

On Living the Martial Way
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This thought is similar to what I did with the Foucault and Mishima thoughts, revisiting some underlines I had entered into a book a decade ago, a book I have re-read from time to time in the years since my initial reading. The book is *Living the Martial Way* by Forrest E. Morgan (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 1992). I suppose I read and underlined it in the mid-'90s. It is grounded in the philosophy and practices of martial arts and provides "a systematic, step-by-step approach to applying the warrior mind-set to your martial training and daily life." I did a bit of aikido years ago and plan on doing a limited amount of tai chi in the next months as part of a mental and physical rejuvenation program I've put myself on, but what I picked up on in the book, both when I first read it and this last time (August, 2007), is the application of these philosophies and practices to daily life.

There are many ways to approach personal change, and it makes sense to include a number of them in any program of personal improvement or transformation: we can acquire insight into what has gone on with us in the past and what is going on now; we can emotionally, mentally, and physically release the past and our connections to harmful aspects of the present; we can change the way we think and act; and we can work on getting physically healthier and stronger and more vital. The Morgan book brings a bit of a different cut to things than any of these approaches. His focus is on a man's self-presentation (this is a book about and for men): his basic manner of engaging the world; his physical bearing, his posture in the world in a literal sense; his personal style, his way of interacting with others. Morgan deals with this concern from within the context of a claim and an ideal: the claim is that a fundamental truth of our lives as men is that we are in a war; and the ideal is that we become warriors.

In this thought I am speaking to the circumstance of men in our time, and I am speaking to my own circumstance as a man. My focus is on men of my kind, white men, who live where I live, in the United States of America. I am not attending to whether anything I say here applies to women. I sense that at least some of it does, but women can decide that better than I can.

The Morgan book, these concerns, are worth white men's attention because, as I see it, a number of elements in modern life have softened them, humbled them, domesticated them, co-opted them, and alienated them from their masculinity and their race and heritage. I won't go into details about how I see all this working, but I will list the elements to which I refer: the schools at all levels, including the universities; the women's movement; the gay rights movement; humanism, collectivism, and egalitarianism in their various manifestations; the black civil rights movement and the ideologies and practices of multiculturalism and diversity; psychotherapy; the mass media; the modern unisex workplace; and computer technology and the Internet. Arguably, a lot of good has come out this last list, but I think it has produced enough atomized, lost, soft, wordy, deferring, safe, edge-less, rootless, easily-led-by-a-leash men (and again, I have white men in mind here) that I am prompted to give this issue some energy in this thought and in my own life.

As I did with the Foucault biography and the Mishima memoir, I will reproduce the underlines I made in the Morgan book over a decade ago and comment on them from my perspective now. To distinguish the Morgan book underlines from my comments, I will put them in smaller type and set them in on the left and right margins.

The reality of life is war.

Despite the rhetoric about equality, justice, community, and brotherhood, the reality is that other people will fuck you over in a minute if they think they can get away with it. Let there be a job at stake, or a girlfriend, or a good spot on the shore for your towel and picnic basket, people will shove you aside to get it. Or enough of them will for it to be a reality to take into account as you conduct your life. Especially if you look isolated and vulnerable, or if you don't fit in for one reason or another, they'll nail you. When you have power, they'll appeal to your benevolence; when they have the power, they grind your face into the pavement.

Living the martial way means thinking of yourself first and foremost as a warrior.

They want us white men to be the reasonable guy, the nice guy, the fair guy, the altruistic guy, the good guy (which means siding with them), the adaptable guy, the servile guy, the sacrificial guy, the safe guy, the wouldn't-hurt-a-fly guy. This is another guy: the warrior guy.

Warriors are special people. Since they understand the concept of honor, they set their ethical standards above most of the rest of society. Since they pattern their lives around the pursuit of excellence, they tend to achieve in their chosen professions. Warriorship is an extraordinary and powerful way to live.

Who talks to boys and men about honor, about being above the crowd, about being extraordinary and powerful? Not today's school teachers, certainly; not the open-collared lecturers in today's universities, certainly. They talk about being nice and fair and being just like the girls and thinking the way they tell you to think and serving the cause (their cause). By the way, a book I liked a lot is the autobiography of the skier Bode Miller, *Bode*—check a library or Amazon. The people in power trash Bode Miller because Bode Miller is a free man and kisses nobody's ass.

Think, feel, and act like a warrior. Set yourself apart from the rest of society by your personal excellence.

Separate yourself from the whole; don't lose yourself in it like they want you to do.

Shimbumi is a Japanese word for simple elegance, quiet perfection, a clean, restrained sense of distinction, refinement, and taste. It never appears busy or embellished.

Elegance, refinement, taste, quiet perfection—not today's lessons in modern America. Hip-hop shimmying and pathetic self-puffery are more likely to be the lessons in our time.

Throw away your vanity, and pursue internal objectives. The Martial Way is devoted to the perfection of character, not the collection of prizes.

A key challenge is to free yourself from chasing after their pats on the head.

Analyze the threat you're most likely to face.

Know your adversary better than he knows himself. Know how he thinks, how he acts, know his strengths, his weaknesses, what he is afraid of, what hurts him the most (and then get ready to hit him right there).

The warrior is always in training.

As long as you are alive there is work to be done on yourself to become clearer, more focused, and stronger, and it needs to be done at the same time that you are getting the important things done in your life.

Strength and confidence are the Martial Way's foundations, and the warrior must learn to walk without fear.

My take on this is to learn to walk in the face of fear. I don't think we can ever rid ourselves of fear, but I think we can learn to do the honorable thing despite being afraid. To me, that is the mark of a warrior.

Train against serious attack.

You have to assume they will do anything to you they can get away with: step in front of you in line, take what yours, exclude you, discredit you, rob you of perks and acknowledgment, fire you, destroy you, jail you, and even kill you and yours. So you need to anticipate and prepare for those eventualities. Don't be fooled by the smiles and proprieties and high-sounding words. Don't get blindsided if you can help it.

You must learn to relax while practicing your martial art.

I'd substitute the word "life" for "martial art" in that sentence. No matter what angle you bring to it—efficacy, personal health, happiness, whatever it is—it helps to be relaxed.

The central principle of *kime* is to focus your entire being on achieving your objective.

In a time of multitasking and dabbling in this, that, and the other thing, and consuming the lollipops they sell you (SUVs, whatever), it is so crucial to develop the skill of deciding on one truly important thing and doing that and only that, losing yourself in that endeavor, and staying with it until it is completed (which is not the same as just finishing the job). How do you learn *kime*? The same way you learn anything: get it firmly in your head you want to learn it, imagine what it will be like if you get it, and then *practice* it. I have decided that all clichés are true, including “practice makes perfect.”

Personal power results from freeing yourself from the fear of failure, no matter what the consequence.

I’m realizing that one of the things I’ve had going for me in my life is I’ve never been afraid of failure. A life fully lived is going to have many failures. I read a lot of biographies, and no matter how successful people are or were they experienced more than a few major failures in their lives. They accomplished big things because they took big risks, and if you take risks you are going to fail some of the time, if not most of the time. And really, failure isn’t the end of the world. Allow it to hurt some, give yourself credit for a noble effort, learn from what happened, and go on to the next thing. And no matter what, don’t let the failure cause you to play it safe—keep aiming high. High up is where the really good payoffs are.

Learn to turn off your internal dialogue. Mind-no-mind is the mental state that is the principle source of the warrior’s quick reactions, extra-ordinary perception, and steely calm.

There are times to engage in inner dialogue, and there are times to shut off the inner chatter and just be-in-the-world: present, alert, balanced, whole, calm, proud, sober.

The center of your gaze should rest gently on the portal of his spirit, his eyes.

So important for me to read this. Until the last year or so, I never looked anyone in the eye, and it is still very difficult for me to do.

But I find that it is self-affirming and empowering when I can get myself to do it. I learn that I'm a more valid and stronger person than I thought I was.

Posture tells people about your physical condition and your spiritual strength. It speaks of your resolve, your commitment to who you are and what you believe. It is the currency of leadership, an unspoken tool of command. Years of slouching in chairs with rounded shoulders and curved spines and the muscles supporting necks, backs, and shoulders weaken, and eventually the spine begins to collapse. [The tacit message: sit up straight.] Drop an imaginary plumb line through the top of a person's head. If the subject's posture is right, the line will fall through the ear, down the back of the neck, through the shoulders and hip sockets, and exit the foot just forward of the heel. To practice good posture, simply straighten your body and put those points in line.

I'm working on my posture.

Practice moving from your physical and spiritual center. Move from the *hara*. As you walk, glide your *hara* forward.

With my dance background, I am pretty good at this. The *hara* is a point in the center of the body at the level of the naval. We are so heady in this culture that, slightly tipped forward, necks thrust forward, we "lead with our head," vulnerable, accessible to attack. The *hara*-based glide is the movement of the lithe animal we are at our best, not the benign talking head we have been conditioned to be.

Some men sneer at the thought of moving gracefully. They associate the idea with feminine qualities, the kind of skill a dancer might seek but nothing with which a manly man should concern himself. But they are wrong. Grace is the product of confidence, strength, coordination, and balance—all qualities to be envied in both sexes. Grace is an outward expression of physical and spiritual power. The warrior stands straight and tall, and moves with a powerful grace that others envy. Move with a somber grace and air of power.

It's not just getting from here to there, it is *how* you get from here to there.

Warriors quietly walk into crowded rooms and command attention simply by their presence. They stand straight and tall and they project confidence. They don't join in cliques—more times than not, they stand alone—but they gravitate toward one another. Only warriors understand other warriors.

There is power in carriage, autonomy, separateness, self-containment. We don't have to be ready with our conversation starters and funny stories and self-promoting anecdotes. And we don't have to wait around for others to “get it” or approve—many never will. But some will get it and approve, and those will be the kinds of people it'll be good for us to be around.

Warriors are never the life of the party. They are rarely interested in small talk and speak only when they have something to say. When they speak, their voices are steady and resolved—strong but not loud, bold but not arrogant. They shake your hand with a firm grip, and when they meet your eyes, you feel an energy.

I don't think somebody would put my picture next to this description. And what's particularly sad about that for me is that I think by merits--what I am and what I have accomplished in my life --I should more closely approximate this characterization than I do. I still act as if I'm nothing and nobody, and if that were ever true, and it really wasn't as much as I thought it was, it isn't true now.

Avoid the self-defeating antics of the social clown and strive for the warrior ideal of personal elegance. Move and act in ways that convey dignity.

Ouch! I've been the social clown. They laugh with you (and at you) for a while, but they don't respect you, and even more important, you don't respect yourself. Dignity and how to come by it is another lesson that is absent in a boy or man's life these years unless he's lucky enough to have a wise mother or father. It's worth

an hour of our time for all of us to identify, in concrete, tangible terms, what a life of dignity would look like and what we'd have to do to make it a reality.

You yearn to carve the flaws out of your life. You just don't have time to waste on them.

Not only do your flaws detract from your ability to be a warrior, they are a waste of your precious time. Get rid of them, starting now.

And something I didn't underline back in 1995, so I'll add it as my own little addition to the book:

A warrior takes no shit from anybody.