

Ruth at New York Aikikai with Stephanie Cook, 2016





RUTH PEYSER

6th Dan Shidoin / New York Aikikai

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

– George Orwell

THE PAST

In June, 1980, a friend told me about aikido. She had trained for a couple of years and thought I might be interested. I rode my bike to the dojo. It was in a crumbling old building on West 18th Street. I inhaled the fumes from the car repair shop on the ground floor as I climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor. I felt anxious, apprehensive.

The mat stretched almost the full length of the large loft space. It was covered with canvas. The worn sections were repaired with multiple rows of gaffer tape. I sat on the bench and watched, transfixed. There were between 20 and 30 people on the mat. Their movement was mysterious, beautiful, fun. If there hadn't been any women on the mat I probably wouldn't have joined the dojo. Thankfully that wasn't the case.

Despite men far outnumbering women at New York Aikikai, women had a strong presence. This was impressive considering that very few women taught and few were used for ukemi. I didn't think much about this disparity. I grew up in an era where mothers stayed at home and fathers worked. Although the limitations of a woman's role were being rethought and were in a state of flux, it was early in this transition and I was thankful for the number of women at the dojo. In those early years I didn't bond with any of the senior women. I was new. They were friendly enough, but they weren't interested in training with me.

The dojo was a wild place back then. Yamada Sensei was in his early 40s, and most of the students were younger and threw hard. This formed my understanding of aikido in the early years. Occasionally someone

would talk about the deeper implications of the practice, but the most admired practitioners, both men and women, were the ones who were the most physically powerful. And that was what I aspired to.

A number of the men at the dojo took me under their wing. I enjoyed the male attention and was an eager student. I was flattered that they thought enough of me to want to ‘mentor’ me, which consisted largely of resisting in order to correct my technique and tossing me around way too hard. It was both thrilling and frightening, but even when I wasn’t comfortable, I never spoke up. My wrists were frequently torqued, my elbows overextended, I landed on my back, had my nose broken, and endured an assortment of other banged up, bruised and damaged body parts. I accepted this as a normal part of doing a martial art. What I found more upsetting than the physical injuries was when white belt men, often my juniors, would resist and correct me. I felt terrible when I encountered this kind of training partner and believed if I were better I could throw these guys. I never discussed it with anyone. It wasn’t part of the culture.



The teachers who had the greatest influence on my training, in addition to Yamada Sensei and Sugano Sensei, were all men: Harvey Konigsberg Sensei, Hal Lehrman Sensei and Donovan Waite Sensei. Their teachings continue to form the foundation of my ever-changing interpretation of aikido. No senior women were as significant in my aikido development. The few senior women around when I started seemed more focused on being able to keep up with the men, and less interested in developing their aikido with a vision that was uniquely theirs. Ironically many of these same women were outspoken feminists off the mat, but their approach to training didn’t seem any different from the status quo.

Instead of getting hard ourselves and trying to compete,
women should try and give their best qualities to men – bring
them softness, teach them how to cry.

– Joan Baez

My first realisation that there was more to aikido than the physical practice was when I returned to the dojo after breaking my nose. Harvey Konigsberg Sensei immediately sat next to me on the mat, trained with me, and showed me how to protect my face. A few years later when I was pregnant and my belly had become unwieldy, Donovan Waite Sensei took me aside and worked with



me so that I would be more comfortable falling down and getting up. That kind of caring and mindfulness – that connection – touched me deeply.

By the time I was shodan most of the senior women were no longer at the dojo. Yamada Sensei gave me a regular class to teach, and he and Sugano Sensei along with the senior instructors often called me for ukemi. It was both daunting and exciting, and ultimately, life changing.

Being put in this more visible position made me arrogant for a while, but eventually I started to relax and consider the implications of being a regular teacher. The catalysts for this change were age, being more comfortable in my own skin and increasing self-confidence. It was the beginning of my shift of focus from the physical aspects of training to studying the underlying principles and their broader meaning. Meanwhile, the population of women at the dojo had increased. The newer generation routinely spoke their minds. We had an ongoing dialogue about all aspects of training in the women's change room. The conversations were open, honest and lively. And I loved it.

The Zen master Ikkyu was once asked to write a distillation of the highest wisdom. He wrote only one word: *Attention*.

The visitor was displeased. "Is that all?"

So Ikkyu obliged him. Two words now.

Attention. Attention.

– Jenny Offill, Dept. of Speculation

THE PRESENT

The dojo is a very different place now. We have beautiful wooden floors, a modern glassed-in office space, an elegant kamiza, a lovely roof area, ceiling fans, excellent showers, and we train on tatami¹. We also have an older population of instructors and senior students, so the focus of the practice is varied, and often more nuanced.

Nowadays I rarely come across the gender issues I did in my early years of training. I interviewed a cross section of New York Aikikai students to get a clearer picture of the dojo's gender politics. The women were delighted to talk because women deal with gender dynamics every day in myriad ways. The men were willing and curious, but clearly it was something they hadn't considered before.

Some of the younger, newer women told me that in their first months of training they had to deal with unwanted flirtation. They often felt overwhelmed and did not know how to handle it. A few of the young black belt women told me about incidents of inappropriate flirtation, sometimes from older married men. I suspect these men thought they were flattering the women, when in reality they were offending them. Women have to deal with this in every aspect of their lives. Unfortunately, the dojo is no exception.

Many women noticed that some men avoided training with them, perhaps because they felt they needed to be 'careful' in order not to hurt the women. And on the flip side, some men threw the women too hard for

¹ Training mat.

their level of experience and their body size.

The greatest challenge to the women I interviewed was male partners resisting and instructing them. The women dealt with these encounters silently and were left feeling disheartened. They wanted a partner, not an opponent or someone who dominated the practice. The men who trained like this usually did it with everyone. But men were more likely to meet the challenge and engage in the combat, even if they usually trained cooperatively. And, of course, they were more likely to match their opponent in physical size.

Like the women I interviewed, I tend to tolerate situations that I don't like and try to avoid them. But that's supporting the status quo, so I am now experimenting with various ways of responding differently. One of the men who plays 'resist and correct' also does it with me despite my seniority. He is unusually tall and weighs more than twice what I do. Last time we trained, I approached him after class. I told him we had different preferences in the way we like to train. I like to work on my timing and movement and seek to blend. He likes to find places to stop his partner. But each time we train we do it his way. Because of his size and approach he dominates the practice. I suggested next time we train he adapt to my approach of training. He wasn't defensive and said he would. But he either forgot or didn't understand, as we trained together briefly a couple of weeks later and it was the same. It's a static workout where he creates walls that I have to avoid colliding with. I eventually find a way and then he creates a new barrier. I find it tedious and counterproductive. I feel assaulted. The distress I feel is something most women understand. It is





the reality for us living in a sexist society. While I didn't get through to this particular man, I told him how I felt in a way that had the potential of being constructive for both of us. Next time I encounter him on the mat, I plan to pick up where I left off. Interestingly, a number of men love training with him. They like to 'test' their aikido and feel satisfaction when they can break through his resistance. The men who don't like that way of training don't seem to internalise it in the same way as women do.

I also asked a cross-section of men at the dojo if they approached training with women and men the same way. About half the men said they did, though they adjusted to the physical size and skill levels of their partners. This was a sad reflection of gender blindness in society at large. There are differences between genders, not only in physical size, but also in how men and women interact with each other and the world. We need to acknowledge that difference, not deny it. The answer that I felt was honest, that showed a greater degree of self-awareness and an understanding of societal gender bias, was from men who said they trained differently with men and women. One man said that he really liked training with women, as he was more likely to study movement and timing and not muscle his way through a technique. Another said the same, but added that he still got a lot of satisfaction in throwing hard, but saved this hard training for men. From my observations, the men who were more self-aware did not patronise women, but treated them respectfully and appreciated the more nuanced approach that many women had.

The most surprising thing to me that no one mentioned was the disparity in the number of women who trained at New York Aikikai to the number of women teachers and women who were called for ukemi. When

I pointed this out to the people I interviewed they seemed to accept that this was the norm. And sadly it is. It is the norm at the dojo and in our daily lives: men dominate many fields such as public office, professional sports, science and technology. We are accustomed to this disparity not only at the dojo, but also in society at large.

“In Japan, we call communication in which understanding is achieved without spoken words ‘Ah-un breathing’ (*Ah-un kokyū*). Placed at the entrance of every Shinto shrine is a pair of *komainu* (stone guardian dogs); the one on the right exhales ‘Ah’, his mouth open, while the one on the left inhales ‘Un’, his mouth closed.

At the very moment ‘Ah’ is uttered, ‘Un’ receives it. This happens simultaneously. *Ah-un kokyū* is the urge to speak, instantaneously understood. Just like communicating with eye contact, it’s a very efficient way of communicating, but at the same time is filled with uncertainty that can lead to misunderstanding. In this way, *Ah-un kokyū* is mutual understanding accompanied by thrilling tension.”

– Kenya Hara, WA, the Essence of Japanese Design

THE FUTURE

In our aikido training we seek a more satisfying way of being in the world, one where we can harmonise and not clash, where we can delve into ourselves and feel empowered because of the understanding and compassion we have gained. When O Sensei developed aikido, awareness of sexism and racism was not a consideration. But aikido is a living art,

one that grows and transforms. To stay true to its philosophical principles, it should adapt to the Zeitgeist. If we want to make the aikido community inclusive, we need to acknowledge that women face obstacles in the practice that men don't. We need to identify these destructive dynamics, develop strategies to improve the situation, put these ideas into action, evaluate their effectiveness and continually refine them. We need to observe ourselves and our community with an open mind and be willing to move out of our comfort zones. It's much the same as how we study aikido. And like aikido, it's a huge challenge.

What complicates it even further is that institutionalised sexism is so deeply ingrained it comes out in ways so subtle we have to be vigilant enough to recognise its insidious effects. Until I pointed it out, no one had noticed that far fewer women were in leadership and teaching roles or were called for ukemi. Newer students tend to be influenced by the training style of men in the spotlight, and accept male leadership as the norm. Despite the strong presence of women at New York Aikikai, few occupy prominent positions. These things then are a given, and so the cycle continues.

For women to achieve equal status, we need to address this problem from both the leadership and grassroots levels.

As a senior student and instructor, I do my best to address the issue on an everyday basis. I try to cultivate a culture where the women feel comfortable talking about the kinds of overt and covert sexism they encounter. We enjoy the conversations we have in the change room, whether they are about kids, boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, a fun class, or a difficult training partner. I welcome new members and let them know that I am approachable if there is anything they want to discuss. When I teach I ask students to focus on more than the physical practice so that they aren't twisting an arm, but are studying aikido: the timing, distance, hamni², how to blend and breathe. I also pay attention to the dynamics between students. If I see someone veering away from focusing on their own practice,

² Basic posture.

I will go over and suggest things they could work on to bring them back to studying their own aikido and not their partner's. I use a range of people as ukes, as I know that the experience of taking ukemi for the instructor can be extremely useful, especially for people who aren't called up much. And I use many women for ukemi. At New York Aikikai we train with the same partner unless the teacher says to change. I have the students change partners, giving them an opportunity to train with people they may not normally train with. It's an important part of the practice to try things outside of your comfort zone. It's the best way to discover new things, to go deeper, to observe yourself. If your partner is a different size, age, rank or gender, it doesn't compromise the practice, it enriches it. I also try to create good and supportive relationships with the men. We want to bridge the gap, not widen it.



But we need the support of the organisation for women to be able to make far-reaching inroads in the community. This is where it gets difficult. We aren't proportionally represented in managerial or teaching positions. There are women and some men who are in this position, and are aware of the discrepancies. And hopefully, with more open discussion within the community from a grassroots level, the situation will improve.

Change doesn't happen overnight. The fact that we are beginning this conversation is a great step forward. The dojo is a mirror of society at large. The struggle for women to gain leadership positions is in its early stages, and it is my hope, that as women gain true equality in society, so will women in the aikido community. And we will all be richer for it.