

Not Having Been a Martial Artist

For this, our 100th front-page essay, I thought I'd reflect on martial artistry in a fanciful way that might just inspire you do to the same.

I almost had a dream this morning. I say “almost” because I think I was awake, just not awake enough to take notes, nor asleep enough to roll over and forget what I had almost dreamed.

It was I without having been a martial artist for the better part of five decades. Now that is a hard dream to have, really. If you are a man, maybe you can dream of being a woman by simulating what your wife does during the day, but you can't dream of simply *not* being a man. If you are a doctor, you might think of what life would be like as a golfer, but it is more difficult to think of simply *not* being a doctor. Similarly, I wasn't almost dreaming of being a famous writer or a successful professor; I was thinking of NOT being a martial artist. Having given myself an assignment too difficult to fulfill, I let little alternatives creep in here and there. Somehow, I made my living as a professor/writer/lecturer so the educational and on-stage part of my martial artistry was sublimated with parallel efforts. Trying to stay in shape was more difficult.

After college, I played tag-football for a year, joined a health club and maxed out the Nautilus machines (even though they had not been invented yet), but found myself bored. My girlfriend Gati Hanson, a curvy Swedish woman I met while teaching kata analysis in Europe...wait a minute! I couldn't have met her there since I wasn't teaching kata analysis at all. Okay, let's say I met her in a short-story writing class my senior year in college. Anyway, Gati was nudging me to get a real job since short-story writing was not making ends meet and she was tired of cleaning the health club at night so I could afford to workout during the day. But I stood on principle: “Short-story writing is a way of life, replete with ethics, physical training, history, character-building...” Wait a minute! Short-story writing doesn't really do that, does it? Okay, so I looked at the want ads for a 9-to-5.

I got a job tutoring wayward youth in a private school called Humboltz's Academy for College-bound Kids. It was really rewarding when Jesse Bladderchallenged managed to write his first coherent sentence at age 14, but I was still a little bored. It was looking like both my job and my relationship with Gati would fade into memory like Steiner St. and the house where I was born, my big brother Nels, my little sister Dagmar, and of course Papa, but most of all, most of all when I think back to those days, most of all, I remember...wait a minute!

Here's where I woke up a bit, eyes still closed, down comforter still up to my chin, determined to complete the almost-dream so I'd know what my life could have been like.

I would still have my dining room library of books on literature, art, science, history, language, psychology, and spirituality, but I would not have my basement office lined with books and videos on Shotokan, Shito, Goju, Uechi, TKD, Arnis, grappling, Judo, Aikido, Daito-ryu, etc. I would still have a computer or two, but not the software to edit videos or to self-publish books. I'd still have my cassettes and CDs

on self-development, politics, and self-improvement, but I would not have the space in the middle set aside for kata DVDs. I could still travel if my income allowed, but I would not be asked to teach in various of the United States, Canada, Europe, or Australia. I would still have friends, but I would not have as many friends in as many different countries, nor as many acquaintances and contacts here, there, and everywhere. I might still have a website, but it would be one of those personal sites where I'd publish the most recent picture of my current girlfriend's golden retriever. Cute, isn't he?

I would still want to contribute something, but publishing would be no less challenging, and teaching would still demand a PhD, or at least an MA, that avoiding the Vietnam draft prevented me from getting. So rather than being a veteran martial artist, I'd be a veteran non-veteran writing to my congressman, demanding (as if I could really demand anything) that he vote for lower taxes because China could afford to pay the interest on our debt simply by initiating a round of its own deficit spending.

I would have contributed to Jesse Bladderchallenged's ability to write and think, but I would not have contributed to thousands of martial artists' ability to improve and self-evaluate. I would have written a few books, but I would not have offered scores of DVDs with drills, skills, insights, and attitudes that would influence several generations of traditional martial artists development. I would still be me, but perhaps not a me that had contributed as much.

Glad that I was now fully awake, I got up, got on some sweats and went downstairs for a short session of Tae-bo before filling a DVD order, planning my next seminar, and writing this essay. Sure, I might have been richer and more successful in many other ways had I not trained like a nut-case in judo, aiki-ju-jutsu, and karate, had I not quit my day job to open a martial arts school, had I not delved into the intricacies of advanced budo, but then this essay would not have been written, or at the very least, I'd be wondering, not having been a martial artist, what it would have been like to have followed my bliss.