

Doing the Unexpected

Hannah Arendt in her 1958 book *The Human Condition* suggests that it is the nature of human beings to do the unexpected, thus every birth implies the possibility of a changed world. Henri Bergson writes in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution* that although human beings would like to see creation as mechanistic and predictable, it is instead fluid and therefore open to possibility. Similarly, in 2007's *The Black Swan*, Nassim Taleb argues that, although we want to make the world orderly, we don't really know from whence change will come. All these philosophers hail back to Heraclitus (535 BC - 475 BC) who told us that we cannot step in the same stream twice.

Doing the unexpected not only is a hallmark of human beings, it is especially the hallmark of martial artists who are successful either in sport or in self-defense. That, I think, is ironic considering that traditional martial artists are known for their conformity rather than their innovation. Nevertheless, the late Steve Nagel used hook and round kicks when the Okinawans around him were using reverse punches. Joe Lewis and Bill Wallace fought sideways when others were fighting facing forward. Bruce Lee trapped and chain-punched when others would try to score and get out. The Gracies grappled on the ground when everyone else wanted to strike standing up. From a technical and strategic point of view, doing the unexpected helps win the battle.

But Arendt, Bergson, and Taleb weren't martial artists or soldiers. They are referring to human culture or to humankind in general. Just as we could not know that hula-hoops and pet rocks would be crazes in their day, we likewise could not know that ninjutsu would hit it big for over a decade while the interest that Steven Seagal would create with his movies would not create a resurgence in traditional martial arts. At this writing, mixed martial arts has been going strong for decades. People can tell you why, now that its popularity has been achieved, but they could not have predicted it when point karate or full-contact kickboxing was hot. Traditional martial arts have fallen, to some degree, on disrepute (too many phonies). To some degree the traditional arts have shot themselves in the feet (too many high ranks in search of an equally high skill level). For one reason or another (or both), traditional martial arts have taken a back seat to the tattooed driver in the sleeveless jean jacket, the emblematic mixed martial arts devotee.

I remember that, when personal computers were relatively new on the market, some company came out with a touch-screen model—something obviously more intuitive than the typed-in commands needed at the time. It went nowhere. Apple's user-friendly interface dominated and when Windows joined in, both typing in command code and touching a screen were out. Ironically, it was Apple that made the touch-screen popular again with its iPad and iPhone technology. That technology did what no one expected even though everyone had seen it before.

As a traditional martial artist, I want to learn from both philosophers and fighters, both from thinkers and athletes, both from the past and the present. When teaching sparring, I advocate, even to the most conservative of fighters, that they mentally mess their opponent up by doing something bizarre and unexpected.

You can never tell when the smallest unusual thing will produce positive and unexpected results. Of course, you can't be bizarre simply for its own sake—that's gets wearisome pretty quickly—but you can hold out hope that one little thing you do, perhaps taking in an article, a DVD, a seminar, or a class, will set a chain of events in motion that will change the world, at least for a time, the way that Apple has; or, perhaps change the martial arts world, the way mixed martial arts has.

Instead of being the sneaky ninja, a traditionalist can do the unexpected by teaching more openly, more widely and with a greater amount of acceptance of other systems. No one would ever expect that.