

Being Important

The deepest urge in human nature is the desire to be important.
—Andrew Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

The traditional martial arts creates a method by which people can measure their relative worth according to a fixed standard and, as they progress, achieve higher levels of importance within their martial arts community. It is wonderful that people can find various ways to feel worthy and important. The drive to be important is so strong however, that sometimes even martial artists prefer to *feel* important rather than to *be* important.

The simplest example of this is rank or title inflation. All traditional martial artists have heard of this, are confident it does not apply to them personally, and thus renew their assurance that their symbol of importance is valid while those of others may be suspect. They look askance at master ranks achieved by local members of Paul's Organization of Ornery Fighters while ignoring the stumblebum who just earned his Shihan title from their own group Fadool's Association of Redoubtable Tarantists. Oh, they can appreciate the skill and knowledge of a visiting master from afar, but they figure that he represents just a higher level of what they are already on the path to achieve. As with most members of groups, their focus is narrow. After all, that is why they joined the group in the first place. It is always easier to become the secretary of a local branch (thus achieving some importance) than to become the honcho of, say, their entire federation, let alone president of The United States.

We may recognize these characteristics as the big-fish-in-small-pond syndrome.

In the 1970s, I was invited to demonstrate at the opening of a New Hampshire dojo. Since the school was too far away to compete with my own, I was happy to oblige. I brought with me three students recently promoted to *shodan*. As luck would have it, we were scheduled to demonstrate last so we witnessed many high-ranking students and masters who proudly showed their skills and self-defense combinations. The grandmaster of the school's system wore a red belt and reportedly knew "over a thousand self-defense combinations". Since one combination can look much like another, I was less than impressed. The head instructor's son, a fourth degree black belt, demonstrated his control by kicking a pipe from the mouth of his father. Successful after a couple of misses, he finished his demonstration with a fast kata complete with 14 kiai. Then it was our turn. My students did a few basic forms and then some *ippon kumite*—nothing terribly exciting, but nothing anyone else had showed. We finished with some aiki-ju-jutsu freestyle. Afterwards, over sandwiches and soda, the head instructor's son told my senior student that he was impressed with our skills. "What rank are you? Fourth, fifth dan?" When he was answered with "Just shodan" his jaw almost allowed his chicken salad access to the floor. He had uncomfortably discovered that there was a bigger pond not too far away.

Disparities in quality occur, of course, and we can't expect there to be a level standards with every art, in every area, at all times, but it seems to me that most martial artists while unconsciously aware of the Carnegie

quote above, ignore a corollary idea that I first saw in a book called *Release Your Brakes*: “You can build your feelings of worth, value, and significance by reinforcing and strengthening the self-esteem of the epi-organisms of which you are a part.” In other words, if your style of martial arts is noted for producing fine martial artists, your *shodan* (first degree) may be as well valued as a *godan* (fifth degree) from another guy’s style.

Rather than leeching off a collective reputation, however, your way of keeping up standards is to contribute to that reputation by expecting high quality work from yourself and by offering your dojo or federation that personal standard as an inspiration. It is not as personally gratifying as being president of The United States, I know, but I’d rather be a clerk in the post office of a system I was proud of, in a country I respected, than be the chief executive officer of a system I was ashamed of, in a country whose qualities were declining.

In case you think I am talking about the U.S., consider that I just may be talking about something closer to home.