

Message from a Woodpecker
Transformational Aikido and Community

On July 30, 2009 at 8:30 am, I was walking toward my home after my morning practice in the Tenchi Aikido Dojo. I walked a well-worn path first sculpted by deer and other animals who traversed this 3 1/2 acres before we built here 16 years ago. Next to the path is our clothesline which is supported by a 4X4 cross on either end. Curiously enough, a woodpecker was perched on the top of the cross and was riveting his attention on me as I approached. It was not only because my theme for my Nidan training these days was “SLOW DOWN” but also because the woodpecker had so clearly and decisively pointed his beak straight at me that I came to a calm and settled halt. This moment of mutual recognition brought everything into focus.

Since I was at the peak of my training I couldn't help but feel that I was lining up to an attack from a very remarkable uke (attacker). He clearly had me in his radar—a moment of decisive connection. I dropped to the center of the great void. What hadn't been awakened in my morning practice was now awakened. He stared at me as only a woodpecker can. Then in a noteworthy instant, he pointed his beak to the top of the cypress trees nearby. Yet, he never really took his attention off me. “Have you looked at the cypress tree tops lately, especially in the morning sunlight?” “No, I answered.”

Then he looked down at the vertical center post of the clothesline cross as if he were looking for a good place to peck. I appreciated his inquisitiveness. Then he flipped around and looked at the back side of the vertical post—then at the south side and then the north side. For all of my familiarity with this post, I had never really “seen” it. I had always been using the clothesline to hang up the laundry and that was all. The woodpecker jumped down on the 4X4 crosspiece and inspected it as well. Five times he directed his beak down with the same intentionality with which he first caught my attention. He skipped over to the right edge and looked at that side upside down. Then he came underneath and hung upside down, again looking and inspecting but not pecking. After 25 or so hops, skips, and jumps and curious bobbles of his head across the cross piece, he descended down the vertical center post, sometimes upside down, and sometimes right side up. But he never pecked. I was getting impatient waiting for that first peck. But I settled and then realized he was more interested in showing me this clothesline cross than in pecking. I saw some holes that he had previously pecked. Then finally he stopped,

photogenically poised, and very slowly reached into a hole with his beak and delicately pulled out a tender, tiny morsel caught in a spider web.

A fellow woodpecker sang out. He called back, and flew off into the rising sun without one audible peck. I stood there, “seeing” the clothesline cross in all its dimensionality without a thought. Then as if in the flick of a beak, I saw the multi-dimensionality of the “Aiki cross”. O’Sensei describes the “Aiki cross” this way. “Keep your movements circular. Imagine a circle with a cross drawn through it. Place yourself in the center and stand there confidently in a triangular stance. Link yourself to the ki of heaven and earth, pivot around the front foot, and guide your partner around that center.” (Pg. 116—The Art of Peace) My felt experience at that moment was my own interconnectedness to all the woodpeckers, all the swallows, all the hawks, all the robins, all the quail, and all the hummingbirds. The joy of this moment of interdependent connection filled the entire space and spread out to the eucalyptus, pines, willows, maples, and oaks. They all became my ukes, sending me their loving presence and bringing my awareness into clear, omni-directional focus.

I felt a precious gratitude and respect for all my fellow aikidoka who are interdependently connected with me in this myriad display that we call Aikido, the richness of which is beyond description. How wonderful! That we can share and be present to one another in such a gracious harmony that is The Art of Peace. That we can share an authenticity which is so basic and true to our human being together that it calls forth our willingness to be the best for one another and mirror our desire to work out the rough spots—an openheartedness and inclusiveness which “sees” the sameness in all of us and surrenders the separateness.

Just as the woodpecker showed me how to hang with him as he hung upside down on the clothesline cross, so also there is an incalculable value to developing our ability to “hang out” within the Aiki Cross together—to hear the inaudible, to see the unseen, and to share the wonder. I never much liked “hanging out,” let alone hanging out upside down. I always thought it was a waste of time, but I’ve come to appreciate what slowing down and stopping to listen really means. It means being willing to do no-thing together, to not accomplish anything together, to listen for the peck that never happens together. From this emerges the quiet enjoyment of being together and appreciating how important each family member is. Sometimes hanging out means that you’re called to hang upside down and listen to what is really bugging your friend or frustrating this family member. It means creating a listening environment, a space with a purpose, where someone can talk and be heard without interruption or suggestion. It means fostering mental calm,

orderliness, and simplicity. It means establishing relationships that are mutually fulfilling and creative. Isn't that why we spend all that time on the mat training—so that off the mat we can live together in a harmonious environment that's natural, relaxed, and effortless.

When we're tired or stressed, we revert back to our old habit patterns of self-centeredness, self-conceit, self-justification, and self-absorption. If we are truly going to transform these patterns into new possible futures, we need to "hang out" in positive, joyful, beautiful places with our friends and fellow aikidoka—to support them through good times and bad ones so that we can all appreciate our interdependent connectedness which is loving community that we can rely on and trust.

In training for this Dan Presentation, I felt the whole Tenchi Community taking the opportunity to practice Ukemi and improve each other's personal physical flexibility, mental agility, and spiritual insight—to develop a "neutral pelvis," the center of the Aiki Cross, the floating bridge. As one fellow training partner said, "All boats rise with the water." I have been so inspired admiring how everyone's training and dedication have "risen" by sharing this process. Aikido is a rare art form in which we can literally (even if for a very brief moment) hang out upside down together. This rare occasion gives a uniqueness to each encounter together that breaks us out of our conventional minds and lets us trust how dynamically unconventional we are. One of my training partners put it this way.

It is relatively easy to sit on a cushion and expand into greater awareness. But off the cushion, with all those other vibrating body energy fields! Yipes! The body contracts again. Automatically. A done deal. We don't even know it. We aren't free at all in waking time with each other.

But the aikido world! We get to find out how we hold our habitual fears and trust each other as we explore and work through to being, moving and delighting in our bodies. Such Terror! Such Risk! Such Trust! Such Joy! Such Gratitude!

Transformational Aikido is a gift that naturally supports us coming together and significantly connecting with each other. With this comes tolerance and humor. Tolerance to allow trickster mind play out its absurdities and good humor to laugh at ourselves getting caught up in our belief systems about ourselves. A Russian Aikido family member expressed this connectedness this way.

I never have stopped admiring the effect it (Aikido) produces on my training partners and me. It is a spiritual practice and thus brings up our connectedness with each other within our beautiful home Earth that spins peacefully in the infinity of the Universe.

At first we learn the words of the basics principles: centering, grounding, blending, connecting. Then you learn about and befriend the partners, who by the nature of the Art help each other to advance and support these principles....

The Home Dojo is an open space promoting respect and compassion, tolerance, humor, and wisdom.

Allowing ourselves the freedom to experiment inside technique is another great gift which is being so graciously transmitted across time by our respected Senseis. This lineage of allowing our foibles and mental gymnastics freedom to spin in the space of experiential and experimental uncertainty creates a spontaneity which allows for a freshness and aliveness to shine through. The boredom and banality of some of our nuclear family's habit patterns can spiral us into a new availability, a new context which is naturally spiritual without being "religious." Betsy Hill Sensei, Yondan at Tenchi Aikido, writes about transformative community this way.

Aikido has always been community for me. At 18 it was my first extended family after going on my own.

It's always provided a context for growth, in a playful atmosphere full of camaraderie. In the last several years, it's been a supportive atmosphere for deepening transformative experiments. I now see Aikido at Tenchi as having such a supportive structure that some shifts in deep habitual patterns or belief systems have occurred. Good humor and learning to take oneself "lightly" go together, and I experience the community go through many changes with openness, heartfulness, and willingness to laugh together. It's so great to have a group of people to go through life with and experience just being there for one another. We've trained ourselves to be available.

In response to my inquiry, other members of our Tenchi Aikido training community explained how important it was that they were accepted for who they were without negative criticism for being a beginner or new to the Dojo. One person put it this way, "I experienced an immediate acceptance of who I was. I was not told,

“Do it this way,” in a tone that said, “Your way sucks.”...I never once felt like I was categorized as an outside or coming from an alien “Aikido culture.”

Another person relatively new to Aikido says, “It provides me with an oasis of warmth, encouragement and positivity without any sense of negative criticism.” He went on to say that the concept of energy without ego is something he found new and refreshing; that it is possible to be “powerful” through calmness.

In response to that same inquiry about Transformational Aikido and community, a fellow black belt said it very succinctly:

Three things that aikido taught me about community and transformation:

- 1) The more I care about and for my friends in the dojo, the more certain I am that I am living authentically in the moment.
- 2) When I feel separateness from a friend in the dojo, I engage in unhealthy concern for myself.
- 3) To be part of a working community of friends is a balm and a joy.

Being a “working community” of caring human beings means that people spontaneously want to share and help one another. In conclusion, I would like to share this reflection from a fellow Tenchi practitioner which says it all.

My wife, not an Aikido practitioner in the formal sense, was recently afflicted with a life-threatening medical condition. As strangers in a small town and small Aikido community, I did not expect the astonishing outpouring of support that has included members of my dojo coming with a weekly casserole or stew, coming to clean our house once a week, including my beloved wife in healing circles, and the overall support of the dojo.

My wife and I have both been deeply touched by this. In addition, this experience has informed my Aikido practice, deepening the way I view my training partners and myself with more compassion and more commitment to the practice.

In leading me into the deeper aspects of Aikido, some of which I had not previously experienced, my own practice has deepened, I find myself asking deeper questions, and feel my practice has become open-hearted, one of my goals all along.

I believe that Ten Chi Aikido provides not just a model, but THE model for how to create a community that lives in harmony with one another and with the world.

I personally want to thank my fellow Aikidokas for making my Nidan experience such a fulfilling transformational community experience.

Respectfully submitted,

James L. Gauer, Ph.D
Nidan