

Introduction

A Black Belt's Journey

The Parable of the Black Belt

In a hot, steamy dojo (karate school), a student has just undergone a grueling series of tests with the intent to earn his black belt. After observing his student demonstrates a solid command of many techniques and theories of combat, the master asks his student one last question before awarding the black belt, "What is the true meaning of the black belt?" Taken by surprise, the beleaguered student responded simply, "It is the end of a journey, a well-deserved reward for all my hard work." Not at all pleased with this answer, the master replied that the student was not yet ready to wear the black belt.

After a lengthy period of training over the series of months that followed, the student was once again asked the same question. To this, the student confidently replied, "It is a symbol of excellence, the highest distinction in the martial arts." Now appearing obviously aggravated, the master wasted no time dismissing his student. He told the student that he needed to return in one year.

A year later, the student returned to respond to the original question asked of him so long ago. He said calmly and humbly to his master, "The true meaning of black belt is that it represents the beginning, the beginning of a never-ending journey of self-improvement through discipline and hard work." The master paused, raised his eyes slowly, and said quietly, "Yes, now you are ready to wear the black belt and begin your journey."

This famous tale about the meaning of black belt illustrates the misunderstanding most people have about this enigmatic piece of colored fabric. Part of this confusion comes from the fact that the symbolism attached to the black belt in the above story requires a level of abstract thinking that frankly not everyone has attained. Even worse, many black belts themselves seem to perpetuate the misunderstanding of what it means to have one. Let's face it; the general public has seen some poor examples of martial artists acting in ways suggesting they only want to draw attention to themselves.

In its original meaning, earning this rank implies that the person embraces the commitment to follow the path of excellence and to embody the warrior spirit. This covenant involves the promise you make primarily *to yourself* to continually challenge yourself to grow.

Vince Lombardi, a great coach and leader of men, once was misquoted in a newspaper article as having said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." I guess it just sounded better to that reporter than what Lombardi really said during that press conference.

Lombardi apparently lamented that misapplied quote even as he lay dying of cancer. He wanted the public to know that what he said that day—and what he always tried to teach his players—was, "Winning isn't everything, but *striving to win* is." Here he emphasizes the process, not the outcome: the journey, not the destination. The end result, he trusted, would come as a by-product of his focused efforts on preparation and continued learning through experience. Lombardi had the warrior spirit and lived the lesson implied by the black belt parable.

Perhaps like all areas of life—and especially professional sports—the original spirit of the black belt's humble personal journey has been tainted by the blind pursuit of notoriety and the almighty dollar.

In his book, *The Climb*, the late Anatoli Boukreev illustrated in detail his training regimen in preparation for what turned out to be his most famous climb to the top of Mt. Everest in 1996. Boukreev had an exceptional reserve of endurance to draw upon as an elite mountaineer because of his unwavering training protocol. This never became more apparent than on May 11, 1996, when a blinding snowstorm caught several Everest expeditions by surprise. Disregarding his own fatigue, zero visibility, and unforgiving windchill temperatures, Boukreev repeatedly risked his life by retrieving stranded climbers and leading them to safety.

Prior to summiting Everest, Boukreev's training involved a process of initially just getting accustomed to the altitude of Everest's base camp, which sits at 17,384 feet above sea level. Boukreev then took his team of climbers on a systematic series of excursions that lasted nearly six weeks before they attempted the mountain's twenty-nine-thousand-foot-plus summit.

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This book contains the formative steps along my personal journey, leading to this climb to the summit of a very meaningful accomplishment. Those not involved in the martial arts will soon understand that this test represents much more than the many movement sequences and skills on which we were tested over a sixteen-week period. The specific content of the test is actually secondary in importance from my viewpoint. For me, this test stands for one's willingness to push limits, to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, to risk loss and failure, and to grow personally.

It was an extraordinary experience—a marvelous feeling of satisfaction, triumph, and rebirth. Yet I'd had my share of personal triumphs before. It happened to me in sports, when I got married, when I completed my PhD, and when I fathered a beautiful boy named Evan (in Gaelic, this means “a gift from God,” which indeed he is).

The uniqueness of this experience, however, is what I plan to share with you, along with the many lessons inherent in it. To provide the best context for why I took this path in my life, I must share some of my pertinent background.¹ You will need to know what radio personality Paul Harvey would call the rest of the story. But first, I will extend the above discussion of the meaning of the black belt by describing the difference between what people commonly refer to as the warrior mindset and true warriors. This will hopefully highlight the ideals of military service (i.e., to serve and defend) from which modern-day martial artists have emerged.

¹ Except where it was absolutely necessary to provide an accurate account of certain experiences, I chose to change the names and certain details of people outside my immediate circle of family and friends to protect their anonymity.