

Invisible Service

Just before a Master Class, one of my longtime students handed me a photocopy of a little page from a book he was reading. He did not identify the book, but said only that it was a collection from the wisdom of several Middle Eastern sages.

The page was in the form of a parable in which Mr. A gives away books and food to those whom he thinks will benefit from them. Mr. H says to him, “You never allow people to perceive what you are doing for them. They think they are getting something which is of no use to you and therefore they do not prize it.”

But Mr. A says that he does not expect them to prize what he gives, nor prize his giving it. “I want them to benefit, not to adulate.”

Mr. H records that Mr. A also gave away his knowledge with the same spirit. In many cases, people did not know they were learning because he taught them in a manner that did not emphasize the value of the teachings. They thought they were taking part in some completely irrelevant activity.

Mr. A explained his philosophy in this way: “The part of learning people prize is the part which does them little good. It is like a nourishing meal that has been so interestingly presented that people want to look at it and perhaps even recreate it, but no one wants to eat it.”

For many years I have noted that in well-taught martial arts, what you see is not what you get. I have suggested that kata analysis in karate is a perfect example of this, as is waza-variation in aiki. You learn to perform the kata or waza perfectly and then learn to apply it nearly perfectly, hoping your partner is not so awkward as to make your presentation falter. You then think that what you learn is to be applied on the street the exact same way and either hope that your opponent will not be so big that your application will falter, or assume that no matter how nasty he is, your mastery of the kata/waza will do the job. In other words, you take the techniques more or less literally, not seeing beyond them for a deeper value.

I have also written that the whole process of learning insists that a student master the curriculum when the curriculum, in many cases, might only be the means to the deeper, more abiding lessons one learns in process. What we learn is both what we are trying to learn and a touchstone for more extensive learning we can't even see.

In civilized schools with even the sincerest of students, as Mr. A suggests, most students either take that which they learn for granted or take it with humility, appreciating the presentation of that which they learn but seldom going beyond.

I would prefer that while students appreciate the presentation, they consume their lessons in such a way that they are made stronger and healthier. I would prefer that the lessons teach them what is overtly there and what they cannot see on the surface. In that way, the teacher does the student a double service: an overt one and an invisible one.

My longtime student brought the page to me because he wanted to use the idea of this parable called “Invisible Service” to fashion an endorsement of my teaching. To say that this idea was a compliment to me would be to understate it severely. After twenty-five years of teaching him, I seemed to still be able to offer something of value. What is more important is that he has now seen that the value is in more than what I offer.

It made my day, to say the least, but more importantly, it recognized what a teacher’s life is about.