

A WAY TO RECONCILE THE WORLD

AIKIDO STORIES FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

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RECONCILING MY DARK AND MY LIGHT by Jerry Green

The Spirit of George Leonard

The last day in January 2010 was the first day after my 67th birthday. I walked into Tamalpais Dojo in Corte Madera for the memorial training honoring George Leonard who died three weeks earlier at the age of 87. The mat was already crowded with Aikido students from all over the Bay Area, and the reception area was even denser with warm greetings.

I waded into the tiny dressing room to change into my *gi* and wrap myself in my faded brown belt. Tying the knot at my *hara* recalled the countless times over the thirty some years this ritual began my unlikely practice. In that crowded dressing room, after taking in the eyes around me, a familiar smile once again spread heat through my body in this ritual transition to the mat. It took me back to my early years, where I recalled my childhood growing up in Sherman Oaks, constantly on guard against the approach of the bullies at my elementary school who taunted me with names while cornering me looking for an opportunity to twist my contracted left arm and shove me off balance.

As I grew up, doctors and physical therapists told me that cerebral palsy interrupted my motor functions that exerted my muscles, but didn't affect the independent function of my sensory nerves. The latter principle was only partially true, and this part obscured my growth for more than thirty years. I discovered through gestalt, massage, yoga and tai chi that sensory awareness was the key to feeling the accumulation of tension in spastic patterns, and that only through feeling the tension, could I learn to release it. I could learn to settle, let go, and drop down. Hanging in with Aikido for 25 years had taught me to do that in movement and under pressure, like being chased by bullies when I was young.

Under pressure, physical or mental, attention rises, likely into the head where the mind can contemplate planned solutions. Aikido brought forth body wisdom under pressure, static or in movement. It trained my grounding and centering skills to operate when the heat was on, when I was being attacked. As a child I grew up falling down. As an adult I learned to turn falling into an art form.

It was George who had brought me into aikido and he knitted the Tamalpais aikido community together with his vision of extending its teachings beyond dojo walls in new and diverse forms. I recalled the day George enticed me into Aikido in his tiny blue MG sports car. He'd been at Devta, the center for body awareness I'd started in Larkspur in the seventies, investigating a story he'd write for New Realities about this collection of healers, yoga and Tai Chi teachers. On our way to Mill Valley he told me to feel my body weight settle into the bucket seat, receiving the pull of gravity from the core of the planet. I went deeper as he sped up along the winding road around the eastern ridge of Mount Tamalpais.

Before I lost the feeling of his thrilling and introspective ride, he took me to his basement, not far from my home and our promised destination, and shuttled me around on the mats he'd set up there to practice. "Gravity is the silent pulse of the universe, and it's language is always speaking to us. The mat is like a library, where we can learn to tap into its wisdom for all our journeys."

After training we sat in a huge circle, appreciated the moment, spread blessings of peace to our loved ones and those suffering the world over. Then reminisced together. I got to tell how George drove me to Aikido in a sports car.

I studied with George and I trained with him. I explored his interest in applying Aikido principles "off the mat." He was a challenging teacher for me. After "driving me" to the ideas of Aikido, he gently "pushed" me into a class by inviting me to stay only for the warm up and energy practices which could last 30-40 minutes of a 90 minute class. I was cautious and embarrassed about my awkward physical limitations, and frightened about training with bullies. After a couple of months watching the rest of the class from the sidelines, I began to stay, and eventually train, but the challenging dynamic between us remained.

Little did I know how much this would impact on my life. On the mat I learnt to deal with my physical disabilities, but in so doing it also changed my approach to life. It gave me a positive outlook and I learnt that the seemingly impossible was in fact possible if only I was prepared to put in the time and the energy. I did not see it at the time, but it opened doors of possibility that previously I think I would not have seen.

After Devta closed in 1977, *rolfer* Ed Taylor and I rented an old boat's galley (where Alan Watt's lived) for our massage and bodywork practice. There was a nice baby grand in the sunlit foyer of the S.S. Vallejo, which was moored at Gate Five in Sausalito. In between clients I'd sit at the piano, one-fingering its keys forlornly, and recalling this dark voice I'd often heard saying "You can't play music."

I had decided to study bio-feedback training to explore developing my manual dexterity. I'd progressed greatly in my massage work, but I felt I'd gotten away with a lot by using my body weight more than my hands and fingers, and was ready to develop more dexterity. I'd been shopping for biofeedback equipment, thinking that it might refine my ability to feel and release my tensions. Wait-a-minute, if I could hear the forlornly in my one-fingering, was that a form of mechanical biofeedback? Did I really need sensors, buzzers and lights or expensive electronic magnification?

I tried a not so forlornly finger, this time with some breath and a relaxed centered posture, like entering onto the mat. Extending that syrupy weighted energy/ki that ran through me and seemed connected to earth's gravity, in me into the strings through the reach of through the long keys and hammers, sounded differently than playing notes. There was still this dark voice whispering, "How can a klutz like you play music?" But now I started hearing a second voice, "Just be present and let ki play through; it's more than you think is you... expand, and let more in. Let it move through you. Ki play was not at all like me play. All of a sudden, there was no forlornly sound!

Something had shifted in me; something subtle, but deep. More than I could understand at the time. I began spending more time at the piano in between clients at the office on the S.S.

Vallejo. I found out that the cost of renting my first piano was comparable to getting into biofeedback technology. So that's what I did.

I soon discovered that the easiest way to touch the keys with my left hand was with my little finger and my thumb, which sounded nicely harmonic; very nice in fact. So I just played that way with my left hand, repeating the pattern an octave up in my right where I could throw in my middle finger and play a total of five notes. I was ten years into body awareness work at this point, and it didn't take long for me to try different expressions of ki flow, attitudes, postures moods etc. in which to play my own little five note arpeggio. A music teacher who heard me said I was playing "fifths," the most common building block in harmony. No wonder the sound held some interest. She taught me to build a scale on any note, and transition through the "circle of fifths" which tied all keys together.

All of a sudden, I started hearing intervals in popular music that were also fifths. It turns out that an "open fifth" (without the third) was a common feature in the new age music I was listening to, such as George Winston and William Ackerman. I found a couple favorite Winston introductions with my evolving fingering one day, and all of a sudden I was playing with his sound....

George Leonard was an accomplished jazz and show tunes piano player. I was a klutz. I envied his ability to move his fingers so fast and rhythmically. When my mother brought me to a piano teacher when I was seven, I didn't last more than one lesson. "I couldn't tie my shoes, so who are we kidding, piano?" said that dark voice. On the other hand, I was attending an aikido dojo regularly, studying martial arts with training partners who reminded me of being chased by bullies and sulking off after school to see physical therapists. To be honest, I had no inkling of being a musician, but now I was slowly learning to make sounds like George Winston. And that other voice was saying "there's way more ki than is in me.... Get outta the way. Let it play."

My limited mobility and coordination actually led me to simply structured music that I could play with as biofeedback messages that taught me progressively to feel and learn to release spastic tension patterns. I was learning to listen deeply in my body for the feelings associated with the sounds of my movements as I touched the keys. By definition, the "music" that I made was calming and relaxing, and others could hear this and be affected in the same manner.

But to be listened to was very challenging for me. It didn't help that my parents met in the high school orchestra and my younger brother was a professional musician. Music is performance art, and people learn to play music in order to entertain others. I was doing something very different, like looking in a sound mirror, or extending into a grab on the mat. But it always felt very personal. When my brother heard me, he said that it was musically appealing... and that he felt a little like a voyeur listening to me.

Somatic pioneer Thomas Hanna defined somatic as a sixth sense, a sense of self awareness resulting from turning our five senses usually occupied with perceiving the outside, within upon ourselves. Massage, yoga and dance were somatic practices for me because I engaged them for increasing somatic awareness. Aikido extended this training in somatic attunement under pressure of attack. My approach to piano made music such a tool for me when I was alone. Both were transforming me in remarkable ways.

By the time I got on the mat regularly, I'd learned to settle comfortably standing alone. On the mat however, training began with a grab or strike, certain to distract attention from such deeply embodied practice. When attacked (verbally as well as physically) attention invariably rises. (We get riled *UP*.) Aikido entrains prompt recognition of this reaction, and the presence to settle *down*, or drop our attention into the core of the body and connect to ground. A "weighted touch" is also what produces a pleasant sound on piano keys and other musical instruments. Responding to attack on the mat was more challenging than collecting one's self on a piano bench, but both invited me to learn to "settle down."

Before long, I was drawn to play with a few favorite themes by Ackerman, Vangelis, then some rather popular themes by Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Eric Satie. I even co-authored a beautiful piece of music unintentionally, and I'm in the midst of another emerging composition.

Feeling my movements and listening for the sounds they create evoked a musicality in me that I couldn't have imagined. As easily as hearing the first half of a sentence someone speaks will often conjure up in the listener's mind what finishes the thought, a musical phrase evoked its extension, and there was more music. It felt just like an aiki-blend after opening, sometimes just a little to the "gift" of a grab or strike, receiving without knowing its nature into my new shape, and discovering a graceful wave formed by opposing flows, that has a shape and direction all its own. Yet I am a part of it. In the end, it looks and feels like "my" musical creation, but I still have difficulty owning that completely.

Did aikido give me the confidence to do something I thought was beyond my ability? It didn't feel like that at the time, but I would say now that aikido opened me to possibility. Then curiosity took over and discovered surprises. Many of them actually, were connected incrementally by opening to something larger than myself, taking that in and channeling it through an ever-expanding sense of self, and discovering that it has a momentum and direction of its own.

You Can't Find the Light Without the Dark

This book includes the famous story of aikidoist Terry Dobson watching an old man in kimono settle down an armed and drunken train robber with empathy and compassion. Yet for long after this incident, there remained in Terry a fierce anger that propelled his connections with others.

Terry was one of *Morihei Ueshiba's* closest students and assisted *O Sensei* personally in tasks of daily living. I took a liking to Terry immediately, and we became friendly on and off the mat, often chatting over shared experiences at California's pioneer growth center Esalen Institute in Big Sur, with Robert Bly, discussing our shared interest in aikido and kabbalah, and playing chess. Somehow I got close to him in spite of my discomfort with his tough guy brashness.

I attended his pioneering psycho-drama workshops on using aiki in conflict situations. He was crude and awkward with words, but fascinating and inspiring in his search for mind-body connection. I loved him up, and he liked me, or the attention I gave him, perhaps both.

At least that was the case until the night that he shared teaching a class with Richard. In the middle of class, Terry broke in to my partner-practice, extending his wrist to me to practice

with him. Then he taunted me with, and after a couple of tries to take his wrist, said “Why are you such a fucking slow learner, Green?... and stormed off.

He came back after the next demonstration to take me on again. There I was, still a fresh brown belt mesomorph, off guard again, feeling quite vulnerable to an angry 250 pound black belt commanding the respect of a sensei. This time I said meekly that I had some ideas why I might be “such a fucking slow learner.” He listened up. I said: “I’m still insecure in my body because of my congenital limitations, (*I was born with cerebral palsy*), and that inhibits my learning this quickly.... And, quite a separate thing is that your anger frightened me, and I was frozen in my own fear.”

He got even angrier and came right at me declaring loudly, “you see anger, then you purify it...!!!” and he whacked me in the nuts with the back of his hand. It hurt. I wasn’t injured, except for my pride, but I was in pain. We’d created enough commotion to get Richard’s attention but not enough to interrupt the class. I got off the mat, feeling disillusioned and humiliated. Richard came over and asked if I was ok. I said probably but I needed to sit-out some, and I couldn’t say more.

Later I asked Richard to convene a dojo meeting to discuss anger and other negative training attitudes on the mat. Terry was invited but he did not attend. Nor was he at the dojo for a while thereafter, long enough to notice, but not more than a couple of weeks. Then one night after a rigorous practice I came down the big iron staircase into the darkened parking lot carrying my sweat-soaked *gi*. There he was, shoulders hunched and looking angry. “Green, you’re trying to run me outta town...!” Terry growled.

“No,” I said,” As he grabbed me with both fists, pulling me close. “I’m looking for a way to train with you and feel safe about it, Terry.” He tensed again, and my favorite Eddie Bauer Chamois snap-fastened western shirt ripped straight up the left side of my chest. We were nose to nose. I was close to soiling my pants. That was the only sense of “settling down under pressure” that I could feel.

Terry paused and seemed to reflect on what his anger had wrought, then opened his fists, releasing the tattered edges of cloth to drop upon my pounding chest. An awkward moment then passed before he regained some composure and demanded that we go back upstairs together and speak with Richard. Later we left the dojo separately after getting Richard’s vague offer to “mediate our differences.” That calmed on our heated exchange like a cold Mill Valley fog.

In fact, shortly after that, Terry left town for the East Coast. I didn’t know when, as I hadn’t come to the dojo for a while, and I felt a bit out of the loop. Then one evening I came in to train. As I approached the counter, Richard set out before me a wrinkled brown paper bag, crumpled closed, and bearing in black marking-pen a message saying, “To Jerry, with love from Terry.” Richard wondered if I might open it now since, “We are all curious to see what’s inside....”

I opened it. Inside was a round steel gear-piece with a rusty sprocketed perimeter, sharp in some places, and just where I picked it up. A drop of red curiously appeared on my finger; no pain, but I was bleeding. Inside the hard steel circle (also an aikido symbol of harmony/love) was the tattered paperback 9 ½ Mystics by Herbert Weiner, my first read in the study of

Kabbalah that I'd loaned to Terry many months ago when he'd expressed having a common interest in Jewish Mysticism.

I kissed my finger until the bleeding stopped. It was time for class. Terry wasn't around. Or was he? That night I began to feel deeper into my own darkness for my own light.

Kabbalah teaches that light was created from within darkness. Mysticism is indeed mysterious and to me aikido has often felt the same. What Terry taught me through his sheer humanity and obvious struggle with his own demons was that in order to change you had to look deep within. He wasn't the only teacher to make this clear to me, but he reached parts of me that no one else could have.

After that class, I carried that wrinkled shopping bag full of Kabbalah and bloodied steel down the dojo stairs into the darkened parking lot where I'd last seen Terry Dobson. It was just a book and a steel ring, but the contents meant more than I could comprehend that night. He wasn't on the mat again, and I got out of the lot safely, but now I felt his presence strangely within me. Was it fear, pain, love? That's what I wondered at first as I bowed in to the class that Richard taught, this time by himself. The encircling one-ness that all mystical teachings speak of? An embodied treatise on finding the light in the darkness? That's what I've been wondering since then.

A long time passed it seemed before Terry returned to teach again in Point Reyes for one of his last moments on the mat. A mutual friend encouraged me to come by saying frequently that Terry wanted to see me again. We met after the training in the hallway by the kitchen and greeted one another in silence, holding both hands gently, gazing into one another's eyes, where no words needed speaking, and all that was called for was said.

Even bullies can blend in Aikido.

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