

## Featured Teacher, April 2020



### **Alan Vann Gardner**

Two Rock Aikido, Petaluma, California

I attended my first aikido class forty-one years ago at Naropa Institute, a Buddhist-inspired college and then mecca for east-west integration of philosophy, psychology, martial and creative arts. I was a college senior majoring in philosophy, studying dance, and seeking some path with meaning and heart. Richard Strozzi-Heckler and Wendy Palmer, Senseis both taught and inspired me to begin my aikido journey. Within a couple of years I moved to northern California and began training with them at Aikido of Tamalpais. I began practicing tai chi and meditation as well; all three disciplines have been integral parts of my life ever since, with aikido being central.

My early training days also consisted of weekly treks to San Francisco's Turk Street Dojo to train with Frank Doran and Bob Nadeau, Senseis. At that time, annual CAA summer retreats were held at Dominican College and Hiroshi Ikeda, Sensei, became and has remained a main teacher and influence.

I am an educator by profession and have worked in public and independent school settings for the past forty years. As both teacher and principal, I have introduced thousands of young people, as well staff, to aikido principles and practices through: teaching them how to "Get a C.L.U.E.," (CLUE standing for Centering, Lining Up, and Entering or Embracing opportunities and challenges), facilitation of the Samurai Game, and design of a "peaceful warrior" curriculum. Aikido has been central to my work in bringing a lens of mindfulness, wholeheartedness and equity to help create safe and sacred spaces where people can collaborate, lead, and learn.

My home dojo is Two Rock Dojo where I train and teach with Richard Strozzi-Heckler, dojo-cho/Shihan along with an amazing community of fellow students. We train aikido as a spiritual path, martial art, and way to communicate skillfully both on and off the mat. I have been blessed to have trained with so many incredible teachers and friends from so many dojos over so many years.

## **My Most Memorable Aikido Experience**

Here are five brief memories or vignettes since no one most memorable aikido experience stands out:

My 3<sup>rd</sup> kyu test was a beautiful one, as I have been told. The test was nearing its end. Terry Dobson, Sensei was one of four teachers on the examining board. Instead of calling out the next technique, he asked me (or rather barked), "Alan, what is the hardest thing for you in aikido?" After a brief moment in which I panicked and froze, I composed myself and replied: "answering questions," perhaps one of my best aikido blends and responses ever.

It was mid/late 1980's, when I left my elementary school classroom in West Marin for two weeks to join a citizens diplomacy venture to the then Soviet Union. I led an aikido demonstration at a Moscow school and forged a partnership with my new Russian friends that would last many years. Through pen-pal relationships and many subsequent trips abroad, many students, teachers, and families from these two school communities enjoyed a rich cultural exchange.

Fast forward to 2017 when I traveled with a small group of senseis and students to Ethiopia for the East Africa Aikido Association's inaugural seminar event. How exciting, and what an honor, to train with so many young and wonderful people from five east African countries and support the expansion of our global aikido community in this way.

Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue describes beauty as “a more rounded, substantial becoming, an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of our unfolding lives.” I’ve enjoyed many glimpses and experiences of a sense of truth, goodness and beauty that are our aikido aspirations; in roles of both uke and nage, I’ve had many moments of wholehearted presence and surrender, being overtaken and in awe by the beauty, power, grace and mystery of a shared aikido connection and exchange.

Lastly, I have fond memories of those first few moments when arriving at seminars each year and seeing friends who I don’t get to see as much as I’d like—relationships that date back 40, 30, 20, 10 years... or people I just met and befriended as recently as the previous year’s retreat!

