

Lessons from my Sensei

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As a teenager living in a relatively small Pennsylvania Dutch community of under 2,000 people during the mid 1950's, my experience of people unlike those of my community was limited. Our family had our B&W TV set for a little over a year. TV broadcasts included only a few commercial channels. The Second World War had ended less than a decade earlier. Some of my uncles and older cousins had been killed on far-off islands in the Pacific Ocean, we were in the beginning stages of a "police action" in Korea. In this provincial environment, Xenophobia was more the rule than the exception.

In 1952, we were ten years away from the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the writing of *The Feminine Mystique*, and the assassination of a popular U.S. President. It was Ozzie and Harriet time in America. A kind of benevolent bigotry permeated the entertainment industry and media. Our tiny community was not totally isolated from the events of the era, but we teenagers were largely unaware of world events and the people involved in them. Our nearest big city had a population of 4,000, and that was where I attended high school.

My ancestors were Old Order Amish and my grandfather still kept in touch with many of our Amish cousins. Though my father had gone to college in the heart of Amish country, and toiled as a chemist in industry, we continued to be surrounded by farms and orchards. My father often joked that he still had "one foot in the furrow." No laws prevented me, a young boy, from pitching hay, picking peaches in the nearby orchards, and doing other farm work after school and during the summer.

I discovered Japanese Martial Arts in a book in our school library. E. J. Harrison's, *The Fighting Spirit of Japan*, published long before the Second World War, survived the purging of the high-school library collection. Few our town knew about Japanese culture except those who had served in the Occupation Forces in Japan. Those veterans seemed uninterested in such things. Some relatives, soundly opposed to anything Japanese, found my fascination with Japanese Martial Arts both alarming and disgusting.

It was difficult to find a martial arts instructor during the 1950's. I began a correspondence with authors of Judo books such as Charles Yerkow using a typewriter I acquired by trading one of my .38 caliber revolvers to a local newspaper editor. As I look back on this today, I realize what a different time that was. As a rural kid, I could carry my 16 gauge shotgun to a nearby general store in hunting season, buy a box of shells and trek off to nearby fields to shoot pheasants. I could take one of my own pistols to the dump and shoot rats. No one paid any attention to a pimply-faced boy carrying a shotgun or a revolver. If I had misbehaved in any way with those guns, the adult males in my town had implied permission to make my life miserable. Gun safety was a no compromise issue in our community. However, I digress.

Mr. Yerkow helped me find and contact some Judo instructors people in Baltimore, Washington, New York City, and Philadelphia. To reach them required travel by bus, then by train and then on foot to each city, something of an adventure for a sixteen year old boy. I was determined to journey to some of the Judo clubs in the above named cities. My parents surrendered their objections in the face of my determination. In the closest city, Philadelphia, I trained with a man named Feinsinger at Hermann's Gym. I soon discovered that Mr. Feinsinger would not be my most important teacher. (The word Sensei had not yet entered my vocabulary). Still I learned some rudiments from him, and he prepared me for the more important teachers I would meet later.

With my best friend, Peter, I traveled to Washington, D.C. to practice on weekends and during the Summer at the Pentagon Officer's Club, home of the Washington Judo Club. General Curtis LeMay, who would eventually be my boss many levels up the chain-of-command during my service in the U.S. Air Force, had become a practitioner of Japanese martial arts. Lemay earned his own Judo black belt and practiced with officers at the Strategic Air Command (SAC) Gymnasium. He also recruited highly-skilled Judoka directly from the Kodokan in Japan to teach Judo at SAC. Eventually, the Pentagon Officer's Club became host to the Washington Judo Club. It was here that I met Kenzo Uyeno, a man different from anyone this young Pennsylvania Dutch boy had ever known. Mr. Uyeno was Nisei, a second generation American of Japanese Ancestry. His own U.S. family had suffered at the hands of the U.S. government during the War. World War II hysteria when the government to suspended Article Fourteen of the Constitution and interned American Citizens in concentration camps for no other reason than the national origins of their ancestors.

Kenzo eventually became my one of my Sensei. He was a patient man who knew how to achieve a lot with a little effort. Through him, and the others in his dojo, I managed to gain a deeper understanding of Judo, not as simply a martial art, but as a way of understanding myself in a complex world.

There were also Sensei at the Washington Judo Club and elsewhere who helped me learn. A USMC Major, Donn Draeger, befriended me and taught me new skills. Some of the Japanese that General Lemay brought from Japan took me onto the mat, announce what technique they would use, and then throw me with that technique regardless of what I might do to prevent it. I competed in tournaments, progressed in my skill and understanding, and earned some of my early ranking in the sport. Jim Takemori, then a Shodan and his brother Ed who still wore a white belt, both tossed me onto the mat with every combination of throws in the canon. I also visited Charles Yerkow's dojo and George Yoshida's Sokol Hall dojo, both in New York City. Later, I trained in Judo dojos in the strange places the Air Force sent me.

The difference between other Sensei and Uyeno Sensei was that he took an interest in the progress of a gangly teenager, not just with Judo, but with understanding the larger world. Kenzo taught me how to use chopsticks, even as the other Japanese instructors found my fumbling with chopsticks the source of some mirth. From him I began to learn

a little of Japanese language, food, and culture. Uyeno Sensei also helped me see a more subtle picture of Judo. It was a Judo beyond throwing and grappling.

I continued my studies of Judo, and had the opportunity to train, participate in tournaments, and progress in my skill and understanding. This was, in part, because the Air Force encouraged Judo. Later, in college, I formed a Judo club and tried to share with my companions in that club some of the lessons I had learned earlier. Eventually I studied other martial arts such as Jiu Jitsu, Aikido and Karate. The early lessons from Sensei Uyeno provided the foundation for my practice in those other forms of martial arts I studied. . Somehow, I eventually continued returning to Judo as my primary interest.

Uyeno Sensei was a man who personified courtesy, and good humor. He knew how to disarm you with a smile. He understood the notion of personal centering. He encouraged me to learn gentleness in the pursuit of victory. Judo became a kind of mental activity, much like a fast moving game of chess, and later became a kind of meditative process. I did not get to spend as much time as I might have wished with Kenzo Uyeno. During my high school years, the trips to Baltimore or Washington were a major effort. After I finished my tour with the Air Force and just before I graduated from college, my Sensei died from complications during a surgical procedure. I learned of this from friends over a year after it occurred. Others of my early Sensei have also bowed their way into the eternal dojo, as I shall do in not too many years distant. Each has contributed to my understanding, not just on the mat, but in my daily life. Some are still alive but old, such as Ishikawa Takahiko. Others such as Donn Draeger are gone but their legacy continues, not just in my life, but in the lives of those who have benefited from their dedication to Judo.

Now, I stand on the threshold of my eighth decade of life, still practicing Judo, though not as skillfully as I did a long time ago. The lessons of gentleness and generosity I learned from my early Sensei are as important to an old man, perhaps more important, than they were to the young man from farm country trying to make sense of the lifetime that lay before him. Sometimes I stray from those lessons, but when I have time to reflect on my own behavior, they return to my consciousness and help me find my center.

In the dojo where I now teach and train, I am the old man with white hair, a belly more rotund than when I was younger, and a touch of arthritis that makes some moves more difficult than they used to be. I can still do randori, take the falls, and execute some of my favorite nage waza. More important, I hope to pass on some of the lessons of Judo in daily life that I learned from the many Sensei who have helped me over the years. I would hope that my legacy will be a small fraction of that left to me by people such as Uyeno Sensei, Ishikawa Sensei, Fujitani Sensei, Troutman Sensei, Draeger Sensei, and so many others who have enriched my life with their wisdom, their patience, their often justified impatience, their concern for my progress, and, ultimately, their friendship.