

Pathways

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**The great Law of Culture:
Let each become all that [he]
was created capable of being
Thomas Carlyle**

What's in a Name?

I find it interesting that we live in a world of such deep connection and yet at the same time we live lives of isolation. There is paradox at every turn.

You will notice that I have changed the name of this newsletter. On the face of it, this is no big deal. What's in a name anyway? This newsletter goes out to something like 500 people now, not all of whom are members of the Starkville Martial Arts Academy. Of those nearly 500 recipients, several (probably a good number more than I am aware) pass the newsletter on to someone else they know or some group with whom they interact. People tell me that they give my newsletter to members of their families and their friends and often ask me to include someone I have never even met on my mailing list.

We live in a world separated at a personal level by no more than 4 levels of separation. That is to say if 1 person knows 100 people and if those 100 people each know 100 people, we are four degrees of separation way from touching the entire planetary population.

Truly, I can have absolutely no

idea how far these words will go or what their impact will be.

It is an interesting effect of tightly coupled, highly complex systems that small effects can generate big change as a function of chaos theory. Meteorologists know this as the butterfly effect: This is the notion that if a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon, it makes microscale changes to air flow around its body, which in turn can build up to create a change in the weather at some distant place on the planet.

When I started writing this newsletter, it was simply a way for me to reach my students with some words that served as an adjunct to the physicality of the martial arts class. It was a way for me to talk about things that were happening in the dojo and to explore the "why" of martial arts training in more depth. Perhaps it was also a source of personal exploration for me as much as anything, if I am honest. As you all know by now, I see the martial path as a completely holistic experience. The martial journey is all about change and this is why some people start out on the path and then wander away

from it either for a while or forever. In a lot of ways this issue of the newsletter is going to be looking at why people make a lifetime of study and why others, for whatever reason, walk away.

Initially however, it is time for me to change the name of the newsletter for the very simple reason that it no longer reaches just my students and is therefore incorrectly named. From what we have said earlier on here, this newsletter is no longer for the "Starkville Martial Artist"; in fact it probably touches as many people who have never set foot in the SMAA as it does those who have. Also, as my students graduate and get jobs often far away....Alaska, California, Maine, the thread of this newsletter goes with them should they so choose for it to do so. So the threads go further than I ever dreamed and the effects extend beyond my original intent.

A New Year is an auspicious time for a change and a renewed commitment.

I hope you can see why it was time for a name change!

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Change and Perseverance

Let us start with the premise that the path to any goal worth pursuing guarantees you two things: Change and Doubt. Let us further say that any goal worth achieving will bring you face to face with your own inadequacies.

For some of us, that is why we choose the goal. It makes demands upon us that wrench us out of our comfort zones and require us to open our minds to possibilities that we had previously been unable to entertain. For some of us the comfort of who and what we are is stronger than any desire. Others of us are caught in a sort of no man's land where we are attracted by change and trapped by inertia. This is not to say that either is right or wrong, it is simply what is. I suspect that this is as it should be for society to work as a synergetic entity: There will always be those who climb mountains and live at the edge of their particular envelope and there will always be those who see no reason to change what "is" and no reason to risk death for any mountain. Equally, there will always be those confused souls who oscillate back and forth between the extremes. I think that the latter group includes more of us more often than we would like to admit.

There will always be a form of dynamic tension within the system. The tension between those who crave change, adventure and take risk as a natural part of living and those who value stability, security and assurance and who don't take risk without first being sure to weigh all the possible outcomes (as though we could ever know them) is something that operates at both an individual level and at a societal level. The tension is mirrored within each of us. So, let's examine the tension which operates at the individual level.

The path to black belt if it is to have any value will necessarily draw us beyond who we were when we took our first lesson. Most of us will, at some point, find a level of performance that eludes us. Most of us will find a physical limit to what we can do, and as we age those physical limits will become more obvious to us....regardless of how grudgingly we admit their reality.

Equally, the martial arts path is NOT ALWAYS FUN. Nothing ever is. I grieve every time a student tells me that he or she wants to quit because it's not fun anymore. I truly hurt at those moments. The *martial* path is like the *marital* path, both require a sort of dedication to self, some-

thing or someone outside of ourselves and the process that will take us beyond what we thought we were getting into to begin with. There will be times when there is no fun in the process and there will be times when we wonder if it is all worth it. We are emotional creatures, no matter how we like to delude ourselves. We do things for emotional reasons and fun is a powerful motivator. The problem is that if we do things because they are fun, or worse yet, stop doing things because they are not fun any more we are denying ourselves the right to become something greater than we could have imagined.

And what of my students who quit because it isn't fun anymore? Do they do the same thing with their marriages or their careers? Certainly statistics tell us that as a society we are only too ready to walk away from marriages that don't work anymore. I know, I have been one of those data points.

When do we learn to stick with things that are not fun? When is it time to walk away? This is another aspect of the dynamic tension in any process.

Some of my students will tell me at some threshold level before black belt that they are plagued by self doubt or that they feel frus-

We can give our children only two lasting legacies, we can give them roots and we can give them wings.

Hodding Carter.

...still changing and persevering

trated by their apparent lack of progress or that they don't get the same endorphin rush (read: fun) out of it. For some of them it will be too much and they will leave the path and find another. Some will struggle with themselves and overcome a part of themselves that stood between where they were and where they want to be. Such moments are the moments of kime. Such moments can be life defining moments. I tell many of my black belt candidates that what I do is not always fun. I have been training since 1968. Do you honestly believe that I'd still be doing it if I only did it for fun? I am in this for altogether different reasons at this stage in my particular journey. For me there are larger responsibilities that go beyond my own desires for myself. Such is the role of a teacher, sensei, guide, fellow traveler, mentor.

Have I ever thought about quitting? Of course. But I will not, I have made a commitment.

It is natural for many of us to doubt ourselves, to wonder if it is all worth it. What is difficult is to renew our effort, overcome that part of us which resists the change and take the risk anyway, uncertain of the outcome.

For this is the crux of the matter: There is no guaranteed outcome. Every day we step into an unknown world. But as Thom Layon epitomizes: It is all good stuff. To make such a statement is a personal life statement and a life choice. But when you truly live life from that perspective, it doesn't really matter whether things

are fun or not. What is at issue is whether or not I am on a path that will lead me to develop my potential or one that draws me away from such awareness. If I truly believe that it is all good stuff then no matter what I face I will grow, I will learn and at the end of it I will be closer to achieving my full potential than I was when I started.

Such are the rewards of persistence. If I quit before the end of the journey I never get to see the view from the end. There is something much larger here that transcends the tension that exists between fun on the one hand and determination on the other. It is the quality of indomitable spirit. Not surprisingly, this is one of the tenets of Taekwondo. It is a requirement of any serious martial artist regardless of style. It is also something that grows over time as we face little pieces of ourselves over and over again. It is something that we end up with, forged from our experiences, not something that we started out with fully developed.

Determination isn't going to get it. Determination has a resistant quality about it. When we stick at something because we will not quit, we become stubborn, inflexible, brittle; only to be overcome by a larger force. Indomitable spirit has a supple flexibility about it.

In Judo we talk about pushing in the same direction as we are pushed. This is yielding to the attack, it is also paradoxically the greatest form of resistance to being thrown by our partners.

There is a metaphor here. When I think about quitting because it isn't fun anymore I am facing a force that can throw me from my intended path. I use the quality of indomitable spirit developed from more than three decades of overcoming similar challenges and I can smile at the imposter. After all, the imposter is merely me in a different form telling myself that the emotional account balance is in the negative right now, so it's time to quit. Knowing that the only enemy you will ever face is yourself is very enlightening and can inject moments of levity into the tensional dynamic of the decision making process.

I think that there is also a vision thing going on here. When things get difficult for us and we think about quitting for whatever reason, it is because we have also lost sight of the vision.

When I look at the picture of my wife and I on our wedding day or when I look at a picture of my son at only two or three months old asleep in my arms, or I look at the students who come to me on their own journeys and truly see their struggles, I renew my vision. Actually, that's not quite true...it would be better to say in those moments, I am refreshed by the vision. The vision of what I am intended to do in each situation floods me and illuminates me from within.

Don't rely on fun as a barometer. It's not always reliable.

Together, indomitable spirit and vision will help you overcome any personal threshold, and any challenge.

Calendar of Events:

- ◆ Akayama Ju Jitsu, Winter Camp, Gulf Shores, AL, Jan, 17 & 18th, 2004
- ◆ Gulf Coast Judo Tournament, Biloxi, MS. January, 24th, 2004.
- ◆ Chappel Family karate School, Judo and Ju Jitsu clinic. Huntsville, AL, February 7th, 2004.
- ◆ Wak Mu Sha Judo Tournament, Atlanta, GA, February 14th, 2004
- ◆ Mississippi Open and State Judo Championship, Raymond, MS, February 21st, 2004
- ◆ Arnold Schwarzenegger Battle of Columbus, Columbus, OH, March 5th – 7th, 2004.
- ◆ USJI High School and Collegiate Championships, Miami, FL, March 19-21st, 2004
- ◆ SMAC Tournament, Greenwood, MS, March 27th, 2004
- ◆ Swamp Classic Judo Tournament. Lafayette, LA, April 3rd, 2004
- ◆ Peachtree Open Judo tournament. Peachtree City, GA, April 17th, 2004
- ◆ USJA Junior NtIs, and Coaching Symposium, Chicago, IL, July 10th-12th, 2004
- ◆ USJI Junior Olympics, Boca Raton, FL, July 23-24th, 2004
- ◆ Gentle Wind Judo Tournament, Baton Rouge, LA, September 25th, 2004

Connections

I find it interesting that we live in a world of such deep connection and yet at the same time we live lives of isolation. There is paradox at every turn.... Hey now, didn't we start here? Well yes, in fact we did and so I want to end here. It is fitting at the beginning of a New Year that we stand back for a moment and look at the connections in our lives.

I find it paradoxical that we are only four degrees of separation away from touching every person on the planet and yet our technology and the structure of our society creates giant chasms between us as people and between us and the planet. I was reading a copy of "USA Today" about a month or so ago and was intrigued that the process of dating is changing and that one of the interviewees considered that meeting a person in an on-line chat room qualified as a "date" after which he decided whether to move on (often within minutes), or whether to develop a relationship. Talk about separation! Have we really come to a stage of such personal isolation that it is easier to meet someone in a virtual chat room than it is to meet a real person in our daily lives? Have we become so hectic and trapped by our habits and our technology that we can't find the people with whom we rub shoulders every day?

At a wholly different level, our society and the inventions that it has created takes us further from an understanding of the land and our part in the planetary ecology on an almost daily basis. We are the first species on this planet to be capable of such sweeping change to our environment, and yet we might also be the first species to not intuitively understand its place in the ecosystem. I look at man's role as one of a custodial na-

ture...after all I am trained as a geologist and a biologist. I see the long term and my science lives in deep time.

But back to people for a moment...

What is truly sad to me, however, is that in search of our collective selves we have lost touch with our planet and we have lost touch with each other. My family is in England, my son will probably never really know his grandparents. I never knew (at a conscious level) that I was making this choice for the child that my wife and I would bring into the world. My choice, made more than half a lifetime ago has guaranteed that my son will only ever know half of his real family. But am I so very different to any of us? It's not just the miles is it?

We can be separated by emotional distance just as easily. We can and frequently do work and live with strangers. Indeed, we might even ask ourselves if this is not a necessary part of living in a crowded world. In this New Year I want you to do two things for yourself if you are of a mind to do so.

I would like for you to take a tent and a sleeping bag and your family or friends and go camping. While you are camping, really watch, listen, touch, smell and feel the planet. Attempt to be mindful of the experience. I have talked about being present in the moment many times in this newsletter, but if you are capable of doing it, give yourself this gift this year. Leave the trappings of technology behind you for a weekend and be aware of the planet.

The second thing I would like you to do might actually be a lot harder. I would like you to remove the distance between you and some of the people you keep on the periphery of your life. I understand that this is a two way street, but for now indulge yourself...create the opening and take a risk of making a connection.

You cannot change yesterday.
But you can make a difference with today!

*Check the SMAA website at
www.starkvillemartialarts.com
for
class schedule changes*

*A New Year is a great time
for a new beginning.*

*Join us now and use this coupon for a
10% discount on the enrollment fee.*

*We are waiting for you,
but act soon!*

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