

# Pathways

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*"Happiness is not a state to arrive at, but a manner of traveling"*

Margaret Runbeck

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## Commitment

Have you ever noticed that we seem to live in a disposable, try it on for size and discard it if we don't want it sort of world? I wonder if at the root of this is an inability to make a commitment and stick with it.

It is all too easy to try something, decide it is too difficult and quit. It is all too easy to walk away when convenient. It is all too easy to seek the novel and the untried in search of a new excitement of the moment. I sometimes wonder how much this has to do with the divorce rate in our modern society.

I was at a Toastmaster's meeting a few weeks ago and one of the members was talking about his childhood experiences of trying on different sports for size and then deciding he didn't like them. His father was apparently a wise man who could see the potential peril of his young son's decision and told him that having made a decision, he was going to stay with one particular sport and would not be allowed to quit. The member credited his father with teaching him commitment.

I have seen this same notion play itself out at the dojo. Some of our children come in and try martial arts for a while and then get bored, or take on another sport, or take on too many outside activities and then quit. I have also seen parents who tell their children that once they have made a choice to do martial arts that they are not allowed to quit until they make Black Belt.

There are some tough lessons here. Sometimes the parents have to weather the storms of "I don't want to

go to class" or "I want to try \_\_\_\_". Of course the counter argument become: "Well I don't want to force my child to do something he/she does not enjoy." On the face of it, this is a laudable statement, but how many times in life do we have to do things we do not enjoy? So if we don't teach this core skill to our children when they are young, what will happen when they are adults?

The road to Black Belt is not easy, and in our dojo at least, Black Belt is not awarded to young children. We believe that Black Belt requires a level of maturity as well as physical ability. We acknowledge that physical ability may be present at an early age, but the maturity takes time. It is here that the commitment really shows itself.

I can understand the desire to try lots of different activities when we are young to discover our talents, but I can also see the danger of continually changing horses....you never finish a race.

I would not say that I am talented or gifted at martial arts, but they have become a way of life. I suspect that the martial arts became a way of life because my parents taught me about commitment at an early age.

You see ultimately it is about commitment to self, not to something outside of self. The former begets the latter. The skills must be learned and internalized before they can be used as currency in the market place of life.

I was reading an article in Inc. magazine recently about employees lacking loyalty to companies and vice versa. As adults we fully expect to have several jobs in our lifetimes and

## Commitment continued

work in more than one field, developing skill sets and personal networks along the way. We do not expect a corporation to take care of us for the duration of our careers or safeguard our futures....these are things that now fall into our own realm of responsibility.

But where do we learn the necessary skill set in school? When do we learn how to build appropriate and useful skill sets? Where do we learn to plan for our own future or that of our families?

Looking through the lens of having worked in the academic world for more than twenty years, I see that all too often we are taught that grades are all important and that a high GPA outweighs the need to take difficult classes. All too often I listen to students and advisees who tell me that they don't want to take a particular class because they won't do well in it, or it is too difficult.

The price of commitment seems on the face of it to be too high. Or perhaps it is that we are committed to the wrong thing? What if we were committed to learning the material rather than getting a high grade? I would argue that if we commit to the learning process, the grades will take care of themselves.

Obviously, the counter argument becomes that if I don't have a high GPA, I will be unable to get the right job or earn enough money. Again, on the face of it, a very laudable

comment....right up until we recognize not everyone can, or should, be excellent. The vast majority of us are by definition, average, and if we are all excellent, we are all therefore, by default...average.

As an employer, grades are less important to me than ability and learning. I look for a person who will commit themselves, someone with drive, determination and resiliency.

I would have to say, however, that these are things that are not taught directly in school, they can only be learned in the school of hard knocks.

Commitment is the beginning place for the skills of drive, determination and resiliency.

When we make a commitment to something, or when we learn how to commit to things at an early age, we discover inside ourselves. We discover the ability which give us the resolve to see through the difficult times that will undoubtedly occur later in our educations, our career and our family life. Moreover, when we make a commitment to ourselves we are better able to make commitments to those around us.

I see shining examples of commitment all around me every day, just as I see examples of people who have not yet learned how to commit to something.

I see the commitment in the faces of my students on campus when they resolve to dig themselves out of a hole, I see it in the parents of children at the dojo and I see it in some of the

children.

Of course, like anything, commitment can be taken to extremes and this again, is another lesson that we learn. If we never learn how to commit to something, we never learn when to walk away at the right time. We invariably walk away too soon.

I am always brought back to the lessons of Judo: The throw does not happen until almost all the effort has been committed to the action, and certainly will not happen if there is no commitment to the throw. The Black Belt itself will only have value if we fall over on the way and stand back up again.

I guess that this goes back to last month and repetition again. We will only do the repetitions when we are committed to ourselves and in turn committed to the process. Everyone else will quit.

Equally, in life, some of the great benefits come only after difficult lessons. This is not say that the intent of martial arts training is to make things difficult, it is simply to say that the path to Black Belt will afford us the opportunity to make a lot of personal discoveries....if we stay the course.

In the final analysis I believe that the ability to make and see things through by making a commitment is part of living a life of honor.☺

Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced

Soren Kierkegaard

## Tactical Action

One of my favorite analogies in the martial arts classes is to compare the field operations of armies to the conflict between two people in combat.

History shows us that when two armies meet in the field and clash in an open set-piece battle, the slaughter on both sides can be horrific and costly. One of the lessons to learn here is that the judicious use of overwhelming force of numbers is more likely to win the day.

One of the things that I tell my students is that it is a good idea to see your partner or opponent like an opposing army and rather than attacking along the entire front, it is often better to bring overwhelming force to bear on a small, weaker position of the enemy and annihilate them piecemeal until the entire structure collapses.

Perhaps an example might help. Let us suppose that I am a little over five and a half foot tall and weigh a little over a hundred and fifty pounds. Let us further suppose that my opponent is almost twice my size and a foot taller. Clearly my opponent is bigger and stronger than me and to meet them head on will only get me soundly trounced. Under these circumstances, it makes much more sense for me to find a weak position in my opponent's distribution of forces and exploit it to my advantage.

I am also a great advocate of the ruse or the feint. I like to leave a vulnerability open as a form of bait and encourage my opponent to attack in a particular direction of my choosing. In effect, I am choosing the timing and location of the conflict and allowing my opponent to fully commit his or her forces to a course of action that I am prepared to accept, evade, counter and turn to my advantage. Sometimes it doesn't work out the way I had it planned and I get soundly trashed... but all this reveals is that I am not yet a master of war, tactics or life. I have much to learn.

I think that there are some valuable lessons here that extend beyond the martial arts training hall or the battlefield.

Firstly, we take things head on too often in life without considering either the conditions of engagement, the potential out-

comes, the forces needed for a successful outcome or an awareness of our own vulnerabilities.

It takes a high degree of strategic awareness in order to implement successful tactics in the fluid and dynamic environment of confrontation. A cool calculating eye is needed. All too often we get emotionally involved in our conflicts and confrontations and at that point we concede control of the engagement to the forces that we see as being ranged against us. But remember...no battle plan survives the initial contact with the enemy.

Secondly, we sometimes succumb to fighting battles that need not be fought. We rise to bait, often fully aware that it is merely a worm with a hook within it. It is important to recognize when a battle needs to be fought, when a battle can be avoided and when an alliance can be forged. If a battle must be fought, then the least that you can do is to find a time and place that plays to your strengths.

Thirdly, never underestimate the effectiveness of the surprise maneuver to throw confusion into the mix. The unexpected can frequently turn the tide of an engagement. Equally, never underestimate your opponent's ability to do the same thing.... that is, to use surprise or the unexpected to their advantage. In short expect the unexpected and never underestimate the perceived enemy.

Fourthly, avoid taking an entrenched position unless you are willing to take serious casualties. Entrenched and fortified positions by their nature are immobile and therefore vulnerable to overwhelming firepower.

Fifthly, understand why you are willing to enter conflict or confrontation in the first place. Will winning the engagement end the conflict or merely set the stage for further confrontations at a later date? What is your purpose? What is the purpose of your antagonist?

Sixthly, know your opponent's strengths and weaknesses and likewise know your own. Be brutally honest in your assessment of the opposing forces, both those of your perceived foe and your own.

I could go on, but I think you get the point.

So let's take this to the boardroom, the family home, the traffic jam, and all other areas of personal conflict. What do these principles offer us by way of instruction? How many needless confrontations do we face every day? How many times do we merely set the stage for further conflict, because winning an argument was more important than conceding ground or admitting that perhaps we were wrong, or at the very least, not in possession of all the facts? How many times do we leap blindly into confrontations because our emotions got the better of us and we do damage to ourselves and those we love as a consequence? How many times do we take a rigid view of things and when challenged, dig in our heels because we absolutely know we are right?

By now I am sure that you can continue this list from your own experiences of life. Again, I suspect that you get the point.

I will tell you that from my own experience, Judo and Karate competition was a great laboratory of learning for me. I learned as much from the Judo tournament arena as I ever did from the "real world." In similar fashion learning in times of free practice in class teaches much also.

People sometimes tell me that there is nothing to learn from tournament, that competition creates losers, that trophies are artificial ego strokes and so on. After more than thirty years of competition in the martial arena, I would have to say that standing on the line opposite an opponent has taught me a lot about communication, conflict, confrontation and commitment.

I guess that in the long run, we find our lessons where we look for them. We learn when we see the opportunity to do so. There are many lessons within the martial arts that can be applied to other areas of our lives if we are willing to see them as such. ...conflict resolution is merely one of them. And I would have to finish by saying that a little less conflict in the world might not be a bad thing and that less personal conflict would allow us to lead lives that are less stressful at the personal level.

☺

## Relaxation

I was talking to one of my students the other night about relaxing and it dawned on me that often we do not even recognize when we are not relaxed. Think about it for a moment. We live lives full of stress and become so adept at carrying stress that we don't even notice it until it flares up in some health ailment that forces us to take a good hard look at how we are living.

Our bodies are very good at telling us how we are living, and yet we do not take the time to listen to them.

In order to learn how to relax we must first recognize that we our levels of tension. We must then make a conscious effort to let the tension go. Initially the effort needs to be conscious, but as we learn to listen to our bodies, we can move to a level of unconscious relaxation.

One of the first places to practice is to become aware of your breathing and your heart rate and to slow them down. Take the time to breathe fully and deeply. Fill the lungs with fresh air and replenish your blood with oxygen. One of the great benefits of working out is that it raises our heart rate and forces us to breathe harder, which means that at the end of the work out we have the opportunity to consciously learn to slow down our own hearts and breathing. It is a learned skill. With time, you will become aware that you are carrying tension in a particular place in your body...your back, your shoulders, your neck. You will learn to bring your attention to tense muscles and allow them to relax.

Interestingly enough, you will also begin to notice how other people carry their stress, and how their postures betray the level of stress in their lives.

But I digress.

In our lives today we rarely take the time to stop and unwind. We work long hours, often living lives of uncertainty and so, the stress builds up. The odd thing is though, that as we become accustomed to carrying stress we do not notice that it is there until something forces us to do so. It does not seem odd to me that our health industry is burdened with people suffering from all manner of stress related illnesses.

I know I keep harping on about Judo, but if there is one thing that being a small person doing Judo has taught me, it is that being stiff and resistant only gets me

slaughtered. Most people I work with are bigger and stronger than me, which means that to resist their actions is to court a martial disaster. It is much better for me to learn to flow with the intent of my partner and to add a little extra push at the right moment. Likewise, in falling over we learn to relax with the fall and not to stiffen up as we fall. Over time Judo works its magic and we slowly relax. Sometimes it takes years, sometimes the process is faster, but eventually, if we allow Judo to teach us, we learn all about being relaxed and we are better equipped to take these lessons into our everyday lives and relax in times of stress. Rather than resist the everyday world we learn to let the stress go and relax more readily. We listen to our bodies, our breathing, our hearts.

The beauty is that over time we become better able to handle stress because we do not cling to it, hoarde it or carry it around with us. We discover that worry gets us nowhere and are more readily capable of letting the worry go.

When I opened my business ten years ago, I worried a lot more about it than I do now. Over time I have allowed Judo to teach me how to run my business and not to resist what it is trying to teach me about living. I have intentions about my business, I even have goals and a business plan, but I do not get quite so perturbed when obstacles or unexpected setbacks occur.

I rather think that learning to relax was, for me, one of the greatest gifts of the martial arts.

We are, all of us, capable of making the choice to be stressed out over life or not. We each have the ability to choose to relax or not. I can either choose to listen to my body or pay the price of not doing so. It is my choice.

I would argue that martial arts training helps us to become more aware of our bodies and that in itself cannot be a bad thing if it helps us to live less stressful lives.☺

October						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	24	26	27	28
29	30	31				

November						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

- ◆ Project Action Kick-A-Thon, SMAA, October 14th, 2006
- ◆ Fall Festival, Starkville Academy, October 16th, 2006
- ◆ SMAC Karate Tournament, Greenwood, October 21st, 2006.
- ◆ Akayama clinic, Birmingham, AL, October 28th, 2006.
- ◆ Ippon Open Judo Tournament, Peachtree City, GA, October 28th, 2006.
- ◆ Mississippi Open Judo Tournament, Raymond, MS, October 28th, 2006
- ◆ Akayama Winter Camp, Orange Beach, AL, MLK week-end, January, 2007
- ◆ Wakamusha Judo Tournament, Atlanta, GA February 7th, 2007.

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