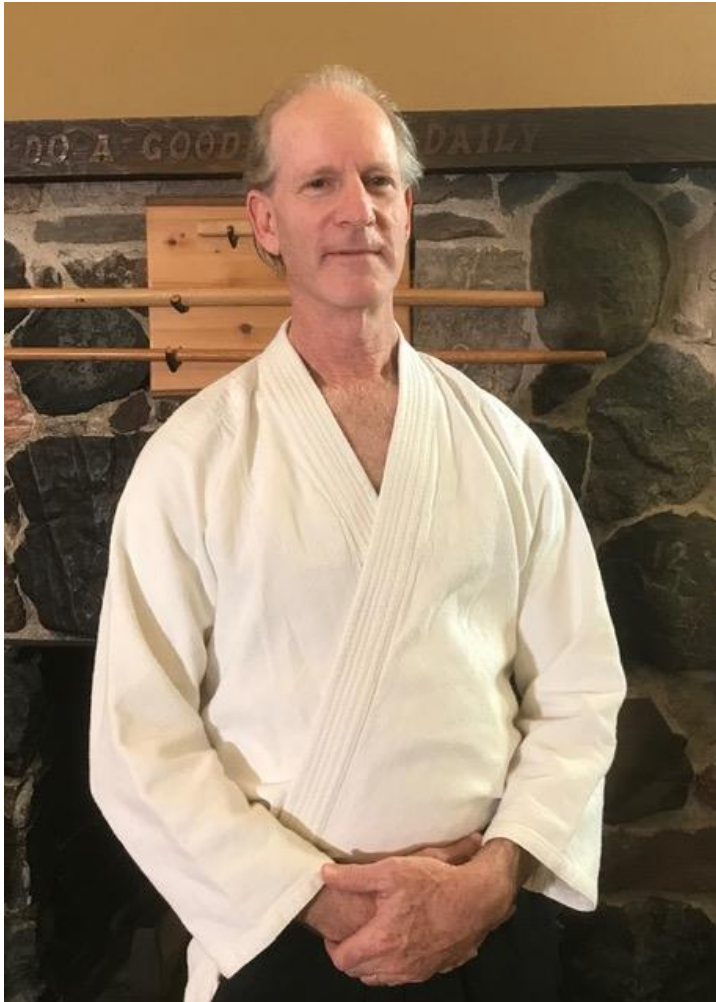


Featured Teacher, June 2020



Grayson James

Two Rock Aikido, Petaluma, California

My introduction to Aikido came around 1984 from *The Silent Pulse*, a book by George Leonard. I'd met George recently when he was writing an article for *Esquire Magazine* about the private school system I was running in the San Francisco Bay Area, and I thought I'd check out some of his other writing. I opened *The Silent Pulse* one evening and didn't put it down until it was over. Unable to sleep the rest of the night, I waited for morning to track George down: I needed to learn more about Aikido.

When I reached George, I asked him to meet me for lunch. He politely declined, and instead invited me to come to Tamalpais Dojo in Mill Valley, California the next evening to watch class.

Luck had it that the dojo was just minutes from where I worked. I showed up at 6 pm and spent the next 90 minutes sitting nearly motionless on the hard, wooden bench along the wall, mesmerized. This was something that I could fully immerse myself in—mind and body—to help balance the long days I was spending in my head, at work. At the time, I had no idea that Aikido would end up being much more than that.

I began training every day at Tamalpais Dojo, with George, Wendy Palmer and Richard Strozzi-Heckler Senseis, and also at Aikido Institute, in Oakland (where I was still living at the time). I soon began traveling to whatever seminars and Aikido camps I could find.

As a beginner in Aikido it was occasionally confusing having four very different teachers, though things got a little simpler when I moved to Mill Valley and focused all my daily training at Tamalpais Dojo. For all their differences, the three Senseis each shared a fundamental commitment to the relevance and applicability of Aikido principles beyond the mat, in our everyday interactions and experience. I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from and be friends with these remarkable teachers.

In those early years of training, my relationship with George extended well beyond the mat. He introduced me to “Leonard Energy Training,” a program of movement and awareness exercises based on Aikido principles, as well as The Samurai Game®, the leadership and self-development simulation that he created, also inspired by Aikido and the principles of Bushido. George’s wife, Annie Styron Leonard, (also an Aikidoka) introduced me to meditation.

My work today—as a management consultant specializing in collaborative performance, and as Training and Certification Administrator for The Samurai Game® worldwide—continues to be influenced by my relationships with George and Annie Leonard (who passed away in 2010 and 2011, respectively), and with Richard Strozzi-Heckler and Wendy Palmer.

I also include in my great fortune the long and inspiring relationships I’ve enjoyed with Hiroshi Ikeda, Shihan and Frank Doran, Shihan. I have many warm, poignant and sweaty memories of training with them in Redwood City, the San Rafael, Rocky Mountain and other summer camps, the wet and rainy winter camps at Mt. Madonna, and many other venues in between. The past 30 of these years have been shared on and off the mat with my wife, Kathy James, (another long-time Aikidoka). We live in Petaluma (40 minutes north of Mill Valley), training and teaching in the converted country-barn-turned-dojō known as Two Rock Aikido, under Richard Strozzi-Heckler, Shihan.

I used to assume that the longer I trained, the more confident I would feel as a martial artist.

Perhaps I shouldn't admit this, but it hasn't worked out that way for me. At least not after the first five or ten years of training. During those early years of vigorous training, I sometimes thought I was actually getting good, and occasionally found myself hoping for an opportunity to "road test" what I'd been learning. Probably a good thing that opportunity never materialized. These days, the more I train the more obvious become the many flaws in my training. The welcome news in all this may be that I'm also learning to become more accepting of them. On my better days, these deficiencies actually become a source of amusement and learning—which is when my training and teaching is the most interesting, and most fun. Which brings me to the first memorable Aikido moments I'll share...

My Most Memorable Aikido Experiences

It occurred while attending a class taught by the late Kevin Choate Sensei, probably sometime in the 90s. Kevin would demonstrate a technique, which looked pretty flawless to me, but then he would accompany his demonstration with comments—as if narrating the action—about how he "missed connecting with the Uke at this moment," or how his timing was off, his shoulder was too tense, or "did you see how my posture was weak?"

I found this unusual and also unexpectedly inspiring. Seeing such an accomplished individual who was not only willing to expose his weaknesses but to use those vulnerabilities as a vehicle for teaching, was new for me. Publicly sharing his self-examination, curiosity and humility helped to humanize the concept of mastery for me, while also giving me permission to embrace my own weaknesses. Most importantly perhaps, it encouraged me to lighten up a bit as an instructor; I didn't have to pretend to be perfect, when I knew damn well that I wasn't. This experience continues to inform my teaching on the mat, as well as my consulting work with executives and their teams in the conference room. And there has been another important and unexpected benefit: I never have to worry about running out of good teaching material—because my flaws come with me wherever I go!

A second memorable moment occurred in 2017 when I was in Ethiopia to help support the inauguration of the East Africa Aikido Association, under the leadership of Tesfaye Tekelu, with Richard Strozzi-Heckler and Lou Pollack. The whole experience was unforgettable, but the moment that still shimmers for me was the opening evening training.

The training venue was a cavernous concrete gymnasium structure that seemed to rise up out of nowhere along a dusty, roughly paved street in what felt like an out of the way area of Addis Ababa. It was the first time that the 80 or so East African attendees and the 17 or so American or European visitors were together and we were assembling the mats over the concrete floor. The One Band—Ethiopia's premiere dance band—was also assembling itself off to one corner

of the gym as band members slowly trickled in. At some point, and with no fanfare, the band just began playing, while we attendees were piecing together and taping the mats. Soon, ad hoc pairings of Aikidoka began grabbing and throwing each other as the final pieces of mat were being put in place, with the late afternoon light streaming through the clerestory windows of the gym. These pairings would nonchalantly expand as new individuals were drawn in, as if by some invisible vortex. Then, just as casually, while the band played, individuals would splinter off into new pairings through an organic and seemingly random version of cell division, of Aiki-tosis. With daylight fading, someone turned on the mercury lamps. As the lamps gradually warmed up and began filling the gym with their surreal glow, the sense of excitement and anticipation on the mat was growing more palpable as well. And then it was time to start class.

We lined up, teachers were introduced, and training began. Fifteen or so minutes into this inaugural East Africa Aikido Association training, the power cut out, leaving us in darkness. Me and the other “Westerners” right around me stopped training and looked around as if waiting to see what would happen next (the light will come back on now, right?). But the other Aikidoka, from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti and other East African countries—almost all with decades less Aikido training than we visitors—paused just long enough to register a smile or nod, and continued right on training, blending masterfully with the situation. And the rest of us followed.

It was now truly dark and we were all doing our best to avoid hurting each other, or ourselves. Someone scrambled over to get their cell phone, and soon others followed, sprinkling showers of light here and there on the mat with the phones’ flashlights. Then, a couple of folks left the gym, pulled their cars right up to the front glass doors of the gym, and shined their headlights onto the center of the mat. Although most of the mat was still in the dark, the teachers were able to demonstrate in the glare of the headlights, and this is how we trained for most of rest of that opening class. The energy and resolve on the mat more than compensated for their absence from the lamps.

Power finally came back on for the last 10 minutes of class, and by the time we bowed out, the lamps had almost regained their full intensity. Looking back, I can’t imagine a better way to have kicked off that extraordinary seminar. It was a blending of the surreal and unexpected with the matter-of-fact reminder that was underscored by our East African hosts: We’re here to train Aikido, no matter what circumstances may have in store for us.