

Featured Dojo-cho, July 2007



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I first heard about Aikido when I attended Esalen's 1974 world tour in New England, where I was a psychology professor at a state college. George Leonard led a seminar on Mind-Body Integration, in which he spoke eloquently about this art called *Aikido*. He described watching his ten year old daughter stand under a sword attack and step off the line with—he used this word—aplomb. Then he said, “Aikido is a martial art where you learn how to protect yourself without having to hurt other people back.” Suddenly and unaccountably, chills ran up and down the whole length of my body, and I heard a small, clear voice in the back of my head say, “Aikido will save your life.” I knew instantly that it meant in the broadest sense of the term. I had always sensed there must be a way to deal with violence without abandoning what I'd come to understand as Universal Love. I vowed to train in Aikido at

the soonest possible opportunity. As far as I knew, no Aikido existed in northern Vermont where I lived at the time, so I waited...

Four years later in 1978, I heard about a remarkable doctoral program at The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in California, which started each day of classes with an hour and a half of Aikido! ITP was founded by Robert Frager Sensei, who was one of the few Americans to have trained with O Sensei. Little did I know what that meant at the time! I applied and was accepted.

Bob Frager Sensei was and is an incredible story teller, and he loved O Sensei with his whole heart. I had the great good fortune to start my Aikido training in a dojo where O Sensei's spirit was brought alive in three dimensions on a daily basis. I came to feel that I knew O Sensei intimately in a very short while. Bob Frager's teaching was at once both wild and traditional, with a live-blade flavor for those of us who were ready. I remember one day his teaching us to get off the line from a knife attack, with a foot-long carving knife he brought in from the kitchen. He organized a richly diverse Aikido faculty for us at ITP, including senseis: Jack Wada; Foster Gamble; and Betsy Hill.

Each one of those teachers offered us free-style at the end of every class we attended. They would exchange roles with us as *uke* and *nage* without fail. I remember Betsy Hill's *ukemi* felt like swirling silk scarves around my body. Foster Gamble saw the exhaustion and fear on my face one day when I was *uke*, and said to me simply, "Mary, you aren't going to die." Until that moment, I hadn't realized that my fear reached to that depth. Betsy and I did free-style each day we were in a dojo together for almost seven years, until neither one of us could stand up. That's how we knew we were done. I am profoundly grateful for the generosity of my first teachers, most especially as it came to learning *ukemi*, which, each of them made clear to me was half of the art.

Once I got my forward rolls down, it was time to join a traditional dojo, outside the sheltered atmosphere of ITP. I chose Frank Doran's dojo, Aikido West, where I learned an impeccable relationship to the spirit of loving protection between myself and others. Thanks to Doran Sensei, I am seldom disoriented in my relationship to the principles of

budo, and to the meaning of technique within its ancient context.

When it was time to study for my brown belt, I became more deeply interested in energy awareness and its relationship to my life. Being privileged to have Bob Nadeau, Jack Wada and Frank Doran Sensei all within a reasonable distance from my home, I began exploring the art with all three. I eventually settled in with Jack Wada and Aikido of San Jose as my primary dojo.

Jack Wada Sensei's teaching cut to the core of every psychological issue in my life, without ever becoming personal. I *uke'd* for him often during my brown and black belt years, and learned that even one opinion in my head can make me heavy and exhausted as *uke*. I remember once being weightless and suspended in the air for so long over Jack's head during a high fall, that I had time to think the thought, "I wonder if they have a gift shop out here?" On another day I got knocked down onto the mat for the zillionth time during *rondori* practice for my black belt. Suddenly I heard Jack's voice bellowing out from the back of the dojo, "Mary! Why do you always have to get knocked down in order to be strong?!?" I had been suicidal at that time in my life. It was the last time I got knocked down in a *rondori*.

I got my black belt in 1983, back when we still held regional exams. Fourteen of us tested that day. I was the first one out of six to be left standing on my *rondori*. Terry Dobson was one of the *senseis* who sat for our exams. Afterwards, they took us one by one into a back room to tell us whether we had passed or failed. The *senseis* seemed burned out that day, none of them saying very much. But Terry Dobson winked at me, and that told me I'd done a good job, because I knew he wouldn't have done that for just anybody.

Centerfield Aikido was born in 1985, out of a shared vision with my friend, Sylvia Marie, then a brown belt in Aikido. By that time, I had a regular Friday night class at San Jose. But Sylvia and I had both moved to Sonoma County and we missed the rich proximity of training with our *senseis* in the San Francisco Bay area. One day, despite my protests, Sylvia talked me into making a budget for a new dojo of our own. Later that evening, I taught my usual

Friday night class in San Jose. Whereas Jack Sensei ordinarily took the night off when I taught, that night he stuck around, pacing back and forth during my class. All I could think was that I had somehow displeased him. When I bowed my class out, before I had walked off the mat, Jack came up to me and said, “Mary, I think it’s time for you to start your own dojo.” In that moment, because of the synchronicity of events in the day, I felt the Universe was speaking to me, and so I agreed.

With Sylvia’s visionary and tactical support, we created Centerfield out of whole cloth. I was its primary *sensei* for the first six years. As classes grew, we decided to expand, inviting more teachers to join us. The teaching staff finally distilled itself to Betsy Hill, David Keip and me for the past twelve years of the dojo. We shared a unique balance of power and creativity, with myself as original *dojo-cho* and business owner, and Betsy some twelve years David’s and my senior in the art. All three of us valued the consensus model of decision-making, and made all policy and ranking decisions on that basis. As a result, Centerfield developed a spacious atmosphere of acceptance amongst all who trained there, fostering over twenty black belts in its 21 years of existence in its first location.

The Universe loves to turn itself inside out. In 2006, Centerfield underwent cell-division. David, Betsy and I have each started our own school in Sonoma County. I will reopen Centerfield Aikido in the coastal redwoods of the wine country above Bodega, CA, in October.

Someone asked me what would be unique about Centerfield’s new incarnation. To my surprise, without a pause, I replied, “It will focus on teaching students how to teach Aikido.” It is a sacred trust that is seldom discussed in the open, at this time in the evolution of the art. I envision a country dojo that serves as a sort of destination-retreat for seminars, in which elders of the art from all over the world are invited to share what has had meaning for them as teachers down through the years, and where students interested in transmitting the art may explore their deepest questions. We will start in a spacious, light-filled tent under the redwoods this fall, and see where the energy takes us.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

I had many memorable experiences as *uke* for Bob Nadeau

and Jack Wada Senseis, many in which I *shape-shifted*, or went beyond my human form, into a state of pure flow. I strongly believe that *ukemi* is half, if not more than half of the art. Its immense beauty and danger has transformed my life. More recently, I have felt awed by the act of surrender to the impulses of consciousness coming from space, itself, around my partner and myself---I guess you could say Universal Energy or *Takemusu*---It has a life of Its own, and It wants to play with us to the fullest extent we are willing. I like risk and I like grace. Both of these require center.

But I would have to say that my most memorable Aikido experience was the time I spent around Terry Dobson Sensei before he died.

The first time I *uke'd* for him I was a brown belt. He called me in for *mune t'suki irimi nage*. I gave it everything I had, fully expecting to be slammed to the mat. Instead, Terry just stopped everything in mid-strike, and held me there between his big hands in front of the class. He said, "Whenever you train, you must remember that you hold a precious, human life in your hands." I went from being this fierce, warrior-like being, to standing there unexpectedly, with tears running down my face.

When Terry was dying in the hospital, I sat with him for three days. The first day I arrived I thought I'd missed him, because when I walked in, everyone was standing around his body, talking about him as if he was dead. I went up to them, and they said the doctor had pronounced him "brain-dead" but he was still alive. I went around to the side of the bed his head had fallen toward, and saw that his eyes were still open. I asked myself what would be the *Aikido* in this situation, and I thought, "Look for the blend." Often in social situations, it occurred to me, the blend is in the eyes. Terry was paralyzed. So I adjusted my body until my eyes were directly in the path of Terry's gaze. And when I found that exact spot, I was nearly blasted backwards out of the room by what I felt to be the intensity of his spirit's attempt to connect with us. There was no question in my mind. I talked to him all that day about how he had completed the mission O Sensei gave him, helping to bring Aikido to America as a path of Universal Love.

About three in the morning, I became fatigued, and began to doubt whether I was really connected to Terry. I was

standing in a bathroom stall in the hospital, and a voice in my head said, “Stop it! Don’t waste time wondering whether or not you’re connected. You don’t owe anyone an explanation.” A great sense of freedom came over me. It cleared away any of the doubt I carried as to whether I was connected to Terry or to anyone else, living or dead.

I am the gatekeeper of my own connection with others and with the Universe. I think this is one of the great powers of Aikido, to teach us that the connection we desire to safety, to Universal Love, to life, itself, is in our own hands at all times, and it need not rely on controlling others.

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