

“Transitions”

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Please be patient with this brief narrative of my personal history; but to explain why I study Iwama Aikido now, I must explain my past.

My first lessons in the martial arts were over forty years ago. I had recently made a friend that had studied at an Okinawan Karate club. He had lived in Chicago and had just moved to Dayton. It was the summer between my freshman and sophomore year of high school. We spent that whole summer all day every day practicing.

Almost all my close friends during my high school years had three things in common, they all came from single parent households, their resources were very limited and they loved martial arts. Martial arts schools however were rare and expensive.

We shared our knowledge with one another.

One of us may have been able to study Judo, another Karate so we exchanged training tips and techniques. We also poured over martial arts books and magazines. To the best of my memory it was an article in "Black Belt Magazine" entitled "The Old Man and the Ki" that was my first encounter with the art and philosophy of Aikido. I was immediately "hooked"; now I know, it was for life.

It would be almost twenty years before I could study with an Aikido instructor. I had filled this time studying arts as close to Aikido as I could find. One of these arts was Hakkoryu Jujitsu. It was while studying this art under Shihan Dennis Palumbo that I met my senior Aikido instructor, Merit Stevens.

Merit was almost seventy years old at the time but his ability to move and redirect force was phenomenal. Sensei Stevens had a good relationship with Sensei Palumbo and often brought his Aikido students to class. I had learned a great deal from Sensei Palumbo and would have studied with him several more years however shortly thereafter he retired and moved to Golden, Colorado. There was no one that could replace him.

I was invited to join the growing numbers of Aikido enthusiasts that were forming around Merit Stevens organization but I was a little concerned about joining this group. Merit's style was Tomiki Ryu Aikido and what most distinguishes Tomiki Ryu from other styles of Aikido is its element of competition. I was very happy to discover Sensei Stevens focused his study on the practice of kata.

I thrived in this environment eventually opening my own school and reaching the rank of Sandan. It was during this period that I first met a practitioner of Iwama Aikido. More than a decade later he would become my instructor.

Mike McVey had recently opened a dojo in Yellow Springs, Ohio. A student of mine arranged our first meeting. Soon we had taken turns at joint practice sessions; first at my school and then at his. I enjoyed the Iwama style very much but was content with what I was doing in Tomiki Ryu and looked forward to continuing that study in my modest dojo.

Life intervened however and I had to give up my club. Two years earlier I had married and the child we had longed for had recently been born. I put my focus on caring for my family thinking. I would open another school at a later time.

I enjoyed my young family more than anything I had done in my life up to that point. Unfortunately during the next few years I began to experience ever more intense illness. The illness led to terrible fatigue and depression. Out of a sense of desperation I went to see a specialist in allergies. I was placed on a restrictive diet and given antigen injections. I began to recover. The sinus and ear infections disappeared along with forty pounds of excess weight and my vigor was restored.

I had always continued to practice individual forms. This gave me

physical exercise and some artistic satisfaction but it was not enough. I became increasingly aware of the large spiritual void I felt. I needed to participate actively in the Aikido community. Unfortunately Merit Stevens was gone and my most immediate instructor had retired. I contacted several schools but none of them were suitable to my needs. The final call I made was to Michael McVey. The moment he greeted me I knew I would be welcome.

It was a difficult transition, studying a new style. It was as if you spent your whole life expressing your art through modern dance and now you had to learn ballet. To the untrained they may look identical; both are expressing art through motion, but to the dancer execution of a motion using a different dance form can be quite challenging.

Helping me through this transition were the senior students as well as Sensei McVey. They were patient, helpful and respectful. The sense of community in this dojo is palpable.

It's a fair question to ask why I have spent so much time in this essay recounting my past personal experiences and the way in which I am presently treated in this dojo. The answer lay in the teachings of O'Sensei about our connections; to each other, to nature and to all existence. There are many schools of the martial arts that have valid techniques but not many that turn the study of "bu" into such a practical method of affirming life. I believe this dojo and this style will allow me to participate in passing on Aikido ideals to the next generation making the last decades of my life fruitful.

Aiki
We dance upon
the boundaries of our
reality.
Unknowing;
we touch the infinite.

NJH