

Nidan Essay
Recollections

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I began my aikido training in 1979. I've only practiced under three senseis in all that time. Some anecdotes stick in my memory from the earlier days. I don't know why these particular stories linger, but I thought this essay a suitable opportunity to share these tales from the "old days".

My first sensei was Bob Tongue. He started his aikido training while stationed in the Air Force in Hawaii in the 1960's. He did it as part of his physical therapy to rehab from a parachute accident. He told us stories of the early dojo in Hawaii. They trained in a garage with concrete floors and no mats. Yes, they did high falls there.

I most remember two things he taught. First, was etiquette. He was adamant that regardless of experience or rank, we should be able to leave his class and credibly present ourselves at any other dojo on the planet for a class. Be on time. Bow in correctly. Never leave the mat without the instructor's permission before the end of class. Conduct yourself with respect and pride; the real basics.

Bob's day job was working as a deputy sheriff, in rural Maryland. He mainly ferried prisoners between the county court house and the jail. Sometimes they could be more than a little unruly and he would occasionally describe an incident where he would use an aikido related technique to subdue an out of control criminal without seriously injuring the person, or getting hurt himself. Long, police flashlights were especially effective for restraint and pins. These tales and demos would often prompt questions from students about using their aikido in the "real world".

I will never forget Bob's reply. "Since none of you are policemen or soldiers, there are two most likely cases where you will have to use your aikido in 'real life'. First, you will be walking down a street in winter and will slip on a patch of ice. Your aikido practice will train you to fall on the hard, concrete sidewalk without hurting yourself. The next time you'll need it will be when you have some friends over for dinner and one of them gets very drunk, obnoxious and cannot drive home safely. You'll have to take their car keys away without hurting them. The odds that you will be walking down a city street one day when three ninjas jump out of a dark alley waving swords at you are pretty low."

Bob was also very active in community activities and he tried to get his students involved, too. Each year, the local community college hosted a mental health fair on a spring Saturday. Our aikido club participated by doing a demo for the day.

However, it was not your typical showy but graceful aikido demo. Instead the local "home" bussed over a shuttle full of retarded kids. Yes, you could still say "retarded" in those days. Our mission was to let them "throw" us any way they could without us

causing them any harm.

One quick preface; while many of the “kids” were young and small, several of them were in their late teens or twenties, huge, strong and not really in control of their own bodies. So, an “attack” could range from a gentle hand on your elbow from a small spastic, eight-year old, to an overpowering bear hug from a very strong, but clumsy giant.

For a white belt like me, it was the best ukemi training possible. We each stood two hour shifts before taking a break. The real reward was seeing the big grins on the kids' faces. It was very rare for them to be able to “act out” that much and jump and clap and laugh and “throw” grownups around. I think I stood 3 shifts that day, but of course, paid the price the next morning. I've never been so sore in my life and it was before Ibuprofen had been invented. But no question it was worth every ache and pain.

In 1984, I moved to Denver where I joined Aikido Nippon Kan, the dojo of Gaku Homma-sensei.

He is among the funniest human beings I have ever met in my life. He was always “cracking wise” in his unique hybrid of Japanese and English, on or off the mat. Typically, right after every Xmas he would ask students of any rank, if they had written their “Third Kyu” notes to people who had given them presents. This would of course, trigger totally bewildered looks from the newer students. He would say, “You know, your “Sankyu Notes”!. If you don't get the joke, try saying it out loud.

Once only, I saw him in a much darker mood, in fact, the only time I ever saw him angry. One day at the start of class he began with the following story. “ I was walking in a forest and there were many birds up in the trees: black ravens and white doves. All the ravens were sitting together on certain branches while the doves were bunched together on others. The two flocks of birds were staring at each with mistrust and suspicion. It felt like a war would soon break out between them. The forest would feel much more peaceful if the ravens and doves would share the branches, so we would see white and black birds on each one.”

For those that didn't “get” his parable, he went on to explain that for some weeks, or longer, many yudansha had been training in the corners only with their “special yudansha buddies”. It was the particular responsibility of all yudansha to train with junior students and make them feel both safe and welcome in the dojo. It was fundamentally inhospitable and rude to ignore new students and this behavior was unacceptable in his dojo. Afterwards, the problem never recurred in the two more years I trained there.

So, why these particular tales from the old days? What makes them “sticky” in my memory? Why don't I muse over the “old school” warm ups we never do any more? Why not obsess over some form of irimi nage that is not currently taught? My best guess is that these stories highlight the timeless qualities and values that make aikido important to me and perhaps to others.