

Fortunate in Defeat

Keith Fink

My first experience with Aikido was also one of my greatest ongoing lessons. When I first arrived for my free trial class at North Texas Aikido, I observed some of the senior students practicing on one end of the mat. They were mostly men, and their strength and speed as they ran through a complex set of techniques convinced me that they were the group I would seek out to discover what Aikido was all about. I had trained in and quickly earned upper ranks in several martial arts since the time I was a teen, and was eager to prove myself to them as a serious student and competent martial artist. Russell Alvey Sensei had other plans for me, however, and assigned me to a small, unassuming woman in a white belt who would be my sole partner for the evening. It was only to be this partner, Janice, who was to show me the basic etiquette of bowing in to class and the warm-up exercises that preceded our eventual progression to actual Aikido techniques. I moved and stepped as she patiently instructed, but I was increasingly becoming frustrated at being assigned to one of the white belts, and the slow pace at which she kept me. I found myself frequently straining to see what the “serious” students were doing on the other end of the mat. When we finally turned to the katate-dori techniques that were the focus of the evening’s lessons, I had my opportunity to show everyone that I was no rank amateur and to impress upon my partner that we had been poorly matched. I was younger, stronger and practically towered over Janice. The increasing intensity of my attacks proved my point - but in a very unexpected way. For the duration of class, no matter how hard I tried to prevent it, I would find myself time and again looking up at the ceiling from flat on my back. I found myself glancing less and less often at the senior students on the other end of the mat while my eyes were slowly opening to the partner I already had. It was more than my body that took a beating that night, and I was in awe of what had taken place on the beginners’ end of the mat.

Afterwards, Sensei called me into his office for what I was sure was to be a sales pitch to get me to sign up for classes. Instead, he simply asked me how I held up with Janice, as it appeared to him that I had been on the receiving end of a sound thrashing. I had indeed, but it wasn't Janice who had been my abuser. It was my own pride. My pride, well-fed from years of being faster, stronger and a quick study at previous martial arts, led me to a false sense of superiority over the partner to whom I'd been assigned. My ignorance of the rank and experience behind that unassuming white belt further compounded my error. Janice served simply as the mirror in which I could see the ugliness of my own behavior. I was deeply ashamed - not in my physical defeat on the mat - but, rather in my prideful attitude that led to so many false assumptions and lack of respect due to my partner. Sensei had sensed my arrogance before I ever set foot on the mat, and had devised this true lesson-plan for me before class even began. So it was that he seemed genuinely surprised and pleased when I asked to sign up for classes. A bruised pride frequently turns to anger, and I wouldn't have been the first - or certainly the last - to storm out of the dojo as a result. However, there was something in Janice's calm confidence and Sensei's expectant eyes that convinced me that there was no humiliation intended in the night's events, but rather a hope that I would take away a deeper truth. It was suddenly obvious that I had so much yet to learn, and that this was to be my new home. I signed up.

Tacked on the wall behind my new Sensei's desk was a small rectangle of paper, the sort that one would pull from a fortune cookie. On it was this simple wisdom: *"Humiliation rarely leads to humility."* Had I been allowed to indulge my own prideful intentions for the night, I may have been just another bruised ego storming out of the dojo and missed out on this important life-long lesson. It is *my* great fortune that I wasn't given that opportunity.