

## The Older, the Younger

The year after I graduated college, at the ripe old age of 21, I taught English Literature at Vermont Academy, a private boys' school. At our first dinner, the kitchen helper, probably in his forties, gruffly insisted that I get out of line and go to the other end of the cafeteria where the students were queuing up. "Why?" I asked in a polite tone.

"Coz this is the teacher's line," I was told in a rather imperious way.

"Yes, I know, and I am a teacher."

"Don't give me any of that..." Luckily at that point, a senior teacher, in his fifties, calmly let the kitchen helper know that I was telling the truth, at which point he quickly if brusquely apologized.

I have always looked younger than the average person of my chronological age. Good genes, I suppose, although I also try to keep in shape and regularly practice that martial arts stuff. But the other day I was editing a video and noticed that I looked rather tired and, frankly, closer to seven decades than I usually appear. Of course, the lighting and the close-ups didn't help, but still, it rather depressed me. Imagine being depressed by one's own age! Kind of silly, thought I to myself, after all, tomorrow is the first day of the rest of my life. Thus, everyone is perpetually young. It was a nice rationalization, but it wasn't cutting the mustard for me.

Then I realized what was really getting to me: I looked like I was pretty unathletic (as well as short of sleep), but there I was, on the screen, knowing that I had been limping from a knee injury, still able to pull off techniques that the younger guys whom I was teaching couldn't even get their heads around. It was not that I was moving like a young Cassius Clay, not even like an older Muhammad Ali, but I was moving comfortably and minimally while the younger guys were straining to move faster, harder and much less efficiently. It was the older me doing more efficient, effective techniques and the contrast seemed strange to me. After all, younger guys can do the jump from Unsu better than I, move more quickly, and hit harder (although not a lot harder).

A year before, I had received a DVD in the mail from China. A friend, who had graduated college with me in 1968, was visiting The Middle Kingdom and witnessed what he said was "The best show of any kind I have ever seen." It was a Wu-shu exhibition with a lot of gymnastic stunts and dramatic scenarios. He sent the DVD not because he knew I would appreciate the athleticism, but because he thought he had *seen me* in the performance! I emailed him that, "I'm afraid I cannot do that sort of stuff anymore, if I ever could." He responded, "I've seen you in action and you can do everything they do."

What had he seen? Certainly not me in a silk *sam* leaping over three opponents to kick another in a mini-play about the hero rescuing the damsel. I'll bet he saw some video clips on YouTube where I move minimally and uke takes off like a cannonball. I'll wager, in other words, that the impressiveness

of uke's falling skills got conflated in his mind with the showmanship of the Wu-shu practitioners' acrobatic kung-fu. I was not the super athlete that the Chinese martial artists were, to be sure, but I was the guy who, although older than most of the people in the dojo, made the younger guys fly high enough to make myself look vigorous and effective.

A lot of people think that those YouTube clips are nothing but showmanship (probably because they are used to seeing Wu-shu exhibitions which are just that), but the reality is just the opposite: the uke fall because they have to, not because they are trying to make me look effective, not because I am their senior. If they fall in a big arc (rather than flop down), it is probably because they are young and can do so safely. So, in a way, I am making *them* look good.

The older I get, the more minimal and efficient I get. And the younger my uke will have to be.