Episode 434 – Ms. Susan Spann | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey everybody, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 434. Today, I'm joined by my guest, Ms. Susan Spann. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, your host on this show, founder of whistlekick and a guy who loves martial arts in pretty much every way you can imagine someone saying that. I love the history, I love the training, I love the camaraderie and I love how all of those things have allowed me to come to you in your ears for this episode and for any of the other episodes we have. We've got 433 more. You can check them out at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. you'll find transcripts and photos, links, a whole bunch more. If you go to whistlekick.com, you're going to see everything that we're involved in because we do a lot more than this podcast including our store and if you use the code PODCAST15, you'll save 15% off anything that we have over there from apparel to uniforms to protective equipment, books, there's a whole bunch of stuff. Check it out and show your support for whistlekick and of course, you can do that in other ways too. We're just happy to have you along for the ride. Every story we have on this show is a bit different but, of course, there are similarities and it's celebrating similarities and the differences that has become the hallmark of this show and it's one of my favorite things about what we do here. Week after week, we bring you guests that hopefully you can relate to, at least, in part and I hope, again, that they leave you with things to think about. Things that will make you better inside and outside of your training and today's guest did a lot of that for me personally. Miss Spann is an author, a practitioner and has a bit of a different path. One that you might

not have expected to lead her where she ended up. Instead of ruining the story for you, I'll let her tell it. She does a much better job so here we go. Miss Spann, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Susan Spann:

Hi Jeremy, thank you for having me on the show.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Thanks for joining me on the show. This is going to be fun as I was just telling you but now I'll tell the audience. Your name popped up as a listener suggestion. We love having the listeners put forth names of people to talk to because it means I get to talk to a variety of different people and, let's face it, it's a little more fun for me to reach out or, let's say, somebody to reach out and say hey, one of our listeners wants to have you on the show instead of hi, I have a show, I want to talk to you on it. Something about that comes through differently.

Susan Spann:

I really appreciate the invitation and I really appreciate the listener so, listener, whoever you are out there, I don't have your name but thank you very much personally for making the suggestion.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, me too and we're going to talk about your journey and there are a lot of maybe tangents that I suspect that we're going to go on. Some things a bit different in your martial journey than the average martial artist. We'll get there but before we get there, we got to start with some foundational stuff so I'll ask you the question I've asked every single guest who's ever been on the show. How did you find martial arts?

Susan Spann:

Martial arts actually found me and I think that's probably the way that quite a few of us come into it. When I was a little kid, I was a girl and I was growing up in 1970s, which probably makes me old but that's alright, and when I was growing up, a lot of parents were telling their girls still to be girls and my dad was very different. My dad put a bow and arrow in my hands when I was 5 years old and said, don't shoot your brother but other than that have fun with this and so, the idea of studying martial arts, and I take a very expansive view of martial arts because a lot of my background is actually in history, but I started actually with bow and arrow was my way in to martial arts and then, later, I developed an interest in taking Karate and Taekwondo, Hapkido and studied those high school. College, I was a fencer and then, after college, I moved again, went back into Taekwondo, Hapkido martial arts and so, basically, it's just been something that came to me when I was a kid because my parents were interested in my pursuing what I wanted rather than what somebody had a preconceived notion about that I enjoy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, and how did that path continue on? What was it you found within martial arts that resonated with you? Because not everybody sticks with it. Most people don't stick with it so the people that do, they find something there.

Susan Spann:

I think it's really less in some ways the martial, well, I suppose it is exactly the martial part of martial arts because when I was 9 years old, I discovered Japanese history and I discovered, originally through James Clavell but then, I started reading all kinds of history and history books. I was a little bit of a weird kid. I did a lot of reading and the whole idea of bushido and the idea of the code of the warrior that there was a way to live your life that focused on martial arts, not just because you wanted to fight people and truly, because you didn't want at all because you want to fight people, right? But because of the discipline and because of the ability to do things with your body that exhibits certain levels of control and skill and finesse and that has always appealed to me. The idea that there is a beauty in motion and a beauty in the ability to harness the power that's within your body and to use it in a way that is simultaneously beautiful and violent has always held a lot of allure for me. When I say violent, I want to be very clear, it's not to be able to hurt but the fact that when you're practicing a martial art, right? Whether it's kendo or whether it is any other swordsmanship discipline, fencing, or Hapkido, Aikido, any of these martial arts; there is a necessary balance of violence and skill and it's, by its nature a fighting art, even if you never intend to use it to fight.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And certainly, that's an aspect to the conversation that comes up really often. I won't say all the time but that notion that whether or not you're using it for violent purposes, there is violence instilled in it. It has roots in violence, if nothing else and it's a contrast that not everyone acknowledges and I think, even more so, there are people who actively avoid it.

Susan Spann:

I think that's true and I think there's also a lot of people who misunderstand. They think if you're a person who enjoys martial arts, if you're a person who enjoys whether that swordsmanship, for me, swordsmanship is a large part of my martial arts journey and so, if you're someone who appreciates learning how to use a sword, there are a lot of people who can't imagine what you would use a sword for except for violent purposes when, in reality, the whole point of using a sword well is not to have to use it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. So, let's go back to you said 9 years old and you've discovered martial arts and now, you've discovered Japanese history and you're, as you described, a weird kid. I can certainly empathize with

being a weird kid and I think you were into Japanese history, I was into Greek mythology. That was kind of my big thing around that time.

Susan Spann:

I enjoyed that too so we have stuff in common.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, good stuff, good stuff. I'm assuming, at least at that time, if there were any, there weren't too many, Japanese history books for children so you're probably reading some fairly comprehensive adult level books.

Susan Spann:

I was, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And what was it you were finding, I mean, you talked about bushido and your love for that code, one of the things I asked a lot of our guests, when they find martial arts and it really clicks for them, it seems like for nearly everyone, it's filling some kind of gap in their lives. As you found Japanese history and martial arts, are you aware of what place that was kind of filling up for you?

Susan Spann:

I wasn't at the time but I am now. As an adult I can look back and say I was a bullied kid and I was never a kid who was going to get into a fight with somebody but I was a kid who would retreat but I felt very different. I never felt like I belonged. I said I was a weird kid, I had glasses, I did a lot of reading. I was doing swordplay in the backyard with sticks but not really knowing what to do with it and I think that what martial arts and Asian history did for me is that I learned very early on about the onna-bugeisha. The women of the samurai class who were trained as warriors who wore the two swords, sometimes even dressed as men although they weren't trying to be men. They were still women but they were warriors and they were accepted as warriors and this idea that these women were both a part of their society and separate from their society because they were so rare. That really resonated with me. It was this idea that you could be different and yet, still have a place and not just a place but a place that was an honorable place and so, I really felt as though I was in the wrong time in some ways. Although as an adult, I really prefer having flushed toilets so I'm not sure that I would really want to go back in the 16th century. However, I really liked this idea that there was a time and a place when being different didn't necessarily make you have to be alone.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And how did that understanding of history and that passion for that time and that together and separate, how did that guide your training?

Susan Spann:

When I studied, when I started studying martial arts, I wasn't interested in just going to a, oh, let's take Karate, let's find a class that everybody goes to, a commercial type of studio. I really wanted to find a studio that was teaching, that was not going to do social promotion for belts. If you didn't deserve the next belt, you weren't going to get it no matter how long you studied because that way when I got another belt, I knew that I had earned that belt and I wasn't just being handed the belt because I'd been there 6 months and everybody who's been there 6 months gets black belts, you know? You know what I mean? I studied for several years and managed a blue belt in Taekwondo and was about to test for my brown belt when I moved and ended up leaving the studio but for me, it was important, I guess the right way of putting it was to do it for real, instead of just doing it for something to do. To do it right, to find a very traditional master. I take a very traditional approach to these sorts of things. When I studied archery, I didn't study with compound bows. I studied with an Osage Orange Bow and a Mongolian Double Recurve Horse bow as well as a Japanese bow. I sought out more traditional forms, not because I think there's anything wrong with any form that is…what resonates with someone. I think that one beautiful thing about martial arts is that people can find the art that works for them and study it but for me, it was about tradition.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, absolutely. Now, I'm not sure how to ask this next question because I know a bit of the later points in the timeline but, at some point, from our youthful interest in Japanese history and your training, we fast-forward and, listeners, I'm going to give some of these away, you're in Japan right now. You live there.

Susan Spann:

I do. I live in Tokyo.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, let's go back and tell me how that happened?

Susan Spann:

Well, I graduated from college and went to law school because that was, I really wanted to get a PhD in Asian…my undergraduate degree backup. My undergraduate degree is in Chinese and Japanese history, language and culture and with a specialization in Japanese history and specifically, the Motomachi period which the period right before the Tokugawa shogunate began which is the 14th, 15th century, 16th century and then also, in the Edo period which is the 17th century and the Muromachi and the Tokugawa

shogunate and so, after I graduated, I really wanted to get a PhD but I was concerned about people trying to make a living because I wanted to be a novelist and I wanted to have a PhD and neither of those really seemed like good, solid income choices so I went into law school which is what my father had done and my great-grandfather had done and it seemed like a safe thing to do and I practiced law for almost 20 years and in 2012, I did, in fact, had my first novel published and continued to practice law, wanted to break away from that but didn't really know how and then, 2 years ago, I decided I was going to move to Japan. Hopefully, to break away from safe is the way I would describe it and tread climb a hundred mountains a year and figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and 3 months before I was due to leave for Japan, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and so, I had to put my plans on hold. I had surgery, I had chemotherapy and 14 days after finishing chemotherapy, I moved to Japan and I climbed those hundred mountains in 2018 and at the end of that hundred summits journey, I realized that what I really wanted was to stay here and to dedicate my life to writing novels, climbing mountains, studying martial arts and studying shodō, traditional Japanese calligraphy and that's what I do now.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What would 9 year old you, as she's discovering these books, forming these ideas of what living in Japan is because, I assume at that point, you hadn't travelled to Japan.

Susan Spann:

No.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What would she say about what you're doing now?

Susan Spann:

I really wish I could let her know because she would have had a lot less angst along the way if she had known that it was all going to work out.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And it sounded like there was some resolve in having cancer. Just the way you talked about that, a lot of people will set up an anecdote, a story like that and it becomes an emotional point in the conversation. This is one of those things that after you've interviewed hundreds of people, you start to pick up on these little nuances. This is something that happens in my seat that, listeners, you might not pick up on these stuff but you kind of served it up for me. I felt the emotion building there but it didn't go the direction that it typically goes. It wasn't, and I got breast cancer and I had to put my dream on hold for a little while and this and this, it was and then 14 days later, I left.

Susan Spann:

Well, it was 6 months.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, sure, but obviously, you couldn't leave in the midst of that but the way you described it was as soon as I could possibly leave, I mean, that's what I heard, I left.

Susan Spann:

That's exactly the way it was when I looked at it. The first time I met with my oncologist, I said to him, I can't believe this is happening. I have plans. I'm supposed to be leaving for Japan to climb a hundred mountains and I don't want this dream to die and I was very lucky and my cancer was found at Stage 1-B so even though it was very aggressive, it was not in my lymph system so I had 4 months of [00:16:35] chemotherapy and, as I said, [00:16:38] surgery and was able to leave. I'm now getting ready to have my 2-year post cancer checkup and anticipated being clear as the last one was but my oncologist said something very important and I thought it resonated with me and I held it very close. What he said was you don't have to stop your dream of climbing a hundred mountains. It's just that now, you have to climb a hundred and one and the first one will be the hardest.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow, it sounds like a title of a book and I don't mean that facetiously, that's a perfect analogy.

Susan Spann:

Ironically, it actually is sort of a title of a book.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Is it really?

Susan Spann:

The book is called Climb and it releases in 2020. It's about the cancer journey and climbing the mountains and the way that life and the experience transformed me into having the courage to shuck off the anchor. My husband and I, we sold our house. We got rid of all of our belongings. We moved to Japan with no anchors back in the States. We have family there but no anchors back in the States to, I was going to spend this year and we were going to figure out what was going to happen at the end of it and the decision was to stay here and it all fell into place but this has been where my heart has been calling me to for the last decade and probably longer than that, truthfully, so I'm very glad to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Typically on the show, I don't bring up people's spouses too often but I think that we have to here because one does not sell everything, pick up, move to the other side of the world and bring their

spouse without either a tremendous amount of fortune, in that they have the same dream, or some kind of…well, I'm not even going to speculate on the other side of that so, if you don't mind, how did that all work?

Susan Spann:

Sure. My husband is a wonderful man and he is also actually a martial artist. He has studied different kinds of martial arts for years and competed some when he was living in Florida and he had never been to Japan, speaks no Japanese and I literally went to him one day and said, we have to move to Japan. This is what's in my heart. It's my dream and he looked at me and said what? And I said, I got to climb these mountains and go do this and he just kind of looked at me and I think it took him all of a second and a half to say okay. That's just the kind of person he is. He's always been very, very supportive of the dream and he's an artist himself, graphic artist, and so, for him, it was not as difficult. He'd worked in the video game industries, flight tester and things like that and then, he was a stay-home dad while our son was in school and our son had actually graduated from college and moved to Japan. Sometimes, the acorn doesn't fall away from the tree at all and so, he was living in Japan and so, basically, he's our only child and so when I said I've got to do this, he said, well, keep the family together, lets do it. Here we are with our cat in Tokyo.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We're going to pull this back and talk more about you and your journey in books and martial arts in a moment but I want to kind of wrap up this circle a little bit and what's it been like for your family? What's it been like to move there? How close are you to your son and all the other kind of logistical family things that the listeners are listening thinking oh, my family.

Susan Spann:

It was really interesting because when I first arrived, I had applied for a journalism visa because I had signed a book contract to write this book Climb about this decision and to break free from safe and climb a hundred mountains and try it and find the courage to pursue my dreams when I had been afraid of everything my whole life a week before I got the cancel diagnosis. So, when I arrived in Japan, they had refused my journalism visa because apparently writing a book doesn't make you a journalist, true story, which we found out 7 days before we moved so when we arrived, I was on a cultural activities visa which long-way around round robin hood fun way to say it was very difficult to get an apartment. The realtor told me that she could only find one apartment in south Tokyo that would rent a "unemployed" because I was a writer, which apparently is unemployed, not too far from the truth, and a foreigner with a husband and a cat, which also was difficult, and so, she said do you want to see it and I said yes and we're driving down the street to the apartment and I recognized the 7/11 on the corner and I said I know that 7/11. We are about 300 yards from my son's apartment.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow! And, I'm going to guess, that at that moment you recognize the 7/11, something in your head said this is going to work.

Susan Spann:

Yeah, I knew it was and the apartment was beautiful and they let us in 7 days later which was 7 days before I went to the far north to Hokkaido to climb some very large mountains and live volcanoes so it all worked out. The timing of this past year has been one long series of fortuitous events or non-coincidences, depending on which way your belief system runs but it has been a pretty amazing year and it's wonderful to have my family here together and just to be able to have landed on my feet which I suppose is what all good martial artists try to do, right? You go for the back flip and you really hope that you don't land on your nose.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We might make some comments about the BJJ community and their desire to be on their back but it's still about where you're comfortable whether it's on your literal feet or figurative feet. It's about finding that place that you feel comfortable.

Susan Spann:

This is true. Control the mat, let's put it that way, instead of letting the mat control you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Now, what was that first hike like?

Susan Spann:

It was hilarious, to be totally honest with you. Bear in mind, I said I was going to climb a hundred mountains and you're talking to somebody who had climbed exactly one mountain in her life and it almost killed me, so whatever possessed me that I could climb a hundred of them, including Mt. Fuji and suddenly, it was absolutely bizarre that this came to me as something that I needed to do as a vision quest and amazingly, on the far side of it, I'm now a mountain climber which is great but that first mountain, I just didn't, I literally went at it with this attitude of this I'll climb up until I can't go up anymore and that's kind of what I'll do and it took me all of 5 minutes to realize that mountain climbing is difficult and it's more trekking, bear in mind. The mountains in Japan are not Everest-sized mountains. Mt. Fuji is the highest. It's 3,776 meters. We're not talking, my friends who live in Colorado kind of laugh at me and they're like yeah, you climb, we'll call them mountains for your sake but it is a reality that when you haven't climbed one at all, any mountain is big.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I don't want to give anything away from the book but did you climb a hundred?

Susan Spann:

I did! I limbed a hundred mountains. I did it within 370 days of finishing chemotherapy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's pretty powerful. Now that, I imagine, transition mentally from, as you said, a few minutes in climbing the first mountain and thinking hey, this is really hard and I suspect some doubt came in, probably some judgment because I'm imagining myself being there, saying I moved here to do this and this is very hard and I don't know that I want to do this anymore but how do I extricate myself? You didn't. you just kept going.

Susan Spann:

There were moments when I would ask myself, why didn't u decide to eat a hundred ice cream sundaes or bathe in a hundred onsen or see a hundred waterfalls or do one of a hundred other things that would not have involved hours and hours and hours of sweaty, hot, physical labor? But having committed, one thing martial arts did teach me is that everyone pretty much sucks at everything to begin with, right? No matter which martial art you pick up, you will be bad for a long time until you're not bad anymore. Mountains are the same.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you think if you hadn't committed to writing this book before you started, you might have been less likely to finish?

Susan Spann:

No, because the decision to climb a hundred mountains wasn't done for the book. The book came later. I decided that, for some reason, I had it in my head that the way that I was going to face y fears and get over the fact that I was afraid of everything and to tie to a safe career that I found unfulfilling in many ways and to a life that I found unfulfilling in many ways and for some reason, I just, it just came to me and I just knew that if I came to Japan and if I climbed a hundred mountains here, I would be transformed and so, having made that personal commitment, I was not going to fail.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Tell us about that last mountain.

Susan Spann:

The last mountain was really interesting because I did it 3 times, meaning I climbed 3 different mountains. I had a friend who came from the States, most of my climbs I did solo, I climbed Fuji, my 75-year old mother came from the States, climbed Mt. Fuji with me and a couple of family friends but then, the last mountain, I went and climbed a series of mountains in places that were very important to me. I

climbed Mt. Inari in Kyoto which is the site of Bushiminari Taishō which is a shrine that's famous for the 10,000 Red Tori gates that lined the slopes. Many people have probably seen photos of it and I have pictures of it on my Facebook and blog if people haven't seen it. it's very impressive and I love it but I had climbed it in July. I couldn't climb it but I climbed it again with my friend who came and then, the next day, we went down to Nara which is where a lot of the elements of what we know is Japanese culture began and I climbed a sacred mountain in Nara city and that was actually technically, mountain number 100 but it was very small. It's only about 300 meters so it's not much of a mountain. So then, the next day, we went to Kōya-san which is one of the most sacred mountains in Japan which is where Kōbō-Daishi who is also known as Kūkai was known. He was a priest who brought esoteric Buddhism back to Japan from China, 8th century and he's also credited in creating the Kana syllabary that's used to write Japanese phonetically. He established the center of meditation and learning in Kōya-san which is a mountain, high-altitude valley ringed with peaks and I climbed Manisan, which is one of the 3 sacred mountains of Kōya-san, the Kōya-san Sansan, and that was the 3rd hundred summit and by doing them in 3 with a mountain I had climbed before and loved and a mountain that was very sacred to Japan's origins and then, I have personal connections to Kōya-san that are very special to me, it basically brought the whole journey full circle and let me complete it in a way that felt truly complete.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You talked about wanting to tackle this because of fear, you're looking to overcome fear and I think the words you used were afraid of everything. Did that happen?

Susan Spann:

It did. It did. I actually had a moment when I was in Hokkaido, about two-thirds of the way up the peaks when I was about halfway finished, actually, and one night, I was getting ready to climb the mountain and this is going to sound really weird and woo-woo, but truth is, woo-woo more than fiction, I guess sometimes, and I have had recurrent nightmares my whole life and that night as I was getting ready to climb this mountain, where we climbed up the side of the waterfall the next day and we're sleeping at a mountain hut and I had a dream, one of my old nightmares where I used to argue with someone from my past all the time and instead of arguing, this person from my past, basically, extended an olive branch and I write more on the book about the extent of the dream but when I woke up, instead of having fought with this person, I had made peace and I realized when I woke up, it wasn't about this, the nightmares wasn't about this person from my past. That was just the face my own subconscious chose to wear and that my whole life, I had not accepted myself and that finally happened and after that happened, I was able to work through fear and come to a place of confidence and so, yeah, it did happen.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's pretty powerful and how has all of this has affected your training? This is a martial arts show and, as much as we're wandering around, I'm curious, because you've got this distinct points of time, hard lines. Childhood and being sick and being in Japan and then, being in Japan on the other side of fear and I'm sure we can find and draw plenty of other lines but how has all of this and then, if we were to look from now backwards, how has this affected your training?

Susan Spann:

I had gone through a period where I've always practiced one martial arts or another throughout my history and as I got older, once I had graduated from law school and I was studying Taekwondo and Hapkido and then, I had to move and I had to leave my dojo which was very sad for me and then, I picked up archery again and was really studying archery for a while. I studied knife-throwing for a while, knife and tomahawk, and did that for a while and we moved to Japan and I had to get rid of my sword and I had to get rid of my, which I had to have practiced with, and I had to get rid of my bows and so, when I came, I was getting sick and you can't really do a lot of that when in chemo anyway and then, when I came to Japan, I had wanted for a long time to study kendo here with a master but I didn't have time with all these climbing. I told myself, you can only do so many things climbing for a year because if you do the math, a hundred mountains in 365 days doesn't leave a whole lot of extra time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, no, especially if recovery is a part of the process.

Susan Spann:

I climbed in on all 4 of Japan's major islands. I climbed in more than half the prefectures and I climbed at all but one of the major regions of Japan over that year so I've seen a lot of this country in the last year and it's wonderful but I did find time to start studying shodō or traditional Japanese calligraphy with a master here and I found that the level of peace and meditation that is involved in shodō, I've truly come to an understanding now. As a historian, I knew that calligraphy is actually considered as one of the martial arts by a lot of the samurai during the medieval period. It was considered to be a sign of culture and refinement very similar to being good with swords and it's only now that I have been studying with a very respected sensei and she is actually one of the senior students of a man who is a national living treasure calligrapher that I have come to understand why, why it makes sense, because she talks about the power in the strokes but the power in the stroke is not just making a bold dark black line. Sometimes the power involves making the thinnest of thin lines using only one hair from the tip of the brush but not allowing that line to wobble, not allowing that line to be weak and it's the same kind of focused power that you need when you're focusing Ki to break a board or when you are performing a kata at the high-end and you need every move to be perfect. It's about fluidity, it's about grace, it's about strength and control and it's about being able to harness rather than subordinate what comes from within you and so, I would say that and also, the other thing that I hold from these hundred summits was the level of

perseverance that martial arts taught. Martial arts teaches you that if you try something and you can't do it the first time, I remember when I was first learning to break boards in Taekwondo and man, did I bruise my wrist! I mean, my hand, my wrist, because I was doing it wrong but my sensei wouldn't let me stop. I mean, obviously, I was able to stop at the end of class, I mean, he didn't actually want me to hurt myself, I'll give that little disclaimer before anybody goes freaking out and saying he was a bad man, but he kept saying you can do this, you can do this, you have to focus, you have to focus, you can do this. You just need to keep trying and I wanted to just give up. I just wanted to just say you know what? I don't need the new belt, it's fine. I can't do this part. I'll just go back to katas and he's like you can't go back to katas. You have to do this because you can and I remember that when I was in the mountains and it's part of what got me through. This idea that it's not about it's hard now, so I'm going to stop. You can do this so execute it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There're a lot of lessons in there.

Susan Spann:

It was a year full of lessons.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it's a pretty powerful year.

Susan Spann:

Yeah, it was also embarrassing sorts of lessons like don't eat raisins on a mountaintop when there's not a bathroom.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm laughing because I know. I've made mistakes such as these. Dried fruit packs really well in your backpack.

Susan Spann:

It does and it packs as well in your stomach.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, the extent of the benefits ends there.

Susan Spann:

That's dark magic indeed when that happens, isn't it?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I want to go back to the calligraphy because I don't think we've had anyone else on the show who's talked about calligraphy and if they had, it's been much more surface than the way that you're presenting it so I want to revisit this idea and this is not critical but because I don't have the understanding of calligraphy to put it in a similar basket as Karate or other traditional martial arts is very foreign to me and you talked about the brush strokes, you talked about that, but I'm wondering if you might go a bit deeper and help the listeners understand a bit more about those similarities and why they were considered similar or together.

Susan Spann:

Traditional calligraphy is not just about being able to write a kanji. I can write a kanji, you can write a kanji, anybody who can copy something can write a kanji but the essence of calligraphy is actually about writing strokes, there are certain recognized masters, many of whom have been considered masters since the 5th, 6th century, Chinese masters of calligraphy which is where Japan got it's calligraphy at all was imported from China and similarly to studying martial arts. The way you learn the martial arts is to practice a form. You learn how to throw a punch, you learn the form to throw a punch. Anybody can throw a punch but can anybody throw a punch the way a black belt throws a punch? Of course not. The black belt knows a lot about harnessing Ki and about the actual, not just the form of the punch, but if you give a black belt a spot on the wall, little tiny one, hit that spot every time the same way with your third knuckle every single time, he's going to be able to do that. She's going to be able to do that because they have the control that when they do the kata, it looks exactly the same the 50,000th time they do the kata as the 55,000th time they do the kata, whatever it is because part of the beauty in the martial art is performing the form in an archetypal way, right? This idea that you are pursuing, not just your own style although at some point development of a style is appropriate but when you're first learning, what you learn is to copy and you learn to duplicate what you've been shown and you repeat it over and over and over and over and that's what belt testing is. You have to demonstrate that you can perform those skills the right way and as it happens, traditional calligraphy also has a testing system and it is also ranked kyu and Dan just like martial arts are and over the past year, in October of last year, my sensei said that I was ready to start testing and as of today, I am 10th Dan which is actually the lowest rank. 1st Dan is the best and 10th Dan is the worst but I am a 10th Dan kanji calligrapher and I am 4th kyu and I'm testing for 3rd kyu in kana, in the ancient kana style and the way that the progression is very similar. You study a form and then, you test in that form and if you pass in the test in that form, you are advanced and you learn a more advanced form and so, there are a lot of similarities in the way that rank is established, in the way that titles are established. One of the things that you had mentioned is a lot of your guests have a title in martial arts. Eventually, I will gain a title I calligraphy as well. What it is? I do not know. I was given a calligraphy name which is something that you're not given until you reach a certain level of progression and so, I have a calligraphy name now and it was bestowed on me by my sensei and so, a lot of the parallels have to do with both the way it was learned and the idea that, just as

martial arts is not just about the physical aspect of a punch or kicking or performing any form, anyone who could learn the motion could do the form, could do the kata but would they actually be performing the kata the same way a black belt, who is harnessing Ki to do it, would perform it? Absolutely not. Totally different experience. It's like the difference in looking at a painting of a bird and looking at a bird. One of them is infused with life and the other is just a copy and calligraphy is very similar. I could hand you a brush and I could show you a form and you could write it and maybe you could even make a passable imitation of what was in the paper, right? But there's a life to calligraphy that's been written by somebody who knows how to harness that interior energy. One last story and I know I've been talking a long time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, please, keep talking. It makes my job easy.

Susan Spann:

My sensei recently asked me to participate in an exhibition in January at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art which is a big honor for somebody at my level and she wanted me to write Kōyagire which is a section of the old Kokin Wakashū, 14th century, one of the oldest collection of Japanese poetry and I'm writing based on the old manuscript and basically, what you're doing is copying the manuscript and I produced what I thought was, I mean, a reasonably not terrible version for someone at my level and I took it in for *kinzaku, for correction and she looked at it and she was looking at the pages and she paged through and she pointed to a line and she said I see that you are hesitant and sad, why does your calligraphy look sad? And I looked at it and I thought sad? The truth was I was sad that day. I was sad because this calligraphy was so beautiful and I wasn't doing a good job of copying and she saw that in the lines and I went home and spent an hour looking at those pages until I, too, could recognize why it was that they look sad and I had known that calligraphy conveyed because I knew when I was practicing martial arts, when I went to Taekwondo, if I was angry or frustrated or sad, my performance was off. You can't harness that Ki properly. You cannot produce the beautiful art, the fluidity of movement when your brain is somewhere else and it's not that you have to be focused because, of course, just like martial arts, the best mind to have for calligraphy is no mind. The more you think, the worst you do.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's some pretty strong stuff right there. I'll confess I just got a little emotional within that. Put a few things that I'm going through so I appreciate that on a personal level.

Susan Spann:

Glad to help. That's part of why I climbed a hundred summits. One of the things that I really hoped in writing the book, one of the things I'm hoping is that I can inspire people to understand that you don't

know what cards you're dealt. You can only play the cards that are in your hand and you better play them to the best of your ability.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, sure. Has your calligraphy experience and like the story you told us, has that had an influence on your martial arts?

Susan Spann:

Absolutely. It's made me absolutely determined that I'm going to find a kendo studio and get back to active practice as soon as possible which, for me, means as soon as I get my next mystery to the publisher in September.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. Everything we've talked about today has been looking back or looking at today. Let's look into the future. What do you see for you, for your time in Japan, for your family, your training, for any of the above and anything else I haven't mentioned?

Susan Spann:

I'm going to continue writing my books. I write mysteries in addition to this book that was a non-fiction book. I write mysteries that are set in 16th century Japan, a Ninja detective, who's not one of the superman from the movies but an actual historical shinobi partnered up with a Jesuit priest so I do a lot of travelling and a lot of research into historical martial arts for those books and so, I want to keep writing those books, keep researching because I love the fact that I get to travel, I get to talk with people who are practitioners of old martial arts so not just modern versions of people who are still legitimately trying to practice older arts, trying to find a living and that's a challenge but finding people who understand about the weaponry, who understand about the way it was used, the espionage, the things that were going on. That's really great and interesting stuff. I hope to find a kendo studio. I would like to also start practicing maybe some traditional Japanese archery here with a master if I can find somebody is not that difficult. You can see people with those walking around very often on the subway which is always interesting and I want to continue practicing calligraphy. That's an art that I will never give up because it gives me great peace. It's a wonderful thing to look up and realize 3 hours have passed and you have not worried about a thing because you have not thought about it. You've just been focused on the lines and the power of the lines and the beauty of the traditional poetry that you're writing because I write all Japanese poetry in calligraphy. It's the old style and continuing to improve my Japanese which is still pretty terrible but better than it used to be. I'm great if you show me a 14th century manuscript. If you ask me to read a shopping list then I'm pretty much toast.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The differences in vocabulary, yes.

Susan Spann:

Exactly and so, that's basically it. Martial arts, maybe even study with my husband, that's something we've never done before and study martial arts together. We decided early on that it was probably not a good idea to spar with each other just on principle but we're older now and maybe he can handle me knocking him down. I can't handle him knocking me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Statistically, I will agree just based on what I've seen.

Susan Spann:

He has actually always been good with me knocking him down. I have been blessed with losing so he was probably being nice to me and saying but anyway, the future holds wonderful things, for me, every day and I know a lot of people say this but every day is a blessing. I was told in November of 2017 that if I had waited another week to get my mammogram, it was possible that I could've been stage 2 and if I had waited another 6 weeks, I would have been stage 3.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's pretty aggressive.

Susan Spann:

Yeah, it was very aggressive. It was the highest possible aggressiveness rating for a breast cancer that there is so, for me, I really do feel like I was reborn. In November, I actually celebrate my birthday and really, in November, and what I'm going to do in July now, because that's when my life started over and so, for me, what does the future holds? I can't tell you what it holds a year from now or 10 years from now or if I have years from now but I can tell you that tomorrow holds calligraphy and it holds walking and I can tell you that this Saturday, Sunday and Monday, it holds a 30-kilometer through hike the mountains of Tokyo and so, to the extent that I have the time, the future holds martial arts, holds calligraphy, it holds nature and it holds everything that I can pack into the time that I have.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sound wonderful, sounds great! Now, if people want to find you, your books, social media, websites, any of that stuff, where would they go?

Susan Spann:

Easiest, well, my website is susanspann.com, S as in San, P as in Peter, A, N as in Nancy with one on the second and another in the end, that's susanspann.com. On Facebook, it's Susan Spann Author, I post a

lot of pictures on Facebook. My blog has not been as active for the last couple months because I was finishing a manuscript but it will be picking up again and I post, again, a lot of pictures from Japan. Everything from mountains to weird cultural things to some of the best looking desserts you've ever seen in your life and martial arts related things. I travel to a lot of sights to Ninja village in Iga-Ueno and all kinds of things so I have pictures from that and swords from the museums and all kinds of fun things that I run into over here and I also have an Instagram which is @susanspann.author and again on Facebook, it's /susanspannauthor.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool, cool and of course, we'll link all those on the show notes.

Susan Spann:

Wonderful, thank you very much.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, one final things as we head out, what parting words would you give to the people listening today?

Susan Spann:

Parting words that I would give you is do it today. Whatever it is that you want to do that you keep telling yourself, I'll find a way to do that, happen, next year, next month when I can, when I have the money, when I have the time, you will never have the time to do anything, you will have to make it so whatever your dream is, don't say I'll do it when I can and especially don't say I'll do it when I retire. Find a way to make it happen.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had a great time at today's episode and I learned a lot. Not just about the guest but about myself. There's some good stuff to unpack and I think I'm going to be referring back to today's conversation quite a bit so thank you for coming on the show and I look forward to next year's book and I appreciate you being so open. If you want to check out the show notes, you can find them at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, we've got photos, we've got links, we've got transcripts. You can sign up for the newsletter and you can follow us on social media. We are @whistlekick on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. If you use the code PODCAST15 in whistlekick.com, you'll save 15% off everything we've got going on over there and if you want to email me, jeremy@whistlekick.com. That will get to me directly. Thank you so much for your time, for your support, until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!