

Featured Teacher, January 2021



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Before the beginning

I was worried for my son, then a shy, small and very young-looking fifth grader. As Junior High School loomed in the horizon, I wanted to broaden his social experience by exposing him to some physical extra-curricular activity. His reluctance was great, since group sports with their inherent competitive nature did not appeal to him at all. I kept looking, but nothing fit.

A student of mine at Stanford mentioned Aikido and the philosophy behind it, and he suggested we check it out to see if my son would be interested. It was a Sunday morning when my son and I first came to the Aikido West dojo to observe an Aikido class. To this day I don't know what impressed us most - the beauty and fluidity of the movements, their energy and variety, or the fact that everybody was having such a great time. By the end of class there was no doubt that he wanted to do it.

So as my son joined the kids' class, I became the Chauffeur-and-Main-Keeper-of-the-Gi.

From my observation deck (the entrance area), the more I listened to Molly's teachings and watched the kids during class, the more I came to view Aikido as an art that transcends a mere repertoire of techniques and the dojo's geographical limitations. Soon I wanted to experience it first-hand, and before common sense raised its ugly head, I too joined the dojo and stepped onto the mat.

The beginning

This was 1992. As a 37-year-old 5-foot-tall woman I realized that this would not be a smooth path. I was too aware of my shortcomings, and contrary to what I may have said at the time, I let my ego run free while I took off my shoes and changed into my own Gi.

I came to classes. I practiced. I thought I understood the principles of Aikido, and that I could accomplish them if only everyone else were not so big, not so fast, not so young, not so strong, or grabbed me so hard. I longed for a softer mat and wished to have started Aikido at my son's age.

Frustrations notwithstanding, there were many unexpected joys - I met and connected with people on a much deeper level, with no need for titles or business cards. I left the day's worries at the dojo's door. I started smiling a lot.

My son and I took Aikido home and pretty much everywhere we went. We had such a great time kotegaeshi-ing each other in elevators and supermarkets that my daughter decided to start training too. Both took Aikido very seriously and yet their hearts were light. So, I became the Keeper-of-Three-Gis, and as they advanced in their training, I moonlighted as Master-Dyer-of-Belts.

I don't remember when I also started training in the kids' classes. As a mother, the joy of spending quality time with my children, having them delight in throwing me around, and being able to be on equal footing as a student is beyond description. Furthermore, it became pivotal to my own growth as an Aikido student.

As I trained in both kids and adult classes, I started noticing differences in the way I practiced. In "my own training", I was still laying the responsibility for the quality of my training on others. However, things were quite different in the kids' classes. Laying the blame at my partners' doorstep was no longer an option. Instead, I had to become aware of the space around me, no matter how chaotic, to avoid throwing kids on top of each other. I had to be accommodating in my responses since an overly-excited-fast-and-furious puncher may not have the appropriate ukemi skills. And of course, I could

not let myself forget that even though they were at least a foot taller than me, most of them were still 4th graders.

Aiki, Kuzushi and Shisei became more than words - they became the fertile ground for discovery and growth.

The path

It took me a while before I braved stepping beyond the walls of the dojo to attend seminars, broadening my exposure to other teachers, students and different schools of thought within Aikido. In many ways these were the first times I came to consciously realize how lucky I was to have landed at Aikido West with Doran Sensei as my teacher. The foundation and principles he passed on allowed me to find my footing everywhere I landed.

I found inspiration everywhere, and in subsequent years the teachings of Saotome Sensei, Ikeda Sensei, Takeda Sensei, Mary Heiny Sensei, Tissier Sensei, Choate Sensei and many others all contributed to developing my own expression of the art. This was another gift Doran Sensei gave his students – the freedom to explore and the freedom to develop our own Aikido.

As a designer and an artist, I believe that the creative process always starts with curiosity. To me, Aikido is no different. It calls for practicing with an open mind, having a never-ending curiosity about every encounter, seizing the opportunity for discovery in every moment, and understanding that the learning is endless.

I never imagined in my early days of stepping on the mat that Aikido would become a lifelong commitment, or that I would enjoy it as much or even more almost 30 years later.

To this day I see myself primarily as a student, with a lot more to polish and learn. That's why when a few months after my Sandan test Doran Sensei asked me to teach regularly, my response was that surely there were more qualified people to do it. Without missing a beat, and in his inimitable style, his reply was, "To tell you the truth, there was one other person I considered: Doshu. But he is unavailable, so you are it."

In my 12 years of teaching Aikido, there has never been a class where I failed to learn something new, discover a new perspective, or encounter a new challenge or area of interest. And yet, with time, the familiarity with the repertoire and tools acquired over the years have made teaching easier and smoother.

But this year, every other teacher and I were faced with a new challenge – teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic. And as difficult and challenging as it has been, I

am once again reminded to have an open mind. To embrace being a beginner again. To explore new ways to practice. To search and discover new ways to inspire and be inspired. To deepen and expand my understanding of the Art so that together we can continue to broaden our study of Aikido and continue to nurture our Aikido community.

My Most Memorable Aikido Experience

There have been innumerable moments, but one has always stayed with me. I was a newly minted brown belt, and at the time I was also training at Stanford. Before class Doran Sensei asked me to lead the warmups. After he bowed us in, he motioned for me to take over. I was so nervous and discombobulated that I bowed us in again. Mortified and sure that I had committed an unforgivable sin, I approached Doran Sensei after class and proceeded to apologize profusely. He listened, put his arm around my shoulder, smiled and said, "When in doubt, bow."