

Aikido Connections

By

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I was deployed to Iraq for a year and one of my biggest fears was coming back and forgetting how to do Aikido. My fear was I would forget all the techniques I had learned over the many years. I was afraid I was a year older and I would forget how to roll and how to fall, I was afraid of getting hurt. I knew my Aikido family would treat me like I never left. I would be subjected to the same Aikido Love I have always been shown, break-falls and the hard wrist locks. That's how we show we love each other, through sweat and pain. In many ways I looked forward to it, but not in some ways. I had not been afraid of injury in Aikido for many years now. As a senior black belt this was never a concern of mine, but things change. While I was away I did my best to at least work on my basic exercise, stretching, and meditation. I figured a little bit of something was better than a whole lot of nothing, as taught to me by a friend. Once I came home and got back to my Aikido family it felt great. It really was like riding a bike. It seemed natural and things fell back into place quickly. For sure there were things I needed to work on and some skills were rusty, but they were still in the attic and it was exciting to dust off the cob webs and get back to practicing.

When I tell other people about Aikido I talk about the art, the culture, the many friends and connections you will make, and the places it will take you if you allow it. I tell of it like it is a church, like a religion and in many ways it is. Like any church or religion Aikido will do amazing things for you but sometimes, just sometimes, it will test you. It is a terrible thing to lose one's faith, whether it is a loss of faith in a church, a religion, a person, a place, or an institution. I once belonged to a church, and that is the key, I felt like I belonged. The head pastor was a great guy and his focus was the people. Although he spent most of his time running here and there not really spending much time with one person or one task. I know many people in the church were bothered by this but I understood his idea; the church is here to serve the people and he is just one man. The more time I spent there and with different committees it seemed the focus on the senior leaders was about money or about themselves. I became disenchanted with the whole thing. To me this was not the way it should be. We are here to humble

ourselves and serve others, not be consumed with our image, ego, or find ways to spend money. From there I drifted away from the institution I thought I knew. I had lost my faith.

I like watching the old Karate Kid movies. It's amazing how cheesy the films are with the 80's montage music in the background, the hair, the clothes, and what they called 'acting' back then. Some of them still stand the test of time. One of the things I liked about the 3rd Karate Kid movie, that's the one where they come back from Japan and Daniel-San gets beat up by the Bad Boy of Karate in an attempt to get him to compete in the next Karate tournament. "Tree have strong root. Same you, Daniel-San!" Things in your life can get blown apart but if there is a strong root, a core, then it can be rebuilt. You have to sit back and examine the core of what you have lost. What is it I liked about this or that? Why did I come here? What was it I believed in? With many companies, institutions, clubs, or organizations it is not the institution that is to blame, rather the people who made it something it's not. One of the main reasons for people being involved, other than your job, is a sense of belonging or connection. Many of our young soldiers and sailors are returning from overseas and having a problem dealing with civilian life. Many of them want to return to Iraq or Afghanistan. If you're non-military you might think this is just insane. Why would a person want to go back to IEDs and rocket attacks every day? In the military they have a sense of purpose, structure, and they know their buddies got their back. Recognizing these are the core values we can begin to rebuild around them to give a person a sense of purpose and connection. Getting a job, joining clubs and other activities to create a connection to give value to a person and what they do.

I have some friends over at University of Iowa Aikikai that I had not seen in a long, long time. The University was bringing in a guest instructor for their Fall seminar from North Virginia Aikikai, Gordon Sakamoto Sensei. I read about Sakamoto Sensei and found out he was born and raised in Honolulu, how bad could he be? The seminar was in November and it was snowing in Omaha but I still

wanted to go. I ended up traveling by myself to Iowa City. The snow actually stopped an hour outside of Omaha so it wasn't so bad. I had been struggling with some ideas about Aikido and wanted to go somewhere to get some other perspective about Aikido. The first morning at the dojo was great. Before class even started I had a great time talking to people. It was great to see some old friends from all over the Midwest. Some of them I had not seen in years. It was great to catch up if only for a few minutes to smile and say hello. I started to remember this is one of the things I most enjoyed about Aikido, making those friends and connections. Class finally started and Sakamoto Sensei began teaching a variety of Aikido techniques. The wonderful thing about the techniques is they were all very basic. There was nothing too complicated and nothing I had not seen before but it was all very new to me. I began to see some of the basic techniques from a different perspective. I like to talk to new students and tell them how much I envy them. It's very exciting knowing they are going to learn so much. I feel like an old timer in Aikido sometimes. As with most things it is difficult to stay hungry, to keep that drive to learn more. When you start out in Aikido you start to learn things and it is a period of discovery. You get those "Aha!" moments, the moment where you discover something or figure out a technique and your brain fires off, "Aha! Now I understand!" As an old timer in Aikido those moments do not happen as often. The experience at University of Iowa with Sakamoto Sensei was full of "Aha" moments. All the techniques were very basic but from a new perspective that I could appreciate. It was a wonderful seminar. It was great to talk to old friends, friends I have spent years making a connection with, and meeting new people. I remember this is why I loved Aikido and what Aikido was all about.

Gordon Sakamoto Sensei was teaching techniques focusing on 'connection'. I have been to other dojos around the country and one message seems to be communicated through all of them is connection. Maybe this message has always been communicated and I just wasn't listening or I wasn't able to understand. It finally occurred to me if different instructors from different schools, even different organizations, were teaching 'connection' there might be something to this. My son is in grade

school and in a recent school newsletter it talked about how the school system may stop teaching cursive writing. I thought this was very interesting since when do you only use cursive, when you sign a check? I was curious so I started reading about where and why cursive came about. The answer was pretty simple. Way back in the days of my great-grandmother, maybe even my grandmother, they used ink wells and quills for pens. You had to keep constant contact with the paper otherwise you would create an ink splotch. The same is with Japanese Calligraphy, or Shodo. You dip then brush into the ink then transfer the ink to the paper in soft, fluid motions maintaining contact with the paper. I think this is a key in many, if not all, Aikido techniques. On one level it is important to maintain contact with Uke at the point of attack. This is a physical connection. In a technique such as Iriminage you meet at a point of contact and as you move behind Uke you create one, or several, points of contact so when you move Uke has no choice but to follow you. The more points of contact you create with Uke the easier it is to move them with you. Uke is attached to you so you are no longer separate but rather move as one entity. One school I trained at focused on connecting your center with Uke's center. Through a point of contact, like the arm or the wrist, you try to make a connection with your center, or Dantian, to Uke's center. It is easy to move Uke around if you can connect your center to their center, you now move as one since you are connected at the centers.

I have spent the past twelve years making my own Aikido. Thanks to the U.S. Navy I have had the opportunity to train with many instructors at many dojos and I always try to take something away from my experience. Most of my experiences have been good but there have been a few bad experiences. You can learn from these experiences as well. I feel very fortunate to have met so many people outside my region and I maintain contact with some of those people from time to time. So many friends and connections all because of Aikido. Being part of an Aikido family is different than being a part of a motorcycle club or similar. With a motorcycle club you get to ride around together and talk about motorcycles. That's fun too. In an Aikido club you make a connection with someone on many

different levels. You have Aikido in common, but you get to work out with that person and connect on a physical level and experience their energy and spirit. That type of connection is what makes Aikido unique. These are the reasons I started practicing Aikido and the same reasons I stay with Aikido. People change and institutions change, but Aikido at its root is still the same and that is what should be remembered.