

## **What I See Now, 70 Years Into My Life**

By Ruth Peyser, March 2025

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Make "shame swap sides." Perhaps it had to come from a 72-year-old woman to have had such a profound impact. For nine years, Gisèle Pelicot's husband gave her sedatives, raped her, and invited other men from an online platform to rape her while she was unconscious. She opted to make the trial public. It united women everywhere.

Since #MeToo, many courageous women have spoken publicly about being sexually abused, raped, molested, assaulted, threatened, stalked, beaten, terrorized, catcalled, groped, ogled, ostracized for speaking up. Gisèle Pelicot has brought it to the surface in a way few have before.

Like Gisèle Pelicot I'm a child of the 1950s. A major focus of my work as a filmmaker and artist has been about gender issues, but I've never had the courage to speak up publicly about them. I often think about when I should have and didn't. But it's never too late so I'm doing it now.

### **The Beginnings**

I started my aikido training in 1980, and it quickly became a major part of my life. Like all martial arts it was male-dominated, but the women at the dojo I was training at were a fierce bunch, outspoken too. Artists, dancers, actors. Proud feminists.

I was especially drawn to Aikido because of its guiding principle of cooperation. It was a martial art that revolved around *not* using force. It was thought-provoking both in the study of the techniques as well as the way I interacted with my training partners. It was a mirror into my own behavior. At the same time it took me out of my head, as when you train you need to be in the moment and

not have a cluttered mind. Its vigorous movement was a great emotional release. And the dojo was where I found community.

Throughout my years practicing aikido, I observed many women leave the dojo. Some had kids and moved out of the city. Others left for reasons I wasn't aware of. Some told me that they were leaving because of the men who preyed on them as beginners on the mat, and also because of how hierarchical and male-centered the dojo was.

The Sensei wasn't only the head teacher; he was a guru. He headed a large aikido organization as well as the dojo I trained at, which was one of the many member dojos in the organization. His aikido was magnificent, but I was never comfortable with the blind fealty that he demanded. I respected him, but I was never sycophantic about it. He was a gambler, heavy drinker, and drug user. He often wielded his power ruthlessly.

Like The Sensei, some of the students were "womanizers." I regularly witnessed certain men on the mat practicing in flirtatious ways, touching women inappropriately or preventing women from executing the technique and then showing them the "right" way to do it. This kind of thing was never addressed as it was also the modus operandi of some of the men in leadership. A memorable example was when a friend attended a large out of town seminar in her early years of training. One evening The Sensei told my friend she should knock on the door of the guest instructor from Japan. He told her that Japanese women do not have big breasts like she does. The subtext was that she should have sex with the guest instructor.

Despite it all, I continued to practice at the dojo. I loved aikido itself, accepted the abuse was part of the package, and I did my best to steer clear of the dysfunction.

It was easy to avoid the bad when I wasn't on the receiving end of the maltreatment. In the first few decades of my training, The Sensei was very fond of me. Soon after I got my black belt, he gave me a class to teach. I wasn't sure I deserved it (not an uncommon feeling for women), but becoming a teacher was a gift. It improved my own aikido, my self-confidence, and over time I learned to

apply the principles of aikido to how to teach: with encouragement and to listen; something I could also apply to other aspects of my life.

During this era, when I was on The Sensei's good side, he would frequently choose me to demonstrate techniques on. The feeling of being thrown by him was incredible and greatly improved my practice. I was uncomfortable with receiving this preferential treatment. It pulled me a little closer to the inner circle, something I was not interested in. I just wanted to train and not get involved at that level, especially as it was the root of the dysfunction. I also felt that all the students should be treated equally and have the same opportunities to learn and advance. The preferential treatment gave me opportunities in the study of the art that most didn't have. But it wasn't something I asked for or something I could change.

Eventually, The Sensei soured on me. I didn't know why, but it was awful, being on the receiving end of his abuse. He would intentionally try to humiliate me. He would yell at me and accuse me of doing things that I had no idea about. He would tell me to do tasks that were intentionally demeaning: before a class, he demanded I get him a bandaid for a cut on his foot. When I returned with the bandaid, he pointed to the floor, so I got down on my knees and bandaged his foot. In Japanese culture, pointing your foot toward someone is considered an insult. This was yet another ploy to demean me. Looking back on it, I can't believe I did it! I should have stood up for myself. But that wouldn't have flown at the dojo. Above all, we had to do what we were told.

I was desperate to find out where his newfound hostility toward me had come from. At the time I felt a lot of shame being the target of his hostility. And a lot of fear for my safety. I had seen him hurt people he was angry at by throwing them harder than they could manage. I was terribly depressed and dreaded going to the dojo when he was there. I asked people in leadership if they could help. But I found no answers and no solutions. Despite all this, I never considered leaving. I loved training and the idea of stopping didn't feel like an option. It didn't occur to me that this was an indication of the cultish nature of the dojo. I had lost sight of my own well-being.

In hindsight, I should have simply gone to another dojo. But I was very attached to the community, and we'd been taught that all other dojos were inferior. The Sensei would be fiercely angry if he heard that someone did a class or took a seminar somewhere else so they always did it in secret.

I was far from the only person who fell out of The Sensei's good graces and suffered the consequences. He was never sexually inappropriate towards me, but I frequently witnessed him overstep boundaries with things like comments on women's breasts and their looks, or barbs toward some of the LGBTQ students. I wasn't the only person who observed the contradiction between his behavior and the philosophy of the art. But no one ever called him out, or attempted to change things.

## **The Petition**

In 2019, two years after the #MeToo movement changed the way our culture responded to abuse and sexual harassment, a group of high-ranking women, some who ran small dojos in various parts of the US, put together a petition requesting a conversation about gender issues in the aikido community.

The petition was thoughtfully and respectfully written. It requested that gender equity be recognized as a valid issue and a group be established to explore the issue within the organization; women's representation be proportional to member population in teaching and leadership positions; barriers to women's advancement at all levels be removed; women be included on the Technical Committee; and for transparency about gender within the organization including a publication of statistics. After years of feeling hopeless about any kind of change I was excited to sign it. As hundreds of people signed it, I began to believe it really could improve things within the aikido community. I was very, very wrong.

The Sensei did not take the petition well. He believed that he had given women many opportunities. In the early years he had, but over time it paled to how the world had changed.

In response, he kicked me out of the dojo. He also kicked out one of the petition's coauthors. The two of us were, at the time, the highest ranking women training at his dojo. We'd been training there for almost 40 years. We were devastated.

He summoned the coauthor of the petition to his office to tell her. She tried to respectfully explain that the intention of the petition was not to criticize him but how it would be beneficial for the organization. But he didn't understand or had no interest in doing so.

I got a short letter via email telling me by signing the petition I destroyed the togetherness of the dojo, that The Sensei took it as a personal attack and after all he's done in his 55 years of leadership this petition was an insult. Even though I didn't have regrets about signing the petition, I felt a lot of shame about being kicked out. But he and his enablers were the ones who should have been ashamed.

I had hoped that the petition could have, at least, started a discussion within the organization, conversations that us women had been having privately for years. Instead it became a huge topic of controversy that played out on social media. Global members of the aikido community weighed in. Most offered support, and found the petition's requests not only reasonable, but necessary.

Some posts from 2019 offer a good description of the organization's tactics:

*"Regardless of how this started, the response shows unconscionable behavior, a lack of sound judgment and at best knee jerk reactions rather than careful consideration, which is what should be the baseline expectation for someone in a director's role."*

*"What a fantastically United States a la Trump way to look at the world. A group asks for fair and equal treatment to be evaluated within an organization. The organization declares fake news. The supporters scream "whiners" and we all forget why we started talking in the first place."*

Some people very loyal to The Sensei started a counter-attack, obsequiously defending him in the Facebook comments section, and posting homages to him that had little-to-no influence outside their insular community.

I received lots of supportive emails: several from people who had trained at the dojo and suffered abuse themselves, but had never told anyone about it; some from students who had once trained at the dojo; others from total strangers. Most came from students at the dojo but none of them publicly supported me or the other women associated with the petition. The culture of fear was too powerful.

After a number of meetings with the authors of the petition, the organization sent them an official letter accusing them of "fomenting scurrilous activity against the organization." Despite the organization's response, the petition had an enormous impact on other dojos around the country that were part of the same aikido organization. A good number of those dojos left the organization. Some of them were large dojos that had been part of the organization for decades with highly respected head teachers. A few of these teachers made their letters of resignation public. They were beautifully written and expressed the pain they felt leaving the organization — because of the organization's response to the petition and their refusal to acknowledge that there were gender issues. The letters were very moving.

## **The Petition's Impact**

Then in March 2020, dojos and every other business suddenly closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Later that year, a woman I had known at the dojo in the 1990s got in touch with me. She told me a horrifying story of how she had been raped back then by a very high ranking and popular instructor. This man who I will call The Alleged Perpetrator, was a friend, and a great teacher. He had a reputation as a womanizer; he'd had countless affairs with aikido women. I'd heard a number of stories about his erratic and sometimes frightening behavior when it came to women. But until this woman, who I will call MeToo, reached out to me, I never knew he was also a rapist. Since the incident happened so

many years ago, she couldn't offer definitive proof of what happened to her. But I believed her.

I wasn't the only person MeToo reached out to. She contacted several other people associated with the petition, asking us how she might make her story public. Without the petition and the dojo's terrible response to it, she wouldn't have considered speaking out. But she wanted others to know her story, and hoped it would help with her trauma, no longer having to suffer in silence.

Ultimately, MeToo decided she wanted to make a website to tell her story. The main focus of the site would be to offer resources for survivors of sexual assault in the aikido community. She also set up a safe space, a confidential support group for people in the aikido community who had undergone similar experiences.

Before the website was to go live, MeToo contacted The Sensei's organization, where The Alleged Perpetrator was a member, to tell them what she was doing. She wanted to give them an opportunity to write a response that would be part of the website. They declined, unsurprisingly, but requested a meeting with her.

She met with three representatives from the organization: Loyalist #1, Loyalist #2 and Loyalist #3. Loyalist #1, a high-ranking woman, did most of the talking. Initially she tried to connect to MeToo by showing a modicum of concern. As the meeting went on she kept her tone the same but the questioning became more aggressive. Loyalist #1 asked MeToo if she was planning to make her story public. MeToo said she was.

Then Loyalist #1 said: "As you know we've taken a lot of PR hits these days and I just want to know if there's a plan with people who might have been assisting you who might have... who might want to weaponize this against us?" Their main concern, apparently, was protecting the reputation of the organization.

Nothing constructive came out of the meeting, but it led us to decide that the only public face of the site would be MeToo. Because of our connection to the petition we thought they could "weaponize it against us" and divert the

conversation away from the incident, suggesting this was done to attack the organization.

The day after the meeting a colleague of MeToo got in touch with her. She told MeToo that The Sensei had phoned her and told her to keep MeToo quiet and stop the story of her rape from going public. Although this felt threatening, it did not deter MeToo.

Shortly before the website's launch date, The Alleged Perpetrator died unexpectedly. He had taught seminars all over the world for many years and was greatly revered. The aikido community everywhere was in shock and there was a tremendous outpouring of grief. The cause of death was never made public.

This was clearly not a good time to launch the site so we put it on hold.

We finally launched the site, two months later. We were prepared to receive attacks on social media but there were very few. The response was overwhelmingly positive. We created a pledge page with principles that everyone in the aikido community should sign off on, like every person has the right to practice aikido free of sexual harassment and abuse; and that we commit to stand up and speak out against sexual misconduct in the aikido community. Hundreds of people signed the pledge and their names appear publicly on the site. We also started a discussion group on Facebook, posting a different topic each week, like "Have you ever turned a blind eye to a situation you knew wasn't okay? How do you feel about it now?" It was exciting to see how many people were engaged.

Around the time we launched the site we discovered a smear campaign against MeToo. They posted shocking and untrue things about her on a number of extortion websites like [cheaters.com](http://cheaters.com) and [shesahomewrecker.com](http://shesahomewrecker.com). An example:

"[MeToo] Uses Aikido To Sleep With Husbands. This woman is not to be trusted with husbands and boyfriends, watch out if they take her Aikido class or casually hang-out with her. [MeToo] just wants a casual naughty secret relationship. This woman is a serial husband snatcher! Watch out!"



Websites like [cheaters.com](http://cheaters.com) and [shesahomewrecker.com](http://shesahomewrecker.com) work so that if someone googles MeToo these sites are at the top of her Google search results, and the only way to get these posts removed is pay a hefty fee.

When we looked further into these posts we found that they were done months earlier when MeToo had the meeting with the organization about what happened to her and that she was going to make it public. At that time the only people who knew about MeToo were our small group and the people in leadership at the aikido organization. We can't verify who was behind them, but the timing seems to speak for itself. And we knew that the organization wanted to keep MeToo quiet because of the phone call The Sensei made to MeToo's colleague.

Not only had MeToo been raped, but now she was the victim of a cyberbullying campaign, created to intimidate her into shutting up.

Going public with her story was extremely courageous. This campaign was designed to traumatize her in a new way.

We did all the damage control we could do. We sent a request to Google to remove the defamatory posts, and had content moderators remove their reposts from Reddit.

But the emotional toll was tremendous. It was beyond what we could have ever imagined that people in the aikido community would do. It was scary, creepy, and totally disgusting.

## **Four Years Later**

The world has changed a lot. Trump is back in office. Many other countries are also falling victim to hard right zealots. What happened in this niche community feels insignificant in the grand scheme of things. But Trump's playbook reminds me of how this aikido organization operates: a charismatic leader, surrounded by loyalists, in a hierarchical structure that expects everyone to play by his rules. Anyone who speaks out falls victim to extreme retaliation.

This dynamic is what I'm seeing in the US right now and it's seriously dangerous. Trump is gutting all our democratic institutions; firing everyone he sees as a threat and retaliating against those he deems aren't loyal to him or have betrayed him in the past.

I think back to all the years I spent at the dojo, staying silent about the abuse I saw regularly and how afraid I was to speak up. The supportive emails I received after I signed the petition suggest that a majority of the community thought that what happened was unjust and cruel. But the fear of retaliation, of losing something they loved to do, losing their community, prevented them from speaking up publicly.

When I was kicked out I spiraled into a deep depression. It was a tremendous loss. Much of my life was centered around my daily aikido practice and the community I shared this passion with. It took a long time, but eventually I started to understand how damaging being part of a system that ran on loyalty, fear and retaliation had been; how it was counter to the philosophy of the art and the principles I want to live by. Being part of the group working with MeToo helped as we offered each other thoughtful perspectives and emotional understanding, as we all were going through our own processes of grieving, reflection and rebuilding.

Seeing how this organization handled the petition and MeToo confirmed that they would go to any lengths to protect their organization. They ousted the members who supported the petition that they felt most threatened by. They used intimidation techniques to try to prevent MeToo's story coming out. We suspected that they tried to spread lies and conspiracy theories about MeToo through online tabloid trash. We were fortunate to have our team and some very tech savvy supporters to nip it in the bud. We didn't cave. The website launched and it was successful in the larger aikido community; but it had absolutely no effect on the organization that was at the center of all this.

I should have spoken out earlier. Most of us can't affect what happens in the bigger picture but it's important to speak up in our own communities. If the Gisèle Pelicot case had happened five years ago and I had the inspiration of this

confident and courageous woman and the framework of make "shame swap sides," perhaps I would have handled it differently. Now I'm ready to say something. 70 years into my life.