

Renaming Reality

There is a certain school of thought that suggests you will feel differently about an item if you name it differently. Certainly we cannot deny the veracity of this statement at least in some cases. I was a kid that did not like to eat fish. Instead of fish on Fridays, my mother would serve “potato cakes” which I consumed without pause. As an older boy, mom sent me to the store for a couple of cans of fish cakes. Only when I saw the picture on the can did I realize that I had been hoodwinked into eating fish for a decade. What I thought I disliked, I actually enjoyed under another name. My negative expectations had been circumnavigated and I got some healthy food snuck into my system. Of course, I never trusted my mother after that, but that is fodder for another tale.

Tony Robbins says that he doesn't get outraged over an offense if he thinks of his emotion as being “peeved”. “Peeved” lessens the intensity of the anger simply by the sound of its name. In his case, a person takes the responsibility to adjust his own emotions for his own benefit; however, in the fish cake case, an adult was lying to a child “for his own good”. You can argue that deceiving a child is not so dishonorable an undertaking — after all, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy have become childhood traditions — but how about when we tell children that there was no winner in the soccer game because we weren't keeping score? That is telling the truth, to be sure, but I'll wager the child sees that case of renaming reality as deception.

Do you think that the children don't know who scored more often? I am just waiting for one of them to ask, “Why should I dive to save a ball from my net if the score doesn't matter?” Or, “Why should a member of my team try to keep the ball from members of the other team if scoring doesn't matter?”

Why should they even have teams if they are playing soccer simply to develop coordination and athleticism? They can do that with drills in practice—no teams or any games need exist at all. If you lay that argument on traditional martial arts, it sounds as if I am advocating for martial sports. After all, why develop skills you cannot test? Why bother developing a never-say-die spirit if you never enter a never-say-die situation (or even a simulation of such a situation)? Sport contests simulate a test and a never-say-die situation. Certainly, as a traditional martial artist, I can see how the quality of budo techniques and skills has suffered from calling “martial” non-intense, prearranged, cooperative interactions like prearranged one-steps, and how those who test their combat skills via sport develop sharper technique (even though they may fool themselves into thinking that their method of testing covers their entire art).

Here we are again, trying to balance two items that, in the West, were seldom balanced: the martial and the artistic. To the extent that something is artistic, it is seldom martial. To the extent that something is martial, it is seldom artistic. And yet, traditional martial artists walk the tightrope of getting the best of both worlds. We do not want to be very skilled in too limited a set of techniques (as in sport sparring), nor do we want to be familiar with myriad techniques but unskilled in most of them (as in prearranged sparring sets). In other articles, I have suggested renaming what we do more accurately and, while I feel this would be a good practice, the

renaming will not change the reality. Martial sportsters will still be better athletes albeit limited in skills than their artistic counterparts and, by and large, the artists will perform their martial skills without the benefit of contests that, after all, means “test together”, that would put them under some pressure to succeed. Renaming the reality won’t help. Rather than renaming, we need a journey into self-awareness—a strict standard of skill and achievement that both broadens those who concentrate on a specialty (sportsters) and tests those whose broad skills have had no means of measurement (artists). Who among traditional sportsters or artists is ready to take on the other’s mantel? What sport kata champion would be willing to experience a non-prearranged application drill? What artistic kata analyst would be willing to experience the same drill with attackers really trying to strike?

If such a martial artist existed, he would, without deceiving anyone, be renaming his martial reality... and, at the same time, living up to the name.

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