

Featured Senior Instructor, April 2019



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Division 2

I grew up experiencing violence as an ordinary part of life. It wasn't considered violence. Under these circumstances I found sanctuary outside my home—in nature. I loved hanging out in the hills and would reflect on what life was all about. The sounds, smells, shapes, colors, being predictable and patterned, gave me solace and a glimmer that there was something more.

When I found aikido in 1990, I found a new home. Aikido became a place to get to know myself explore the geometry of my inner and outer life.

I was introduced to aikido through my first two aikido teachers, Mary Tesoro Sensei and Tom Elliott Sensei at Aikido of San Luis Obispo in California. It was their

presence and attention to the mystery of life beyond what I had known—that drew me to the power and beauty of aikido. They taught me that I was more than what I thought. Aikido was a way for me to learn about the power of nonviolence, a place to find my grace, my dignity, my fire—to move beyond and transcend my past.

Thank you Mary Tesoro Sensei for believing in me, walking with me through decades of post traumatic growth, showing me how to protect myself and have a voice. And Tom Elliott Sensei for sharing your passion for aikido, your transparency, and teaching me how to really play and be human. Deep gratitude to Danielle Smith Sensei for being present for my fifth kyu, and all the countless years and moments of crystal clear mentorship, wisdom, and discovering the oneness of aikido beyond the veil. And Michael Smith Sensei for all the post-training conversations about the universal golden threads of “truth, beauty, and goodness.” Dennis Evans Sensei for waking me up with the shinai and encouraging me to embrace my own shadow. Cyndy Hayashi Shihan for asking the right questions at the right time, supporting my partner Bruce, and helping me find a place to land. Kayla Feder Sensei for embodying joy and authenticity both on and off the mat. Michael Friedl Shihan for your down-to-earth, joyful presence, and offering me the opportunity to develop and polish my teaching skills. I thank them all. And the many senior students and teachers who know who they are at Aikido of Monterey—Cathy Jaeger, Mitch Johnson, Erik Haag—for mentoring and practicing with me for many hours through the spiritual forging of dan preparation. Thank you to Cathy and Nikki for opening your home to me for days and months on end. In recent years I have had the opportunity for honest dialogue and direct feedback from master teachers, Kimberly Richardson Sensei and Richard Stozzi-Heckler Sensei on the art of teaching with presence. Asking myself the question of how I show up in my leadership and how my practice is relevant to my everyday life and the lives of others has been potent and invaluable.

Thank you Frank Doran Shihan for your clarity of vision and exquisite, dynamic alignment as a teacher. There were times when my path in aikido felt stuck and choices had to be made. I found Doran Shihan to be a great source of wisdom.

A dojo has become for me much more of a spiritual than a physical location. After two decades of training with my original teachers at Aikido of San Luis Obispo, my

dojo started out as an intention to practice daily in the sacred geometry of my backyard. Returning to nature seemed like the next step and became a grounding source for my body. The jo and bokken were exacting companions to my quickening spirit. To maintain some connection with the community I had known for decades, I travelled to Aikido West and Aikido of Monterey two to four times a month. Always welcomed.

Years later, a small group of independent practitioners started training together in my area. We started out in a park, then in a friend of a friend's warehouse space with a roll up door and a big van parked in one part. Itinerant yes, but we started to form a like-minded yet diverse group, more came, we struggled, then we found a space and in a slice of serendipity...already painted white, not a perfect space, but one that worked, and downtown. Several years in, it's time to move to find an even better space, with a real working bathroom and changing areas. And as I said above a dojo is located inside us. We can take our dojo anywhere we go.

Aikido awakens a deeper intelligence beyond the mat. When you take your body off the mat, the aikido goes where ever you go. Connecting with my clients as a somatic psychotherapist in private practice, my intent moves moment to moment with *aiki* as we discover what they want and what is getting in the way of creating a more effective or meaningful life. I have found many occasions working with "high risk" youth where the intent and intelligence of aikido came through in navigating highly chaotic and violent situations. Once working with a group of eight adolescent boys on probation in residential treatment who were very frustrated with all the rules and regulations of a program they did not choose, they ran amok breaking windows, throwing chairs, threatening staff, and painting mayonnaise, mustard, and ketchup on the walls. It was a regular hot dog special of a riot.

The staff were alarmed calling the police which was prudent. I took the risk, entered the chaos and said, "Hey guys...where's the relish?" in a very firm but curious tone so all could hear. And like fast food secret sauce, the boys immediately came together in a very clear and loud way to let me know how unfair they thought they were being treated. I brought the staff together to blend solidly with wholehearted listening, giving these boys a safe space to express. This led to a productive conversation about how these boys would design the program if they were in charge. Later, the staff reflected how under stress they shut-down

and try to control in a way where things escalated. They realized that there may be another way to join and contain the chaos and pain expressed by these kids. Not without challenge. I “failed” often—yet learn from all of it. During my dozen years as a therapist and clinical supervisor in residential treatment and now consultant, local agencies contact me for private classes in aikido for at-risk youth at what now is called Aikido Central Coast.

I didn’t start out to be a teacher, but it was during those moments in the early 1990’s helping with the children’s classes at Aikido of San Luis Obispo, and later teaching them, that I found the heart of aikido. I embraced the small perfect bits of time here and there, lost and found in the late afternoon sun streaming through the dojo and the sound of little bodies being mountains, being joyful, running, jumping, expectant, curious, and just being...sitting in the effulgent quiet, moments of bright pulsing aliveness that children embody so well. Here I found my innocence and a sense of purpose for my own training. Later these little vibrant bodies grew up and now some have returned as adults to continue training and some have moved on to careers where they embrace what they learned long ago. Gratitude comes for the opportunity to see them on the path and even train with some of them now.

So I come full circle into the present moment of my life.