

Gōdan Essay

Chuck Hauk

Aikido of Eugene

April 2007

“I’m sick and tired of her scamming us and I’m gonna’ evict her!” one of my co-workers said, angrily, about one of our residents. I’ve worked in social services for over thirty years and for the last fifteen years I’ve worked at a Public Housing Authority. I deal with low-income folks on a daily basis. Many of them are under-educated, are just getting by day-by-day economically, are involved in negative relationships, have poor coping skills, and are often angry about their lot in life. Some of them “scam” social service systems as a way of life, trying to maximize the benefits they receive in a time of decreasing budgets and limited options. My co-worker’s frustration was showing that day; she was angry that one particular Public Housing resident was hiding household income, allowing unauthorized persons to stay with her in her subsidized rental unit and, in general, flaunting her almost continual violation of the rules. The worker was going to evict the resident – which she was legally entitled to do -- and she had worked herself into a feeling of righteous indignation as a prelude to doing that.

I sat down in her office and asked her if she had taken a look at the life this resident was living. “You know, she’s living in a small, crowded three-bedroom rental unit with three kids. Her 17-year-old has been arrested a couple of times and is facing time in jail. We know that her mother, with whom she doesn’t get along, has moved in with her, without getting authorization and without reporting her income to us, which means she’ll owe us back rent for the unreported income. Her last boyfriend, who was also living there without authorization, has left her pregnant. She now has a new boyfriend, who is also living there without authorization. She’s having a tough pregnancy, physically, and she wasn’t able to pay her rent last month and is now facing losing her subsidized housing and being put out on the street.”

“You don’t have to make this personally,” I told her. “You can lay out the consequences for her behavior without making her the ‘bad guy.’ It’s not personal. She’s not out to get you.” Then I suggested that my co-worker try something different. “Whenever you see a resident in this type of situation – before you get angry -- think about her life and then think about yours. You have a husband who loves you and four beautiful, healthy, smart daughters; you own your own home, where you love to garden in your large backyard; you and your husband have good jobs and are able to

pay your bills; you have dependable cars; you have your health and family and friends who care for you. What do you have to be angry at her about?"

I suggested that she take a few minutes and consider the incredible obstacles facing this particular resident and compare that to her own life, before getting into a personal argument with the resident. I reminded her that she still needed to enforce the rules but suggested that she could probably do that from a compassionate point of view – a point of view that might even result in the resident straightening up and following the rules, instead of “digging her heels in” and, ultimately, being forced to leave Public Housing.

To her credit, my co-worker listened to what I had to say and actively considered it. She ended up, after all that, having to evict the resident but she did it in a compassionate, caring way that resulted in the resident thanking her for the way she’d been treated. A few months later I was pleasantly surprised when the co-worker pulled me aside and told me that she hadn’t been able to forget what I had suggested and that, in several subsequent situations, she had taken the time to sit back and look at the other person’s life in comparison to hers. She said taking the time to do this had changed the way she approached these types of conflicts; that she made it less and less personal; and that she was actually able to do a better job because she had a better overall perspective. In a few cases, she had been able to evoke a change of behavior on the part of the residents, rather than having to push them into an eviction.

When applicants for Public Housing assistance reach the top of the waiting list, they’re invited to a Public Housing Briefing. The written notices that invite applicants to the 3-hour briefing, where they will learn all about the rules in Public Housing and where they will complete their intake interview, are very clear: “If you arrive more than 20 minutes after the start of the briefing, you will NOT be allowed into the briefing. Please make child care arrangements; children will NOT be allowed into the briefing.” The reasons for these restrictions are pretty simple. At least 20-30 people will be involved in a very complicated 3-hour meeting and, if you miss more than 20 minutes of the meeting, you will have missed a significant portion of the information. Also, with that many adults trying to listen to a complicated presentation, there just isn’t much patience for young children who invariably can’t sit still that long and who will interrupt the process.

One morning, while a briefing was being held in the Community Room of our Housing Authority, I was meeting with several other managers in my

office. I began to hear what sounded like an argument at the front desk just outside my office door, with angry voices getting louder and louder. It was forty minutes after the start of the briefing and two couples were arguing with the receptionist, demanding that they be allowed into the briefing. One couple had two loudly whining small children in tow. As the voices got louder, I left my meeting and went up to the front desk. The receptionist was politely, but firmly, telling both couples that they would not be allowed into the briefing because they had arrived too late and because they had young children in tow.

I asked if I could help. The one man began loudly telling me that he wasn't "going to put up with this shit." I quietly repeated why he was not going to be able to attend the briefing. He turned his attention from the receptionist to me. He became increasingly agitated and repeated himself in a louder voice. The other man began egging him on, encouraging his anger, to the point that the first man made a stereotypical "pre-fight" move, by shrugging his shoulders back and dropping his jacket to the floor behind him. He clearly sent the message that he intended to "get physical" with me. I was aware of myself automatically maintaining proper maai, standing in hanmi, and casually folding my arms across my chest, in a stance from which I could quickly move and defend myself, if necessary. As the man began yelling at me, I lowered the volume of my voice even more, so he really had to pay attention to hear me. The "vibes" I sent out were completely quiet, self-assured, and conciliatory. I explained that I empathized with him; that it must be frustrating to have traveled all this way, only to be turned away; and I explained the reasons for why he would not be admitted to the briefing. I told him that I would not be able to help him today. As he continued to yell at me, I told him that, if he thought I was not doing my job correctly, he could contact my supervisor. I asked the receptionist to hand me one of my supervisor's business cards and I handed it to the man. I told him that he was free to contact my supervisor with his complaint. At this, he picked up his jacket and left, saying, "Damn right! I'm going to have your fucking job!" His wife and the other couple followed him out the door.

After they had left, the receptionist and her co-worker at the front desk nervously laughed and said, "Hey, teach us some of your Aikido moves." I told them that what I had just done WAS Aikido. I explained that I had physically presented myself in a non-threatening but protected stance; that I had taken the man's point of view and agreed with him, that it was frustrating to be told he couldn't enter the briefing; that I had not given him any energy or intention that he could use to start a fight, purposely not reacting to his yelling and keeping my voice calm and low; and that I had "led his mind" and given him a way to remove himself from a confrontation,

while “saving face,” by referring him to my boss.

My biggest disappointment in almost 30 years of Aikido training is the realization that getting “better” at Aikido does not, necessarily, make you a “better” person. There are plenty of Aikido students out there who are very good at Aikido techniques who don’t have the first inkling about taking Aikido principles off the mat and into their lives. Why do we train in Aikido? If we’re training just to become more proficient at throwing people, controlling people, “defending” ourselves against people, I’d suggest we’re missing the real purpose of this “dō” – this “way.”

I once heard an instructor say that he was disappointed that he didn’t hear the word “compassion” used more often on the mat. His words had a strong impact on me. I initially began my training in Aikido because it appeared to me to be a methodical, physical way of training that would result in my being more “aware.” What I soon realized is that just training on the mat would not be enough. The principles of Aikido have to be practiced off the mat for real change to occur. There has to be a conscious effort to continually practice what we’re learning, in all situations – on and off the mat. Look around you at the next seminar and watch your seniors. Which ones do you want to emulate? In addition to their technical skills on the mat, which instructors also conduct themselves off the mat in a way that you admire – that you want to emulate? Which instructors show integrity, caring, compassion, respect, humor, discipline, and intelligence in their day-to-day interactions with others? I would suggest those are the instructors you should want as your role models.

As I approached my Shōdan years ago, I was fortunate to have a very technically-gifted instructor, who had been a student of a well-known Shihan. The Shihan was quoted as saying that my instructor had been his “best student” and his “worst student,” having learned virtually everything the Shihan had to offer on the mat and virtually nothing of what the Shihan had to offer for off the mat. This also had an impact on me. I didn’t see the behavior in my instructor off the mat that I wanted to emulate, in spite of wonderfully powerful Aikido technique on the mat. I took my leave of this instructor and moved on.

Why are you training? Aikido is a martial arts “way” – it is a discipline whose real purpose is self-development, self-awareness. The question of whether or not Aikido is an “effective” martial art is almost irrelevant. If you are not confronting the true enemy – yourself – I would suggest you’re not truly benefiting from this beautiful art and discipline. Almost thirty

years later, I still deal with fear each time I get on the mat. Am I really training hard enough? Am I strong enough? Disciplined enough? Good enough? Can I deal with real conflict, with strong, committed attacks that push me? And off the mat, I still deal with similar questions. Am I compassionate enough? Am I working hard enough? Am I doing the best I can? Am I strong enough? Disciplined enough? Good enough? Can I deal with real conflict, with strong, committed attacks that push me?

I've made progress, but I still have a long way to go. Let me leave you with my own, personal kōan, which you are free to use:

How insufferable would I be without my Aikido Training?

In gasshō...