

Pathways

A SOMETIMES MONTHLY NEWSLETTER PRODUCED BY CHRIS DEWEY MARTIAL ARTS, INC.

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 3

APRIL / MAY 2009



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*In order to get the cubs, you
must enter the lion's den
-- comment by Virgil Bowles*

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Mentors

Recently, I attended the funeral of one of my mentors. Saying the last farewell to someone who shaped your life for the better is not easy, and like most events that touch our hearts, this one left me thinking deeply.

There have been many people in my life who have touched it and helped me to grow. There are, however, a very few who I would call 'mentor.' To me the idea of a mentor often implies something of a reciprocal agreement between two people. You can have parents, teachers, ministers, friends, but none of them need necessarily be a mentor. A mentor is something special, something different.

To me a mentor is three things: A map reader, a lighthouse and a mine sweeper. Mentors understand where you are going, because they have been there and the two of you resonate because of the common ground. They know the ground over which you travel. Notice I said that they have *been* there. They are a light at the end of the road, an indication that the road is passable and the destination, achievable.

Mentors also know the cost of the journey, they know the pitfalls, the risks, the dangers. Mentors do not stop you from falling over, but they do know what you feel and how they carried on after falling along the way.

Virgil was a mentor in Judo. He taught me movement, efficiency, patience, grace, humility, silence. There was a tacit agreement between us. He had deep insight to offer and I was willing to listen (well some of the time...I was too blind to listen all of the time). Our medium of communica-

tion was Judo form (kata). Virgil opened my eyes to the irreducible elements of form and allowed me to discover for myself how that was supposed to change me. He never once told me what I was supposed to do with his gift; it was, after all, my journey, not his.

I asked him once why he taught me so much, and he simply said that I needed it. He was not a man given to lots of words, in my experience. "Need", was an interesting word. I'll never know what he saw as my 'need', but I do know that generations of my students will learn from me things that Virgil put there.

So this is a mentor to me. Someone who is a guide, a beacon and a cautionary advisor when needs be.

One thing that mentors do not do is make things easier for you, nor do they do the work for you. Mentors are there when you need them in a completely non-intrusive way. I like to think that the ideal mentor only goes where invited.

There have been mentors in my life at various times and for a variety of different reasons. All of them have played a very specific role and offered a very specific gift. Some of my mentors have been in the academic community, my martial arts world, some have been business mentors or 'life' mentors. Some of them will never know that they were my mentor. Some, like Virgil, were people who took a deliberate interest in my development. All of them touched the future in ways that will become fully apparent only in hindsight. Thank you Virgil. ☺

On the Train

I was teaching my graduate level professional presentation class this past semester and asked one of my students a philosophical question. "How will you know if you have found the answer, if you don't know what you're looking for?" It was not intended to be a mean question, I was not attacking her work, I was digging for a deeper understanding of how and why we do research. In Geoscience, I tend to think that research is the art of asking increasingly elegant questions of the universe in search of a more holistic truth.

So what?

At times I am given to pondering the nature of this world in which we move and learn, and since the class in question I have been contemplating one of the great paradoxes of life. Let's start from the first question: "If I don't know what I'm looking for how will I find it?" A series of thoughts emerge, not the least of which is the companion and antithetical question: "If I am looking for something specific, how many missed opportunities or discoveries will remain unseen along the way?" Herein, of course, is a paradox.

It seems that in order to truly learn about the world I have to do several things simultaneously:

First, I need to understand what it means to say that I don't know what I don't know.

Second, I need to know what it is that I think I seek to know.

Third, I need to remain open to the possibility of being surprised by what I don't know and what unintentionally I discover along the way.

O.K., so clearly I'm talking all about academics here....right? Well, in fact....No.

I'm talking about life. But let's start with the dojo (martial arts training hall).

Sometimes I will interview prospective clients who tell me that they are looking for a specific type of martial art and when they discover that we do not teach xyz martial art, nor have ever heard of the grandmaster of the style, they go away disappointed.

In these cases the mind of the prospective client is on a railroad track looking for a specific thing and can see no other possible destination for their mental train. The station at the end of the line is xyz city and no other destination will do.

What about the other side? Some clients come to the dojo to 'see if they'll like it.' They don't necessarily know that they want to do martial arts, but it might be neat to give it a try for a month or so. Sometimes these clients have no idea what it is that they are looking for, but they are curious, so they try martial arts to see if training brings some benefit they might be seeking. Occasionally some people come to the dojo who know that they need something, and want to make a commitment to finding that 'something'. They start martial arts with an open mind and the train leaves the station to who-knows-where. The railroad track is self-discovery and the destination is further away than any of us realize. Along the road we may go through 'indecision junction' or 'frustration hill' or even 'excitement city' or 'rejuvenation crossing' and any number of other cool and not-so-cool places, but not one of them is the place we are looking for. The point is that we may think that we know why we start the journey, but often we do not know why we stay on the train. Equally, the longer we stay on the train the more that we realize that the ultimate destination

is not what we thought it was when we set out.

Ultimately, (and to return to the original question)...what we are looking for when we set out is not what we thought we were seeking. Once we get a hint of what might lie hidden within us, however, during moments of exquisite performance, we have a hint of what the destination looks like....At that point there is nothing that can dissuade us from the journey.

For certain, the reasons that I am still in the martial arts are not the reasons that I started the journey. The same is true of me as a geologist. Indeed, the martial artist and the geologist are on some sort of journey of discovery. Both of them are attempting to understand how life works and why the universe does the things it does, both of them are mutually complimentary (believe it or not) and in both cases, I thought I knew what I wanted when I started out.

Forty years later, the reasons I set out on the journey are not adequate and are certainly not capable of sustaining the questions that I now ask...but equally, I could not have asked those questions earlier in the journey.

So what is truly important here is the notion of how we start the journey and why we keep going...rather than where we end up. If we start with an open mind, we may end up somewhere we didn't necessarily intend...but it might be a truly amazing journey of discovery that brings us to the destination. There may be any number of detours, false starts, and unintended visits along the way, but it is the journey that creates the person we each become. ☺

How we learn

What is interesting to me, as I sit here and write, is that in our electronic age, we are changing how we learn and process information, and how we communicate about what we know. As we all know from computer games, T.V.'s and cell phones, electronic media are both addictive and communication-changing.

We get so used to reading e mails and text messages that we forget how to write on a sheet of paper. We spend so much time 'googling' that we forget about reading books. We spend so much time watching T.V. or on our cell phones that we forget how to have a real two-way discussion, where two or more people meet face-to-face and take turns to talk, where people listen to ideas and counter arguments with respect and dignity.

So how did this happen? And more importantly, what does it mean?

In the learning process, any activity that leads us to lose track of time and which can absorb us completely has the ability to rewire our minds and reprogram the way we think. Activities that captivate us, rewire and strengthen specific neuron connections in our brains that relate to the activity.

Following my example, think about the high speed world of video games or T.V. programming...the sound bite, the quick-flashing screen changes. Children today can have

lighteningly quick hand-eye coordination for very fine motor skills and short-fuse attention spans acquired from the time they spend on a computer or watching T.V.. Their language and learning process is the language and learning skill set that most closely relates to the world of the computer and the television.

Ask yourself how often you see children reading books? Books are passé...right? But think of the benefits of digesting a book and allowing the imagination to conjure mental images from the words? It's a completely different way of learning isn't it? Reading, however, can be just as addictive as a computer game...time can simply disappear in a good book.

Do you see? It's not the activity in itself that changes our learning process, it's the captivating nature of the activity, which keeps us so enthralled that time disappears... That's what changes us.

So let me bring this back to the martial arts. The martial arts also have the ability to completely captivate our attention and during our practice times, time can just slide by unnoticed. During those times we can learn mind-body functions that improve our awareness, coordination, mental and physical balance and our ability to react to non-verbal communications from our training partners. We become more self-

aware as we train and our self-awareness feeds itself back into the learning process, prompting us to improve by showing us areas of improvement.

Like reading, martial arts has an ability to slow us down and bring us back into ourselves because it deals with real interactions with real people. We must listen, see and feel before we can respond.

Like video games, martial arts also has the ability to teach us to respond to small changes in posture that can signal an attack. Witness the speed at which a sparring match or a judo match can move. The subtle changes in position can win or lose a match in a heartbeat.

When we train in martial arts we learn to reshape both physical and mental patterns through refined repetition...rather like a child working through the various levels of a video game. If we are absorbed by the activity, even in the face of frustration, we will return to the game until we have mastered it...or we find some other new diversion that feeds the pleasure centers of the brain.

In moments when we are completely absorbed by our actions, be they healthy or not so healthy, we are rewiring our brains to want more of that activity due to the hormones we receive during the activity. So what are you learning these days? ☺

"All mankind's inner feelings eventually manifest themselves as an outer reality."

Stuart Wilde

Going Somewhere?

Are you going anywhere? How do you know? Do you know where you want to go? Do you have a road map?

All very interesting and useful questions.

What I'd like you to do this month, is do some homework...not for me, but for yourself. This is not an easy task and it will probably take several days to do it properly.

So it goes something like this:

1. Write about a typical day in your life as it right now. Be specific. Be detailed. Be honest. Put in all the color that you can. Who do you work with, play with, live with? Where do you live? What do you eat? What do you see? What do you do? Who pays you? How much? What is your gross income for an hour's worth of effort in your day? And what is your real or net income? Who controls how much money you keep? How much money do you give to others (creditors, government, etc.) Describe it all...in graphic detail. Once you have done this, tie emotions to the day...how does it make you feel when it is over? What did you say to yourself when you woke up? What do you say to yourself just before you go to sleep? In a series of one word answers, is your typical day somewhere that you want to be? Is it on the path to where you would like to end up? Do you want to repeat the components of your typical day?
2. Write about how you would like a day to be one year from

now. What are you doing? Do the same things...be specific, detailed, honest. How does the day make you feel? Are you energized by the day or drained by it? Is the day one year from now where you want to be or merely a stage along the way? How is it different from a typical day right now?

3. Now, what does a typical day look like five years from now? How have you changed? How have you grown? What have you learned? What new skills have you acquired? Again, answer all the previous questions and be totally honest with yourself. Hold nothing back from yourself, after all, you are going to be the only person to read it. Is this day still part of the process, or are you now doing exactly what you really want to do most in life? Are you doing it in the most idyllic environment for you? Are you doing it with the people who most nurture you?
4. Once you have done all this you have a road map for the next five years of your life. More than that, you have an emotional map of how much baggage you are dragging around with you from day-to-day and how much energy people either bring into your life on a daily basis, or suck out of it.
5. If you have gotten to this stage you need to program the five year plan into your mind....deep into your mind. So reduce everything you wrote in your five-year plan into a mantra of sorts. Write the entire

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

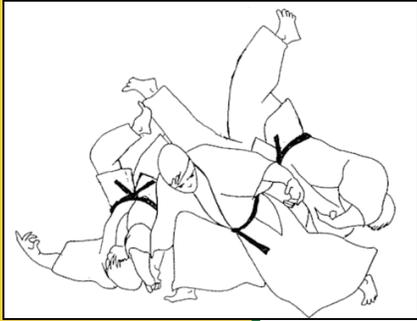
- ◆ **AKAYAMA RYU SUMMER CAMP, GULF SHORES, ALABAMA, JULY 17-18TH, 2009.**

five year plan as a single sentence that describes your ideal world.

All of this may sound like wishful thinking, but what you have just done is develop a business plan for life. If you open a business, you need to know what you want to do, where, with and for whom. You need to know your assets, liabilities, skills, aptitudes, resources. You need to have some idea of where your business will take you and what you will achieve as it grows.

The single sentence at the end? Your mission statement. Just like a business mission statement speaks to the world about what your business does; your own personal mantra speaks to you about what you want to achieve in your own life.

So I now have only one more question...do you believe that you worth the effort? ☺



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