

## Thoughts on Mulberry Trees

Next to the building where our dojo is located there is a small mulberry tree. It sprung up in a somewhat unkempt area right next to the parking lot. I suspect it grew from a seed a bird dropped. Once, when I was arriving for class, I noticed that it had berries and that many had turned black. I don't know if this was the first year it had berries or the first year I noticed. I tried a few berries and those that were all the way ripe tasted surprisingly good. I went to class with purple stains on my fingers. After class I counted five mulberry trees along the road on the way home. They were easy to tell when the berries are ripe and fall on the road. Apparently the economy is still well enough so none of the tree owners see a need to harvest the berries, I am sure the birds appreciate it. I don't know why I never noticed those trees before, I have heard it called "subjective perception", we see what we want or need to see. Sometimes it takes Aikido to open our eyes to the Mulberry trees.

Speaking of Aikido, my first exposure to Aikido was in early 1978 at the University of Vienna, in a combined Aikido and Jujitsu class. The Aikido instructor was a Japanese exchange student. I was impressed with the elegance of Aikido moves, even the rolls, and the fact that it did not require strength, since we were aiming to redirect the attackers force. There was a lot of knee-walking. The instructor told us that amongst senior students at his home dojo it was a badge of honor to wear holes through the hakama at the knees. He also showed a movie where his sensei was throwing people across the room. Our instructor told us they were just showing off for the camera, that wasn't a normal class. I don't remember enough to figure out which style of Aikido it was, I did not know at the time that there were different styles. In contrast with the Aikido part of the class, I was not so impressed with the Jujitsu part. I injured my collar bone during a fall and had to drop out of class. I decided that Jujitsu was not for me, but I felt I would want to learn about Aikido.

However, life happened. I got married, moved to the United States, joined the Air Force, had four children, left the Air Force, and got divorced. Twenty-some years had passed when in the early nineties I saw an advertisement for an Aikido beginners' class at the Air Force base where I was working. Except for a few breaks, I have been Mike McVey Sensei's student ever since. I even managed to introduce two of my children to Aikido. They didn't stay long, but who knows, in twenty years ...

I thoroughly enjoy Aikido. Having already started on my second half-century of life, I don't expect to become a ninth Dan and unlike the young people, who still have most of their life before them, I am in no hurry to be promoted, but the test preparation does help me focus and I understand that it is a responsibility I have to my fellow students and Sensei. I enjoy Sensei's instructions, I enjoy working with my fellow students, and I equally enjoy teaching junior students my particular clumsy ways - so Sensei will never be at a loss for things to correct.

Beyond the sheer enjoyment, Aikido is good for me because of its physicality (if that is a real word). I work in an office all day, so I need some exercise, but am not particularly fond of gyms. Repetitive motions, like working on a treadmill or a stationary bike, bore me to tears. I never get bored with Aikido, not only because there is so much to learn, but also because of that, which I do best in Aikido, the “Beginner’s Mind.” I remember many times honestly saying to myself, “I don’t remember ever having done that,” when Sensei demonstrates something we haven’t done in a while, only to catch glimpses of recollection once I have done it myself a few times. Fortunately Sensei is the most patient of man, demonstrating and correcting over and over again. So it is not only my body that gets exercised, but also my mind and memory. In addition, I suspect all that rolling around and falling down and getting up is bound to be good for one’s digestion and perhaps knocks loose a few calcium deposits - but I am not a doctor.

Another great thing about Aikido is the fellowship. Aikidoka and Aikidoists are unfailingly nice people, at least those I have encountered. Perhaps it is that shared face-pressed-into-the-mat thing that helps us all connect. In addition to the training I enjoy the interaction before and after class, the movies, the meals, the many people I get to meet.

There are many other things about Aikido I appreciate, but I was talking about mulberries. I wonder if practice weapons can be made out of mulberry wood – I suspect not. Would silkworms eat Ohio mulberry leaves and produce silk? I wonder if anybody has ever tried. Conventional wisdom has it that “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” Who came up with that one? I might yet give that mulberry tree in my backyard another chance. I cut it down years ago, but it stubbornly sends up new shoots every year – if only I will always stay that persistent in my training. I’ll blend with the tree, I’ll only use as much force as necessary to keep it from taking over the backyard and the electrical wires.