

On The Eve of Nidan

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November 30, 2011.

Now I go within to reach back and touch memories: things I have noticed along the way. Tomorrow is my exam; but tomorrow is also another training day – not only in the dojo. In life every day is a training day, and every day is also a test. No matter who one is, or what one does, or where one lives. Some reflections I'm having today on the eve of nidan.

June 14, 2011.

It's 11pm at Petaluma hospital ER. My nidan exam was to be this coming weekend; the operative word is "was". Four hours ago I took a fall on the mat and separated my shoulder. Outside the dojo in pain, I sat on a wood bench and looked up. My sensei is standing there. "Well, no test for me," I say. He softly replied, "Maybe *this is the test.*" Moments ago the ER doc had good news. The injury is not major and I will heal. She says it's a matter of patience and time. Isn't that the truth – she, the doctor – could be sensei's best friend, showing up here tonight to remind me that aikido, like life, is something we live within. Tonight begins my entry into six-months from which I can turn and look back so I might move forward again. Tonight is irimi tenkan.

At the moment I landed on my shoulder and it separated I didn't take it as an opportunity to irimi and tenkan - but I do now.

September 30, 2011.

I'm sitting seiza at the recreation center gym in Incline Village, NV. The weekend seminar hosted by Truckee Aikido has just opened. It's an annual gathering for aikidoka from Two Rock Aikido (Petaluma) and North Bay Aikido (Santa Cruz). Richard Sensei, bows in and turns, "Let's practice Aikido". A wave of hot energy surges within me because these three words ("let's practice aikido" is his standard opening to every class) sound so differently in this moment. Prior to tonight I've interpreted this greeting as an invitation to engage in a martial art full of techniques: katate dore and irimi nage and kaiten nage and kata dore, etc. Tonight I'm struck that my journey these past eleven years stretches far beyond a martial art, or taking a sit fall or doing a soft front roll or learning to knee walk. Tonight I hear his invitation as "let's practice living in accordance with life's principles" – principles of mastery important to all: martial artists, musicians, lawyers, teachers, physicists, carpenters, farmers, soldiers, politicians, priests, rabbis, casino floor workers, sports coaches, workers on the floor of a stock exchange, bankers, prison guards, etc. Yes, tonight, "let's practice aikido" will that I perform certain martial art movements; but this shrinks in comparison to how I engage with people outside the dojo: how I listen, how I walk @through an airport, how I comport myself when passing through immigration in some far off land, how I pay my bills and file my taxes, how I engage with my ex-wife, etc. All of this is suddenly included into possibility of "ai " and "ki" and "do" as a practice.

Before this night I didn't think of Richard Sensei's class greeting this way – but I do now.

1992. A Late Spring day at 4pm

I am walking aside a pond in Lake County, California. Two government-issue general purpose medium tents stand before me; butted together they form the classroom for an

intense seminar that I'm conducting. A few months ago I hired Richard Strozzi-Heckler to come here today and facilitate a leadership simulation, The Samurai Game®. Richard is fast becoming a friend and colleague. The Game is an aikido-based invention of his friend, George Leonard. I don't realize it at this time, how much Richard and George have contributed to the world as aikido sensei as well as through their individual and collective teachings based on aikido.

About a half hour ago the men I was in charge of followed Richard outside the tents for some grounding and centering exercises and "two-step", plus something he calls *walking into empty spaces*. Now on our way back to the tent Richard turns and asks me a simple question, "What is your practice?" I haven't a clue what he is talking about, and in that moment I'm tongue-tied, though my internal mental chatter is running non-stop. I look around me. A vivid world explodes and settles like dust: the sounds of birds and frogs, the warmth of sunlight striking my left cheek, the texture of the air stirring my hair, the smell of pond water, the crunch of my boots on rocks beneath my feet. Richard's exercises and his question have caused me lift my head and reach out with my senses to connect with all that surrounds me.

Inside the tent he quotes Taisen Deshimaru, "You must concentrate upon and consecrate yourself wholly to each day, as though a fire were raging in your hair." In the moment it's impossible for me to know that in eight years in addition to the word "friend", I will associate "zanshen" and "sensei" when thinking and speaking of him.

Mindful connection. Teachers. Both are important, regardless of one's profession or study or occupation or position in life. All of us, whether walking to tent or walking through life, no matter who we are, if we look we will find many sensei. If we truly commit to connect we understand zanshen.

I didn't think about teachers and present mindedness in this context in 1992 – but I do now.

January 10 1997. Mid-afternoon.

I am sitting legs sprawled, on Capitola Beach south of Santa Cruz. The sunlight is striking my face, as is a brisk sea breeze. The wet sand soaks through my trousers and puddles of water surround me. The tide is coming in. An hour ago my friend, John Gallagher, and I were walking over boulders and I slipped and fell. A horrible pain shot up and down the left side of my body. I heard my left femur split. John turned to ask, "Are you OK?" In hopeful denial I replied, "I think I've dislocated my hip." Broken the hip was, but broken I didn't want it to be.

John has gone to fetch help, leaving me alone. Down the stretch of beach a disheveled man with dreadlocks is ambling towards me. As he approaches I tense. I am helpless. Easy prey. Two things have kept me conscious the past half hour: deep breathing, and my incessant humming "Think of Me", a song from Phantom of the Opera. The man now stands over me. "Are you OK?" I respond, "No, I'm not. I think my left hip is broken." He then acts differently than my fear has guarded me tense against. He extends an offer and asks, "Is there anything I can do to help you?" I accept his offer, "Can you hold my hand and help keep me from passing out?" He reaches out and we begin to talk. A little while later the police and paramedics arrive. My helper (training partner?) vanishes.

The paramedics assess the situation. They say the only way to safely get me off the beach is: first, carry me directly into the on-coming waves and beyond the boulders; second, move sideways parallel to both waves and beach; and third, turn and walk directly with the

flow of the waves back toward to the beach. It's a painful journey full of twists, turns, bumps, jolts, laughter, screams, but it works. We get to where we're going. The next morning a surgeon skillfully aligns and joins together my split femur, wraps it with wire, screws a plate to it and then bolts the whole contraption into my hip. I live five days in a hospital and go home.

Three years later Richard (by now I'm calling him "sensei") introduces me to strange words which unfold into profound ideas: "uke" – a would-be attacker who ultimately becomes an ally to a life of growth (my stranger with the ragged hair); "onagai shimasu" – an offer made and replied to by training partners ("Is there anything I can do to help you?" "You can hold my hand"); "randori" – when we find ourselves in the midst of forces (waves and incoming tide) beyond our control, "aiki" when we blend with those forces; "get off the line" when we allow those forces to have their way, yet we remain in connection with our own needs and sensibilities and core values. Paramedics, I discover, know the importance of "irimi", and "get off the line", and "tenkan". And they get it that life is randori.

On a January day fifteen years ago, I sat broken and helpless on a beach, and was carried to an ambulance and was then pieced back together. I didn't think of that episode when it happened in the ways just described above – but I do now.

The year is 2000. Today is May 1.

About a year or so ago I started bringing my younger two sons to Richard's dojo. He invited me to come here in the evenings to find refuge. The futon in the back is my perch from which I watch his classes. My sons snuggle and sleep on my lap. It's a peaceful place, yet filled with swirling energy and falling bodies. I like it here. Outside this building mine is a world of anger, disgust, judgment and disillusion – the residue of my second divorce.

Tonight, on May Day, I put on a gi and take my first official step onto the mat. I come face-to-face with a truth about me: I put ten units of effort into achieving one unit of result. How do I know? Within five minutes I am sweating and exhausted. No one else around me will break a sweat for another half hour, and some won't even sweat at all.

Over the next few months it becomes clear (not because anyone tells me) that the anger, disgust, judgment and disillusion is a world I carry within. Who tells me so? I hear it in the same voice that told me three years ago to distrust a vagabond walking towards me on Capitola Beach. I've noticed that Richard Sensei has been weaving a discourse regarding life learning outside the dojo. He speaks of it as "to embody an ability to relax under increasing amounts of pressure." I begin to realize that in all the years we have been friends, he has never defined effectiveness as mastering ways to avoid life's pressures and problems. He's only spoken of effectiveness as an ability to enter well into conflict.

I didn't think of my life struggles that way on May 1st, 2000 – but I do now.

June 2001. The day arrives for my 5th Kyu exam.

My youngest son, Alex, is here to watch. He's a 10 year-old forth-grader and he has only just now learned to read. For him school is a depressing, exasperating, frustrating place. He knows of my education and he is aware of how smart his older brother is. Within him is a world self-judgment and comparison is held. Himself vs. me. Himself vs. his brother.

During tonight's 5th Kyu exam I find it difficult to remember the meaning of certain Japanese aikido terms. My front rolls look like falling timber. There are moments when I

freeze. My back rolls look like tumbling cardboard boxes. Richard Sensei has to call out some techniques using English words. When my short span on the mat is complete I find myself in the midst of personal judgment and comparison – me vs. other aikidoka. But sensei declares with a grin, “You passed.” Later that night as I tuck Alex into bed I’m curious to know his thoughts of my test. “Wow, Dad,” he says, “You did great!” I reply, “Well thanks. But I barely got a D.” From that day Alex begins to see his father and himself differently. Coming to my Fifth Kyu exam is part of a foundation from which, ten years later, he will stand and walk taller as a man. Though he’s never stepped onto the aikido mat himself, a seed is planted that night from which he and I will appreciate each other and ourselves differently.

In 2001, I didn’t think of a 5th Kyu exam in this way when I stepped out onto the mat that night – but I do now.

November 30, 2011. On the eve of Nidan.

Two days ago my son, Alex, fainted and fell and hit his head. He was taken to an ER. Tests were conducted. We’re still unsure what caused his fainting. A picture of his head shows something the ER doctor cannot explain.

Tomorrow is my exam; but it’s also just another training day. Every day is a training day. Something uncertain happens. Every day *is the test*. No matter who one is, or what one does, or where one lives. What will I learn? I’m not sure. But I trust that my practice will be zanshin, so that I can learn from life’s sensei – teachers that live in everything around me. I trust that I will irimi so that I can tenkan. I trust I will keep my base. I trust that I will move from my center, my core values, my true hara, and that when and if I don’t that I will return to my center very soon. I trust that I will love life’s ukes, in whatever form they take because through them what is (and will be) here for me to learn from will be revealed.

I may see things differently in the future than I do now. And I hope and trust I will.