personal power and, therefore, also their own fundamental self-worth. If this happens at an individual level, as in the case of NEETs, there will certainly be repercussions in society.

Professor Ugo Morelli has described the influence of cultural processes to which the collective consciousness quickly adapts, creating what he called "passive conformity." This term describes the process whereby feelings of impotence and anxiety caused by uncertainty lead to an acceptance of unfavorable situations. For this reason, it is always easier to limit and contain desires and expectations in order to avoid disappointment, failure and frustration. Gradually, the ability to "desire"—to create and control one's own future—dissolves and is extinguished in a blackout of hope.

It is in the "womb" of this mindset that feelings

Paolo Mecacci is the founder of SocialEmpower (*www.socialempower.it*) and a member of SGI-Italy.

of impossibility take shape, feelings which freeze those essential human traits of spontaneity and creativity. These traits are the embryos of the human imagination, enabling one to make coherent choices in order to attain an objective and turn a desire into reality. Poetically, we might say that hearts which stop dreaming of the future go out like a light.

In considering the linkages between these problems and macro issues such as the economy and structural processes in contemporary society, we must remember that human beings are the creators and primary components of these processes, and therefore the transformation of these problems cannot occur apart from a transformation in the human heart.

The well-known anthropologist Arjun Appadurai recognized that a significant cause of the current unease of society was the fragility of the social fabric in "communities with weak social ties"—a distinguishing feature of postindustrial societies which place emphasis on individualism—and a pervasive sense of disintegration. Professor Appadurai, however, encourages us not to let ourselves be crushed by the weight of these situations and by the sense of impotence they cause, but to foster what he calls "the ability to aspire"—to cultivate desires and the vision to make them reality.

SocialÉmpower is an association in the field of psychosocial studies, founded in Italy in 2014. The association develops programs for individual growth and social change, and creates programs to stimulate empowerment through counseling approaches and the "Action Method," using techniques of psychodrama and socio-dramatic play. This work is carried out within both public and private organizations as well as in small informal groups and with individuals using methods typical of relationship counseling. The users are people of all ages who are facing deadlock in their lives, including young NEETs.

Using techniques such as psychodrama, people can tell their own personal or collective story, which is brought to life with the guidance of a director. They can explore unusual, unexpected or until then only dreamed-of scenarios. For example, a young unemployed person who has no hope of finding a job, or who is unaware of his own talents and aspirations, by working through his own life experiences on stage and sharing them with others, may discover that his problem is actually a condition of contemporary society shared by many others. He can also build on insights learned from the spontaneity and creativity of experimenting in "new roles" and thus feel able to open new doors for his own future, a future full of possibilities and connections with the world around him.

People Desire What They Can Imagine

According to research into the idea of empowerment, in order to activate this process, a person must go to the root of their desires, that is, to the primary elements of hidden or forgotten potential within themselves.

To begin this process, a strengthened ability to imagine desired situations is needed, enabling the person to begin to connect these desires coherently and concretely to the reality in which he or she lives.

Therefore, desire—the first step toward empowerment—needs to be given form, a concrete representation that can be shared with others in order for it to produce a change. Along with this, there needs to be a recognition of belonging to something larger, be it a family, a clan, a community or a society. Human beings can only live if they perceive themselves integrated into the warp and weft of the social fabric. For this reason, the capacity to create relationships and significant ties with others needs to be supported.

The process of empowerment leads to a profound transformation of consciousness, allowing the uncertain and impotent perception of the self, of "myself, alone and isolated," to mature into wisdom to perceive the degrees of interrelationship and interconnection which join people together.

It is this perception, what we might think of as a kind of fertile humus of sociality, which enables us to realize that we do have the power to make decisions and transform reality. People who work hard to realize their own and others' happiness build something that we might define as a new sense of "we," creating informal networks with others that allow them to live in the real world with a sense of possibility.

Empowerment manifests itself where people express trust, belonging, spontaneity and creativity. It is here that individual desires interact, and each person can give expression to his or her own self-worth. Empowerment is simultaneously an individual and a collective process. Empowerment links both micro and macro social systems, giving people an essential sense of belonging, personal choice and self-worth. Perhaps it is best expressed in poetic form:

Empowerment is like a marvelous sculpture
to be found within a rough block of marble.
The eye (and the genius) of a visionary artist
perceives its existence.
With his chisel, his sweat and rhythmic
blows, he uncovers it.
When the work has emerged, all can see,
admire and desire. ❖

"I Am Master of My Mind"

An interview with Sabra Williams

Sabra Williams, a member of the SGI, is the director of the Actors' Gang Prison Project. Launched in 2006, the project employs highly physical theatrical techniques based on the emotive 16th-century Italian "people's theater" culture of commedia dell'arte. The work has proved transformative for inmates of the California prison system and has significantly reduced recidivism rates.

SGI Quarterly: Please describe how you came to this work.
Sabra Williams: I was with the English Shakespeare Company, and we had a program where we would bring Shakespeare's plays into prisons and do workshops with the inmates. I was really amazed by the power of the arts to transform.

When I moved to Los Angeles 12 years ago, I encountered the theater company, the Actors' Gang. Actor and director Tim Robbins is the artistic director. Experiencing the work, which was so physical and emotional, I thought it would be really good for rehabilitation. I told Tim I wanted to be part of their community outreach into prisons (I just assumed they had one). "We don't have one," he said. "Go ahead and start one."

I had no idea how to do this, or about the prison system in the US, which has a much higher gun-related crime rate than the UK, and in California, in particular, there are major gang issues. It took a year to set up.

I asked three people to come with me, and with a rudimentary plan, we went into the prison. The first day was incredible. I remember being mind-blown by the transformation in the guys.

Then the recession happened, so all arts programs were taken out of prisons in California, including the facilitators who enabled us to work in the prisons. But I was so determined. We carried on for four years with no state funding. Because there were no other programs but ours at that time, it was like a petri dish—the only thing that could be making the changes we were seeing in the culture of the prison was our work!

SGIQ: How does the program empower people?
SW: In prison, people believe they have to be numb in order to survive. The only culturally acceptable emotion is anger. They have numbed themselves from other emotions. This affects not just them but their families and friends and the staff.

In this work, they start with a guided

Photo credit: © Peter Merts

Participants of the Actors' Gang Prison Project

relaxation and then play theater games. Then they get "suited up" into the commedia dell'arte stock characters—they wear masks of makeup. They are then able to sieve their lives and issues through these characters. They might play the old miser Pantalone, the young lover or even women. And they play them in this highly emotional state—so all of these emotions that have been dormant for sometimes 20, 30, 40 years, they are now able to express them through the filter of a character. So they are the happiest person in the world, the saddest person, the most scared person in the world, or the angriest person in the world, in a safe environment.

We have no fourth wall, so they have to look directly in someone else's eyes in a highly emotional state. That in itself is a revolutionary act. In prison, if you look directly at someone else like that, especially someone from a different gang or a different race, you can be killed.

They are in a room with a bunch of people from other gangs, other cultures, other races, and doing this ensemble-building work together. Over time, you see the changes.

We do 8- and 10-week sessions. At first, people often join in for fun or to pass time. Then comes week three. I call this the drop-off week, as their emotional stuff starts coming up. The work starts holding a mirror up to them. They have to write a journal every day to track their progress. Emotional stuff starts to come up and they start saying, "I'm sick" or "I'm really busy," "I can't make it."

The other guys are the ones who say, "You need to come" and "You're a valuable part of the group." The empowerment starts. This work makes them visible. It takes a lot of courage. It starts to give them back their power. Many of them say it is the first time they have felt like a human being again. I don't allow them to say they made mistakes; they have to say they made choices. It's all about taking responsibility for themselves. It's terrifying for them, but it gives them back their power.

In the relaxation exercise, I use the affirmation, "I am master of my mind, not the victim of my thinking." That is the title of this work. They have to use "I" statements, all these things that reflect themselves back to themselves.

They start to understand their own potential, the effect they have on the world—that they have an effect. It can be positive or negative, it's entirely up to them. They can't blame, they can't defer responsibility. It's like a double-edged sword—the empowerment is exciting and amazing and also terrifying. They start to have empathy for others, including the staff. There are less violent infractions and there is lower recidivism.

In the last week, we always do a final presentation, like an open workshop, not a show. We open the doors. They invite other inmates to come and see, which is a major, major thing for them to do. We invite staff, politicians, funders. That is their culmination.

A year ago, we were invited to Washington DC to meet US Attorney General Eric Holder. He is trying to change the prison system. Recently, he traveled to California to see the program for himself. Our program has become a model program in the country for rehabilitation.

> I began to think about myself. I have had a life-changing experience. I may be a broken vessel but I'm not destroyed. I understand the light within me. Some of my afflictions are cured. I like when I am a Master of my Mind not a Victim of my Thinking. I want to change and do good.
> **—Class participant**

SGIQ: These people are learning that they are empowered, but they are locked up. How does this affect their lives in prison?

SW: Some of the guys we work with are very violent. The only response to difficulty they know is violence. We work with these four emotional states: happy, sad, angry, afraid. Science has recently shown that everything boils down to these four—what commedia dell'arte has known for 600 years.

Photo credit: © Peter Merts

> As I am listening I feel that I have grown and matured. For a long time I was hiding from me and now I feel like I can look at myself and love who I am. I was so selfish not sharing myself with others. This class has done so much for me. I can't even express how I feel. I want to cry. I feel like I can be the real me in here. I was lost. Now I am found and I can see.
>
> **—Class participant**

What they learn through practice in the class is that you have a choice of four states, not just one. You might not have a choice over what happens, but you do have a choice over how you respond. You are the person that decides. You are not a victim of circumstance.

Often they will say to us, "This guy got up in my face today in the yard. Before, I would have punched him or stabbed him. I looked at the guy and I saw Pantalone or one of the other characters, and I started laughing at him and how ridiculous the situation was. And the guy was completely shocked and walked away, and later I saw him in the yard and he said hello."

It's especially noticeable, too, with family and friends. The wife will say, "For the first time he has become a husband," or they will say, "It's the first time I feel I have become a parent"; "I can play with my children for the first time."

These guys join gangs at age nine—they've never had a childhood, and suddenly they are playing like children. It's incredible to see, really beautiful.

Tim and I always say that we get the most joy in our lives from being in prison. And what's great is that we are doing the work on ourselves, too—we are transformed by doing it. I certainly have become empowered as a woman, as an actor and as an activist through doing this work. It has profoundly changed my life.

They always say by the end of the session, "The guys in this group are my brothers." The change is so profound and so fast. What I've learned is that humans really do want to change, humans want to live valuable lives. They just don't think it's an option most of the time. When you give people a viable option, they take it. ❖

War victims turned peacebuilders

Goran Bubalo from Bosnia and Herzegovina describes an effort to empower people to heal the scars of war.

War in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) ended almost 20 years ago, but without resolution, without true peace. Three parties waging war fought for almost four years without winners, where everybody lost something or everything. It cost 100,000 lives, 60 percent of the population was displaced, around 200,000 people experienced various kinds of imprisonment, and up to 50,000 women were raped. Today, we can't agree if it was aggression, civil war or something else, and we struggle to find a way toward a shared future.

Ethnic divisions are once again placing BiH precariously on the edge of renewed violent conflict. Underlying these divisions is an array of intense grievances held by the large numbers of people who continue to experience the negative effects of the previous ethnic conflict. These grievances shape the views of ethnic relations in BiH, and because many hold other ethnic groups responsible for their experiences, they are opposed to reconciliation. Furthermore, the generation directly affected by the war is passing on its grievances and prejudices to its children, fueling radicalism and lodging intractable ethnic divisions deeper into BiH society.

The project "Choosing Peace Together" was implemented by Catholic Relief Services

Photo credit: © Peter Merts

Choosing Peace Together

By Goran Bubalo

in partnership with the Caritas of the Bishops' Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the period from January 2010 to April 2014. By working with members of victims associations, the project aimed to reach a group of people already self-identified as being more strongly affected by the war than the general population, and who have not managed to find closure on their own. A particular focus was placed on youth because the second generation often feels the weight of responsibility for the suffering of their parents and may for this reason be even more opposed to reconciliation efforts.

Through our activities, we focused on supporting those who suffered the most, including war-camp prisoners, families of missing people, women victims of the war, people with post-traumatic stress disorder and civilian war victims.

At initial gatherings aimed at bringing individuals from different groups together, people refused to mix and sat drinking coffee at separate tables. And this is easy to understand. How do you make peace with war in mind; how do you reconcile with enemies before doing so with yourself? Imagine returning to your town after losing half of your family, having survived life in a concentration camp, only to see people who committed crimes walking free on the streets, meeting them daily and not being able to deal with it.

Eventually, however, people began to realize that they share something profound in common: they are all victims of war and are struggling with similar problems, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Through the stories of trauma, they came to realize that at a certain level they are the same: they have experienced trauma; they are all victims; they have the same problems; and it is necessary to create a positive climate in which to solve their problems.

They realized that they can be much more effective in addressing their problems if they join together, and that they can help each other regardless of where they are from. Through the project, they began to realize: This is our task; we have to reach out to one another.

Through seminars and group sessions, participants came to see each other as individuals and realized how, as individuals, each of them had the ability to influence the group positively: "Ever since I began participating in these workshops, my life has changed. I began to function and I am no longer this Smurf, hating everyone. Now, I am much closer to extending a reconciliatory hand than I was when I first joined."

> Above all, they spoke a language of hope, trust, power and compassion.

Once they were enabled to see each other as "people," not merely as "others," the challenge became how to send this message to society at large, how to connect them with ordinary people and help make peace.

We organized public speaking events where participants were able to share their experiences of the horrors of war but, most importantly, of what they are doing today to build peace. They have spoken to various audiences—students, government officials, other war victims, ordinary citizens. Prior to listening to the stories of these war victims, many of these people were not willing to lend an ear to the sufferings of other ethnic groups.

Although survivors spoke in three similar but different languages—Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian—they all spoke with one voice. Above all, they spoke a language of hope, trust, power and compassion—a language of the heart and soul. They spoke in a voice of people who have gone through suffering, but who carry the message of truth and peace, a message for future generations. This is the voice of peace.

And it worked. Through 100 speaking events, they reached tens of thousands of people throughout the country, encouraging reflection and opening up new fields of dialogue. When you forgive, you will not change the past, but you will change the future. And a better future is all we have to hope and work for. ❖

Goran Bubalo, survivor of the 1992–95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and activist at the Network for Building Peace (*www.mreza-mira.net*), served as project director of the "Choosing Peace Together" project. He was also involved in the production of *My Story*, a documentary about war victims. Visit *www.moja-prica.org/film.html*.

A Ghanaian girl does her homework on a blackboard painted on the wall of her house while her older sister looks on

Pathways of Women's Empowerment

By Andrea Cornwall

Andrea Cornwall describes an international research project to uncover the dynamics of women's empowerment.

Andrea Cornwall is professor of anthropology and international development at the University of Sussex, where she is head of the School of Global Studies. She is director of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment program, which began in 2006. For more information, visit *www.pathwaysofempowerment.org*

What works to support women's empowerment? An eight-year international collaborative research program, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, sought to answer this question. Taking a multidisciplinary approach combining survey research, qualitative interviewing, life history, ethnography, filmmaking and creative writing, Pathways went beyond development's "motorways"—conventional women's empowerment initiatives, such as microenterprise and political quotas—to explore the "hidden pathways" that can be enormously powerful in changing women's lives but that often lie out of the view of development agencies. Researchers from five continents came together to conduct research and analysis aimed at gaining a better understanding of women's own strategies to negotiate the constraints of their everyday lives and empower themselves.

Regional hubs in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia and West Africa convened academics, activists, artists and policy practitioners; a global hub focused on international policy discourse and policy actors working to champion gender equality in international organizations and policy spaces. Multisite thematic working groups brought together researchers from around the world to address emerging areas of cross-regional synergy around the themes of "Building Constituencies for Equality and Justice," "Empowering Work" and "Changing Narratives of Sexuality."

Underpinning these themes was a seam of analysis and conceptualization of empowerment as being about changing power relations in favor of greater justice and equality for all. One dimension of our work sought to understand the impact of broader social, political and economic changes on women's lives. Surveys in Ghana and Egypt, for example, situated women's paid work in relation to other dynamics in the labor market, identifying changes in the implications of pathways of empowerment offered by education in a changing labor market in Ghana—where for younger women, education is no longer the pathway of empowerment that it was for their mothers and grandmothers—and that of the decline in public sector employment for women in Egypt. Together, these studies demonstrated the importance of women's access to regular, independent sources of income. Other studies mapped changes wrought by changing political and social orders as countries previously under military rule and dictatorship came under democratic governance.

A second dimension of Pathways' work was investigating policies and programs that were specifically targeting women's empowerment or otherwise concerned with women and gender equality. Empirical work addressed issues of body, voice and work, often in combination. One example was research on Brazil's groundbreaking domestic violence legislation, Lei Maria da Penha. This focused on the investigations of a feminist observatory that gathers evidence of the successes and failures of implementation, feeding these into efforts at national, regional and local government levels to ensure the application of the law.

A third dimension for Pathways was to understand those sources of empowerment and disempowerment in women's lives that may pass below the gaze of international development agencies, governments and NGOs. Much of our research on sexuality fell into this category, and much of this work focused on the domain of culture. Sexuality is often represented in

development as a source of hazard and harm, rather than of pleasure and intimacy. Our work on sexuality sought to break with this limiting thinking, exploring the positive and political power of pleasure. A study of the negative representations of women's sexuality in Ghanaian popular music sought to engage popular artistes in changing narratives of sexuality, while another study of the television-watching habits of women in a Dhaka slum revealed dimensions of agency and desire that might well remain utterly hidden to those seeking to "empower" women like these.

Reflecting on the priorities and blind spots of international development institutions was in itself an objective. Rather than adopt a common assumption that policy makers needed potted versions of our findings in order to be activated into action, we realized that another "hidden pathway" lay in the transformational effects of reflective practice itself. A project that enlisted feminist bureaucrats from a range of international organizations in a series of reflective workshops as they sought to grapple with the dilemmas they faced in support of women's empowerment and gender equality shed light on some of the challenges that are often hidden from activists and advocates.

Labor Day parade in New York City

pathways into political power and press politicians for accountability, including for their international commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action or other such agreements. And it seeks to fill the public sphere with alternative representations of women and narratives on gender relations that place into question the stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination against women.

support for women's organizing or education and training, then it can make a difference.

In many of these cases, local or national NGOs and feminist bureaucrats working from within the state played a role, supporting women's empowerment with tools for thought and action. Their support enabled women to see their lives differently and to give themselves permission to dream, building critical consciousness and collective strength.

In one case, for example, a development NGO helped a domestic workers' association acquire a small house to use as a meeting space, and this was the catalyst that spurred a wave of organizing that led to further changes. In another case, a feminist organization worked with women agricultural workers to analyze how they understood what it meant to be a woman, producing ripple effects in many areas of their lives, from their working lives to their relationships at home. And at times, it took the shape of conscious policy design informed by feminist principles, and a proactive approach to policy implementation that placed women and their needs and desires at the center.

There are lessons from this work that have broader implications for development.

> Empowerment is something that people do for themselves, not something that can be induced by others.

What Makes a Change?

Our most striking finding was that across the board, whether in the arena of the economy, politics or women's intimate lives, the biggest contributing factor to women's empowerment was women's rights activism. This activism takes the shape of mobilizing informal sector workers to recognize that they have the "right to have rights" and to press their demands for better, safer, more rights-respecting labor conditions. It takes the shape of campaigns to press governments to put in place and improve implementation of domestic violence legislation to protect women's rights to a life free of violence. It consists of feminist and women's movement-organizing to generate a platform for women's rights, pursue

Perhaps the most important lesson of all for those who want to support women's empowerment is one that feminists have long recognized: empowerment is something that people do for themselves, not something that can be induced by others. Empowerment is a journey, one that may involve moments of doubt and difficulty, where things may become worse before they become better. One person's experience may be very different from that of another. There are no simple one-size-fits-all solutions. But what we do know from research as well as from experience is that when people make those journeys together, and where there is support and accompaniment, whether in the form of enabling legislation, financial or practical

The principles of participation, inclusion and voice lie at the heart of any successful development process. If organizing is, as we found, the wellspring of change, then this is where development organizations can put their money—not into quick fixes, elaborate and expensive auditing instruments or randomized control trials, consultants and all the apparatus of what has been dubbed the "development industry." In a time when women's rights organizations around the world struggle to find resources for their work, it is time to pay more attention to how those development dollars can be redirected to support their vital contribution to making positive change happen in favor of greater justice and equality for all. ❖

Making the Connections

By Karen Sugar



WGEF farmer and agro loan client in her field; Creating a Voice for Women dance group; literacy class

An organization in war-ravaged northern Uganda is changing women's lives on the basis of a broad definition of empowerment.

Karen Sugar is the founder and director of Women's Global Empowerment Fund (WGEF). Her master's studies at the University of Colorado focused on gender and development concentrating on the concept of microfinance. WGEF and its programs developed in partnership with local NGO Volunteer Action Network have been recognized by the Ugandan Ministries of Education and Health. Visit *www.wgefund.org*.

The empowerment concept gives life to the idea that a woman can be an agent of change in her own life, determining her own future. But defining empowerment is nearly impossible. The way we see others, and ourselves, is subjected to our own life experiences, perspectives, culture and values. It is also defined according to (societal) norms, market-based and political agendas. As a graduate student studying international gender and development and working in various global communities, I became keenly aware of the narrow vision (including my own) of what an "empowered" woman looks like.

The development and philanthropic world is always seeking the next trend or concept to energize the mission, funding and purpose. The word "empowerment" is one such word or theory used and, one could suggest, overused in creating a narrative that focuses on women. Because of the varying ideas associated with the word, the concept is hard to track, and norms are not well established.

There is a general consensus that women in the Global North (higher income countries) are more empowered and live with a certain level of equality. There is also an assumption that women in the Global South (lower income countries) are not "empowered"; it is also suggested that women wearing the veil, or other coverings, are less empowered and oppressed solely by the garment. In my work, some of the most powerful and capable women I have met wear a head covering or may be in a plural marriage, thus creating the paradox of what empowerment looks like. Globally, women struggle for basic human rights and equality. While religious or culturally conservative women may wear a veil or body covering, women in the US are undergoing painful procedures in order to look pleasing; oppression takes on many forms. While women may have more opportunities in the Global North for work and career choices, they are often paid less than their male counterparts; gender-based violence is a stubborn and pervasive problem around the globe, creating disenfranchisement and inequality.

My point in highlighting comparisons or contrasts is to build the connectedness of women, allowing for a richer discussion of what empowerment might look like.

Creating Opportunities

In a moment of brilliance or insanity, I founded Women's Global Empowerment Fund (WGEF) in Uganda, a country I had never been to that was recovering from a long and brutal civil insurgency. I created the organization based on the belief that women are natural leaders and, when offered meaningful opportunities, are able to rise above abject poverty with dignity, while advancing self-determination.

Our Credit Plus program combines microcredit services with social and educational services in three areas of focus—literacy, leadership development and health initiatives—into a single service reaching under-resourced women. Borrowers form groups and attend business trainings, where they elect leaders, develop a business plan and work with staff to ensure their success. What makes our intervention unique

Photo credit: © WGEF STAFF

is the inclusion of a political dimension. Poverty is the result of inequality in many spheres, and meaningful interventions must include a political dimension that enables addressing systemic inequality through participation and advocacy.

and financial tools to create viable businesses, making strategic choices that increase decision-making capabilities and control over resources. Eighteen women run our peer-counseling program, providing leadership and advocacy opportunities, and several hundred clients participate in our leadership development programs. As a result, in the last Ugandan national elections (2011), WGEF had five clients run for elected office.

Microfinance clients at work in their market stalls; microfinance client and successful restaurateur

WGEF defines empowerment as "one's ability to access resources, make choices and determine life outcomes." While many definitions are focused on financial mobility, I contend it is much more complex, suggesting financial agency alone does not create empowerment, but may be a catalyst to other variables that enable empowerment; other variables are contextually important and valuable in the process. Below is the list WGEF uses in defining/evaluating empowerment:

1. Increase in participation in household (decisions)/community activities
2. Increase in mobility
3. Decrease in violence
4. Increase in decision making (personal, household, financial)
5. Increase in health, food security, access to care, rest
6. Increased self-esteem/confidence

WGEF does not include a specific financial measurement; access to financial resources alone does not necessarily translate into greater autonomy, increased security or mobility. Using our definition of empowerment, I believe our clients are experiencing economic and social empowerment.

WGEF clients have utilized educational

All of our surveys have shown increases in areas that we consider empowerment markers (see above).

These changes also address systemic problems, allowing women to have a greater voice in their communities and policy development.

Because empowerment is multidimensional, one must be careful when drawing conclusions. A woman may be empowered in one sphere (household, community, economy) but not another. It is important not to overlook or place more importance on one area over another, as long as the focus remains on self-determination and ability to shape one's life. I believe WGEF is creating the potential for empowerment in multiple spheres, providing greater autonomy, security and mobility while elevating women's voices.

Financial inclusion, microfinance schemes and other traditional interventions may be ways to empowerment, but I suggest that true empowerment comes from more complicated human experiences such as autonomy, participation and voice.

The idea that empowerment can somehow exist without basic human rights or access to basic human services is incorrect, but much easier to discuss. The empowerment of any human being must first begin with the notions of social, economic and environmental justice, making the goal of empowerment more complex, albeit more meaningful.

One could argue that if the goal is true empowerment, we must go further and suggest that all human beings experience equal and full access, and not just one gender over another. Empowerment must include equality and liberties for all; only when all people are imbued with dignity, justice and human rights can we say that we are empowered. ❖

"As a mother of seven, I had no idea about how my life would be after the impact of the LRA War. I was abducted at the age of six and returned with two children, I hardly knew what to do with my life because my parents were gone.

"I had one problem after the other, with no one to turn to but one day I met a group of women benefiting from WGEF . . . due to my low self-esteem I feared to be among other women but gradually I gained the courage.

"My life has now changed not only because of the loans but also the trainings that I received. I managed to start up a business and a live stock project which is helping me pay school fees and other basic needs . . . At this point the relationship within my family has improved and we are working together to provide for our family, people in my community now respect me and I am now even a community leader, something I thought wasn't meant for me. At last I have the hope that was long gone. Please fellow women, do not think whatever you went through or are going through cannot change—we can rise above poverty once equipped with the right tools."

—Akello Beatrice, WGEF client

Photo credit: © WGEF staff

Education: A Transformative Potential

By Maria Guajardo

Children in the Amazon rainforest region of eastern Ecuador

Maria Guajardo of Soka University considers the connection between education and empowerment.

Maria Guajardo is dean of the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Soka University in Japan. She was previously executive director of the Mayor's Office for Education and Children in Denver, Colorado. She is a graduate of Harvard University and has a Ph.D. from the University of Denver. She is a member of SGI.

Empowerment is the human endeavor of tapping into the limitless potential inherent in our lives. How is the path of empowerment opened, discovered and revealed? Education is one way of opening this path. A formal education is the gateway for many children and youth to acquire knowledge and an understanding of themselves. Yet, for millions of children a formal education is unattainable. As we experience the globalization of the world, the distance between myself and that small child with no access to education grows shorter and shorter. This proximity will begin to affect both of our lives, theirs and mine. There is no avoiding the fact that those individuals who were seen as "the other" are part of our world on a daily basis through the world news, the continual expansion of markets or social media and the Internet. This proximity prevents us from turning away.

For poor and ethnic minority children, there continues to be hope that education will be the gateway to a better future. This was the promise I grew up with and believed as a little girl, the daughter of immigrant parents who could not read or write and whose struggle revealed the invisibility created by the lack of a formal education. As a poor Mexican child growing up in the United States, I felt invisible. I was "the other." Like any child, I, too, wanted to grow and blossom. Education proved to be the path that allowed me to discover my abilities; it nurtured my curiosity and defined my passion for justice. Education was a powerful catalyst.

I was eight years old and in third grade when I was assigned an essay on my father's occupation. My father was a migrant worker, and I was embarrassed to write about this. My embarrassment turned to mortification when I was asked by my teacher to read my essay to the class. As I finished reading, my teacher, Mrs. Garcia, acknowledged the importance of my father's work, saying that because of his efforts many had food on the table. At that moment she affirmed my existence. She "saw" me, and that gentle support empowered me to move ahead in my studies.

Making the Invisible Visible

Education can make the invisible visible in the same way that empowerment transforms powerlessness. Education that can spark that transformation, that can ignite one's passion, is education that can transform the world. As our lives become more entwined and interconnected globally, the advancement of such humanistic education becomes ever more vital. The relationship between education and empowerment is complex. At best, one fuels the other. At worst, narrow definitions of education, which confine us to prescriptive roles that lessen who we are, serve to disconnect the two.

As dean of the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Soka University, my goal is to strengthen the connection between education and empowerment. This goal is propelled by the vision of my university: to uncover each student's potential. The founder of Soka University, Daisaku Ikeda, states: "The greatest resource that humankind has is to be found within human life itself. This treasure can

A primary school in Quito, Ecuador: education that sparks an inner transformation is a powerful source of empowerment

be endlessly mined and developed. To believe in and encourage youth, bringing out their wisdom and strength; this is the challenge and purpose of education." His perspective as a Buddhist philosopher whose humanistic purpose is to believe in and encourage those around him aptly captures the power of inner transformation. He writes: "A great human revolution in the life of one person can change the destiny of humankind and our planet."

This perspective on empowerment and the purpose of education takes a complex relationship and lifts it up to a broader plane that is not limited by economic scarcity or environmental constraints. It encourages individuals to become aware of their power and to use it for a greater purpose, a purpose with value that can lead to a transformation of one's environment. This is the gift bestowed upon us by education if we have the courage to embrace this possibility. At Soka University, I see it as my job to raise the next generation of global leaders, a new generation of young leaders who will be dauntless in their efforts to transform their environment.

Changing the destiny of humankind for the better can be accomplished, step by step, person by person. We are seeing empowered individuals transforming the world in various fields and sectors. Their courage to create is paving new pathways for humanity. One such individual whose work illustrates this for me is Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistan-born visual artist. A woman whose work crosses many boundaries and is constantly developing, she says: "I felt empowered, and it was precisely that inspiration that I held onto and which allowed me to continue taking risks and transform my work for more than two decades." She speaks of an inspiration that fuels the courage to take risks and transform ourselves and that allows us to create a new future, a new perspective, a new artistic piece.

Empowerment unleashes our inner potential and brings forth our true self. Daisaku Ikeda describes this when he says: "To lead a life in which we are inspired and can inspire others, our hearts have to be alive; they have to be filled with passion and enthusiasm. To achieve that, we need the courage to live true to ourselves. Rather than borrowing from or imitating others, we need the conviction to be able to think for ourselves and to take action out of our own sense of responsibility."

Education can propel us on this path of empowerment. One by one, empowered to transform ourselves and our environment, we become the critical mass of change. Empowered, courageous, creative individuals are the human capital of change and the hope of the future. Our children and youth are our link to the future. So how can we best respond to their hopes and dreams? By recognizing, honoring and promoting the education that can tap into the rich potential of their lives: wealthy, poor, brown, white, male, female.

We are individuals, "creative capital" from diverse communities living in a rapidly changing world. Sikander's example encourages us to think creatively and respond to the complex realities of our present-day world. This is the same challenge being presented to our students at Soka University. They are being prepared for jobs of the future, jobs that do not yet exist!

Dr. Linda Sanchez of Colorado State University–Global Campus states that the purpose of education in the future should be to strengthen global interconnections that challenge cultural and political boundaries, boundaries that are temporary. Education will allow us to imagine new, interconnected realities. Our rapidly changing world will present us with challenges of a global scale. These are challenges I want to face courageously and creatively, alongside others who no longer feel invisible. And while I am no longer that little girl feeling invisible, I recognize that there are many who have not yet gained access to their inner potential.

The challenges of our time call on us to become the "creative capital" that creates broad access to empowering education that will enable us, individually and as a global community, to break through even the most difficult realities. Let no child remain invisible. Let no adolescent feel powerless. Let us open a path to empowerment through education. ❖

> Education can make the invisible visible in the same way that empowerment transforms powerlessness.

Photo credit: © Dieter Telemans/Panos Pictures/Uniphoto Press

In the Thinnest of Places: Initiation as Empowerment for Civil Action

By Bayo Akomolafe

An initiate prepares to take the plunge

When I turned 18, I was serenaded with little wrapped boxes of surprises, birthday cards and the one artifact that was existentially crucial to the celebratory proceedings: cake. I had lost my father three years earlier, so he wasn't around to usher me to the vaunted gates of adulthood, to see me take my first manly steps into the heart of things. I had to make do with fleeting commentary from uncles and guests, and a generic awareness that becoming 18 years old somehow granted me access to the shibboleths of manliness—that, even though I didn't feel like it, I had really become a man. "You are no longer a child, you are now a man," said my uncles, goaded by the bonhomie of the atmosphere—a sentiment my sisters chuckled at.

However, there would have been nothing to laugh at if I had tied sinewy vines to my feet and jumped off a 90-foot wooden tower, plunging myself toward an uncertain outcome in glorious free fall—the gritty textures of the hard ground screamingly rushing up to greet me. To become a man in the Melanesian culture of the Vanuatu peoples, one must perform the *n'ghol*, a ritualized precursor of bungee jumping—without the assurances of safety equipment. It is said that the young candidates take weeks preparing for this rite of passage, abstaining from sex and choosing their own vines. In what must be a most horrifying spectacle to behold, at least for that species of the human race whose moments of heightened awareness are often occasioned by the number of "likes" generated by a Facebook post, the "men" climb stiff heights and then hurtle toward the ground, their heads only a few centimeters away from certain death by the time they come to a dangling stop. Of no less propinquity to a quick demise is Maasai lion hunting, in which young men-to-be must vouch for their courage and spirit by killing a proud lion with the comparable whimsicality of a thrust spear.

"Initiation is not indigenous entertainment, the ancient equivalent of thrill-seeking teenagers burning rubber on asphalt."

In that thinnest of places, in the hushed moment just before the spear breaks into the taut hide of the "king," between the bloody ground and a human head, something transformative happens: a man is born into the world.

To an 18-year-old African boy, brought up and shaped by the modern abstractions of urban life and the luxurious conveniences of a flush toilet, eating cake had to do. It was seemingly the best that could be offered to reassure me I had become a man.

Perhaps one of the more fundamental aspects of our modern disenchantment is the gradual loss of

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meaningful rites of passage and initiations. Ensconced in the numbing illusion of safety, separation and sedative order, we might immediately protest the needless exposure to danger and death that these rites involve—but that would hide away the fact that the precious premise of such rituals is the transformation of normal ways of perceiving reality. To radically alter one's experience of himself, his relationships and his world, to loosen the threads of common perception and break open the matrix of the real, to summon new identities from beyond the latticed enclosures of culture and orthodoxy, one needed to be brought to the veil. *One needed to be initiated.*

Initiation is not indigenous entertainment, the ancient equivalent of thrill-seeking teenagers burning rubber on asphalt. In its most profound sense, initiation *is* empowerment, an attunement to a different order of life. By contemporary standards, empowerment is the reinforcement of the human will, the legitimization of preference by recognized authority or the permission given to another to act within certain parameters. This notion of empowerment leaves human agency intact and colludes with the inner logic of the status quo. Some Buddhist teachings speak of certain ceremonial initiations (*wangs*) or "empowerments" in a different way—not in a masculine sense as mere enablement, but in the very feminine sense of surrender to a "higher" discipline or a "deeper" calling. This disruptive sense of empowerment is largely missing in today's conversations about emergence.

This is changing, however. The notion of empowerment as initiation, as an uncoupling agent, as a psychedelic catalyst that stuns the habitual mind into an alchemical quietude conducive for radical realities to be perceived, couldn't be more urgently needed or desperately important to today's discourse on social change.

New Wells of Empowerment

I am not alone in believing that we need pockets of mass initiation rituals, a cultural rite of passage to break our dependence and affixation with normative modes of experience—and that this amounts to a deeper kind of empowerment. The writing is on the wall. For civil society, plagued with accusations of complicity with the *establishment* it appears to resist, the questions are slowly changing. Instead of asking, "How do we continue to force the hand of the *powers that be*?" there is a growing desire for the creative enactment of a different notion of empowerment—one that at least complements efforts at resistance. There is an emerging sophistication that acknowledges that the more assiduously one resists the "other," the more likely it will be that we take on the shape of the "other." In short, something other than the master's tools is needed to dismantle the master's house—a different sort of empowerment, an initiation—something that brings us again and again to the thinnest places.

The simple act of sharing can reconnect us: unemployed men in Albolote, Spain, grow their own food as part of a council initiative

Today, the politics of outrage is wearing us down. Recently, I listened to a seasoned environmental activist from Brazil as she shared her insights about the establishment of carbon exchanges where emission credits—or the right to continue to pollute the environment—are traded. She chuckled when she noted that these regulations are a direct result of climate justice movements pressing for low carbon emission rates. As I listened to her, it became clearer to me how our best efforts often end up being co-opted by the dominant logic, how continuing with the same linearity, with the same rituals, with the same presumptions can often be counterproductive.

We need to retire into silent sanctuaries where our tired vision and pretensions to realism are purged and reinvigorated—where we are empowered in a way that transcends institutions and normative politics.

I am suggesting that we need to find other wells of empowerment and that the mere exercise of brute political force (which largely characterizes civil society action) is itself symptomatic of a prior initiation into modernity; into the dangerous ideas that the universe is merely a collection of blind clumps of matter, that we are alone in the exercise of agency and that "nature" must be reined in to adhere to our world-building agendas. I am suggesting that we make the transition from ordinary to sacred perception, that we deepen, expand and stretch our imagination of what is possible.

I can think of nothing more favorable to a civilizational initiation than the subversive act of turning to each other, of reviving our affinities with neighbors and community and earth, of learning to plant our own food and localizing our knowledge and economies. As things get smaller, more human-scaled, more down-to-earth, a different politics allows the participation of once silenced agencies and brings us closer to those thin places where we are reminded that empowerment is not merely the transfer of power, it is the overwhelming realization of powers more compelling than ours. ❖

Photo credit: © Pablo Blazquez Dominguez/Getty Images

A Buddhist Perspective on Empowerment

By Anthony George, *SGI Quarterly* editor

Nichiren Buddhism begins from the premise that everyone inherently has the power to overcome all of life's challenges and construct a life of deep fulfillment and meaning. It terms this inherent potential "Buddhahood," and the purpose of Buddhism is to enable people to bring this forth from their lives. As such, Buddhism is all about empowerment.

Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda recognized that the core notion of Buddhism—the idea of attaining Buddhahood—was essentially abstract. He reframed it as the process of "human revolution": the idea that a self-motivated positive change in one's inner life creates a change in one's destiny. This in turn impacts the destiny of one's family and, ultimately, one's community. Empowerment in this sense is an inner change that produces expanding ripples that pervade the interconnected web of life.

As more people carry out this process of inner revolution, ripples of transformative change spread throughout society, bringing about a transformation toward peace in one's country and in the world as a whole. This is "kosen-rufu," the ultimate ideal of the SGI: the realization of world peace through individual empowerment.

One important way in which empowerment in the Buddhist sense differs from the way it might ordinarily be conceived is that it is always cognizant of the connection between self and other.

A person who rises against the odds from poverty to become the president of a multinational company, for example, might seem like a good example of empowerment. But what if the same person, having risen to a position of influence, writes off those who are not able to overcome their difficulties, perhaps even exploiting poor and vulnerable communities for profit?

Empowerment in Buddhism means not simply gaining power and agency, but continually orienting one's life in the most positive direction. The Buddha, embodying the most fully-realized positive potential of our humanity—a life characterized by profound compassion, courage and wisdom—exists as a role model or ideal to inspire this effort. Buddhist practice, then, is a practice of action toward this ideal amidst the challenges of ordinary life. And an integral aspect of this practice is the effort to awaken others to the vast potential of their Buddha nature.

In the Buddhist perspective, once one begins to aspire to a noble ideal, there is a natural impulse or driving force inherent in all life that guides one in the direction of good.

When life functions in this way, individuals and society as a whole are able to advance in the direction of happiness and good. However, when the positive ideal is lost or abandoned, this impulse within human life becomes faulty, driving one to seek power over others.

In the poetic expression of ancient texts, this negative urge for power, as it becomes extreme, is characterized by the image of a devil king who abides in the Heaven of Freely Enjoying Things Conjured by Others. This is the devilish power to freely control others in order to satisfy one's desires. We see this condition in the structural violence and profound inequalities that are so pervasive in the world at present.

A key discovery of Buddhism is that when our desires are under our control, we follow our natural orientation to strive toward good, and the inherent strength of our humanity is brought forth. Accordingly, Shakyamuni's first teaching was the eightfold path: right views, right thinking, right speech, right action, right way of life, right endeavor, right mindfulness, right meditation.

"A key discovery of Buddhism is that when our desires are under our control, we follow our natural orientation to strive toward good, and the inherent strength of our humanity is brought forth."

The essence of this teaching is expressed by Nichiren when he writes: "The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being." He clarifies that the core characteristic of this behavior is the concrete action of respecting others. In the Buddhist perspective, then, a deep respect for both oneself and others, for the dignity of life, is the foundation of the development of our strength and humanity and the heart of empowerment. ❖

Photo credit: © Cargo/Getty Images

A Chain Reaction

By Daisaku Ikeda

The following are excerpts from SGI President Daisaku Ikeda's 2015 peace proposal, "A Shared Pledge for a More Humane Future: To Eliminate Misery from the Earth." The full text is available at *www.sgi.org*.

An SGI discussion meeting in San Francisco, CA

One of the key teachings of Mahayana Buddhism is the idea of dependent origination, that the world is woven of the relatedness of life to life. But it is only when we sense and treasure in others a dignity as valued and irreplaceable as that in our own lives that our interconnection becomes palpable. It is then that the tears and smiles we exchange spark in each of us a courageous will to live.

Here, I would like to reference the ideas of psychologist Erik H. Erikson (1902–94), as I explore the infinite possibilities that arise from the teaching of dependent origination, namely the capacity for self-empowerment, which can enable people burdened by suffering to illuminate their community and society as a whole with the light of their inner dignity.

The first of these ideas is that the mature person needs to be needed. So long as we are made to feel necessary to others, we will be moved by the desire to respond. This desire awakens the inner capacities of life, keeping alive the flame of human dignity.

This brings to mind the example of the peace scholar Elise Boulding (1920–2010) and the way she lived her final years.

After entering a care facility, she spent each day motivated by the thought that there must be something she could do, despite the limitations she faced. Her student Dr. Kevin Clements recalls that she told him that she felt she could bring good to those around her by smiling and being complimentary to others and thanking the medical staff for their kindness. She continued, until just prior to her passing, to welcome visitors with a beautiful spirit of hospitality.

As Dr. Boulding demonstrated, we are always capable of maintaining a sense of connection with others, and through this can offer moments of authentic happiness to those around us, bringing our humanity to an ever-greater luster. These moments become the living record of our being, held in our own hearts and the hearts of others.

Another element of Erikson's thought is the idea that the effort to reconfigure meaning has the power to prevent suffering from spreading and generating destructive cycles. We cannot redo our lives. But by recounting to others the steps that have led us to the present moment, we can reformulate the meaning of past events. Erikson considered this a source of hope.

This can be seen in the practice of the SGI's faith activities, in particular the sharing of personal experiences, through which practitioners together develop deepened confidence.

Here people speak of what brings them happiness and how they find meaning in life, as well as such trials as the deaths of family members, illness and difficult work and family situations. It is a place of collective recognition of the weight and irreplaceable nature of each individual's life journey, a place where people are encouraged in the struggle to transform suffering.

Through such sharing, the speaker develops a clear awareness that any and all experiences were in fact milestones in the formation of their present self, enabling them to use those experiences as fuel for their future progress. For listeners, the shared experience can help bring forth the courage needed to confront their own challenges. This chain reaction of empowerment, based on empathy, is at the heart of our practice of faith.

What I would also like to stress is the far-reaching impact of the life story of a single individual who has succeeded in discovering a sense of purpose from within the depths of personal suffering. These life stories can transcend national boundaries, connect generations and offer courage and hope to many. ❖

Photo credit: © Kingmond Young

Mrs. Wakitani celebrating Kanoko's 12th birthday

The Perfect Medicine

By Midori Wakitani, Japan

My daughter, Kanoko, was born on December 23, 1981. When she was two months old, my husband and I noticed she was visually unresponsive. When we took her to the hospital, we were told that she had severe cerebral atrophy and probably cerebral palsy, and would most likely be visually impaired. I felt as if I had suddenly been plunged into hell. I lost all hope and was in complete darkness.

I visited a fellow Soka Gakkai member who also had a child with cerebral palsy. She embraced me with her words, saying, "Your child was born with a mission. Everything will be all right. You can definitely become happy, but the most important thing is first and foremost for you yourself to change." I thought to myself, "What use can I be if I am an emotional mess? I must support my child so that she is able to walk by the time she starts elementary school."

> I suddenly realized what my fellow Soka Gakkai member had meant when she told me that nothing would change unless I changed.

I put all my energy into her rehabilitation. However, all my efforts were to no avail. Instead, she suffered seizures, and her condition only worsened. I wondered why, despite everything I had done, not one thing had changed. I felt exhausted and hopeless.

I remember it was the beginning of spring as my daughter and I sat on the train going to a doctor's appointment. Gazing out the window, I saw a car pass by in the distance and said to my daughter, "I bet there's a happy family in that car. You know, I once used to be happy like that before you were born." I was shocked at what I had said. I realized that all along I had been thinking that unless my daughter became a healthy, normal child, and unless I could return to the life I had lived before she was born, I would never be happy. I suddenly realized what my fellow Soka Gakkai member had meant when she told me that nothing would change unless I changed. At that moment, my heart did change. I thought to myself, "It doesn't matter if my daughter is confined to bed for the rest of her life. I will make sure she lives the happiest life."

As if responding to my new determination, Kanoko began showing signs of improvement. She started responding to the caregivers at the rehabilitation center and even became able to support herself while sitting and to draw and do crafts.

While caring for my daughter, I reflected on life and recalled that I first began practicing Nichiren Buddhism because I had wanted to fulfill a dream of becoming an author. I determined, once again, to pursue that dream. An ironing board next to my daughter's bed became my desk, and I began writing. The room where I cared for her was transformed into my study. Eventually, at the age of 36, I published my first book of children's stories.

New Challenges

One day, when Kanoko was 14, I suddenly received a phone call from my father who lived several hundred kilometers away. He told me, "Your mother is in a serious condition. She keeps cutting her hair and says she wants to die. Please come home!" My mother, who was 67, had for some time been suffering from anxiety and showing signs of Alzheimer's, but until then I had had no idea. I couldn't believe this change in the strong, centered woman I had known. Hearing my father's dismayed voice, I wanted to fly back home immediately. However, my daughter required assistance almost every two hours, which consisted of changing her position, maintaining her body temperature and removing mucus. There was no way I could leave her or move into my parents' home to look after my mother. I felt an unbearable pressure at being thrust between these two grave concerns and not being

Photo credit: © Soka Gakkai

Some of the 5,000 postcards that Mrs. Wakitani wrote to her mother

able to deal with both.

What calmed me were some words of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda that I had engraved in my heart throughout my struggles to care for my daughter—that as long as we hold on to hope, as long as we have the earnest spirit to strive on, spring will arrive without fail. I determined to do my best where I was and not to give up on either my daughter or my mother.

I thought long and hard about what I could do to support my mother who was so far away. It occurred to me that the best thing I could do was make her laugh. I believe laughter is the best medicine for any illness. Each day, I sent her a postcard with a funny story and drawing. I wrote on one, for example, "As I was shopping, it suddenly started to rain. I glanced over to see a man riding on his bicycle with the handles of a grocery bag hooked around both ears. As he rode, the wind inflated the bag—it was such a funny sight! Everyone who saw him burst out laughing." I thought to myself that if my mother could get by one day at a time, the medicine would gradually take effect and she would get better. I continued to write her funny stories, praying that each and every postcard would help open the doors of her life.

The results were astounding. Two weeks after I began sending the postcards, my mother stabilized and gradually became healthier. Four years later, she no longer needed antidepressants. On top of this, amazingly, my mother wrote me one day, saying, "You know what? I think I can write funnier stories than you!" She had never written anything in her life, but she took up writing her memoir, which was eventually published when she was 77, followed by a sequel at the age of 80. Somehow, the despair that had engulfed her had transformed into a font of hope.

In all, I wrote over 5,000 postcards to my mother. I realized that through these postcards, I could bring joy and laughter to other people, too. In 1999, I created my own monthly "newspaper" of funny stories from daily life—stories about my failures or things I learned caring for my daughter. At first, I sent the paper to parents of children with disabilities or to doctors, nurses and teachers who took care of my daughter; then people started asking me to send them copies. Currently, 250 people subscribe to my paper.

I have been featured on the radio, and a local newspaper carried a series of my illustrated essays. I have received letters from readers saying things like, "It makes me happy to know that someone understands my struggles to care for my child. I feel I can keep going," and "Reading your stories makes me happy and gives me courage." These responses give me strength in return.

My parents have now come to live with us and are in good health. Kanoko is 33 and has overcome numerous obstacles. My son, Masashi, who often felt lonely growing up because my husband and I had to give all our attention to his sister, ended up studying special needs education in the US, where he is currently working as a special needs teacher.

I feel immense gratitude to be a messenger of hope and joy. Most importantly, I have been able to transform my struggles and use them as opportunities of growth for myself and my family. By sharing this joy with others, I will continue to open new doors of possibility in my life. ❖

Mrs. Wakitani with her mother, 2014

Photo credit: © Soka Gakkai

Dr. King outlines bus boycott strategies to his advisors and organizers, including Rosa Parks (seated center)

The Expansion of Democracy

Dialogue between Vincent Harding and Daisaku Ikeda

The following are excerpts from *America Will Be!: Conversations on Hope, Freedom, and Democracy* (Dialogue Path Press, 2013), a dialogue between Vincent Harding (1921-2014) and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. Dr. Harding was chairperson of the Veterans of Hope Project and professor emeritus of religion and social transformation at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. A historian, social activist and confidant of Martin Luther King Jr., his books include *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* and *There Is a River*.

Daisaku Ikeda: Life is a drama. In the course of this drama, defining moments, pivotal events, and crucial encounters occur that affect the course of one's entire life. After Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] finished graduate school at Boston University, he took a position as pastor in Montgomery, Alabama. It was 1954, and Dr. King was twenty-five.

Dr. King's return, with his wife, Coretta, to the South, the area suffering the worst racial discrimination in the entire country, resulted in his taking leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott movement.

Vincent Harding: And the catalyst for this historic movement was Rosa Parks, an ordinary woman who had been working for racial justice for many years and was active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Women's Political Council, the black women's political advocacy group in Montgomery.

The spark that ignited the boycott was an event that symbolized the unjust and humiliating treatment that black citizens had suffered for years. Its elements were Mrs. Parks's refusal to relinquish her seat on the segregated bus, the policeman's decision to arrest her, and Rosa Parks's determination to seek justice in a court of law as well as to arouse the defiant spirit of her people.

Ikeda: There is no way to measure the enormity of the suffering and bitter sorrow caused by the injustices of racial discrimination. The humiliating discrimination that black people in Montgomery had lived through for so many years finally provoked a groundswell of indignation. It was the courageous Rosa Parks who opened the floodgates, and out flowed all that pent-up dissatisfaction. Mrs. Parks said in retrospect: "I knew someone had to take the first step. So I made up my mind not to move."

What do you think was the reason that the bus boycott movement became such a powerful force, like a tidal wave across the South?

Photo credit: © Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

> It's important to always recognize that it was the people who called King to lead them. They knew where they wanted to go and what they wanted to do.

Harding: Before I address your question, let me explain something first. I believe that the term *civil rights movement* is an inadequate description for the movement in which we were involved. Oh, there I go—jumping into a debate about terminology.

One of the reasons that I am so adamant about this is that the next generation may be tempted to count up all the civil rights laws and conclude that, "Oh, now we've got this law and that law, a total of more than seven hundred civil rights laws, so we're finished with this."

If, instead of referring to the movement as the *civil rights movement*, we spoke in terms of *the expansion of democracy*, then each new generation would recognize that they have a responsibility to expand democracy beyond the way they found it. This duty is an ongoing task that each generation must accept. The question is how to engage the next generation and convey this important message to them. This is a major issue to which, as you can tell, I have passionately devoted myself.

In any case, the bus boycott movement in Montgomery was an important point of departure for the growth of democracy in post-World War II America.

Ikeda: As you say, the human rights movement in which you, Dr. King, and your colleagues were engaged was not simply an effort to protect the rights of a socially disenfranchised minority. The aim was not to overthrow white rule and supplant it. Rather, it was a movement whose goal was to create a truly democratic society that would wash away the injustice of discrimination and hatred with a tide of justice, thus bringing freedom and humanity.

We can also say that this was a challenge to win peace and dignity for all humankind.

An Exchange of Energy

Harding: It's important to always recognize that it was the people who called King to lead them. They knew where they wanted to go and what they wanted to do. They told him, in effect: "You've just received your doctorate in philosophical theology. You are recognized as an educated man in this society. People will listen to you the way that they will not listen to most of us. Be our spokesperson."

King had to decide how he would respond to this call of the people. According to Coretta, it did not take him long to come to a decision.

Ikeda: On the evening of December 5 [1955], a mass meeting was called to decide if the boycott, one day old, should be continued. Dr. King, as president of the new Montgomery Improvement Association, was to give the keynote speech. The occasion called for a speech that would fire up the people and boost their morale while at the same time calm them and inhibit a rush to hatred and violence.

Harding: So, in his speech at the first mass meeting, King exposed the false claim by the opposition that boycotting the buses was somehow wrong:

> We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this Nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!

King was blessed with such a powerful gift—the capacity to absorb energy from the people. And the energy that he gave back to them boosted their morale and sustained them through the struggle.

Ikeda: This exchange of energy was crucial—Dr. King received strength and energy from the people and returned it to them. He gave them unwavering confidence, conviction, and hope by establishing the legitimacy and philosophical basis for the bus boycott movement.

He expressed solidarity with the people and generated new energy to propel the movement forward. This is, historically speaking, a formula shared by all successful movements.

Harding: King told the people that what they were doing was not just for themselves but for the whole country and, indeed, for the whole world. This was the dramatic and powerful context in which King told them that they must see themselves. King had answered the call of the people, and they helped him to define his mission. In turn, he called them to see themselves, awakening them to their own calling. When we think of King the leader, we must never lose sight of this dialectic, this constant sharing between leader and people.

Ikeda: One of my favorite quotes by Dr. King is "The universe itself is on the side of freedom and justice." The struggle for justice, when observed over the long term, has unyielding allies in the forward movement of history and the fundamental principle underlying the universe. Armed with an awareness of this truth, we need to engage in and win our struggle for justice. ❖

Dr. Harding greeted by Mr. Ikeda in Hachioji, Tokyo, April 1996

Photo credit: © Seikyo Shimbun

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda's 2015 Peace Proposal

On January 26, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda issued his 2015 peace proposal, "A Shared Pledge for a More Humane Future: To Eliminate Misery from the Earth."

In the 70th year since the United Nations was created, he calls for a return to its founding spirit, as well as for increased collaboration between the UN and civil society.

In order to lay the foundations for elimination of the suffering caused by poverty and conflict, he stresses a need for the rehumanization of politics and economics based on a solidarity of ordinary citizens, for people's empowerment and for a broadening of the sphere of our friendships and concern for others as a basis for building peace. He welcomes the ambitious scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be adopted later this year, particularly in terms of the emphasis on eradicating poverty.

The SGI leader applauds the signing of the Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons by 155 countries and territories in October 2014 and notes growing common ground between nuclear-weapon states and those calling for nuclear abolition regarding the desire to avoid the horrific outcome of any use of nuclear weapons. He urges heads of government to attend the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, calling on them to voice there the pledges of their governments to eliminate the danger posed by nuclear weapons.

He further expresses his hopes that a youth declaration pledging to end the nuclear age will be adopted at a planned World Youth Summit for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons to be held in Hiroshima in September, building momentum in support of a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons.

Mr. Ikeda also calls for increased regional cooperation and youth exchange among China, South Korea and Japan, stressing the importance of reviving trilateral summits. He proposes that leaders of the three countries mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II with a pledge never to go to war again and to cooperate in support of the SDGs.

The full proposal is available at *www.sgi.org*.

Celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day

On January 11, SGI-USA was one of 11 different faith communities that participated in a Martin Luther King (MLK) Day multifaith service held at the National City Christian Church in Washington DC, organized by the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.

Jo Reed of SGI-USA spoke of the need for engagement in nonviolence as the basis for addressing the challenges facing the world today. There was also a reading of Dr. King's landmark "I Have a Dream" speech and musical performances.

In another MLK Day interfaith initiative held on January 19, SGI-USA partnered with the Washington National Cathedral for the fifth consecutive year to organize a clothing drive for homeless and low-income families. This year there was a special request for business attire that could be worn to job interviews. Donations of clothing were collected by volunteers at the SGI-USA Washington DC Buddhist Culture Center and were then passed on to agencies working with the homeless including Friendship Place and the Family Place.

MLK Day inspires multifaith unity at the National City Christian Church

Interfaith Symposium on Sustainability

On December 9, 2014, the Spanish Chapter of the Club of Rome and SGI-Spain sponsored an interfaith symposium, "Beliefs, Sustainability and Human Development," at the CaixaForum Madrid in Spain. The symposium brought together some 50 individuals from economic, legal and religious circles, including representatives from Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish and Muslim communities.

The keynote lecture, "Truths, Values and Beliefs: The Challenges of Sustainable Development," was delivered by UNESCO Chair in Environmental Education Dr. María C. Novo Villaverde. Two roundtable discussions followed—one on religious pluralism and coexistence and the other on the role faith communities can play in sustainable development.

Photo credit: (from top) © Seikyo Shimbun; © SGI-Spain; © Jack Gordon

Faith Communities Unite Against Nuclear Weapons

On December 6 and 7, 2014, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) held a civil society forum (CSF) at the Aula der Wissenschaften in Vienna, Austria. The CSF was attended by more than 600 people from 70 countries representing 100 organizations.

On December 6, the SGI, ICAN and the World Council of Churches, with support from Religions for Peace, organized an interfaith panel, "Faiths United Against Nuclear Weapons: Kindling Hope, Mustering Courage." The panel issued a joint statement, "Faith Communities on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons," which pledged continued grassroots efforts, awareness-raising activities and dialogue within and among faith traditions toward a nuclear-weapon-free world. The statement also expressed strong support for international efforts to ban nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds and called for the commencement of negotiations by states on a new legal instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons.

On December 8 and 9, SGI representatives attended the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons held at Hofburg Palace. On December 9, the joint statement was delivered by SGI Peace Affairs Program Director Kimiaki Kawai. A message from Pope Francis condemning nuclear weapons was read out during the opening session, adding further weight to the moral and ethical voices of the world's religions that were raised during the conference.

SGI youth from the UK, US, Netherlands and Austria took part in the ICAN Civil Society Forum Marketplace in Vienna on December 7

Walking for Peace in Iceland

On December 23, 2014, members of SGI-Iceland participated in an annual peace march and gathering in downtown Reykjavík, which some 4,000 people attended. The event, joined by several local peace organizations, marked its 35th year and has become a traditional way for many people to start their Christmas celebration. Participants carried candles and sang Christmas songs and hymns as they walked through the city and, at the end of the walk, placed their candles in the snow. SGI-Iceland has taken part in the planning of the event for over 20 years.

SGI-Iceland youth leader Eyrún Ósk Jónsdóttir was the main speaker at the event and spoke about the meaning of creating peace from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. Quoting a passage from the writings of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, "A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind," she called for a revolution of the heart and for sincere dialogue based on trust and respect as the way toward securing peace.

Sustainability Exhibition Shown in India

On January 8 and 9, Bharat (India) Soka Gakkai and the Green Society of Jesus & Mary College (JMC) in New Delhi jointly organized a two-day showing of the SGI and Earth Charter International exhibition, "Seeds of Hope: Visions of Sustainability, Steps Toward Change," on the JMC campus.

Speaking about the exhibition, Dr. Mani A. Nandhi, associate professor of JMC's Department of Commerce and convener of the Green Society, said, "All the [exhibition] panels present information with background support and case studies which students can understand. This is the kind of awareness-building we want."

The documentary film *A Quiet Revolution*, produced by the Earth Council in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme, and supported by the SGI, was screened after the inauguration ceremony. The film features three case studies of how individuals in India, Slovakia and Kenya have contributed to solving local environmental problems.

After viewing the exhibition, a student from the Green Society commented: "I hope all of us spread this idea, that this planet is ours, and so we must take care of it."

Members of the Green Society of JMC with staff members and Bharat Soka Gakkai volunteers

Photo credit: (top) © Seikyo Shimbun; *(bottom)* © BSG

Ana I. Ruiz Núñez, *from Madrid, Spain, is a social educator specializing in child and family services. Her areas of expertise are educational intervention, conflict resolution and social integration.*

Tina Rosén, *from Stockholm, Sweden, is a social worker and counselor at the Disability Information Centre, Habilitation Services, of Stockholm County Council.*

Serving Society

What does your work entail, and why did you choose your profession?

Ana: I studied social education almost by accident, but it completely changed my way of thinking and perception of society. I have been working 10 years for a private company that provides social services in Madrid. My work is focused on families in which children are suffering from serious neglect or various forms of abuse.

Families come to us through different social agencies that know or suspect there may be serious problems in the family. I investigate the risk and vulnerability of the children and offer support as part of a multidisciplinary team offering psychological, social and educational care.

Sometimes, protecting children means separating them from their families. I must assess the possible impact of these decisions. In such cases, we also try to work on the problems so that the child can eventually be safely returned to their family.

Tina: My job and mission is to make life easier for people with disabilities and their relatives. This includes raising public understanding of mental disabilities.

I am a team leader responsible for a group of colleagues. We meet people of all ages with different conditions such as intellectual disability, autism, Asperger's syndrome, ADHD and acquired brain injury. We offer counseling, support and treatment. Most people who contact us are mothers of children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

I also work in our unique library that houses some 4,000 books and films about different disabilities. We hold seminars for patients, their families and people working in the field.

During my three years of study at university to become a social worker, I had the opportunity to do an internship with a counselor. It was exciting, and I really enjoyed meeting patients and their families. That was when I realized I had made the right career choice.

Photo credit: © Joe Raedle/Getty Images

What does a typical day at work consist of?
Tina: A day at work might involve offering counseling by phone or by e-mail, working in our library or holding exhibitions to provide information about our services. Sometimes I attend lectures and share what I have learned with my colleagues. We also spend a lot of time updating our websites and booklets with new information.
Ana: Every day for me is a challenge to support families and enable them to feel they can change the things that are causing them to suffer. I try to support them in discovering their power and create the awareness that they have the potential to change their lives and the lives of their children.

I conduct individual and family interviews. I visit people in their homes to get a sense of their day-to-day life. I try to establish a therapeutic bond with families, empathize with their feelings and let them know there are professionals who can assist them.

We also offer multifamily therapy groups where families get to see there are other families struggling with the same problems. In these groups, we foster interactions that help strengthen the relationship between parents and children.

What are the most satisfying and challenging aspects of your work?
Ana: What is most satisfying is when a family or a child, despite the harsh experiences they have suffered or are suffering, allows me to help them. When they recognize and accept the problem, they begin to become aware that they have the capacity to change their life.

My work is very difficult, emotionally. The economic crisis we are experiencing has a great impact on the welfare of these families, especially children.
Tina: What I really appreciate is listening to people and being able to give them advice, support and hope. It is important for me to do that with great respect.

When you are a social worker, it is easy to focus on your patients and forget about your own needs. Work can sometimes be stressful, but, at the same time, that is what makes my job inspiring and enjoyable. I find that if I take care of myself, I can take care of my patients better.

What social changes would you like to see that would have a positive impact on the issues you deal with in your job?
Tina: Difficulties in Sweden's economic situation have increased tremendously in recent years, which have led to the denial of support to many people. I am afraid our society is becoming cold and unfriendly. I want to live in a society that believes every citizen is important and valuable and can contribute—a society of greater solidarity.
Ana: I would like to see social change that benefits individuals and that is focused on the welfare of society, rather than just politics. In recent years, especially, children are at risk not only because of the economic difficulties of their families but also because state and social institutions are failing them.

How does your outlook as a Buddhist help you relate to your clients with a sense of respect and equality?
Tina: Nichiren Buddhism has taught me that every person has Buddhahood and is beautiful. We just have to focus on seeing the Buddhahood in everyone; we have to listen with deep respect and try to understand how other people think about things. By practicing this Buddhism, I have gained courage to stand up for myself and others. I am also able to respect people and not be prejudiced toward their religion or way of life.
Ana: Being Buddhist has helped me see that, despite the difficulties the families I work with have suffered, there is always the possibility for change. My Buddhist practice helps me believe in them and their potential to overcome their inner negativity. It also helps me encourage families that have the potential to overcome life's difficulties and not to be defeated by them.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has spoken about how the path of self-improvement is a continual process that never ends. He encourages us to continue striving toward new goals, step-by-step, while seeking to develop ourselves. Sometimes, change happens very slowly and seems minimal, but I must not forget that it is still a step forward and advancement toward a goal.

"Every day for me is a challenge to support families and enable them to feel they can change the things that are causing them to suffer."

What has doing your job taught you about life?
Ana: I have learned from my experience of working with so many different families that inner strength and constant effort can enable us to transform any bad situation. Despite the difficulties we may face at any point in time, everyone has the potential to change and create a life where they can feel happy and good about themselves. My work is always worth the effort and profoundly gratifying. I am grateful to think that through my work I can help build a cohesive, more caring society.
Tina: My job has taught me that you really have to try and be happy and grateful every day! You never know when you or your loved ones may fall ill. An accident can happen anytime, and in a second, you wake up and need other people around you to get by. I also learned that you can never judge a person by how they look and that you always have to stay curious! ❖

The Parable of the Bright Jewel in the Topknot

This is the sixth in a series introducing the parables of the Lotus Sutra.

The word "peaceful" tends to bring to mind a relaxed, effortless state of life like lying on a beach under a palm tree. While this may seem ideal, such untroubled tranquillity can very quickly disappear, just as storm clouds can soon dampen a day at the beach. Nichiren Buddhism, in contrast, equates a "peaceful" state of life with a robust spirit, where we are undaunted by problems and challenges, a state of inner security and equanimity independent of our circumstances.

"Peaceful Practices" is the title of the 14th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda explains its significance, stating: "The word *peaceful* (Jpn *anraku*) in the chapter's title is written with two Chinese characters. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai of China interprets the first character, *an*, as meaning 'unmoving' and the second, *raku*, as meaning 'free from worry.' Peaceful does not mean a state of life free of toil and suffering. Rather, it means living without being swayed and without worries, no matter what happens. This is a state of true peace and happiness."

In the Peaceful Practices chapter, after describing the importance of making a vow or commitment to work for the happiness of others, Shakyamuni Buddha relates the parable of the bright jewel in the topknot to illustrate just how great and rare the Lotus Sutra is. The parable describes a powerful sage king who rewards his soldiers who have distinguished themselves in battle by giving them all kinds of precious objects such as elephants, horses, carriages, clothing, houses and even towns. But within his topknot he keeps a bright jewel. Only when he sees someone who has truly distinguished themselves does the king remove the jewel from his topknot and give it to that person.

"The Lotus Sutra teaches that making a vow to help others become truly happy is in fact the key to attaining a peaceful state of life free of worry and anxiety."

The Buddha is likened to the sage king and the soldiers of merit to his disciples who battle against the darkness of life. The ordinary treasures the king gives away represent the provisional teachings, teachings that are relatively easy to understand but do not fully reveal the great power and inherent dignity of human life. The jewel in his topknot, meanwhile, represents the "difficult to believe" Lotus Sutra—a revolutionary teaching that enables all people to live truly empowered and peaceful lives.

The Lotus Sutra teaches that making a vow to help others become truly happy is in fact the key to attaining a peaceful state of life free of worry and anxiety. While one may think it makes sense to help others only after one has mastered all one's own problems, rather, as Daisaku Ikeda points out, it is by setting aside our own worries and concerns to help those who are suffering that we are able to develop a powerful, expansive state of life. And in developing such a vast life condition, we are also able to overcome our own challenges. Nichiren further states: "If one lights a fire for others, one will brighten one's own way."

When blinded by fear and unable to see the greater purpose of our lives, we may easily lose our way and fall into greater suffering. However, Nichiren Buddhism teaches that we can always find the path of happiness by fearlessly confronting our problems head-on while helping others do the same. As President Ikeda confidently states: "It's not a matter of leading a timid and weak existence, seeking to avoid obstacles and difficulties. Rather, we should have the spirit: 'Come what may, I will survive! I will climb another mountain! And the more I climb, the more I can enjoy my life, and the more people I can help become happy.'" Nichiren Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra aim to impart to all people the art of revolutionizing their inner state of life in this way. ❖

Photo credit: © Francesca Romana Perazzelli

Living As Learning:
John Dewey in the 21st Century

A dialogue between Jim Garrison, Larry Hickman and Daisaku Ikeda

"A word of encouragement can be incredibly important, a precious seed of inspiration that develops into something grand and wonderful in the future. People blessed with outstanding leaders and teachers are fortunate, because such encounters can enable them to develop and demonstrate their potential to the fullest."

—Daisaku Ikeda, *SGI president and founder of the Soka school system*

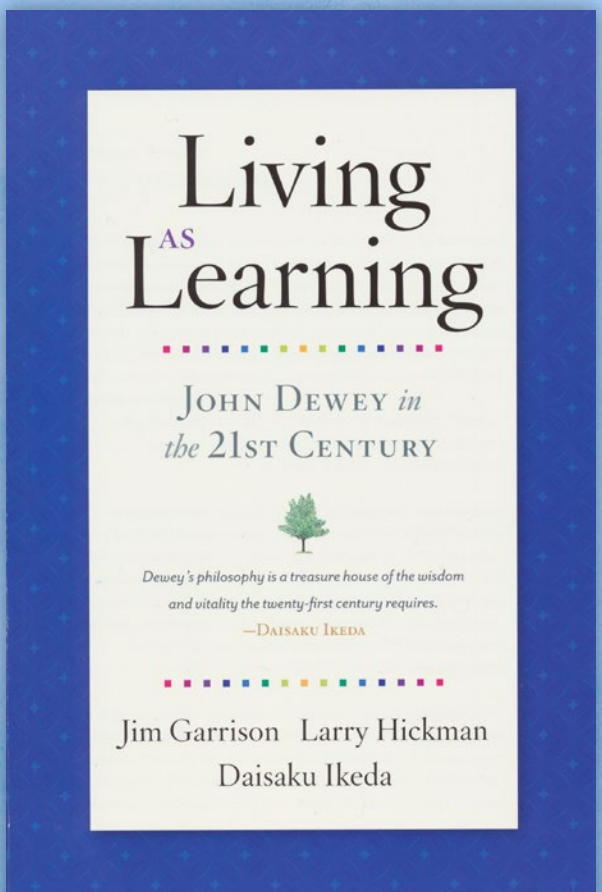
"It's clear to me that happiness and growth are in many ways the same things . . . There are distinctions, but you will not have happiness if you do not actualize your unique potential. You cannot actualize your unique potential if you are not participating in, and contributing to, a larger community that allows you to teach and learn from others."

—Jim Garrison, *professor of philosophy of education at Virginia Tech and past president of the John Dewey Society*

"Dewey was once introduced as a philosopher who *wanted to make intelligence practical*; to make abstractions applicable to the real world. He responded that he in fact *wanted to make practice intelligent*. By this, he meant that intelligence in everything, including education, must be grounded in the needs and interests of real people in real situations."

—Larry A. Hickman, *director of the Center for Dewey Studies, professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and past president of the John Dewey Society*

Living As Learning (Dialogue Path Press, 2014) explores the legacy of John Dewey (1859-1952), the great American philosopher, educator and social reformer. Visit *www.ikedacenter.org/books-publications/book-list.*



SGI Quarterly

A Buddhist Forum for Peace, Culture and Education

A girl sits on a mat doing her homework in the village of Tala, Bangladesh

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a worldwide association of 94 constituent organizations with membership in 192 countries and territories. In the service of its members and of society at large, the SGI centers its activities on developing positive human potentialities for hope, courage and altruistic action.

Rooted in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, members of the SGI share a commitment to the promotion of peace, culture and education. The scope and nature of the activities conducted in each country vary in accordance with the culture and characteristics of that society. They all grow, however, from a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and development of all humanity.

As a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI is active in the fields of humanitarian relief and public education, with a focus on peace, sustainable development and human rights.

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