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Notes toward a Greater Unbalancing: Judo, Your Mother, and Clive Cussler Calling

1.

Play a little martial arts in your life—particularly judo—and you come to appreciate what the Japanese call *kuzushi*, or unbalancing. Overcommit in one direction, and you're vulnerable in the opposite. Every push invites a pull, every throw a counter, every strength a secret weakness in the end, and you only learn to throw by being thrown, only keep your balance by losing your balance. As a white belt you practice almost nothing except how to fall. It's what you do—fall, get up, fall again—until falling becomes second nature to you, something so basic you don't even think about *ukemi* anymore. Foundation of an entire art—*ju* (gentle) *do* (way)—no strikes, no kicks, nothing but the easy give-and-take of balance. When done well, it will feel absolutely effortless. As *tori*, when you throw your opponent, when you steal or break his balance, or as *uke*, when your feet suddenly go from under you, when you wheel through the air on some fulcrum of leg and shoulder, there's a giddy joy of perfection, the wild rush of having your ass handed to you so incredibly well, of hitting the mat with force and speed, and of finding yourself amazingly undamaged, unafraid, unbalanced.

Not uncommon to laugh—little bird of relief escaping your throat as you get to your feet, adjust your uniform, tie your belt, and bow to start again—a good judo player remaining loose like this. Buoyant, dynamic, jaunty, oddly unfixed and unfixable, like a bead of mercury. *Pliant* is another word—less common, but perhaps more accurate—for the Japanese character *ju*. The best *judoka* must cultivate an ability to keep somehow, always, pliant. Rooted yet floating, strong yet soft, heavy yet light, fierce yet calm, you come to life in contradictions. Through the chess games of *newaza* (grappling), and the choreography of *kata* (forms), and the free play of *randori* (literally "chaos taking"), you start to catch glimpses of all the endless nuances, begin to grasp just how many things go into the most basic of foot sweeps.

Balance, timing, preparation, experience, and luck—luck to escape serious injury, luck to have *sensei* standing there, with his constant nudges and scowls and occasional beams of praise, luck to have *senpais* in front of you, senior students who take this art and class and commitment seriously, luck to have fellow *judoka* in the dojo beside you, luck even to have this dojo at all—and this is part of the reason you bow upon entering the *do* (way) *jo* (place), and bow upon seeing your *sensei*, and your *senpais*, and the photograph of Professor Jigorō Kanō, founder of judo. It's why you err on the side of bowing and bow whenever you are in doubt of bowing.

Even something as simple as the etiquette of *ritsu-rei* (standing bow) becomes nearly infinite in its meanings over the years. Not only do you bow in respect of the tradition; not only do you lower your neck to take the yoke of technique, *waza*, and to demonstrate proper spirit, *ki*, and to honor all the blessings and sacrifices that enable you to be here once again, five or six nights a week; not only do you bow to the whole wheeling world that supports and nurtures and makes this dojo possible for you; you also bow in order to set that whole wheeling world aside for a moment; and bow to clear your mind of everything but the hour that awaits; and bow to pause and gather yourself, to concentrate and be present for the practice before you. Your bow is an effort to bring spirit and body together, an attempt to put future and past aside, a chance to concentrate on the moment at hand. On the mat you bow to acknowledge your fellow player, bow without taking your eyes off your opponent, without submitting in any way, without giving any taunt or hint of strength or weakness.

There are times, of course, when a bow is just a bow—an empty habit, a stupid little nod before taking grips—and there are days when judo feels so entirely beside the point, weeks when your dreams of black belt strike you as meaningless, months when those dreams turn out worse than meaningless: they appear to you mocking, belittling, profane. An entire winter you simply don't show up to class, don't take the art or your commitment seriously, don't feel much like falling down or getting up. In the words of Professor Kanō, "The man who is at the peak of his success and the man who has just failed are in exactly the same position. Each must decide what he will do next."

Your ultimate success or ultimate failure in martial arts will have little to do with physical ability or athletic talent or even luck or gung-ho commitment and energy. In fact, those who excel too quickly or too eagerly are invariably the first to drift away. Some small injury turns into a month off, which turns into a new job, new apartment, new girlfriend, dog, kids. There's always a better party, the excuses to stop forever outnumbering your reasons to keep going to the dojo. As it happens, the true mystery of martial arts becomes less *how* and more *why*. Why keep going to the dojo at all? Why devote yourself to the art of judo? Why bother, really, with any of this?

II.

Now, try to explain to your family and friends that you play judo and jujitsu four or five or even six days a week. And then try to tell them this for two or three or even ten years. And then be prepared to get all *aikido* on them, ready to redirect their energy as best you can. Deep down they *care*, of course. No one wants you to get *hurt*. It just takes so much *time*, this *little hobby* of yours. Emphasis theirs. Your wife rants *selfishness*, your brother digs in with *lazy*, and your mother—who deserves (but never gets) a bigger and better entrance—she wishes aloud for "a daughter instead of a son," which "has nothing to do with your judo."

Still, tell a stranger you play martial arts, and the first question out of their mouths will be, "Do you have a black belt?"

It'd be a lie to say there's no satisfaction in being able to say yes. "Yes," you say, "I have a black belt." But it's not the loud, kick-your-ass satisfaction you'd been fantasizing for years. Instead you find only this quiet authority to say, finally, yes. No hemming, no hawing, none of the usual mealymouthed apologies for yourself. Instead you deliver this simple and solid affirmation of who you are and what you've accomplished. "Yes," you say, "I have a *shodan* in judo."

A satisfaction extends to him or her as well, a sense of well-being in the room when you can answer this way. The black belt doesn't mean what you thought it would mean—all the ninja-like reflexes, all those punk injustices you would avenge once you mastered these hands-as-weapon skills, all the dreams you dangled in front of yourself for the last ten years—given enough time, you have hoped for all sorts of crazy things that have nothing to do with the actual black belt you've earned, let alone the actual life you've been living. Turns out the most gratifying part of saying you have a black belt may be the way you can immediately move on to more interesting things. Like the history of judo or jujitsu. Or how it's said you only begin your studies with a black belt, a *shodan*, the name for the rank meaning "beginner" in Japanese. If nothing else, your black belt allows you to steer the conversation around to this other person. What does he or she care about in the world? Wastewater treatment? I bet that's actually fascinating, isn't it? And they tell you whatever's most interesting to them: how the entire plant runs more or less on gravity; how the first stage screens for logs and dogs; how the process gets more and more granular as you go, down to corn and nuts and other insolubles. It's true, anything one thinks about enough becomes nearly incredible, and you listen, rapt, and ask how'd you ever get mixed up in something like that?

They smile and tell their story—their childhood, their parents, their passion for rivers—and then they turn the conversation back to you and the dojo. One interesting thing you can say about your *sensei* is this: he seems to trust his hunches about what each student needs most from the art. Every evening Sensei Higashi seems to hold twenty different dojos on the same mat at the same time. Big Bill gets one kind of *sensei*, Little Bill ("I'm Little Bill," you say) gets another kind of *sensei*, Diana's *sensei* is sweet and fatherly, Daniel has a tough and impossible-to-please *sensei*.

And besides martial arts?

Well, you've worked as a teacher, an editor, a bartender, and a lot of other things, including a lifeguard, a janitor, a Mister Softee ice cream man, but mostly you've been working on a novel. It's back to mealymouthed as you explain what got you mixed up in something like that. You never knew your father. You met him twice when you were growing up, he died when you were ten, and none of the stories your mother told about him seemed to lie still for you. It's taken you almost ten years to touch bottom on that little book. Like your black belt, you honor the work and sacrifice and dedication and achievement and all that self-congratulatory pep, but still you're talking a good decade of delusion, years of hoarding and conjuring every déjà vu of book happiness and book sorrow, just as you hoarded and conjured every déjà vu of black-belt vengeance and register-these-hands-with-authorities respect.

In the end, the last thing you expect to find at the dojo or the desk: tenderness toward existence. As if anyone ever set out to write a book or earn a black belt in order to gain humility or kindness or friendship or generosity. But maybe that's what you learn more than anything else, thank goodness: the world turning out to be more strange and surprising than any of your hopes; you, yourself, turning out to be more surprising and strange than any of your dreams; nothing about life turning out to be quite what you expected.

You know these loops by heart—both the hope you had that your *sensei* would some day tie that black belt ceremoniously around your waist, and the wish you had to see your mother fanning the pages of your novel—but after the black belt is tied, after the book is on the shelf, the most striking thing is the absolute trust you had to give to the process itself. The cliché of it only makes it more profound, maybe, but everything besides the day-to-day process is above your pay grade in some way. You simply arrive at the dojo, bow to *sensei*, fall, get up, fall again. Foundation for an entire life—years passing yellow to green to brown—and just that constant promise of luck, balance, timing.

III.

"Hello," comes the voice on the other end of the line, "you wouldn't happen to be the author of a novel called *The Wasp Eater*?"

Takes a moment to get your balance here. No one's ever asked that before. A little stutter step before you can say yes. "Yes," you say, "this is he."

"Well, good," says the man, "this is Clive Cussler calling from Arizona."

"OK," you say—and in your mind you're trying to think who this person on the phone really is—which one of your friends would do this, though you're thrown by the voice so gentle and friendly, his tone oddly familiar as he gives just enough proof for you to believe he's actually read the book. By the time he asks where you'd gotten the name Cussler for the family in your novel, you're gushing to the man, saying how he's your mother's *absolute favorite writer*, how at your wedding your mother had the most memorable line of the weekend, saying to your wife's friends, "There should be a Dirk Pitt in every girl's life."

You're saying she reads everything he writes—*Pacific Vortex!*, *Inca Gold*, *Cyclops*, *Iceberg*, *Sahara*, *Treasure*, *Shock Wave*, *Flood Tide*, *Arctic Drift*, *Black Wind*, *The Mediterranean Caper*—you have them all on your shelf, with the clippings, interviews, pictures of his antique cars, stories about shipwrecks he's hunting that she has sent. You're saying that in your novel, as a kind of wink to your mother, you gave your family the last name Cussler, as if giving her the Dirk Pitt that every girl deserved.

He describes how one's first book is the most difficult. "Real door opener for your life," he says, adding how it should feel like you're on your way after this first book, building readership, getting new projects done, putting some real miles under your belt, feeling like you're a writer, *being* who you say you are.

You chat about your judo with him—James Cagney was a black belt, Peter Sellers played in London, Lucille Ball in California—and Clive Cussler talks about his shipwrecks and his writing process with you, what his days are like, how you can fuss something to death but can never fuss it to life. After you hang up you call your wife, your agent, your editor, and your mother.

"Hey, Mom," you say, "you will never guess who just called."

"Oprah?" she says.

"C'mon," you tell her, "better than Oprah."

"Not possible," she says, "no one's as big as Oprah Winfrey."

Your mother has written multiple letters to Oprah at Harpo Studios, Washington Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois. These are great, detailed, handwritten gushes of all that would make you perfect talk-show guests—your mother offering her side of your novel to Oprah, filling in all the gaps in your story for some future audience, correcting all the mistakes you've made, things you've left out, secrets she's never told, your mother suggesting you and she could stay in a hotel together right there on Lakeshore Drive, bring photographs of your long-dead father, bring the actual love letters he wrote, bring his old wallet and keys and wristwatch and pint-curves of Fleischmann's Preferred Blended Whiskey, the bottles she still keeps under the sink with the cleaners and chemicals.

"Right, Mom," you say. "To hell with Oprah!"

"Please don't say that," she says.

"To hell with Oprah," you say, as if backhanding your mother across the face—not hard, but sharp enough to distract, your voice more steel-cage-death-match than you mean it to be. "And to hell with *The New Yorker*, Mom. To hell with whatever nonsense I thought I was writing for."

She doesn't say anything—what can she say next to all this?—what can you say, really? The two of you let each other hang for a long moment, and she says, "So who called?"

"Well, he wanted to know where I got the name Cussler from."

"You're kidding," she says.

"He said there were only four other Cusslers in the country, and three of them were related to him."

"My oh my," says your mother, her voice tilting up and unsteady over the phone—you standing in your apartment high on tiptoes—and you don't believe she's ever said something so unalloyedly happy in her life. Your mother is not a my-oh-my sort of woman. Yet there it is, this beautiful surprise of a day, everything unhinged and vivid and strange, as if your life's just been reenchanted by some odd coincidence, some larger-than-life idea becoming briefly real: Clive Cussler brushing up against you for a moment, your mother saying "my oh my."

About an hour later—sun setting on the day Clive Cussler called—the phone rings again. "So," she says, "what'd he sound like?"

"I don't know, Mom. Like a gentleman—very kind, very nice. Sounded like you'd expect him to sound."

"OK, but give me a voice."

You don't have a voice for her just then.

Late that night you call back.

"Yes, William?"

"All right," you say, "I have a voice for you."

"I'm waiting."

"Burl Ives."

"Perfect."