

So Near...

Let's pretend that you are my direct student, or even that you have taken a seminar of mine. In terms of instructional generations, that would put you one generation behind me. Now let's work backwards. I studied under a number of teachers, one of which (Shihan Albert C. Church, Jr.) was a direct inheritor of an 800-year-old tradition. Although you did not study his Kamishin-ryu, attending an Annesi seminar would still put you two generations away from him. I also studied under Sensei Mitsunari Kanai, an uchi-deshi of O-sensei Morihei Ueshiba. So by this reckoning, you are no more than three generations away from Ueshiba. I also have taken Shotokan seminars under both Sensei Masatoshi Nakayama and Tsutomu Ohshima both of whom studied directly with Gichin Funakoshi. Chronologically, that puts you three generations from the founder of Shotokan, even though you may never have studied the system. I have also taken a seminar with Sensei Keiko Fukuda, the world's highest ranking female judoka who studied under Jigoro Kano. So that puts you only three generations behind the founder of Kodokan Judo.

I am not giving you this calculus so you can self-aggrandize, nor am I trying to toot my own horn in terms of my instructional background. My purpose is to recognize that if I am only two and you are only three generations removed from the "ancient masters", they were not so ancient. They were of my grandparents' generation.

I was watching some 1950s sci-fi the other day and realized how poorly the shows had forecast the future. They put a few passengers on a "rocket ship" but they have to climb a ladder to get to the top of the gantry. They have "space guns" but still manage to use communication receivers that are wired to a console. We have jumped way ahead of where they were and yet have not managed to discover intelligent life they discovered (complete with hourglass-shaped buildings) on a moon of Jupiter. Still, Richard Crane who played Rocky Jones, Space Ranger and Steve Holland who played TV's Flash Gordon were younger than my father. And my dad was only a little younger than Buster Crabbe who played Flash Gordon in the movie serials.

Ueshiba founded Aikido sometime between 1942 and 1953 (the precise date is unknown probably because of World War II), approximately the time I was born. Funakoshi's arrival in Japan was in 1922, seven years after my father was born. Even the founding of Judo in 1882 was during my grandfather's lifetime, and only 100 years before many of you started your martial arts study. Admittedly, much has changed since the early and middle 1900s, the years when many of the traditional martial arts were founded. Transportation, communication, and general awareness of martial practices are much more available. If we consider how "old-fashioned" people were when they rode streetcars rather than automobiles, ships rather than airplanes, and how out of touch they were when they telecommunicated over landlines rather than satellite links, via telegraph rather than email, we can assume how out of touch martial arts traditionalists must be in harking back to those days. But if we recognize that those older choices existed even in our own lifetimes, they do not seem quite as old-fashioned.

Because older is not always better, some martial artists embrace the current trend (whatever it may be), ignoring the “traditional”. But because newer is not always better, other martial artists stick with the tried and true rather than losing their tradition to embrace the fashionable. It’s the age-old argument between philosophically liberal and philosophically conservative. No, not big government vs. big business or social planning vs. marketplace creativity, but dropping a tradition (albeit a relatively young tradition) in favor of the new vs. maintaining a tradition that has served well despite the fact that the world is changing around it.

We Americans are chronologically nearer to our “ancient masters” than we are to the social traditions of our own culture (the founding of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Independence Day, or even Veteran’s Day) or the founding of our national pastime, baseball. Although we prefer to think of these masters as “ancient” and worthy of emulation to maintain the “tradition”, I suggest that we are not so desirous of conformity as to strap on a straight jacket along with our gi.

Next Week: ... Yet so Far