

A Sandan Essay

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Aikido of San Luis Obispo

“Please, please tell me you’re kidding,” I pleaded. After all, he had already suffered a devastating accident one year ago immediately following his last demonstration for rank. Several of us lightheartedly reminded him to exercise due care as he neared his next promotion to brown belt, just weeks away.

But of course, the bearer of this terrible news would never utter such a cruel joke, and the awful realization slowly, painfully, began to sink in. I was his uke, and no sooner had I finished reading the email confirming the arrangements for his brown belt pre-test scheduled for that evening did I hear he would not be making it. We would in fact no longer be training together. Not ever. With haunting irony, he had moments before tragically and inexplicably suffered another motorcycle crash, this one far more dire....

There are many ideas to choose from when deciding on an essay regarding Aikido: Learning how to protect myself while learning how *not* to fight. The importance of Perspective, a life lesson illustrated physically in the art of blending. The idea of posture and grounding which transcends the strengthening of technique alone to enhancing an openness and confidence in personal existence and world view. But it is the death of a well-loved Aikidoka, and more specifically why it affected me so deeply, that I recently find myself contemplating.

My relationship with him extended beyond the dojo walls, as many friendships developed from training do, but I was not his best friend. I did not frequently hang out with him. I did not know his taste in music nor his favorite author. I did not know he skydived. I did not know his siblings’ names. I did not know he had a new girlfriend. In fact, to many people, including myself, it would seem I hardly knew him at all. Yet the impact of his sudden and shocking death just hours before we were to meet left me overwhelmed with a profound and pervasive sadness. And I wondered how the passing of someone I barely knew could possibly affect me so much.

But as I reflected again on what Aikido asks of our training as well as working at times exclusively with one partner, it dawned on me. Simply speaking, I realized I knew him far better than I had imagined. I knew how he moved. I knew how he processed. I knew how he smiled. I knew how he felt. And I knew how he cared. I had an intimate, if intangible, understanding of his core. His center, his strength, his compassion. His very real being.

Of course, I do not claim to have known him any better, nor care for him with any more affection than those closest to him. Our interactions beyond dojo walls were relatively few. However, sincere and open training in the art of Aikido affords the opportunity to connect to someone in a way that is often much deeper and truer than the regular luncheon meetings, the softball games, or the occasional movie night might do. For me, training in Aikido—and in particular with a specially “assigned” partner, either as an uke or the one preparing for promotion—can be an especially bonding experience as we can share a uniquely personal journey of exploration and self-discovery.

Learning new techniques and deepening our technical understanding of those we’ve practiced a thousand times before is rarely easy, but it is the foundation of how most Aikido classes are structured. And it is this dynamic and challenging process that can be observed and readily understood by any non-participant. However, in my experience the very nature of Aikido’s physicality, let alone its ethical and spiritual teaching, is exceptionally intimate and thus can foster personal growth and the ability to more fully connect to another far beyond what any casual observer will easily, if ever, fully comprehend.

Trust has not always come easily for me. Being physically close with someone I don’t know well has rarely been comfortable. And I have certainly never been at ease being the center of attention, preferring instead to participate in life more anonymously. I had been active in competitive team sports for many years, which certainly afforded many opportunities for building confidence and coordination. These athletic endeavors were

fun and rewarding and to be sure provided me with a valued ability to embrace a strong sense of team spirit, loyalty, and camaraderie.

However, practicing Aikido has turned out to provide the more substantive personal growth experience for me. O'Sensei developed and shared Aikido as a way to harmonize our cultural and personal demons. He thought we must acknowledge their existence and yet find a way to redirect them with a positive generosity of spirit. Interestingly, it is this cooperative rather than competitive aspect of the art that has fostered in me a stronger sense of confidence, self-worth, ability to trust, and the willingness to be seen. Full-contact physical training based on the premise of protecting one another cultivates a deeper, human connection that continues to inspire and fulfill me. To be truly engaged in the art of Aikido we must learn to open-heartedly trust our partner with our physical and emotional safety as certain vulnerabilities and insecurities are often readily exposed. In doing so, those who train together so closely can achieve a level of mutual understanding and intimacy with their partner that is intensely personal and exceptionally rewarding which in turn enriches our daily lives well beyond the dojo.

But as it the nature of Love, this deep connection allows for very painful experiences as well. When an Aikidoka's life is cut short, it can leave a very real and very painful void in those of us who trained so sincerely with him. Though our connection may not have been severed completely, it has surely taken an unexpected and uncertain turn that is difficult to blend with. I feel a great sense of sorrow for Wicke's family and friends who loved him dearly and knew him so well. And, as it turns out, that includes me.

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