

TACOMA AIKIKAI JOURNAL

CONNECTION

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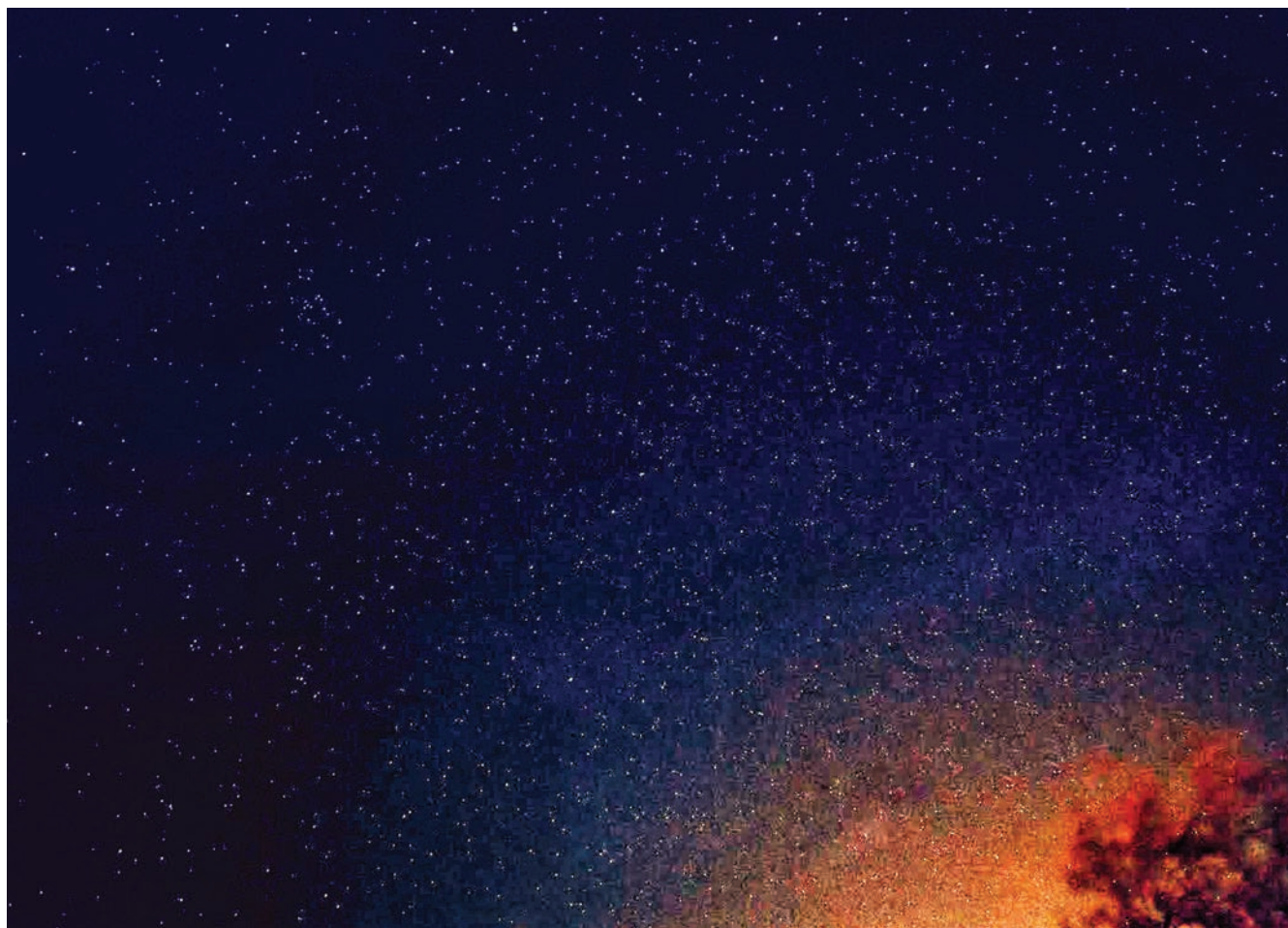


Photo by Diane Deskin

EDITORS' NOTES

EA MURPHY

As we grew, I always envisioned a Tacoma Aikikai Journal as a natural next step for the dojo community, establishing a creative space to share our collective experiences and individual stories. What I didn't envision was the individual and global upheaval that would precipitate this first issue.

But what better time, really, to reflect on our Aikido training than in the context of this year. Our collective experience and expression of the global pandemic, economic shutdown, devastating losses, and national racial reckoning have profoundly shaped our lives, while, in stark contrast to our isolation, made strikingly clear how interconnected

we truly are.

The theme of this issue, Connection, means many things from the perspective of our training. If anything can help us heal from this past year, it is practices like Aikido that deepen our connections to each other and to our true selves. If you're like me, you've spent much of this past year vowing to cherish each moment once we can come together again. Now, as we slowly emerge into our post-pandemic lives, I hope these pages can capture some of the aspirations and insights this last year held, helping us to experience this new day with eyes wide open and hearts full.

NIGHT SKY PHOTOGRAPHS - COVER ART AND PAGE 2

Deep Thanks to Diane Deskin Sensei (chief instructor, Sonoran Aikikai) for her inspired photos of the starry skies that connect all of us.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ALLISON MUIR

Stories are precious gifts. They illuminate, challenge, embrace. Stories invite connection. Recently, the gaps in our stories about democracy, justice, and well-being became painfully apparent, urging us to seek out new stories, to listen closely, and to speak up. As a beginning student, the first chapter of my Aikido journey inextricably connects to the pandemic. Aikido centers me as I wrestle with uncertainty; it is a vehicle for self-discovery. For our dojo community, the pandemic deepened our connection to our practice and to each other.

Helping with the inaugural issue of the Tacoma

Aikikai Journal, offered me the opportunity to reflect on my training and to learn from others. Receiving the stories shared in these pages is humbling. While recording one of the interviews, time slowed as I became keenly aware of the air on my skin, the care with which Chris sanded his jo while he listened, the way Shauna leaned in as Beth told her story. In that moment of complete presence, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. The journal you hold in your hands is the gift of our collective story. I hope it fills you with a sense of wonder and the promise of stories to come.

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H A I K U

Aikido is the
Art of falling and also
Making people fall

Aikido is fun
If you enjoy falling and
Most people do, right?

-Isaac Muir (age 12)



QUARANTINE, THE REVOLVING DOJO

LAURA LIVINGSTON (MARCH 2021)

It was the summer months that lured me into waking up at 5:00 am. The traffic outside the window of my old apartment was limited. The silence combined with the intense commitment of the daylight coming forward, creating and altering shadows, seemed to be a time that existed outside of a clock. The Covid-19 pandemic and the year 2020 spurred many memes about time, as we existed alongside an illness that could at the best temporarily separate us from our friends and family, and at its unforgivable worst sever us from them. Building my quarantine bubble, I found my early morning hours that had always existed outside of a clock became a way to recognize time. I started to place moments of Aikido into that space of the day where it is truly silent. Now, I rise in the morning, eat breakfast, and pick up a bokken or jo. I must be quiet in practice as the other people in my household are still asleep.

I started virtual training at the beginning of the pandemic, grateful for Ea and Eric Senseis for believing in adapting Tacoma Aikikai to the world of the internet and spaces of cleared floors wherever they could be found at home. For the first few months, virtual training was a commitment to weekend mornings, and I rearranged furniture and storage boxes to create my rectangle of a home dojo. At the beginning of 2020, I had actually written down “learn Aikido weapons” as a New Year’s resolution. It merely took a statewide lock-down for me to follow through on that commitment. Mimicking the movements of others does not come naturally to me, and my approach to Aikido is the same approach that

I used to bring to swing and contra dancing: patient persuasion of my four limbs and one brain that they are part of one body. While learning the eight-count suburi, I may have started out spinning in circles and rusty, mechanical arcs as I tried to figure out the pattern that would keep the movement going through all eight counts. Watching the virtual dojo videos, I could break down movements into the tiniest of steps. Slowing and pausing the videos, I watched the movements one hand and one foot at a time. Virtual training and a pandemic are no substitute for in-person practice, but I began to approach training from home as a work in finding opportunities to practice in sustained little moments. I started with practicing footwork while the morning tea water was boiling. This movement back and forth across the kitchen floor soon seemed like too few breaths in a day, and I was eager to sneak in a few more breaths of daily Aikido.

I have been working from home during the enduring presence of Covid-19, and I realized that the time that I once spent in a short commute could be spent with a bokken or jo in my hands. I started out with practicing the 8-count suburi, focused on how the seemingly idle motion of cutting down could be altered by alignments of the creaky hinges of elbows and wrists. Recently, I have tried to sift out movements and moments remembered from in-person training in the park. While the people in my quarantine pod are dedicated to walking, running, and kayaking, Aikido is the practice that I do independently of them. Solo practice means that my mind must be split to effectively sift out moments from class: in my own feet and in the feet of my imaginary practice partner. If mimicking the movements of

others does not come naturally to me, imagining the locations of another person's hands, feet, and weapon while moving my own hands, feet, and weapon may be an exercise in futility. However, I'm convinced that this imagination of another person and my own response is fundamental to my practice of Aikido, whether in-per-

son or virtual. So I continue to rise, make the morning tea, and in the lightening dark hours of the day, despite all protestations of my limbs that they are separate entities, weave my mind, hands, and feet into one body through the motions of Aikido.

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY: THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGE TO AIKIDO PRACTICE

CHARLEY EMLET (JANUARY 2021)

Most of us, if we have practiced a martial art long enough, have faced times when we could not train as normal. Maybe a training related injury or work/family obligations thwarted our training routine. These situations usually last days or perhaps weeks. Few (if any) of us have faced the challenge of maintaining training in the middle of a worldwide, contagious and deadly pandemic. For me, a knee injury that occurred just prior to the initial onset of the pandemic added some further restrictions. I would like to share with you a few of my humble attempts at maintaining some semblance of Aikido practice in the COVID world we live in.

Adjust your attitude. We all get stuck in our familiar patterns as they provide comfort in some respect. This current situation offers us the opportunity to practice *Shoshin* or having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions. For me, it means redefining what training is and how it looks. What daily, normal activities can take on the essence of practice? For example, doing the dishes at night (I don't own a dishwasher) becomes a practice in mindfulness. Awareness of the water, temperature, texture of the dish you are washing. Your attitude toward food that is really stuck to the plate. Now for me, dishes = practice. Throwing the "chuckit" for my Goldendoodle becomes an opportunity to practice shomen strikes as you might with a bokken or iaito. Practicing *Shoshin* creates a chance to be open to new ways of thinking or relating to other people and experiences.

Redefine training. In what ways can we "train" or practice our art in this COVID context? Can we create openness for new or past practices we can re-engage in? As Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, we can practice being present in every moment of our lives. During the pan-



demic, I renewed my intent to engage in sitting meditation practice on a daily basis. Zazen has a historic place in martial art practice and Chiba Sensei said that through Zazen we "can come to see the true-self and the quintessence of existing things." So for now, daily sitting has again become part of my training routine. The mat became my zafu.

Engage in what is possible. Each of us, within the context of COVID, work and family life responsibilities, have to figure out where and how Aikido practice can fit. For me with the added limitations of a knee injury, I have focused primarily on laido practice, sitting meditation and mindfulness. Classes in the park, (the dojo when allowed) and Zoom classes have all served to keep me engaged physically, mentally and spiritually in "the practice". There are opportunities to practice aiki weapons, distanced training. Opportunities exist to keep training.

Aikido practice teaches us to reject rigidity and learn to lean into what occurs, to flow – to blend. This time in history is one of those ultimate tests of how Aikido lives within us. As my dear friend, a Shihan in Shorin Okinawan Karate, says, "accumulate practice daily".



Zanshin
"Remaining mind." The state of relaxed alertness before, during, and after an action

BRUSHSTROKES

EA MURPHY (MARCH 2021)

PLANS CHANGE.

One out of many of the things planned for 2020 was hosting Thierry Diagana Sensei and his family from California for a summer seminar at Tacoma Aikikai. When we finally did see the Diagana family over winter break, we were speechless when they gave us the calligraphy that now hangs above the kamiza.

Zanshin. Literally translated as continuing mind, *zanshin* describes the relaxed state of awareness before, during, and after every action, which allows for a natural, spontaneous reaction.

How appropriate for this year. With plans, routines, livelihoods, and cultures turned upside down and an inability to plan next week, let alone next month, the pandemic has emboldened us to live entirely in the present. To adapt, what choice do we have but to be present for what is and respond accordingly. **Zanshin.**

Our culture is filled with landmines that sabotage *zanshin* in our daily life. Our phones, social media accounts, television, advertising, desk jobs, and traffic can even outcompete hunger or thirst on the level of distraction. Yet the great pause of this past year fills the air with a collective breath as we are forced to Be. In. The. Moment.

If daily life takes us away from the present moment, then in some ways, training is the antidote. We feel our feet on the mat. Our differences diminish with our single uniform. Our sore muscles, the grip on our partner's wrist, and the sweat of exertion bring us back into our bodies, right here, right now. But training without *zanshin* is an empty form. Why throw someone down if our back is turned when they get back up? Why move into the gap without feeling the opening? Why join with our partner's center only to retreat back into ourselves?

Zanshin is the flame of the unexpected that ignites our training. It is the live sword of our attention. It is the expansion of our consciousness past ourselves and into the world. The partner who attacks more quickly than we expected, the crowded mat during a seminar, the stranger who walks into the dojo, or the glance calling us up for demonstration are all moments to practice *zanshin*, responding to what is as effortlessly as breathing.

Aiki
"Harmonious spirit." A concept describing the meeting and blending of ki.



We were humbled once again over the winter, when another piece of calligraphy came in the mail from Kyoto. Hanging to the right of the kamiza, its brushstrokes offer a clear, elegant reminder of why we are here. **Aiki**

However we have reached this door, when we step into the dojo we all come to practice the way of *aiki*. English translations are numerous, and maybe not one does it justice. Harmonious spirit. Blending energy. Peace. And somewhere in there lies joy too.

We harmonize with our partner and with the movements of our teacher. We harmonize with the ways of the dojo, and the rhythms of the community. We practice blending with the world. Our jobs and our families. Our passions and our circumstances. This pandemic. Before long, we see *aiki* in the crushing waves on the beach and the sweet wind in the trees, in the churning volcanos and the mountain meadows. And if we are lucky, following the natural path, with awareness in the present, we may get out of the way just long enough to glimpse our true *aiki* as well.

DEEP THANKS TO THE DIAGANA FAMILY AND AIKIDO KYOTO FOR THEIR GIFTS AND INSPIRATION.

AIKIDO IS NOT A PLACE

MALORY GRAHAM,

Chief instructor, Seattle Aikikai

As the global Covid-19 pandemic continues into another year, we are watching dojos all over the world make the hard decision to close their physical spaces. We closed up our dojo in Seattle, WA in July after operating for 23 years. We said goodbye to years of accumulated memories. While I was initially feeling sorry for myself and the loss of my space, my teacher aptly commented, "Why so sad? You are now as free as the clouds."

Dojo closed, but the universe is open.

What happens to our Aikido when we go outside into the open universe? Does it naturally expand? I have noticed in my own Aikido practice doing weapons outside a lovely feeling of expansion. In breathing practice, that breath I feel in my chest seems fuller as my arms extend out to the sky. I have noticed my gaze looking out at the horizon, not confined by any walls. And I have noticed my sword cut naturally expanding with what feels like a truer cut with more freedom. A cut as free as the clouds.

I have also noticed a shift happening in the global Aikido community as we find each other and connect virtually across organizations and lineages. There has been a dissolving of barriers as we offer teachings to one another online and share our best practices. I have taken classes from teachers in Mexico, London, Kyoto and Australia, to name just a few. I have had the opportunity to learn from an Aikido instructor in a wheelchair, and a program designed for teaching Aikido to the blind. I have also had my mind opened to issues in Aikido like equity and race and ableism as well as seeing innovative approaches to making Aikido accessible to diverse populations. I probably would not have expanded out of my usual routine or comfort zone if the necessity had not been there. For this, I am grateful to the pandemic.

Many worry about the future of Aikido as we see physical dojo spaces closing. But I have total faith that our Aikido practice will survive this pandemic and emerge with a new sense of vibrancy on the other side. And I don't mean to sound just cheery about this by looking on the bright side. There will be some loss, for sure. We will have given up a year or so of practicing the full con-



Photo Credit Marissa Vitiello

tact art that we love, that feeds us. There will be some physical dojos that will close for good. But we still have agency and a choice to make about how we use this time.

One of the most beloved objects that we removed from the dojo when we moved out was our zen Han, a wooden board and mallet that we hit to start each class. Over the years, we have worn out the wood so that what started as an indentation is turning into a hole in the center of the wood from its constant use. Written around the edges of the Han is the zen saying that translates roughly to: "Life is precious. Do not squander your time."

It is our task to use this time wisely during the pandemic. For it is a gift of sorts. To use this time not only to connect widely with a larger Aikido community but to also go inside, to get quiet and do the hard work of personal examination. To question our beliefs of what we think we know about aikido and HOW we know it. To study our anatomy and explore how to use our bodies more efficiently. To not just make sword cuts, but to sharpen our blades, so to speak. To review and study all of the years of practice that we have gotten from our teachers and see what emerges as true and useful so that we can make it uniquely our own. To compost all of these treasures, polishing what is useful and discarding what is useless, so that when they are ready to emerge we have created ourselves as the perfect containers.

A CONVERSATION WITH TACOMA AIKIKAI COMMUNITY MEMBER ROSE

(MARCH 2021)

Why did you first become interested in Aikido and how long have you been training at Tacoma Aikikai?

Rose: I think I first heard of Aikido from *The Walking Dead* TV show, and I liked the idea of being strong and skilled but causing no more harm than absolutely necessary for self-defense. I had never done any martial



arts training before and thought of myself as strictly pacifist until the past few years, when I started to think more intensely about self-defense/community defense in the context of movements for social justice and to admire the contributions of antifascists, Black Panthers, Zapatistas, and other indigenous resistance movements. Before I moved to Tacoma in summer 2018, I was thinking about becoming a member of the dojo or joining a rock climbing gym in town; I let the idea simmer in the back of my mind for a year and a half before I decided to come check it out. I knew from the first time that I sat in to watch a class at the dojo that there is something very compelling for me about

arts training before and thought of myself as strictly pacifist until the past few years, when I started to think more intensely about self-defense/community defense in the context of movements for social justice and to admire the contributions of antifascists, Black Panthers, Zapatistas, and other indigenous resistance movements. Before I moved to Tacoma in summer 2018, I was thinking about becoming a member of the dojo or joining a rock climbing gym in town; I let the idea simmer in the back of my mind for a year and a half before I decided to come check it out. I knew from the first time that I sat in to watch a class at the dojo that there is something very compelling for me about

“[This practice] is explicitly inclusive to people of all ages and genders, adaptable to any level of experience and ability, and there seems to be an intention of lightheartedness along with the aspect of real self-defense and fighting techniques ...” - Rose

ing a beginner's class. We were very impressed, and the rest has been history.

A CONVERSATION WITH TACOMA AIKIKAI COMMUNITY MEMBERS CHRIS, BETH, AND SHAUNA

(MARCH 2021)

What made you interested in Aikido? How long have you been a member at the dojo and how long have you been training in Aikido?

Chris: I was interested in Aikido probably since I first saw a Steven Seagal movie. As it turns out, he was maybe not as good as I thought he was, but he was a different type of martial artist than I had seen in the Kung Fu movies I watched growing up during the late 70s and 80s. He moved differently, and the forms he used were different. So, I was interested in Aikido and martial arts in general growing up, and then we got a flier in the mail from Tacoma Aikikai around April 2019 and realized that the dojo was right in our neighborhood. We were pretty excited. I had taken Aikido at a different school years ago, back in the early 2000s, and then that Sensei retired, the school closed, and my schedule changed, so it had been some years since I had taken it. My girlfriend, Beth, and I decided to check out the school. We went in for an introductory session, and they were do-

Beth: As Chris mentioned, we started in April 2019 when we got the postcard in the mail. I knew it was something Chris was interested in because he had done Aikido in the past. I suggested that we go and check it out. We went to the first class of the beginner's course, and I was pretty much leaned in the whole time. I was completely engaged. There wasn't any point at which I thought “this is not something for me.” It was just like, “yes, I would like to get on the mat and start doing those things that those people are doing right now,” which is, surprising because I'm not so much about exercising, just generally. It was great to be able to find something that Chris and I could do together to be able to keep active and exercise - to do something that I enjoy.

Shauna: I've been studying Aikido for a long while now. Like Chris, I was first exposed to martial arts through a movie, *The Karate Kid*. That got me interested way back when I was in Middle School. But I really started martial arts much later when I was teaching English in Korea. I went to a Hapkido dojo near where I was working for about two years. Then my work schedule changed, so I switched to a dojo that had later classes and that was an Aikido dojo. We had class from 9pm to 10pm sev-

(ROSE CONTINUED) *this practice. The atmosphere of Tacoma Aikikai drew me in immediately and I have been a member since March 2020.*

What keeps you engaged in training even when it's hard, like it's

been during the pandemic?

Rose: I think some of the elements that make Aikido training a good fit for me include the combination of serious, earnest discipline and also extremely friendly and open attitudes that our Sensei model. It's hard work and fun at the same time. This balance seems to be a part of Aikido practice more broadly-- it is explicitly

inclusive to people of all ages and genders, adaptable to any level of experience and ability, and there seems to be an intention of lightheartedness along with the aspect of real self-defense and fighting techniques that require a "safety first" mindset with caution. I was also intrigued by the combination of Aikido and Zen meditation since I have had positive experiences with Zen meditation practice in the past. In addition, the dojo is gorgeous and so calming; I am always excited to go back and to see the new flower arrangements.

If you had to describe your experience of Aikido in three words, what would they be?

Rose: Challenging, painful, exhilarating!

"When I started Aikido, I was interested in fitness and self-defense. I've stayed for fitness, self-defense, the community, and the art. The more you learn, the more there is to learn. It's just this amazing art form to me."
- Shauna

eral nights a week. When I came back to the States, I trained for a few years in Austin, Texas. Following that, though, I took about ten years off due to work and graduate school. When I moved to Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, I started Aikido again. I found Neilu Naini Sensei there. At the age of 40, I took on a totally different style, but it was great, and I really got into Aikido again.

I've been training there ever since. I met Ea Sensei at this time too, and started training in Tacoma when she first started Tacoma Aikikai and had Saturday Intensives once a month. During the pandemic I've been coming to classes regularly. It's been wonderful to train with Ea Sensei and Eric Sensei more often. When I started Aikido, I was interested in fitness and self-defense. I've stayed for fitness, self-defense, the community, and the art. The more you learn, the more there is to learn. It's just this amazing art form to me.

How has your training been impacted by the pandemic? What changed for you?

Shauna: Initially during the pandemic, nobody was training much at all, but then it became this opportunity to work a lot more on weapons. I've always been so focused on body arts, so it's been good to just really

focus on weapons. It's been a fantastic outlet during a really stressful time. It's been something that's kept me grounded.

Chris: My training is different because I have not been to an indoor class since March 2020. When the rest of the world shut down, the school shut down, but we are fortunate enough that our Senseis realized that we could do classes outdoors. In Tacoma, we are blessed with a selection of quality parks, and there is one close to the dojo. We started doing outdoor classes with a lot of weapons work that we are told will translate into the body arts. Now that the vaccines



Photo Credit Philippe Wagemans

have started to become more widely available, I hope we will transition back into indoor classes, but it's been great to be able to at least keep training outdoors while maintaining distance. Everybody wears masks and all that, so everybody stays safe, which means that I'm comfortable and still continuing my training. I really enjoy weapons. It's definitely different. In the dojo, we did a lot more of the body arts, and even though the weapons were offered, it was not a primary focus of my training. Now it has become pretty much the only focus of my training because we have not been able to do any sort of close contact work at the school until very, very recently. So I've been thankful, and I have enjoyed it. There is so much to learn. It's a whole body- mind experience.

Beth: I've been grateful to have Aikido during the pandemic. 2020 was a big year for me, personally and Aikido offered some new challenges as well as a haven of sorts. In spring, everything shut down because of the pandemic and things changed, but everyone is making do and making changes, and trying different things. Instead of meeting at



the dojo, we started meeting in the park and focusing on weapons work. Weapons was one aspect of Aikido that I had been interested in prior to the pandemic and wanted to try, but it was hard to fit into my schedule. I found it to be a nice opportunity to experience other things that Aikido offers beyond just the body work, and once we're back in the dojo, I'd like to continue the weapons practice.

In summer, my mother's health started to decline, and, due to the restrictions, we weren't allowed to see her regularly. But by the end of summer her health declined to the point where she ended up being hospitalized, and I was spending a several days a week with her. I would continue to come to Aikido in the park as a break from that, to have some little block of "normal." When you're doing Aikido, you get that focus where ev-

everything else falls away, and you're just working a single technique. It was a place to be able to come and have everything else fall away and just focus on this physical thing. It was a solace in a difficult time.

In the fall, my mother passed away, and I injured my shoulder. I stepped away from Aikido for the winter. Now it's spring again, and I am back. During this whole year, with my mom and my shoulder, everyone at the dojo has been super supportive. Even when I wasn't coming to practice, Chris would mention that people were asking how I was doing, not just once to be polite but on a regular basis, keeping up with my progress, offering support, and sending care packages. Our dojo - it's a nice group of people who care about each other, that's not something you generally find at

a Pilates class. I mean, maybe some people do, but that hasn't been my experience. To be back in that community, to be back doing the techniques, the exercising, doing Aikido, has been really nice.

Shauna: I didn't even think about this until you were talking about how Aikido gave you a place to go when you were dealing with your Mother's illness. I had a similar experience when I had a cancer diagnosis five years ago where everywhere else I was a cancer patient, but I could just let all of that go while training.

Beth: One of the silver linings of the pandemic is that it created a lot of opportunity for ingenuity. Would we really be doing Aikido in the park if it wasn't a pandemic? Probably not, we would all be in the dojo sweating to death in the summer, but now I think this is a viable option for doing Aikido in the summer, not a five hundred degree dojo. (Laughter)

I hope that we continue to think out-of-the-box, where we look for opportunities and where we can try different things that allow us to still practice Aikido, but in a slightly different situation. I like to be outside. I like that we did the intensive outside in the park. I thought that

was awesome. I've been glad to have Aikido during the pandemic. It's a little pocket of normalcy. Even though it hasn't been "normal," it's been one of those things that grounds you. It's one of those things that reminds you that it's not always going to be like this. We're going to get past this. It's going to be better. We're going to get back to where we were.

Chris: I also appreciated the ingenuity of Eric and Ea and their willingness and ability to continue classes. When all we had were the virtual options, they filmed themselves so they could at least provide something for people who are at home. We don't have room in our house, unfortunately, to practice; we just don't physically have the space, but just to be able to watch and still kind of participate that way was helpful. I know that other schools weren't able to do that. Not all of them stayed open. So, it feels like we've continued to benefit from Ea's and Eric's ingenuity. They figured out different ways to provide their knowledge even when we're not able to practice in person.

Beth: There were times in the beginning of the pandemic when I was working sixteen hour days, I would turn on the virtual practice with Ea Sensei and just listen to her while I was working, to hear her talking and just to have that in my head. Listening would bring to mind how I feel when I go to Aikido, reminding me to breathe and of the flow of the practice. It would release some of the stress of the day.

If you had to describe your experience of Aikido in three words, what would they be?

Chris: *Strenuous, fulfilling. We only get three words? (Laughter)*

Involving, strenuous, fulfilling. Yeah, involving, like when Beth was just talking about that you have to be absolutely focused. That is the truth for me. It takes so much for me. I am fully committed physically and mentally in every class. That's what I mean when I say involving.

Beth: *Community and engaging. I use my brain a lot for it being an exercise kind of thing.*

Shauna: *I'm going to quote Chiba Sensei and give you five words, his five pillars of Aikido. Openness, centeredness, connectedness, liveliness, and wholeness.*

Beth: *Oh, those are good. I like lively.*

What advice would you give a new Aikido student?

Shauna: *Just come and try it. There's this concept of Shoshin, beginner's mind. It's being open. So, come and be open to learning and trying. Don't be intimidated by others you see in the dojo because maybe some of those people have been training for 20 years. Just come and practice. Put yourself out there and do it. Beginner's mind is an advantage, to come in without all those preexisting concepts or ideas and thoughts that sometimes hinder us.*

Beth: *You're not going to get it on the first try; it's going to be bad at first. It's okay. You watch Eric and Ea Senseis and they are so fluid, and you think compared to these people I have no coordination, but Ea has been doing this for like twenty-five years, even longer. This is what she does. She breathes Aikido. So, you have to temper your expectations that you're going to get there overnight. It's definitely a ten thousand hours kind of thing, but it's possible to get there, which I think is cool.*

Chris: *Yeah. It takes a lot of practice. Put in the work, because it is work - for me anyway. It's enjoyable, but, make no mistake, it's not like a pastime where you can just show up and commit half of yourself and get a lot out of it. I mean, it takes a lot. The interesting thing about Aikido for me is that it takes having a partner almost to really understand it. It's not like other martial arts where you're going to throw a punch or a kick, and the other person is there to defend against it. This is a blending exercise, so no matter whether you're the attacker or the defender, both of you play an important part in the success of the art. To my knowledge, I don't think that there's any other martial arts like that.*

Beth: *It's a relationship.*

Chris: *It's about harmonizing and blending. You are using your opponent's force against them, yes, but it's a lot more subtle. Both of you benefit from the exercise while you're doing the exercise. It doesn't matter who is the "attacker" or the "defender," you both have a part to play and both of those parts are integral and important.*

Beth: *Different partners, different experience.*

Chris: *It helps deepen your understanding of why the movement works, why the techniques work, and by changing the partner, it forces you to grow. You don't have the same kind of relationship with each person. We mix it up. So you grow with the technique as you change partners and play each role, and that's true*

from black belt level, a very advanced partner, and all the way to a beginner. There's always more to learn. A partner with more skill or more knowledge can teach you. If you're working with someone who has less knowledge, you help them learn. By teaching them, you also solidify and fortify your own learning.

Beth: Yes, teaching always makes it better. It's different, you know, even within the same skill level grouping. There's always a difference with every person, even physically. Working with different body types brings into focus more the mechanics of how the techniques work. I get very analytical about it, and a lot of times, that's how I end up learning the techniques. I like to have that variety to kind of try things and see how they

work.

Chris: I'm really thankful that we have this community here. I mean, Shauna travels two hours to be a part of this. I try not to take it for granted because it just happens to be our local school and yet it feels like it's become more than that. Even while we're not able to train in the way that we want to train, like Beth and I haven't been in the dojo for a year, it hasn't felt like we've lost anything. We're missing contact, but we're able to see people here at the park. We're able to at least go to a weapons intensive and experience really hard core physical training. I'm glad that we've had this opportunity to meet a bunch of people and to work on our own self betterment.

"When you're doing Aikido, you get that focus where everything else falls away, and you're just working a single technique." - Beth

A CONVERSATION WITH TACOMA AIKIKAI COMMUNITY MEMBER, CLAIRE

(MARCH 2021)

How long have you been a member of the dojo, and how long have you been training in Aikido?

Claire: This dojo is my beginning with Aikido, and I came to it in September of 2019 for the fall Beginner Series. That was my first ever exposure to Aikido. I've been mostly consistently at the dojo since then, except for a hiatus that happened during COVID.

How has your training been impacted by the pandemic? What changed for you?

Claire: I was so new to the training and had never really had a similar practice in my life that required this type of commitment. That was one of the reasons why I started training - because I wanted to have something that was routine and benefitted me, and something like an obligation that was good for me to stick to. I've been in choirs before, but that was never more than once a week, so to have the goal of having practice three times a week was already a hurdle for me to adjust to. Then I found that the space of the dojo was really motivating for me, having somewhere where I could go that was dedicated space. The dojo incited certain feelings about training.

When that option was removed, I was hesitant to continue training, and, because I was so new to Aikido in general, I was self-conscious, too. I was nervous to train over Zoom and be filmed in my tiny apartment trying to make space. Everything felt like a source of anxiety of being exposed. I'm not good at being new and vulnerable to learning things. It stresses me out. So having been new and then having the realization that going to a park or being on Zoom would make me feel even more vulnerable than if I was training in the dojo, where, in my mind, training is supposed to happen was hard to wrap my head around, so I stopped training for about three months.

I started doing the private sessions as soon as the dojo opened. I pretty much trained any time the dojo has been accessible. I did a few park classes, but for some reason I found it difficult. I think especially because I'm interested in working on my ukemi, and I think that aspect of training was taken away or just less of a focus in the park because you can't roll around too much in the grass in the same way. Also, going to the park and thinking, "Alright, we're going to do weapons" was a shock and a difficult adjustment. I realize now that all that footwork is really helpful, and I look differently on weapons training now. But I'm someone who struggles with anxiety and feeling unprepared for things, so

it was hard for me for a while. I've only been consistently training when I've been able to go physically to the dojo.

What made you interested in Aikido?

Claire: I was watching a show called A Man in the High Castle. It's on Amazon Prime, and it's actually a fantastic show. It's written by Philip K. Dick, and it's an alternate history where the Nazis won World War II, and the country is split into the Pacific Japanese states and Nazi-ville. It's incredibly dark and well-written. One of the main characters lives in the Pacific Japanese states, and she studied Aikido. It shows her in the dojo, and she talks about philosophies that she learned from



studying Aikido. It was applicable to many situations, whether they were confrontational or not.

There is this scene where she is sitting on this bridge and some guy comes at her and she barely moves but just redirects his energy, and he flies off the bridge. It was her gut reaction. She's mortified because she just killed this guy, but she just got off his line, and he threw himself over the bridge. It was crazy to watch, and it really compelled me. I didn't know much about Aikido before actually watching that show, and it seemed unique how it was more than just a fighting style - that it's very much a philosophy and kind of a mindfulness and a way of viewing things. I felt like the show illustrated that really well. It was something that the character held onto throughout all of her experiences, and she used it to make decisions and to defend herself on several occasions. So that got me thinking, "wow, that's cool - female empowerment and female martial arts representation in the media."

Then, I started thinking about how I don't have any

self-defense skills. My husband is a big, strong guy and can easily defend himself. He worries about me being able to defend myself if someone attacks me, so he started putting a worm in my ear that "you should learn self-defense. You should know how you're going to respond if things happen." So, the idea of self-defense came at the same time of seeing this cool representation of Aikido. Then I was in Valhalla Coffee and there was a poster for our dojo for the Beginner's Series. I went, and I was totally hooked.

What keeps you engaged in training even when it's hard, like it's been during the pandemic?

Claire: One of the things that's cool is I can tell that I'm learning things. I can feel the progress physically in my body. Our teachers are really great, too. I feel like the dojo is such a welcoming and open community. As I mentioned, I'm a vulnerable student. I'm very uncomfortable not knowing things and struggling to learn things and going through that awkward part where you're trying to figure something out, and you don't quite have it yet. I'm not a courageous student. I'm kind of timid in that way, but they're super patient. And then, when I get something right, there's really good positive feedback. I've had conversations occasionally with Ea where I say, "I'm sorry, I'm a difficult student." And she's like, "you're fine." They're just so sweet. So I feel like that's been a big part of it. And also, I don't want this to be one of those things that I don't finish. I don't want to give up on it. I need something physical in my life, and I feel like I need to challenge myself kinesthetically because it's an area for me that I haven't delved into much. I feel like I'm not super coordinated. I'm not super connected with my body in that way, and I would love to strengthen that area of my life. I would love to be able to have something that I can be proud to say I'm diligent about and that I continue to do. I get that sense of accomplishment striving for those personal goals. That keeps me engaged.

It's also pretty fun when I go home and try out one of the techniques, and I actually take my husband down for a second. He's like, "oh, man, you totally got to me." He's always so surprised because he's 6'2" and he's 200 lbs., with a built frame. He's a tall, fit guy. And for me, I'm 5'2" and kind of stocky, not actually very fit or muscular at all. For me to be able to say "hey, can I try this out on you?" and have him be totally taken out by a technique,

I'm like, "wow, this actually works. I've learned something and I can take my husband to the floor." So, that's pretty cool.

What advice would you give a new Aikido student?

Claire: *Just keep at it. Don't be a vulnerable, timid student like me. Just keep trying. You're in a great community. You'll have support. The people that are in the dojo with you that are more experienced than you, they want to help you learn, too. That was another thing that stressed me out when I first started. I thought more experienced students wouldn't want to do techniques with me because they're going to think, "I want to practice my own stuff and not have to deal with a new person." But everyone's super committed to the whole group learning together. And so I would remind a new student of that and say "don't be afraid to work with a person who is more experienced. It's kind of interesting for them, because when you don't know what's going on, you're an unsuspecting subject to their technique. It's helpful for them, and they'll help you. They'll walk you through it. People are really kind to each other.*

FALLING INTO AIKIDO

ALLISON MUIR (DECEMBER 2020)

How'd I get here?

I'm scurrying down the deck stairs in my gi with a MacBook Air dangling in one hand and a bokken in the other, praying I have enough battery juice and Wi-Fi bandwidth. Bare feet hit backyard grass absorbing the moisture from this morning's drizzle. I place the computer on the patio table, login, and click on the camera.

"Hello," Sensei greets me as I kneel. "Is there anything you want to work on today?"

"Can we do the 8 directions?"

I've been practicing it over and over on my own since last class, and I am not sure when to "step in" to switch feet. It's driving me insane because it seems monumentally significant in COVID times to be on the correct foot.

I started Aikido in September 2019 because every time my friend Josh described his training, it sounded perfect for my 12-year-old son who was throwing his body all over the place, half falling half rolling. It seemed

So, you know, everyone has to be new at some point." I wouldn't want any new student to view themselves as being cumbersome in the dojo because that's kind of how I viewed myself. I would want any other new student to go in there and just keep at it and trust that they will make progress if they give it their best.

I haven't experienced a culture like this before, because when I was a kid, I did ballet, and ballet has one of the most toxic cultures in terms of anything that you would learn in a group setting. That was the only other kind of kinesthetic learning setting that I'd been in. Everybody just wants to be better and skinnier than each other. It's really, really unhealthy and unfortunate. It's not that I expected Aikido to be like that, but I just had nothing else to compare it to. So, I was nervous because I always felt horrible about myself when I did ballet, and I didn't get something right. That's just not something you want to be a part of.

If you had to describe your experience of Aikido in three words, what would they be?

Mindful, fluid, growing

worth looking into if only to avoid future hospital visits. Never before in my lifetime had I considered pursuing a martial art. Josh was rather convincing, though, and sure enough after meeting Ea Sensei and one class observation, my whole family joined Tacoma Aikikai.

To say I was confused for the first 3 months of classes is a major understatement. I had no idea what was going on. I felt inept and embarrassed by my obvious directional challenges and lack of coordination; however, I also found training physically and mentally rewarding. Rolling, especially slowly, connecting as much of my body as I could to the mat, was soothing. Watching Ea Sensei and Eric Sensei demonstrate techniques was awe-inspiring, like witnessing a beautifully dangerous dance. Most of all I enjoyed discovering this new practice with my husband, Dan, and sons, Dylan and Isaac. By the time 2020 rolled around, I was completely confused but committed.

In March, as the world was locking down, I attended the last class in the dojo where we trained socially distanced with bokken. Prior to this class, I held a bokken

only a handful of times, and it was the first time I actually registered the word “suburi.” At the end of class Ea Sensei assured us we would continue with online classes and offered us bokken and jo to train with at home. I had no idea at that time how much I would rely on these gifts over the next nine months.

Before quarantine, I did my best to attend two to three classes a week, sometimes changing into my gi in my office at Tacoma Community College rushing to my car to barely make an evening class at the dojo. I always enjoyed training, but there were many days when sending that last email or grading one more paper took priority over making it to class. Then everything shifted.

In the first months of quarantine, I was just grateful to be working, that I could be home with my kids, and that no one close to me was sick. I was getting through it day by day, figuring out teaching online and Zoom meetings while navigating my kids’ education and the needs of my household. I walked all the time, wherever I could, no matter the weather. I showed up for every online Aikido class.

I looked forward to Sunday emails with the virtual dojo schedule. I marked each class on my calendar like a bright light to look forward to. Setting up mats in my basement, positioning the laptop on our piano, turning on my camera, became a ritual. Each time finding Sensei on the other side to guide training. “Onegaishimasu.” Following another student’s lead, I realized I could expand my at-home training space to the backyard, opening more room to practice bokken and jo. Together in the virtual dojo, we conditioned, we visualized, we imagined, we breathed, and for me, as the reality that the pandemic would continue indefinitely grew apparent, daily training became a lifeline. During “check-in conversations” with colleagues, friends and family, I found myself saying, “I just need to move, to process

this in my body. I’m doing OK. I have Aikido.”

Moving Forward

We bow in, Sensei towards the kamiza in the dojo and me towards his picture on a screen in my garden.

Though still new, the bokken feels less foreign in my hands than it did a month ago. I find comfort in its weight, and as I begin to move, to turn and cut in each direction, my worry for my students, for my profession, for my loved ones, for the most vulnerable in our community, begins to move, too. It shifts in new directions that seem less impenetrable and unrelenting. The sorrow is present but not all consuming. I hear Sensei

counting, instructing me to drop lower, cut from my center. He reminds me to keep my energy moving forward.

In June, along with the hope of clearer skies and loosening restrictions, I carried a heavy heart witnessing growing social and political unrest in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder and



the ongoing racism highlighted by this horrific event. Amid the division around us, our dojo community came together in the park with our masks to train among the trees. I reunited with familiar faces as we learned new ways to connect with each other and with our practice. Watching my sons train again with their friends and hearing their laughter as they rolled across the grass offered much needed levity. When my college held an Open Forum to discuss the Recent Violence Against Blacks, I longed to greet each of the participants with “Onegaishimasu” so that in this space, too, we might build relationships based on an agreement to hold each other accountable to care for one another, especially in the most challenging of circumstances.

The Black Lives Matter movement prompted a deep reflection on my own Whiteness and the antiracist actions I might take moving forward. I resonated with

Resmaa Menakem's body-centered approach to addressing racism in ourselves and our communities. "Remember that trauma is all about speed and reflexivity. Slow yourself down and pay attention to your body. Be curious about what is going on there. Lean into your body's experiences and sensations. Do the same with uncertainty. Love and trust are not concepts or tactics. They are ways of being with someone, ways of being in the world, and ways of being in your body" (Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* p.290). Words like these aligned with what I was experiencing through Aikido.

Now during "check-in conversations" with colleagues, friends and family, I found myself explaining, "I'm doing Aikido socially distanced in the park. We do weapons training with wooden swords. I know it sounds weird. I'm not sure why, but even though it's difficult for me, I love it." When feeling down or stressed, I turned to my jo or bokken and went outside to train. On several occasions, my neighbors could hear my son's voice yelling from the back door, "Mom, it's getting dark. Time to bring your jo inside." If I was having trouble sleeping, I went through the jo kata or the 8 count suburi in my mind, like a meditation, until I drifted off.

Kyu testing was not something I aspired to in the beginning of my training. I'm not a huge fan of tests to begin with and watching my senior classmates prepare for testing the previous December convinced me I was a long way from ever being ready. However, as the grass stains grew darker on my gi pants throughout the summer, Sensei started to mention my 5th kyu test. Say what??? Although intimidated, I agreed that it was probably time. I was incredibly fortunate to have Aikido partners, my family and Josh, that I could touch during quarantine, so I had every advantage in preparing for the test. With these patient and supportive partners, I practiced in class, in the dojo, in my backyard, in my kitchen. Announcements were made. Emails were sent. Since we couldn't congregate, the test would be part of the regularly scheduled virtual class so that dojo members could watch it live.

On the day of my test, I felt ready-ish. We were all wearing masks; the camera was on. During warm-up, I started worrying that my pants might fall off in the middle of kaitenage, and what was kaitenage anyway.

I breathed through the initial wave of panic, and once Sensei called me forward, I was a little calmer. At several points during the test, I could feel myself slipping into old habits. Josh was a steadfast and trustworthy uke who had my back the whole way through, and even though I knew my technique was far from perfect, I kept going. When it was finally over, beyond relief, I felt an immense amount of gratitude for my uke, for my family, and for my Senseis. The most touching part, though, was at the end when Sensei read the congratulatory comments from our community who had watched the test virtually. They knew exactly what I just went through, and they were cheering me on. They didn't care that I was imperfect; I accomplished a step on the path we were traveling together, and they were right there with me.

In the days following my test, I struggled as I processed the fact that I had failed to meet my own expectations. I wanted to do better, to prove that I'm "good" at Aikido. I went over the techniques in my head identifying my mistakes, and criticizing myself for being sloppy, for letting anxiety take over, for being stuck in old patterns. At the same time, in my actual training some of the physical movements that were most difficult for me were suddenly clicking and concepts I thought I would never understand were beginning to make sense. It was like the test had peeled back a layer, making me softer, more open, humble, and stronger in ways I hadn't anticipated. I started to consider that maybe proving that I'm "good" at Aikido really isn't the point.

Being Here

I'm tiptoeing down the stairs in my gi with a Macbook Air dangling in one hand and a bokken in the other. It's Saturday morning and everyone else is asleep in my house. Bare feet hit the soft carpet, as I begin the ritual of setting up mats, positioning the laptop, lighting a candle, placing my cushion and my bokken, and turning on my camera. Sensei is on the other side, but there is no "Onegaishimasu," just quiet. We bow in, Sensei in front of her cushion in the dojo and me in front of mine in my basement, separate in our spaces but together in our practice. We take our seats and a moment to settle. I place my hands in mudra and lower my gaze. She sounds the shōkei and claps the hyōshigi to signal the beginning of our meditation. In the stillness and the quiet, I find space to connect to the contraction

and expansion of my breath. As I notice tension in my body, I direct my breath and soften. Eventually, I follow my breath to my hara. In my daily life and in training, I struggle to find this place, to connect to my center, but here in Zazen, it's accessible, and it feels like coming home.

I have a long way to go before I will be ready for my 4th kyu test, but I know I want to walk away from it feeling more successful than I did after my 5th. I know that this goal has more to do with my mindset than it does with my execution of the techniques or the expectations of my teachers. I know that when the time comes, I will be more precise in my movement, my timing, and my contact, not because I am striving for perfection, but because I am training to embody what these elements mean and why they matter. Most importantly, I am beginning to notice how exploring these concepts deepens the connection between my body, my breath, and my spirit.

In my training, I often still push away instead of maintaining contact and drawing uke closer. I continue to react out of fear or anticipation instead of relaxing and responding to what is actually happening in the moment. It is ridiculous the amount of energy I waste over-efforting, both on the mat and in my daily life. However, my experience of these tendencies is different than it was a year ago. I am more aware as they are happening, both inside and outside of training. I

recognize that the places where I feel “stuck” are not insurmountable walls but rather puzzles to solve in my body and through my relationships with others. They are doorways I will open as I learn to slow down and connect with my center. This will be a lifelong journey.

As 2021 approaches, being on the correct foot no longer seems as significant as it did in the beginning of the pandemic. What matters more is the place inside myself that I am moving from. Maybe there is not just one correct way to move forward, but many depending on the direction from which we look. What I hope to cultivate is the presence to see the possibilities in each moment and respond in a way that reflects my most authentic self.

In our Aikido training, we learn techniques in parts to hone our skills, expand our repertoires, and refine our movements. Then, we connect the parts to explore the bigger picture. As we ebb and flow, from part to whole, we notice how small changes to our position, to the angle of our cut, have large impacts on the effectiveness of our technique and the rhythm of our flow. The more I tune into my body, to the flow of my energy in conjunction in space and time with other people's energy, the more I feel connected, inside and out. It really doesn't matter how I got here or where here even is. What matters is that I keep arriving and with each return I am more at peace as I move in harmony with you.



Aikido and skateboarding made quarantine enjoyable. I have trained in Aikido for over a year and a half.
-DYIAN MUIR, age 14

THE ART OF THE POOL NOODLE LESSONS IN FLEXIBILITY

EA MURPHY (MAY 2021)

Long ago, I determined that whether or not to go to the dojo, whether or not to train on any particular day was not a decision. It just was. I woke up, had a day, then trained; or woke up, trained, had a day, and then trained again. Early on, and after a few false starts, I learned that if choice had a chance to compete in the day-to-day multitude of possibilities, the burden of the decision would inevitably take me away from my practice. I was, and therefore I breathed. I was, and therefore, I trained.

Freed from the burden of decision, going to the dojo was as natural to me as brushing my teeth, an invariable part of every days' routine. And paradoxically, in the abandonment of the daily and life-distracted decision, I got a chance to explore the deeper choice to practice aikido.

With the pandemic, my attitude towards training didn't change. But now, in those first few weeks, the schedule was entirely of my own making. Would I train in the morning, in the evening, or both? Would I go to the backyard or to the dojo? Should I run or do some ukemi conditioning? Sit zazen for 20 minutes or 45?

As the need for modified training and then dojo closure became apparent in those early weeks of Covid-19, we talked a lot about flexibility and adaptability. I held in my mind the image of bamboo bending in the wind. In truth, while enriching, this freedom of schedule complicated practice.

After the first couple of weeks, it was a relief to start to structure this flexibility. Weekly Sunday emails punctuated one week and started the next. The virtual classes provided a schedule to scaffold daily training. Back in the dojo, even with laptop and iphones dominating the space, training felt "normal". We rolled, we jumped, we stretched, we trained on the camera, and then off the camera with each other.

This structured flexibility paid off, as we felt an explosion of creativity and possibility. We learned new ways to teach and connect concepts together without touch. We saw our colleagues, mentors, and teachers doing the same all over the world.

At first, virtual teaching was like a classic zen koan. If a live video streams and no one sees it, does it make a sound? Then slowly, our technological capabilities improved, and we started interacting with students on Zoom. Few brave souls were able to make the leap into online practice, but with those that did, we embarked on a grand new experiment. So emboldened were we by the possibilities of this experiment, that we even moved forward with the online Beginner's Series, teaching students we had never met how to roll on their living room floor.

An underlying tenet of aikido is that our technique arises naturally from our position. Move to the right spot, get the laws of physics on your side, and voila, there is a technique. If this is true, shouldn't it be possible to imagine the partner, and move to the correct position? Could we teach aikido with these fundamental principles in mind, even without connection?

The answer to our exploration was, sort of. We used chairs, pillows, construction cones, and the columns in the dojo to imitate our partner. With relative beginner students, we stumbled through ikkyo, iriminage, kote-gaeshi, and kokyuho as a series of random movements that made no sense on their own. We strung them together out of blind faith that these individual words would form a language when matched with another person. And to no surprise, the kids had an easier time doing this than the adults. (A year into this experiment, and our two remaining virtual youth students can iriminage by irimi ten kan from different levels and attacks – all while mirroring the movement on the computer. Wow!)

After the time warp of that spring, suddenly, it was June. There we were, in the park and in the flesh, almost dazzled by the bright light of each other. Shy of unknown dangers, we kept our distance. Maii, the space between us, should feel electric at any part of an encounter, before, during, and after. Now, our training depended on cultivating that empty space all the time. Could we still do technique at a distance? Could we visualize and feel the string of attachment between us and our partner? Could we compress three-dimensional space to be



standing in shokaku, but at a six-foot distance? The answer again was, sort of.

By the time late summer rolled around, we were back in the dojo – at distance and in small groups. Our pantomime practice was wearing thin. We needed some sort of connection.

Enter the pool noodle.

In the beginning, it was actually two pool noodles taped together to create a solid ten feet of distance. Now this invisible connection between physically separated partners had form, shape, and color. In those frightening months of late summer/early fall, as cases and deaths skyrocketed throughout the country, walking into the dojo was like entering a MacDonald's playground. I both hated it and loved it at the same time.

As we got more comfortable with the science of Covid-19, two pool noodles became one. Slap on some duct tape and we could even mark the location of an elbow, or attach a ball to the end to become our partner's head. With a little effort (imaging trying to cut with a feather) we could give a full shomen strike, forcing our partner to move off the line. The noodle's limp, floppy nature challenged our sensitivity, as it slipped through our grasp with a hand change and provided a new study in how to catch an ai hamni gedan blend.

Then, there was a moment when if you lined up the dayglo Styrofoam just right, with all the atoms in its plastic form aligned and compressed in the same and correct direction, you could sometimes, just sometimes, feel your partners center - a moment of aikido.

But no matter how great the pent up desire to connect a strong ikkyo or kotegaeshi, to channel the stress and frustration of the pandemic into the sweaty grind of a solid throw, the pool noodle always gave right before that moment of satisfaction, teaching us to abandon our quest for gratification every time we tried to find it.

There was some solace, however, for this frustration. It wasn't long before we discovered the satisfaction of smacking our partner with the noodle. We couldn't throw the kids, but with the noodle, we could make them move. Soon a substantial part of kids classes, and some adults classes, too, was dedicated to pool noodle ukemi. Move before the noodle catches you!

Post-vaccine, the first time I touched a wrist was electric – and sweaty and a strange sensation on my skin. I grabbed another. Each one was different and each one a direct kinesthetic pathway to the person I touched. Never could we have experienced contact and connection as something so pure and so novel as those first times training after the vaccine. The differences between a pool noodle and a human arm are obvious, but I was struck by the life force and the pulsing of ki beneath the palm of my hand. Still every week, a new person comes back to training with contact, and we meet each other anew. The enrichment with every new point of connection is exponential, in our aikido practice and on some deeper level. As humans, we are meant to touch – we need to connect. This feeds our very souls.

Still the pool noodles rest in the corner of the mat, close within reach. Some of our kids, not vaccinated, still learning with the aid of this subtle teacher. Nine months since we started relying on the noodles, and 14 months into the pandemic, they look a little bit like how many of us feel. Ragged, torn at the edges, and crumbling in places, but still brightly colored, sturdy and strong, or as strong as a floppy piece of plastic can be. But really, it's hard to imagine anything else standing up so well to the beating these noodles have taken over the past year's hundreds of hours of ikkyo, sumi-totoshi, shomen, and tug-of-war. All things considered, they have come out looking pretty good. I don't chalk it up to the indestructible nature of plastic, but to the flexibility the pool noodle embodied. While a strange mascot for one of the hidden gifts of the pandemic, the pool noodle still persists. I still love and hate them both at the same time.

THE WAY

JOSHUA KNUDSON (FEBRUARY 2021)

"The essence of Aikido is to put oneself in tune with the functioning of the universe, to become one with the universe. Those who have grasped the inner meaning of Aikido possess the universe within themselves."

- O-sensei

New age spirituality has never really resonated with me. However, I have to confess to a strong belief in universal energy and the power of the universe to deliver what you need, when you need it, as long as you have the capacity to see its providence. I feel the strong connection between this universal system of delivery and my relationship to Aikido.

One of these moments of (what I perceive to be) universal providence occurred for me in 2016-17, while serving in my current role as an executive at the University of Washington Tacoma. I was invited to the experience of participating in class XXIII of the American Leadership Forum (ALF). ALF provides its participants with an environment where we have meaningful personal experiences within the context of building individual capacity in partnering across difference. These experiences and explorations can be challenging and require the individual tools to find center and balance when emotions are running high. Amongst many, there are two very resonant tools introduced to each class for understanding our emotions and needs as well as finding balance during moments of conflict. One is a system of conflict resolution, developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg called Non Violent Communication (NVC). The other is a day of introduction to Aikido and its principles of blending, harmony and "stepping offline" as metaphors for managing conflict. A new sense of curiosity in Aikido and NVC, as pathways to finding balance and center through mindfulness and being aware, present and "in the moment," was alive in me.

Although I could continue my reading and practice of NVC, it wasn't clear where I could access Aikido training. I knew there were dojos in Seattle and the Kitsap Peninsula, but schedules were tight and the commutes too far. Late in 2017, I was surprised and excited to hear that

Aikido classes were being taught by Tacoma Aikikai out of one of the studios in Urban Grace Church. I felt like I had been delivered a gift and didn't hesitate to sign up for classes a couple times per week.

As a bit of history, in my early twenties, having just graduated from college and headed to New York to pursue a life in the theatre, my movement instructor at the time encouraged me to engage in some master practice to continue to develop my facility with movement and body control. On his recommendation, while living in the Bronx, I identified a Nihon Goshin Aikido dojo about an hour north in Ossining, New York. I spent a year training in the dojo during my few years in New York. My theatre career lead to a move back to Arizona and the start of a new career in Higher Education. Unsurprisingly, over the next two decades my professional life was accompanied by the joy of marriage, the miracle of children, big moves, new friends and hobbies, but no Aikido.

Upon joining Tacoma Aikikai, even after a twenty year break in training, I could still feel the whispers of Aikido in my body, but a lot had changed. I was fifty pounds heavier, my big toes arthritic with a stiffening condition, and my body suffering from chronic illness. When I stepped barefoot on the tatami for the first time, after so long, I was filled with excitement and trepidation, and both were warranted. I was open with Murphy Sensei about my condition and limitations. She was supportive of my persistence but never failed to challenge me. She introduced me to parts of my core that I hadn't previously realized existed. I felt pain that made me think I couldn't go on, but strangely, reassured me that I was improving my health and condition. Sensei would ask me about the nature of my pain and reassure me that my body was "reorganizing" itself around

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the demands of the practice. Although following authority hasn't always necessarily been my inclination, I trusted her and the well of wisdom she drew from. As O-sensei said, "The purpose of training is to tighten up the slack, toughen the body, and polish the spirit." These assertions translated directly into my lived experience. In that first year, I lost 40 pounds, progressed in kyu, and tamped down the chronic issues I had been dealing with for so long. I found breathing and centering, stretching and movement to be medicine I most needed.

It's one thing to lose a few pounds or gain some stamina. Just as important, I need to recognize the impact of Aikido on my spirit and relationship to others. My recent experiences with ALF and Aikido have been during a period of turmoil for our country, our communities, our

stems from conflict opens the door to our shared progress.

For nearly a year now our usual training schedules and rigors have been disrupted. In my news feed, the world appears in disarray, while on the same monitor I engage in endless, end-to-end meetings with colleagues, whom I may never experience the same way again. I was paralyzed by the fear of losing Aikido as an anchor for my physical and mental well-being. I shared the same feelings of grief and loss, along with 6 Billion other human beings, as our collective lives were disrupted, isolated, threatened or put on hold. Yet, as we see some light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, I can't help reflect on some of the beauty and grace of our Aikido community in persevering and training, on the power of solo training, on my gratitude to Eric and Ea



Photo Credit Philippe Wagemans

kids and families. Most of us have never witnessed before the current climate and wide-spread inability to navigate and progress beyond difference with others. As a condition of being human, difference can polarize us, or it can energize us by leveraging our diversity of experience and perspectives. In order to harness the power of difference we have to be facile with the natural conflict that can arise out of that difference. As NVC is the manifestation of a psychology and system of communication that can help to navigate potentially volatile difference, Aikido is the physical metaphor and manifestation of tethering in to the energy that arises out of difference. O'Sensei believed Aikido to be the path to reconciliation for mankind, a way to harmonize all mankind into one family. Although the statement seems lofty, I believe when the body realizes the power of stepping offline and not addressing conflict with opposition, this facility for harnessing the energy that

Sensei for their creativity: training in parks, in the cold and rain, in masks, with pool noodles or nothing or no one at all. I am grateful for the Bokken and Jyo. Were it not for social distancing, I would never have embraced training with weapons in the way I have, and, now always will. In spite of the absence of physical contact, pandemic training has deepened my sense of connection to Aikido. When the reality of pandemic set in, Murphy Sensei told us, "this is your training." She was right.

As I have weathered the onslaught of the last year, seen my children mourn the vacuum of tween social experience and endure the mind-numbing side effects of online learning, as my wife and I feared for our parents and had to distance from friends, as I watched our country burn and democracy come under assault, I still reached for training to sharpen my vision and balance my heart. I still reach for the hope that is Aiki.

FINDING OUR CENTER THANK YOU!

A year after opening the dojo at 2502 S. 12th St in 2019, we never would have imagined shutting our doors so soon. But despite one door closing, another opened. The trials of this last year brought us together and deepened our training in ways we could have never found only on the tatami. Now, a year later, and standing on the other side of this pandemic, we see our dream of Tacoma Aikikai come true – a dojo community that is strong, supportive, and deeply connected. The dojo is not the four walls around us, the dojo is *you*. You persevered, so the dojo persevered. Our gratitude to your commitment and your generosity this last year is beyond words. Gassho, Ea and Eric



ARBUTUS MENZIESII. MADRONE.

KIRSTEN LAWSON (MARCH 2021)



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I walk. I most enjoy walking in nature, natural surroundings, or as close to that as I can get. Light, smells, and sounds change day-to-day and season-to-season. Right now, I am looking forward to the sounds of the song birds professing their love and territory, the budding trees and shrubs, early blossoms, and early sunrises. I am looking forward to the shedding of winter.

I think of walking as meditation. Meditation is not about an empty mind, in my opinion, but finding calm in the midst of the moving mind. A walk is the time for me to find that calm. I take notice of trees, birds, smells, flowers, sounds, and weather. My lungs fill with a large breath and release it. I feel my feet move over gravel, concrete, and dirt. In this way, I reconnect to myself and the present. I walk.

UPCOMING EVENTS

YOUTH SUMMER CAMPS

JULY 19-21 (age 7-11) & JULY 26-28 (age 10+), 9am - 1pm

GASSHUKU SUMMER RETREAT

AUGUST 13-15, Friday evening - Sunday afternoon

FALL KYU TESTING

SEPTEMBER 30, Thursday 6pm

HALLOWEEN COMMUNITY OPEN HOUSE & CELEBRATION

OCTOBER 30, Saturday 2-5 PM

WHAT IS A GASSHUKU?

In Japan, many dojos take a weekend summer retreat outside the city, where members can lodge, eat, relax, and train together.

We are excited to start the tradition at Tacoma Aikikai with our first gasshuku in the nearby Gifford-Pinchot Forest. Members and families are welcome to join us at the Cispus Learning Center, a two-hour drive from Tacoma, for all or part of the weekend.

First classes will be held Friday evening, last classes on Sunday afternoon, and plenty to enjoy in between. Showers are available with meals at a communal camp kitchen. Dorm beds and tent sites are by reservation, so please confirm your attendance by email as soon as possible. Cost is \$25 per night for lodging. Food is by donation, but will be supplied by the dojo.



This Journal is Dedicated to

JD SANDOVAL SENSEI

MARCH 2, 1970 - JUNE 14, 2021

Tacoma Aikikai

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June 2021

CONNECTION
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