



The brain is as strong as its  
weakest think.

— *Eleanor Doan*

## “i sing of Olaf glad and big”

THE MARTIAL ARTS DO WONDERS FOR A PERSON'S confidence and self-image. Often. But not always. And only to a point. Psychiatrists will tell you that they just help people deal with their own problems and find their own solutions. It is the client who cures *himself*, not the psychiatrist, not the martial arts, not the most recent book on self-image psychology. But if we pay close attention, we may find that all three teach us something about self-image. If we are responsible for our own positive self-image, we are equally responsible for a negative self-image.

Pop-psychology is often an accurate presentation in layman's terms of a social science that is more social than scientific. Pop-psychology suggests that self-image works like this: you get an impression of yourself early, often from parents, friends, or teachers; you believe it; you hear phrases that reinforce it; you begin to repeat these phrases to yourself; you believe yourself. Whatever disproves the negative self-image, you ignore. Whatever can be seen as proving your negative self-image, you record as part of "the story of your life".

Olaf liked to tell stories. He came to the dojo early and stayed late to entertain us with the latest episodes in his Rodney Dangerfield life.



He was a talented talker and could turn something you and I might just as soon forget into a raucus, rollicking romp to remember.

His favorite personalities were the above-mentioned stand-up comic, Gilda Radner's Rozanne Rozannadanna, and Peter Seller's Inspector Jacques Clousseau, imitations of whom were Olaf's forte. To us poor karate-ka, his life seemed almost exciting in its comic convolutions. Not only a good tale teller and a jolly entertainer, Olaf was also a hard worker and a good friend.

Even though he painted a picture of himself as fat and unattractive (to well-balanced women, that is), he seemed to have no trouble getting married immediately after college to a well-balanced lovely. The self-portrait included perpetual poverty, yet he managed to buy a house and land a regular 9 to 5.

During the tough times right after setting up a household, I gave him two martial arts related presents, as wedding and housewarming gifts, that I hoped would help him financially and "spiritually" The first was a year's membership to the dojo, the second an embroidered black belt, which, I explained, he could not wear until he stopped trying to be the world's oldest brown belt. During his four years in college, practice had become understandably irregular, and now he was too short of funds to earn the classtime and learn the skills necessary for black belt. I had tried to change that.

Olaf initiated his gift-membership the day before it would have become invalid. As if he had not been away more than a day, he attended class early to late, as usual. It was great to have him back. The dojo seemed to laugh with him, he was a big help teaching beginners and set a grand example on the mat.

He kept up the Rodney Dangerfield self-reprobatation but did so with an entertaining smile. He would instruct a junior in kata or kicking, making it clear that the junior, with a little work, could master the technique, whereas Olaf, when he was a beginner, had needed the help of several pieces of heavy machinery to hoist his body into the proper positions.

"That's it. Thrust your hips forward when you punch. Like this. You have to pretend that you're like a tank in high gear! You know, sort of like me when I see a banana split at the other end of the room. It's like I have a sort of ice cream magnet under my belt. Zoom! There go the hips! Zoom, there goes Olaf, the armored

vehicle! That's why I have deep tread on my street shoes: tanks need traction!"

One year after his return, he took a job in another state and stopped attending class, still a brown belt. He had never gotten to wear the second gift, and I wondered why. Had a year not been enough time?

I could imagine him telling the story to co-workers happy to have him around: "I don't get no respect. I'm the type of guy who gains weight pretty easy, y'know. Last year, my karate instructor gave me a black belt. Gave it to me. Suddenly I gained 200 pounds. I was so fat, I couldn't wear it. So I worked out. Come to find out the karate school was over a bakery. Every time I took a breath, I gained five pounds.... The belt was a good incentive to lose weight, though. Yeah, I had my wife tie it around my neck so I couldn't swallow."

What would Rodney Dangerfield have done if suddenly he got respect? There would be no more stories worth telling! Hell, if Olaf earned a black belt, that would be a serious praiseworthy accomplishment! Nothing to laugh at! And totally contrary to the Dangerfield personality. After all, my dojo did not award black belts to flakes like Inspector Clousseau or Rozanne Rozannadanna. Olaf would have had to repaint his self-portrait entirely.

i sing of Olaf glad and big  
 whose warmest heart recoiled at war;  
 a conscientious object-or  
 ....

Although Olaf was nothing like the character in e.e. cummings's story-poem, he was glad and big, and a conscientious objector to success. He might justify his longtime status by thinking, "I don't get no respect, but how boring life would be if I did."

I wonder if Rodney...er...Olaf ever read any pop-psychology, apart from the backcover of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He was a damn good storyteller. So good, in fact, that he became his most convinced audience and a character (more like caricature) from his own lifestory.

Next time I witness a black belt earn his degree, I'll think of Olaf.



("It only goes to show you, Jane, it's always somethin'. Either you gain 200 pounds from pastry fumes, or your wife ties your belt around your neck.") What a boring life must be in store for those who suffer the success of shodan!



*"i sing of Olaf glad and big"* Drawing by Wade Munson