

Courageous Enough

In the 1970s Judee Sill was a religious/country-folk singer whose phraseology and voice I found especially enjoyable whether or not I agreed with her take on spirituality. In her song *Ridge Rider*, she writes, “He’s courageous enough to be scared/But he’s too humble win.” She was, I suspect, setting out a Christian ideal for her character, a man who does his job bravely but doesn’t need to feel the adulation that comes with victory: a modesty to the point of self-effacement. I believe that the Zen influence on Japanese budo aspired to a similar ideal, not based on theology, but on Zen philosophy as a way to an idealized culture. “The samurai is hungry but uses a toothpick” was a saying that emphasized the ideal warrior’s humility and self-control.

I prefer a philosophy that paraphrases Judee Sill’s: “Courageous enough to be scared, but not too humble to win.” You could argue that I am not spiritually advanced enough to give up winning, but I do not mean “winning” in a trophy/limelight/adulation way. Rather, I mean what Funakoshi said in his 12th precept: “Do not think that you have to win, think rather that you do not have to lose.” Were I too humble to win, it sets me up to be taken advantage of. I don’t need to laud myself victorious over the inferior masses, but I sure prefer not to have some inferior mass victorious over me, at least in a self-defense situation. There should be (in my sometimes humble opinion) a balance between healthy self-respect and an overextended self-opinion.

Have you ever studied under a teacher who feels that everyone else has no concept of reality and that his is the only valuable way to do anything? What masquerades as confidence is his need to control. His need to control makes him feel comfortable while everyone else seems able go through life without controlling anyone. Have you ever witnessed a student that claims, no matter what talent he may possess, that he is not very good at anything at all? What masquerades as modesty is a fear that he will not live up to his potential. In both cases, what’s missing is courage. Not just courage to be scared, but also courage to fail on one hand, and courage to win on the other. To balance the two, I would argue is the golden mean of my Zen-influenced Western mind: “Courageous enough to be scared, but not too humble to win.”

When I was working for The Academy of Physical and Social Development in the 1970s, Director Mike Burg’s shorthand analysis of some of the kids in his conferences with both instructors and parents was, “David is afraid of failure.” Made sense to me: a lot of people would rather not try too hard on the chance that hard work would pay off in failure. (They did not see, of course, that the work itself produced an experience that provided benefits, win or lose.) But a phrase Burg used that did not make sense to me, at least at the time, was, “Jesse is afraid of success.” My 24-year-old mind could not embrace the idea that some kids would not want to succeed. Several decades later, we all can grasp the concept more easily: kids sometimes don’t want to succeed because then you will expect a higher standard. Expecting more of them means (a) more work on their part, and (b) a greater chance of failure. It would be better, they believe, not to succeed now while the stakes are small than to succeed now, be pushed up the ladder to an inevitable failure later on.

A few of those kids, and many like them, grew up to be martial artists. The traditional martial arts generally reward those who have enough courage to try, but aren't too humble to win. Occasionally, however, both in martial arts and in life, people's personal power wanes so that it becomes easier for them to be, conversely, too scared to be courageous and too humble to win.

There is no instant way out of that dilemma. I would council going to Mike Burg's Academy if it were still around. Since it isn't, the only thing left is to listen to uplifting music, Judee Sill or otherwise, and hope that you don't ride the ridge so long that you slip down on the side of false humility or pseudo-confidence.