

Cherry Blossom

DOJO

THE WAY OF  
INNER STRENGTH

CLAIRE HIGGINS

*Cherry Blossom Dojo*

# The Way of Inner Strength

*Training & Awakening to the  
Reality of Life, Love & Work*

Claire Higgins

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**Author**

Claire Higgins

***For my younger self, who needed time to find her Way.***

*And for anyone who has ever had to build and rebuild their Way to inner strength, step by step, and brick by brick.*

**“Between our two lives, there is also the  
life of the cherry blossom.”**

Matsuo Basho, Japanese Poet (1644-1694)

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*“These forty years have been turbulent ones, and the path that I chose for myself turned out to be far from easy; now, looking back, I am astonished that I attained in this endeavor even the quite modest success that has come my way.”*

**Gichin Funakoshi, Founder of Shotokan Karate**

~

*“A thoughtful and steady perusal of Master Funakoshi’s axioms will lead us on a much deeper journey than we might initially expect.”*

**John Teramoto, Translator of Twenty Guiding Principles**

~

*“Karate-do, like life, which it mirrors, is a struggle: a struggle with our own weakness, with our egos and our selfishness, with our narrow-mindedness and prejudices. Growth in the way of karate comes through unceasing, repetitive daily practices of the basics... There are no shortcuts to anything of lasting value.*

**Tadashi Nakamura, Founder of Seido Karate**

# BEGINNER'S MIND

This book is a real time memoir of a small part of my journey as a martial artist. By that, I mean it unfolded as I simultaneously engaged in the task of writing about it.

More specifically, it is about a path I chose to take through Shotokan, one of the many styles of karate, at the age of twelve. It was researched, lived and written between the ages of thirty-seven and thirty-nine, before, during and after my second-degree black belt exam.

It was a somewhat painful process, not only to live but also to write. I ended up writing and re-writing the book at least three times. In many ways, the book is not just a memoir but also a diary. So sharing it with you is an invitation into parts of my innermost world. That feels quite vulnerable but as you will learn, strength can also emerge through vulnerability.

In the book, I question many aspects of myself as a martial arts practitioner and how this relates to me being a human being, woman, professional, friend and life partner. I do this through a subtle reflection of *Twenty Guiding Principles*, which the founder of Shotokan karate, Gichin Funakoshi, wrote a long time ago.

Funakoshi is often called the “father of modern karate”. He was born in Okinawa to a traditional family in 1869 and, before his passing in 1957, was successful in bringing his style of karate to mainland Japan and from there, out into the world. He wasn't technically the founder of Shotokan, as he believed that karate was just karate, regardless of style. But some of his students named his teachings that, in reference to his pen name, *Shoto*.

By adding *kan*, they created a name for his first dojo, the *House of Shoto*, which was bombed during World War II. I didn't realise that for a long time but with my own history with war, it is quite a fitting heritage for a martial art. The name *Shotokan* stuck and thus a style of karate was born.

*Karate-do*, which is usually translated as “The Way of the Empty Hand,” wasn't more widely known before teachers like Funakoshi dared to change that. A schoolteacher by training, he was instrumental in lifting the mysterious veil of this martial art that was until then taught behind temple walls, and contributing significantly to its development. He himself had been drawn to it as a sickly child and found that through his training, he had become strong. Perhaps because of that, he felt called to share his knowledge with others.

Shotokan training, like most traditional Japanese martial arts, typically takes place inside a *dojo*, or training hall. It is divided into three parts, the first of which is *kihon*, or the basics. Students spend many hours, weeks, months and years immersed in this part of training, perhaps even their entire lives. Attention to a strong foundation is essential and, with its lower stances, *kihon* training not only helps the student acquire the strength needed to carry the rest of the martial art, but it also helps them to discipline their mind, which can wander frequently

in training. Eventually, with diligent practice, it will wander less and less.

My mind has been one that wanders frequently throughout my life. With an insatiable curiosity and stubborn nature, I have taken myself to places far and wide. Much further than someone of my background may feel called to explore. I was something of a black sheep in my family, especially in my interest in the martial arts and choice of work.

As you will learn if you read on, I have both a personal and professional history with violence. It has been a little too close to comfort at times, forcing me to grow and question what I was doing in violent places in the first place. Perhaps as an Aries child, I had a head start when it came to mental strength, and my stubborn character made me rather difficult to teach. It also made it hard for me to absorb lessons and I found I would have to repeat several of them again and again.

My training in the karate dojo was no different. As a young karate student, I diligently showed up to each class. I saw Funakoshi's photo in the dojo and it intrigued me that it was always hung so high, almost touching the ceiling. But being quite shy, I refrained from asking questions. Instead, I thought I could figure karate out simply by observing. As an adult student returning after a ten-year break, I knew better. This time around, I interacted with my teachers and did my best to read books but still, that wasn't enough for me to understand.

Eventually, I realized that the kind of understanding I sought only happened through many, many hours of training. Five years wasn't enough. Ten years wasn't enough. Perhaps even a lifetime wouldn't be enough, although that would depend on how much our mind wavers. Why? Because, ultimately, as Funakoshi once said, karate is the perfection of character. *Spirit before technique*, he would say to his students, and it was this spirit that I sought. That kind of thing doesn't appear overnight. It takes time, effort, and sometimes rather brutal inner work.

Over fifteen years passed between my first and second degree (dan) black belt gradings, and they had been very difficult but enriching years for me. As I returned to the dojo at the age of thirty-three, I did so with a mind and body that had endured years of chronic and traumatic stress. I had been a fighter, that much I knew. But I wasn't really a *skilled* fighter and because of that, I was repeatedly at risk of burning out. I wanted my power back, or my inner strength, but I didn't know how and I thought that karate could help me to find that out.

The second aspect of Shotokan is *kata*, or a series of choreographed movements that resemble an imaginary fight. By sequencing movements, the student learns to activate their memory and practice transitions between different stances and postures. The third aspect is *kumite*, or sparring, and this is the part that most closely resembles a fight. While this fight is designed to take place with a partner, in my experience it was always more of an inner fight, in particular with my mind.

*Could I release the stubbornness of my mind? Could I melt the walls of fear around me so that I could let other people in? Could I for just one moment stop and think clearly about where I was heading in life, and if this is the direction in which I wanted to go?*

In other words, I was looking for a way to respond to life, rather than just react. My tendency to react was typical of my emotional make-up. The moment I felt unsafe, I either ran or fought, and while those had been helpful reactions at time, they weren't a long-term strategy for life, love, or work. Rather, they had run me ragged through multiple jobs and war zones, and an abusive marriage and divorce. By the time I returned to my childhood home in Dubai at the age of thirty-three, I had passed through twelve organisations, fourteen job titles, and over thirty homes. Suffice to say that stability wasn't something that I knew.

In my fourth year back in training, I decided to live and write this book. The idea of cherry blossoms kept coming to me and I found myself relating to their fragility. I was very much an Aries child but with Cancer rising in my sign, I had also been born with a watery and compassionate heart. That combination had led me to humanitarian work and later, to establish an executive coaching practice, but it had also been a double-edged sword. Because my headstrong ways led me to bite off more than I could chew, my heart very often suffered.

One day, reading a book on Funakoshi's life, I learned of the moment he told his parents that he wanted to be a schoolteacher. At the time, topknots, a traditional Japanese bun worn by many men at the time in Okinawa, were being phased out. His family was staunchly against this practice and yet, to pursue his school teaching path, he needed to cut his topknot off. This was perhaps a moment at which he chose to set himself free from his past and dare to step out on his own. Needless to say, his family wasn't impressed.

What stood out about this story was Funakoshi's description of the brass buttons and caps schoolteachers wore at the time. They both carried the design of the cherry blossom and reading that, something inside of me was sparked. Funakoshi didn't elaborate further on what this meant to him but in my mind, it was a symbol of strength over adversity. In his story of being a weak child and eventually becoming strong enough to stand up to his past to pave his own way in life, I saw fragments of myself mirrored back.

*Hadn't I also felt weak at times? Hadn't I also longed to break free from my past and find my own way? Hadn't I also felt the beauty and fragility of the fleeing cherry blossom bloom?*

Those questions led to a two-year journey through my own *inner dojo*. I named it *Cherry Blossom Dojo*, to remind me of the moment when this enquiry began. A dojo is not only a training space but it is also a place to train to awaken. The training comes first, the awakening after. In this spirit, my book unfolded. By the time I exited this inner dojo I had created, everything had changed, and so had I.

Ultimately, this book you're holding is one person's journey of understanding and building emotional strength and safety, not just a temporary refuge or quick fix that mimics them. The details of my story are unique to me but the theme of finding emotional refuges, developing inner strengths, and creating safety that flows through it is familiar to us all, whether we realise it or not.

In every *dojo*, there is a set of rules or expected behaviours, known as *dojo kun*. Shotokan has five *dojo kun* that its students practice every time they set foot in the dojo, and even when

they leave. These rules aren't easy to master. For many of us, they require a sincere attitude, time, practice, and many tests of character in order to sink in.

One of Shotokan's *dojo kun* is respect. It is also the first guiding principle set forth by Funakoshi, and a life long lesson for me. Because of this, if you do choose to read further and enter my *inner dojo*, I invite you to do so with the same respect that I would enter yours'.

# GRATITUDE

While I wrote this book alone, a whole army of inspiration and support stood beside me. Along with my heartfelt appreciation of every martial arts teacher who has ever taught me, and every student I have trained alongside, I am grateful to:

**Mike Clarke**, a karate *budo* practitioner and author of *Shin Gi Tai: Karate Training for Body, Mind, and Spirit*, among other books, prompted me to reflect on **Character**. His reflections also prompted me to question, perhaps without meaning to, my life-long relationship with karate. Mike and I share a birthplace in common. Manchester, UK. We also share parallel stories of prisons and violence. Both of us found a meaningful path in karate, and our conversations helped me to process thoughts I had as a female martial artist today.

**Reece Coker**, a self-defense instructor, accomplished martial artist, and ex-military personnel, taught me about protection and **Defense**. With Reece and his team at Combat Academy UK, I was trained and certified as a self-defense instructor. By sheer coincidence (or perhaps not), Reece is also a Positive Psychologist and teacher and I later studied for a Positive Psychology diploma with him through the PP Network UK. This process led me towards a new understanding of karate, and the power of bridging old and new.

**Lee Harris**, an ultra-endurance athlete and former engineer and amateur boxer with the British Navy, taught me about **Competition**. With Lee, I spent half a year studying sports nutrition and how to manage my mental and emotional energy on and off the tatami mat. Along with being a nuts and bolts kind of man, who runs grueling marathons in the desert, Lee was raised by a father who taught tai chi and practiced reiki, an energetic healing art. His knowledge of healing and stress recovery arrived when I needed it most.

**Diane Dreher**, an aikido practitioner, positive psychology coach, and author of several books on the *Tao* and other wisdom-based paths, taught me about **Longevity**, and balancing *yin* and *yang*. She was also my writing coach and like a warrior, didn't hesitate to walk alongside me for two difficult years as I wrote and rewrote this book several times. Diane is also a Positive Psychology coach and, like Reece, her passion for it naturally impacted me over time. As you will learn later, Positive Psychology is a natural fit for martial arts philosophy.

I would also like to thank those who contributed their time and energy to the *Love, Fight, Surrender* interviews that I held in 2016. These interviews formed part of my early research for this book. Their names are: Neha Jamani, Cory Minton, Sam Majed, Elaine Bradley, Jess Lyons, Jane Higgins, Agam Shah, Ms Abo and Meg Walck, Anne Marie Marsa, and Becky Hart. You can find these interviews published on my personal website under the heading "Martial Arts Interviews" at: [www.clairehiggins.me/blog](http://www.clairehiggins.me/blog)

Lastly, my deepest gratitude goes to my family, without whom I wouldn't have had the opportunity or strength to write this book. Thank you Mom, Dad, Tori and Jane.

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please note that all of the following excerpts of Gichin Funakoshi's *Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate* mentioned at the start of every chapter, and the subsequent commentaries in the chapter lessons, are translated by John Teramoto and published by Kodansha USA.

It goes without saying that my interpretations of Funakoshi's principles and the teachings behind them are exactly that. They reflect a particular phase of my journey where this is how the lessons made most sense to me. We can only know as much as we know at any point in time, and no doubt there are many areas where I can improve as a student of karate.

Likewise, the wider story I tell reflects a point on my path in life, love, and work. Two years exactly. It would have been easy to return and edit the difficult, awkward, or painful parts out. But that would have ruined some of the best parts of the story, and given a false impression that wisdom is something that doesn't have to be earned over time, trial, and effort.

I have done my best to protect the identities of some people mentioned in this book. Where it hasn't been possible to draw on more positive references, I have erred on the side of compassion. Ultimately, these are my experiences, and they reflect how I experienced them at the time. And relationships of any kind are never one-sided affairs.

Being a self-published author, I am grateful for the editorial freedom that I needed to express what I felt called to write, and to create my own structure. I have done my best to remove as many typos and repetitions as I can. Should you come across any, and no doubt you will, I hope they do not throw your reading off course. Eventually, once this process is done, the book will go to print.

Finally, I hope that this personal enquiry into the strengths and weaknesses of my karate path offers a worthwhile and relevant contribution to what it actually means to practice karate today. I welcome further exchanges on this topic with karate practitioners who are also examining the ins and outs of their own paths.



# SPRING

BIRTH

# CHARACTER

## *The Way of Self-Awareness*

### The Seeker

*“To go deeply into your martial art you will be required to go deeply into your own character, and to do that, you will have to become a seeker of truth. Not the “mystical” kind of truth that places you at the center of the universe, but the plain and simple kind: the honest truth that exposes your true nature.”*

Michael Clarke, Shin Gi Tai

## *Everyone has a reason to train.*

---

*“Do not forget that karate-do begins and ends with rei.”<sup>1</sup>*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 1)

~

**“You still don’t believe in yourself!”**

Standing in our makeshift dojo, under fluorescent lights, right in front of a floor-to-ceiling length mirror, I see my once-flawless white karate suit turning grey with sweat. I swallow my breath, which wants to argue back, and control any external display of emotion while Sensei, my teacher of the past few years, proceeds to tear strips off me.

His words bounce painfully off the walls of my narrowing mind, like a hard lacrosse ball that I can’t quite catch. *I don’t believe in myself. I still believe everything my ex-husband told me, and that I am nothing. Instead of working so hard, I need to take some time off to paint my nails, get a new handbag, and have some fun with my girl friends.* Fat chance of that ever happening, I thought to myself, trying to remember the last time I had fun.

**“What is it with you?”** he finally exclaimed, as the abrupt and explosive lecture drew to an end. **“Do you want to die like them, like those people you help in war zones? Like the refugees? Is that why you’re working yourself to death?”**

His last remarks hurt the most but still, I didn’t let it show. I knew because I could see my face looking back at me in the mirror. The sweat was drying on my face by now, and the angry red colour I tend to go in training was fading to a lighter pink. Although I was looking at my Sensei, my spatially trained gaze could also see our reflections in the mirror.

But who was I fooling. My teacher wasn’t judging my reaction based on where I looked. He could sense where my mind and body were even with his eyes closed. He knew I had stopped breathing for a moment. Hadn’t he been watching my every moment in the dojo for almost four years? Hadn’t he dedicated his entire life to this art? Wasn’t he the one who had repeatedly blindfolded me in class, teaching me to see and sense with my body, even when

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<sup>1</sup> In Japanese, the word “rei” can have many meanings, depending on the characters used. One meaning is an expression of gratitude. In a martial arts context, it is associated with the bow a student makes as they enter the dojo. This bow is a sign of their “respect” for the art they practice, their teachers, and themselves.

my sight was taken away?

There are no lies in the dojo, and there is nowhere to hide. Eventually, everything, including the truth, will find a way to come out. And right now, the truth was that I had stopped breathing deeply. My breath had turned shallow and faint, which meant I was stressed. The average person wouldn't know this but both of us standing in the room most certainly did.

For reasons I didn't yet understand, my Egyptian Sensei had given me just ten days warning that the grading for my second dan, or second degree black belt, would be taking place. In my mind, the grading was a pretty big deal as it meant testing before a senior examiner from the Japan Karate Association, or JKA, who was due to visit Dubai.

The JKA is one of the official examining bodies for Shotokan karate, a style of martial arts that I had taken up at a young age. In Dubai, where I was raised and now lived, such opportunities were rare and only came around once a year. I knew that if I didn't show up this year, another long year of training would pass before I'd be given another chance. I had spent nearly four years training for this moment and, now it was finally here, I wasn't ready.

I had told him I was too exhausted and that I couldn't guarantee I'd be able to take time off work. For months, I had been working myself to the ground, afraid that I couldn't make ends meet in an expensive city where I had once felt safe and protected but where I now lived alone. As a solo business practitioner, I knew the penalties for getting into debt. Just a few bounced cheques could land me in prison and I felt like nobody other than me had my back.

Fifteen long years had passed since my first black belt grading at the age of twenty-two, and much had changed. I remembered my other Sensei, a Sufi practitioner from Iran, first announcing the test date to me. The way in which he chose to test me was typical of a spiritual path.

As my present-day Sensei fell silent, I lowered my eyes to hip level, staring back at the reflection of my first black belt, now turning white at the edges. They say that a black belt turns white with continuous wear, symbolizing the cyclical nature of teachings and a return to beginner's mind. A place where anything is possible and right now, I was still a very long way away.

Tall, athletic, and wise, my Iranian Sensei also had a special way of doing things that didn't quite make sense in literal or rational terms. A coach for the national team, and a yogi who stood on his head for ten minutes before class, his powerful presence and unpredictable nature had both inspired me and kept me on my toes.

**“You will grade for black belt this month,”** he told me at the end of class one day. **“I will not tell you which day or what time. I expect you to attend class daily and be ready for your test at any time.”**

Back then, I didn't argue or answer back, like I had just done now with my Egyptian Sensei. Instead, I had controlled the fear that raced through me and accepted the mission at hand.

Although I was scared, I trusted and believed in myself. That was pretty much how I approached and lived my life until I returned to Dubai. I quietly accepted tests and trials, rarely complaining of the suffering both naturally entailed.

Karate was my purpose as a teenager and young woman, and I showed up to train almost every day. My mind was still as water and my body, while not as physically strong as it was now, was used to being put through fire. Five weekly classes of two hours each, alongside male black belts twice my size and several times my strength, had made sure of that. So too did the community dojo spirit, which helped me to feel less alone. There can be a feeling of more strength in numbers, that's for sure.

This time round, fifteen years later, life was different. For a start, I no longer trained in a community dojo. Instead, we trained in an aerobics studio my Sensei rented in a five star hotel. Neither my teacher nor myself were five star hotel kind of people. He had grown up in Egypt's coastal city of Alexandria, founded in 331 BC by Alexander the Great. It was a town where I had also spent a year of my life as a twenty-year old student, studying Arabic language and calligraphy. I had even helped out teaching at a karate class in the local sports club.

That common history and my ability to speak fluent Arabic had given our classes a different flavor. I wasn't the average English woman training with him and he very quickly realized that. Instead, I was someone who could speak his language and relate to his culture. I was also quite often the only student in the class, which naturally shifted the style of teaching. So too did my life experience and past experiences with trauma.

He first found out how nervous I was when I refused to place my bag near the front door. I was afraid that someone would walk in and steal it during training.

**“But I’ll keep my eye on it, Claire,”** he would reason, trying to reassure me.

It didn't work. Nobody could reassure me that I was safe, not even a sixth dan black belt who was teaching me to be strong. I didn't trust anyone including myself and that was exhausting.

At thirty-seven, I was older. Those fifteen years had taken their toll on my mind, heart, body and soul. Over a decade of helping others through aid work, and witnessing horrors that many people I knew would rather turn away from, had left their mark. On mission, I had also had my bag stolen and home broken into. Such memories had left me feeling insecure.

Marriage, domestic violence and divorce had also tested me. They led to a loss of home, money and stability. It seemed that wherever I turned in life, disaster wasn't far behind me and I couldn't figure out why. Why couldn't I just be safe? Why was I always battling life and work out alone? And why was I always so damn tired?

The memory of my first black belt grading quickly faded as I returned to present day. With my Sensei challenging me so openly, there was nowhere left to turn. Everything was out in the open. It didn't matter how hard I trained physically, or how good I had become at

performing techniques. It didn't matter how good my memory was, how much I obeyed his commands, or how much pressure I could endure mentally. *I still wasn't ready.*

It didn't matter that I was "tough" enough not to show any emotions, or break down in tears. It didn't matter how much of my private pain I hid from the world around me, including my own friends and family, because without uttering a word the truth was spilling out onto the pristine five star hotel dojo floor.

My Sensei, who had spent hours in training with me each week for several years, had read me like a book. Unlike most adult students who quickly came and went from his classes, I had stuck around. Even when commuting over twenty hours a week by car for work, I still made it to class. Karate continued to take precedence in my life, just as it had when I was younger. The difference now was that I was juggling so many balls.

After years of training, I could certainly take the heat of his voice. But he had missed a few pages and that was why I had started to answer back, before he cut me off. It wasn't my ex-husband who had damaged my self-belief. It was the fear that anything I earned could be taken away from me at any moment, even my karate training. *Because I wasn't safe.*

Sub-consciously, I had linked the meaning of my second dan to a long list of unrealistic expectations. I had to feel safe in order to grade, and I was far from that. I had to be fitter than I was, and that was still a work in progress. And I had to have a life that *worked*.

Deep down, I didn't want to grade because I was afraid that I would pass. I knew that even in my state of exhaustion, I could still perform. But in my mind, a pass would be meaningless because my life didn't look the way I wanted it to. I wanted to wear my second dan with pride, not feeling like I could have done more.

This wasn't how I expected my martial arts journey to go. From the perspective of Gaza, my last humanitarian posting, where human rights violations are happening every day, life back in my childhood home of Dubai seemed straightforward. In Dubai, unlike Gaza, where I had to travel in armoured vehicles due to security restrictions on international UN staff, I could walk freely in the streets. I could visit bookstores in my free time, and I could spend time with old friends.

There would be no rockets or bombs, and no daily reports of death or despair in Dubai. I could even return to karate training, which I hadn't always managed to do on mission over the past ten years. When my parents decided to retire to the UK, moving back to take care of the family dogs and re-anchor my life seemed like the right thing to do and besides, a tug in my heart was pulling me there. A big part of me just wanted to go home.

It's easy to dream and imagine. It's another thing to bring those dreams and imaginations to real life. I don't know why I returned with a suitcase full of idyllic expectations that life would suddenly get peaceful when the life I had chosen up until that point had been anything but calm. If our choices reflect patterns of thought, and I didn't change my thinking, then why would I choose anything different?

Looking back, I'm reminded of a popular Zen saying. *'The way you do anything is the way you do everything.'* If I had chosen to live a stressful life up until that point, why would my return to Dubai be any different?

Ironically, I had returned to Dubai with a dream of setting up a restorative health and fitness coaching practice. In the years leading up to my divorce, I had become obsessed with stress and trauma recovery and taken multiple trainings as a yoga teacher and health coach. I had even taught yoga for several years on mission after work and had recently developed a business plan for this evolving work. But a series of unexpected events had emerged within weeks of my return, throwing me back into emergency mode.

It wasn't just war and divorce I had lived through. By now, I was living in my thirty-third "home". I had passed through fourteen job titles in twelve years, lived in numerous countries, and adapted to even more cultures. I had spent over three decades of my life in the Middle East and knew more about not belonging than I did to belong. Always the outsider, always the traveller, my life, work, and relationships had long been in a flux of change.

There was also a childhood memory that kept throwing me off centre, each time I tried to slow down. I had left Dubai at the age of sixteen, a year after a teenage assault, and while I had often passed by to visit my parents in the years that had since passed, I hadn't ever tried to return. The truth was that I swore inwardly I would never come back. The pain of that memory had been so great, and I had associated any return with a feeling of disempowerment. But after my divorce, I thought I had dealt with that pain. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Because I hadn't tried to return, I thought I had come to terms with some of the more painful moments of my past. It was another one of the feel-good fantasies I held safely at long distance but returning had shattered that illusion. It was only when I actually returned to re-anchor my life that I noticed the rubble I had spent the past seventeen years standing on. That rubble made it awfully difficult to rebuild because first, I had clear it up so I could prepare a better ground. I didn't know it at the time but that process would take almost six years.

For almost six years, several times a month, I would drive past a building site where one of my childhood homes had once stood. It was home number four in my life. This was the home in which I had once been raped. It was also the home in which so many of my happier childhood memories had taken place, and I missed it with an ache that could sink my heart.

Sometimes, I would park my car in front of the building site and stare through it. Then I would close my eyes, remembering exactly how the entire home looked and what it felt like to be in it. Memories would flood my body and senses, and tears would get trapped in my eyes. I longed to step out of the car and walk back in, just for one last time. A part of me was buried in that house and I needed to go back in and dig her out, but I just couldn't figure out how.

The house stood a stone's throw away from the beach, where the little version of me loved to hang out. I could see my ten-year-old self, carrying the family dog under her arm, walking

barefoot across the road to join her family on the beach. Back then, the road was narrow, with sand and gravel on either side. Now, it was smooth and wide with traffic lights, and flanked by fancy pavements.

We lived in that house twice, moving further out for a year in between. When we returned, I was twelve turning thirteen. The first karate centre I joined was a ten-minute walk away. It was run by Iranian karate teachers and quickly came to feel like a home away from home. I saw myself walking to class and waiting outside for my father to pick me up. By then, it would be dark and my parents made a point of keeping me safe.

The karate centre where I graded for first dan was a ten-minute car-ride away. By the time I joined at eighteen, I was able to drive. Borrowing my mother's car in university vacations, I would feel ever so grown up taking myself there and back. Back then, I felt that anything was possible. I had survived the teenage assault without telling a soul and now, I was a black belt. Surely that meant I could rule my world?

But now, in present day, both my old home and my first karate centre had been torn down, and newly built shopping malls were being built in their place. My other karate centre had long been vacated when my teacher and his black belted family moved to Canada. Karate had long been on the decline as other styles of martial arts had taken off. First, it was MMA, or Mixed Martial Arts. More recently, it had been Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, known as BJJ.

It was as if there were two versions of Dubai in my mind, and the present day version was cloaked in the past. Everywhere I turned there were memories, either still standing or buried under the rubble. Some were good, some less so, and whether good or not, this dual vision often made my head spin even more.

So there I was, trying to slow down from over a decade of war while also grieving a life I had left behind. By the time I returned, nearly everyone and everything I knew was gone and all that was left were memories and a pile of rubble.

To make matters more complicated, I had just entered my second year of running a solo executive coaching practice. It wasn't the restorative health and fitness coaching practice I had envisaged but it was registered and legal, and it was a start. It was also a way out of full time aid work and a way to start slowing down.

Ironically, I had made the same mistake two times in a row. If I thought returning to Dubai would bring me any peace, I was certain that running my own freelance coaching practice would. During the planning phase, while I was still employed, I expected that setting up and running my own show would give me more space and time to slow down.

A big driving factor was gaining more energy for karate training. In my mind, I thought that was the missing part. It wasn't my thinking that was wrong, it was just the logistics of my day. In reality, I changed my daily set-up but I didn't change my mind. Because of that, I fell into the same traps. The details differed but the outcome was the same.



I may have been working for myself but with the constant pressure to guarantee a monthly income, and pay the annual registration and office rental fees, I had fallen back into full time humanitarian work with the regional team of an international medical NGO based in Dubai. This time, I was consulting by day and coaching private clients in my free hours. I knew that I would have to be extra careful to not burn out, especially with the monthly travel to places like Jordan, Syria, and Turkey and having a media role.

A couple of months back into juggling the extremes of working on war and coaching clients through personal growth, while tending to media mayhem in between, I became acutely aware that burnout wasn't long off.

It was getting harder to wake up on time and harder to train. So I switched to part-time consulting work, accepting a smaller and steadier income, thinking it would free up more energy for karate and coaching work. But it was too little too late, and by the time my second black belt grading date was announced, another phase of the war in Syria, where some of our medical teams were stationed, had broken out.

**“I can’t possibly grade,”** I had told my teacher, before he tore me to strips. **“The hospitals in Syria are being bombed and it’s only a matter of days before one of ours is hit.”**

As a media and communications advisor, my role was to draft releases and coordinate the interviews that followed. This may sound straightforward but gathering exact information in the midst of chaos and war takes time. Then there was the pressure of dealing with stressed out colleagues trying to cross check information.

With the correct information, drafting the press release was then easy, but verifying it was a nightmare, as it still needed the approval of five different headquarters and several departments and hierarchies to go ahead. That entailed further egos and stressed out people to get through before just a few paragraphs could make it to print.

All of these details were at the top of my mind. For years, work had come first and so it was only natural that those old instincts would kick in. Humanitarian work had taken precedence over my love life, my family life, and even my physical and mental health. Media coordination was a round-the-clock job and my political instincts, honed by years of working on violence, conflict and war, told me I would be mobilized within hours.

I knew in my heart the next press release would coincide with the grading date, and that on this occasion, I would have to put work first. I had committed myself and I wasn't prepared to let the team down. I was doing the right thing but I also felt deep shame. Because in doing the right thing, I had let my teacher and myself down.

Saying “no” to this opportunity to grade shattered my heart. Fifteen years of waiting and nearly four years of hard training wasn't something I took lightly. But because I had a stoic character that wouldn't break down, at least not in public, I didn't let the pain of that swift decision show on the spot.

It wasn't that I thought I wasn't good enough to grade, like my Sensei thought, although I could certainly have done with a decent manicure and letting my hair down every now and then. The real issue was that I didn't believe I could create a life where these kinds of emergencies didn't happen. I didn't believe I could create the kind of peaceful life I felt a second dan holder of karate should have. I just didn't know where to start.

My mind and body had been reared on disaster. It was like a chemical addiction running through my veins and, wherever I turned, there it was, another disaster and another opportunity to shoot myself up on disaster response.

This wasn't the life I wanted anymore, and it wasn't the life I was training for in the dojo. But I couldn't find a way to get out. Training alleviated my suffering but it hadn't yet gone to the source of my pain.

**"I'll do it,"** I said, breaking the silence. **"I'll come for the grading."**

My disaster-oriented mind had just shown up. I could coordinate the press interviews from the car on my way to the test centre in Sharjah, one of the northern emirates. I could leave work a couple of hours early to make it in time. I could temporarily hand over the media coordination to a colleague in Paris for an hour while I did the test.

There had to be a way to make it all work, I just needed to try *harder*.

**"No you won't,"** he answered back in Arabic, with a firm look in his eyes. **"Because I will not allow it."**

A heavy pause descended on the room and I let out a long breath I had been holding. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our reflection in the makeshift dojo's full-length mirrors. I saw the image of myself and my teacher, standing face to face, in our bright white suits. Our black belts hung around our waists, his fading much more rapidly than mine.

I saw the look of fatigue in my eyes and the familiar black circles under my eyes. The same black circles my Iranian Sufi Sensei had called me out on once at nineteen.

This wasn't how I wanted to live but for the life of me, I couldn't figure a better way out. I was a fighter, that much was certain, but I was a fighter of the wrong kind and one that was burning out.

**"You must truly want this, Claire,"** he said gently. **"You cannot do it for me or for anyone else. You must want it for yourself enough to make it happen. You must learn to respect yourself first."**

With that, he turned away. The class and my lesson were over for today.



# MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 1

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## FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Rei is often defined as “respect” but it actually means much more. Rei encompasses both an attitude of respect for others and a sense of self-esteem. When those who transfer that feeling of esteem – that is, respect – to others, their action is nothing less than an expression of rei... True rei is the outward expression of a respectful heart.”*

~

## INNER STRENGTH 1 | **Respect**

Funakoshi is teaching both self-respect and respect for others in this principle. By respecting ourselves, we can better extend that feeling and experience of respect to others. To respect others without first respecting ourselves is to miss an essential ingredient. Such a tendency can lead us to want to please others or seek their approval before taking care of ourselves.

By deciding to wait, I was practicing an inner strength of *timing*. In the ideal world, I would have been ready for my second grading but that wasn't the case. I hadn't set my life up yet in a way that could allow me to show up for such an exam at short notice, and succeed. So I chose another route, which was to wait, respect my current limitations, and bide my time.

~

## YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How does respect show up in your life today?*

*What lessons are you learning, or have you learned, about respect?*

## *Love is a journey without a map.*

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*“First know yourself, then know others.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 4)

~

**I** drove home in a sober mood, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

It was late, almost eleven o'clock by the time I reached home. With a coaching client at eight o'clock the next morning, and my consulting shift starting at ten o'clock, I continued to walk a fine line but with a greater sense of self-awareness.

The dojo confrontation had felt like icy cold water thrown on a sleepy face. What the hell was I doing with my life? Why wasn't I taking better care of myself? Why did I repeatedly invite fatigue and burnout, even when I was working for myself? And why, with a black belt around my waist, did I still feel so unsafe?

I remembered signing the official papers to set up my executive coaching business the year before. For legal reasons that seemed quite odd, I had been asked to write and sign a contract and terms of reference with myself, stating my working hours, monthly salary, and number of annual days of leave.

Quite literally, *Claire Higgins* had to employ *Claire Higgins*, and choose how she would be treated. From that day onwards, I was effectively responsible for safeguarding my employee rights, nobody else, and it was myself who was making myself work like this.

I was guilty of overworking my one and only employee, and business resource, giving her insufficient remuneration for her efforts, and no compensation for her overtime. That wasn't something I would let my clients stand for, so why was I accepting such a low standard for myself? The answer came crashing down on me once more. *The only person who would do such a thing would be someone who lacked self-respect.*

I knew I had to walk away from my work, just for a while so that I could sort myself out. But financially, I couldn't yet afford to take that step and I had still to learn how to ask for help. So I kept the lesson of self-respect close to my heart, vowing to take the first opportunity to press pause and exit, and finally rest and reset.

Miraculously, in the midst of this all of this, a love story was emerging. After a few months of being on my own, without a romantic relationship, I had met my current partner. We had crossed paths at one of the Sufi meditation classes I attended every couple of weeks.

His presence that night was driven more by his passion for music than any spiritual calling or appreciation of the Sufi path. Being a close friend of our teacher, she had invited him to play the drums during a special session of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God in Arabic. On meeting, he hadn't hesitated to tell me with a ready smile that he thought all our meditating and chanting was one big pile of crap.

**“Pir this and Pir that,”** he said, referring to a common Sufi title for an elder or spiritual guide. **“We have them a dime to the dozen back at home!”**

I had seen him once before months earlier but this time, he had caught my eye. Seated in the candle-lit meditation room, the yellow light from the street lamp crept in, bringing the contours and laughter lines of his face to life. Cracking non-stop jokes to the group that were genuinely funny, I found myself laughing in this usually serene and spiritual place.

I admired his sense of ease in himself and ability to be funny and entertain us all at the drop of a hat. He seemed to take life so lightly, a skill which I would later learn was a reaction to a very difficult life. But in that moment, all I knew was that he expressed a state of being that I had rarely experienced. *The ability to take life less seriously*. Suddenly, I was hungry to know exactly what that state felt and tasted like, and he seemed to know a way.

A few hours later, as I prepared myself to leave, I bumped into him in the lounge. The meditation classes were held in our teacher's home, which was a good forty-five minute drive from my home. Afterwards, she would offer food and a place for people to connect. As students, we would take it in turns to contribute our culinary skills. My offerings were always salads and simple dishes I threw together in ten minutes, due to my obvious lack of time.

That night had started off like all the others. As usual, I was conscious of the time, which was now gone ten o'clock, and the forty-five minutes I needed to drive home. I had also agreed to drop off a meditation friend whose car was in service, which would add a further twenty minutes to my drive. It was due to all this planning that I wasn't fully present when I bumped right into him.

I remember walking out of the bathroom, scrambling in my handbag for my car keys while looking for my meditation friend. For once, my spatial vision failed me as I then walked right into a coffee table standing in the middle of the lounge.

Turning around, there he was smiling back at me and remembering his earlier jokes, I couldn't help but smile back. A spontaneous conversation began as he told me about his passion for flying. Not flying in a plane or aircraft but attaching a propeller to his back and flying like a bird across the sandy desert. It was his weekend passion and I couldn't help but laugh once more at the funny way in which he delivered the story with so many punch lines.

**“You probably think I’m crazy!”** he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with delight.

**“Not at all,”** I responded. That was right before we both said in perfect timing and harmony, **“you only live once!”**

**“Wait,”** he asked, staring back at me in genuine disbelief. **“Did you just say what I said?”**

**“It seems I did!”** I responded, turning several shades of red and breaking out in a nervous laugh.

Suddenly, I wanted to escape this intimate moment. It felt too much too soon. It was as if he had seen right through me and the thin veneer I fought so hard to keep up was being stripped away. I felt vulnerable and unguarded, and my defensive instincts were kicking in. Cutting the conversation short, I told him that I had to leave.

**“Here’s my business card,”** he said, reaching into his shirt pocket as I turned around to look for my friend. **“Why don’t you stay in touch?”**

In my typically impulsive Aries style, I sent him an email the very next morning. Our strange encounter and the intense feeling of connection had blown me away. Not being someone to take anything slow, least of all the start of any new relationship, I thanked him for the exchange, then I proposed we meet up.

His positive response arrived a few days later, along with several more jokes and a sincere desire to also meet up. To my surprise, he showed up with a bunch of flowers in his car.

**“I can bring them now or you can get them later,”** he said shyly, not seeming as confident as he had appeared in front of the Sufi meditation group the night we had met.

If I had been feeling bold and brazen about this date, the acute awareness of my emotional vulnerability now made me feel uncertain and self-conscious in very unhelpful ways. Doubts flooded my mind. Six months had passed since my last relationship and I was suddenly nervous. *What would I say once we had sat down? What would I order to eat? Would I even be able to eat if my stomach was in knots? What would he think if I didn’t eat?*

This man was also from another culture and until now, having spent nearly my entire life in the Middle East, and being Arabic-speaking, I had really only known Middle Eastern men. Unlike them, this man came from Asia, and culturally, I felt nervous and lost. I knew very little about his homeland beyond the headline news, and the thought of simply asking him to fill in the blanks hadn’t yet occurred to me.

I was so accustomed to having to figure out personal things alone and, despite being a coach at work, in my romantic life I couldn’t remember how to ask a simple question like, *Tell me about yourself*. It isn’t complicated but I was running on stress and having spent so much time alone in life, karate training, and work, was overly self-conscious. I had forgotten, or perhaps

lost, the emotional and mental energy needed to be curious about the world.

I tried to steady myself and regain some perspective. I may not know Asia or its various culture well, but my Sufi meditation teacher was from there, and I knew she was a good person. So too was my Arabic calligraphy teacher. While one was gentle and the other sharp, I had warmed to them both and felt at ease in their company. I also had many positive memories of my Asian-British university friends in the UK, even if that was many years ago.

Suddenly aware that he was waiting for me, I snapped myself back into the present moment and followed him into the café where I had suggested we meet. He had asked me to share stories of my past and as I had dashed out of the house a few minutes earlier, I had grabbed several memorabilia of days gone by. If he wanted to know who I was, I figured these small objects would give me the memory jolt I needed to share that.

**“Claire, I don’t want to see those objects,”** he told me kindly as I carefully laid them out on the dinner table. **“I want to see you. I want to see who you are without them.”**

I froze mid-movement as my mind scrambled to catch a thread of who I was. Any thread would do as a starting point, but which one should I pick?

His question sent me into a panic, which I hid behind a frozen smile. Was I the Claire who did humanitarian work and coached others towards a better life, yet was now burning out? Or was I the one who did karate and knew how to throw punches and flying kicks, but was falling hopelessly short of reaching second dan?

What if I was neither? What if the real me was the one who spent her weekends painting and penning Arabic calligraphy in silence, or hiding alone on the beach because she couldn’t find the words needed to reach out and relate to her old friends?

The rest of the dinner passed in a daze. But driving home with the pink flowers on the passenger seat, I figured something must have gone well as he had asked me half way through if *he* had passed the test. Apparently, he hadn’t noticed, or had chosen to overlook my nerves.

The first time he came over to my house, after we had become a couple, he surprised me by bringing three bird ornaments. One of his interests was birds. His love of birds was the reason he had taken up flying. His own life had been filled with one tragedy after the other but he seemed to laugh them off, at least on the surface. He wanted to feel as free as birds, without anybody clipping his wings.

That was what drew me in. It was a feeling I could relate to, an intense desire for freedom that burned within us both. The desire to be free of suffering was probably the catalyst that brought us closer together in the year that followed, as we settled into a quiet and somewhat ordinary companionship.

**“Look at the three birds,”** he said, lining them up on the coffee table. **“They represent three different aspects of yourself. Karate Claire, Humanitarian Claire, and Artist**



**Claire.”**

To him, I wasn't that complicated. I came in three parts and the problem he thought I had was that I couldn't figure out which Claire I really was. All three aspects of myself were in conflict. They all wanted airtime and expression but I couldn't tend to all three at once, as they sent me in different directions. Which Claire did I want to be, was the question that lingered.

**“It's your Cancer rising,”** a Vedic astrologist had told me a year earlier.

**“With Cancer rising in your charts you feel deeply for others. But your sun and moon signs are in Aries, and that means you're ruled twice over by Mars, the God of War.”**

Remembering these words was a reminder of why I often felt torn. My Cancer rising energy led me to paint and hide away. My double dose of Aries was the reason I took action to defend others and was also drawn to the dojo. All of the paths were intense and I hadn't yet learned how to flow harmoniously between them all.

**“You need to find a man with a stronger Mars energy than you,”** she advised, **“or the relationship won't work. And you must learn to surrender because when you finally meet this man, you will have no choice.”**

She believed that a series of partners were preparing me to surrender for this partner she had seen in my charts. With the gift of hindsight, I now understand the process I was going through in preparation for my soulmate but at the time, like many people I was trying to find my way step by step in the dark.

There was no disputing the fact. My new partner was *anything* but this God of War. In fact, he fled conflict at the first opportunity. But he was funny as hell and despite the pain I later learned of in his life, still made me laugh so much. I soon forgot the Vedic astrologist's words and decided to go with the flow.

Right here, right now, with this man felt like a good place to be. He wasn't interested in my passion for fitness or martial arts, nor did he follow politics or question the meaning of life. He was a practical person, almost a father figure, and being in his company was easy. For the first time in years, I found myself doing “ordinary” things, like watching movies and going to the cinema. After such an unusual life for someone of my background, I thought that “ordinary”

may be the secret to happiness, and so it was that which I now sought, at least in love.

We had quickly fallen into a rhythm of seeing each other on weekends. In between, I was burning out juggling my coaching and consulting work and after eighteen months of separation, he now was handling a complex divorce. Both of us needed companionship during a rough part in both our journeys and gradually, our friendship turned into feelings of love.

The relationship also encouraged me to be honest with myself and find the courage to change.

I was quietly devastated that my choices had led me to miss my second dan grading. Every karate class was a stark reminder that I had failed myself and my teacher. It didn't matter how I reframed it, my intention to live a more balanced life and not burn out in work had not transpired.

That week, I handed in my notice. Despite my very real need to make a drastic change, it wasn't an easy choice. A big part of me cared about humanitarian work and I felt bad letting my employer down. A part of me also thought I could continue to do it all. That was the part that repeatedly bit off more than she could chew and I was finally realizing that her logic was all wrong. She wanted to protect me on all fronts but that attitude was wearing me out.

A few weeks later, on mission to Northern Iraq, I began working out with an online women's fitness tribe, which taught fitness, nutrition, and spiritual practice as one connected practice. The supportive energy of the all-female group after training for so long in the dojo alone was a life savior at the time. From a safe distance, it offered me the tools I needed to pay more attention to how, what, when and why I ate. That helped me work through a very difficult phase of eating out of habit, comfort, and stress.

I also followed the group's three weekly strength and conditioning workouts on top of my karate classes, and finished each with a ten-minute guided meditation. Lying on the floor of a hotel room after an online workout in Erbil, in Northern Iraq, I let the sweat and tears roll down my face. The madness of thinking I could do it all was over and while I would miss this consulting role, I knew I had to move on, and my body was crying out for rest and care.

The positive attitude of the group leader began to rub off on me. Although she was a well-known fitness cover model, and not someone I would usually follow, she did not fit the stereotype that such images portray. Instead, she was a down-to-earth and socially astute businesswoman who knew exactly what busy and burned out women like myself needed on the fitness front. She knew we were doing too much and needed to slow down. While she was compassionate and empathic, she refused to treat us as victims. She believed we could do and deserved better, and those were the words I needed at the time.

I was under no illusion that my current state of burnout would need more recovery time. As December rolled in, I notified all my coaching clients that I would be unavailable for at least three weeks. Then I exited my consulting work and booked a solo spiritual pilgrimage for mid-December to Konya in Turkey, the final resting place of the Sufi dervish, *Mawlana Rumi*. There, I planned to enter a badly needed rest cave where nobody, not even my family, could find me. After that, for once there was no plan.

Before leaving, however, fate once more intervened. An old family friend was holding a Christmas fair at her music centre and asked if I'd like to showcase some of my Arabic calligraphy works. Not having any on hand, as I'd been too busy to create, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to switch my mind off and do something more freeing and fun.

For five solid days, I created non-stop. Taking well-known verses from the hadith, or sayings of the Muslim Prophet Mohammad, and words I loved like life, joy and love, I created

fourteen colourful designs with my bamboo reed pens. There was even time to frame most of them.

The following week, I set up my tiny stall, throwing a rustic blanket over the table and positioning my works of art at angles. One of the centre's music teachers was playing the saxophone and jubilant festive spirit was in the air.

As the visitors to the fair walked around, several stopped to comment on my works and pick up a small biography I had quickly put together. In it, I summarized the story of how violence and suffering had led me to art. From the paintings on prison cell walls to the political slogans and images sprayed on refugee camp buildings, art had always surrounded me on mission.

I may not have picked up a paintbrush or reed pen myself since my teenage years but the appreciation for such beauty and meaning never left me. Art had once again become a personal refuge as I left humanitarian work to set up my freelance coaching practice. For the first few months of my business, I made time to attend weekly Arabic calligraphy classes with a highly spirited lady from Asia.

My love of art and Arabic calligraphy fell into this spiritual container. It was a way I made sense of the suffering of the world. It offered a means to express what I myself could not put into words. Being able to share that in a small way at this fair brought another layer of comfort and a bridge to people from other places, who were curious enough to pause and engage.

One of those people who passed by my stall that day was a husband and wife who ran a sports equipment trading company. Their stall was positioned directly opposite mine and I had been checking out a very long punch bag on display for the better part of the morning. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what a punch bag was doing at Christmas craft fair, but it was to become another sign on my path.

**"Ah, you're also a martial artist!"** the wife exclaimed with a Scottish sounding accent as she read my biography. I had managed to squeeze that minor detail in there as one of my calligraphy styles was inspired by the martial arts.

**"We operate out of our showroom just around the corner from her,"** she continued. **"Why don't you stop by after the fair and we'll show you all our combat sports equipment?"**

Stumped by the direction the events of the day had taken, it took a moment for me to find my words. Last week I had been in Northern Iraq, this week I had been in my calligraphy cave, and now I was being invited to view a whole lot of martial arts attire. It was like my three worlds and three selves had suddenly collided.

**"Sure!"** I managed to say back, as I promised to see them later that day.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 2

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Karate practitioners must be completely aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and never become dazzled or blinded by conceit or overconfidence. Then they will be able to assess calmly and carefully the strengths and weaknesses of their adversaries, and create an ideal strategy.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 2 | *Enquiry*

Funakoshi is offering a lesson on self-awareness. This happens through a process of self-enquiry, enquiry of the environment and people around them, and personal reflection on both. He is advocating against developing a false sense of confidence and instead, developing the calm attitude that is needed to look truth in the eye, and position ourselves from there.

To reflect honestly about oneself is a journey in itself, as we all carry blind spots and cognitive biases. In this phase of my journey, I wasn't grounded enough to fully understand myself. I had yet to learn that a true understanding of self is much more complex than a personality analysis or breakdown of a person into different parts. Deep understanding of the self comes through ongoing enquiry into direct experience, and that takes time.

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### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*What does awareness or enquiry mean to you?*

*In which ways are you practicing self-awareness or enquiry today?*

## *Our younger selves might know a better way.*

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*“Mentality over technique.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 5)

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**T**he fair ended on a positive note. Although I had put my heart and soul into all of my creations, I hadn't expected to sell more than one or two and yet I had sold just over half.

Those who had passed by my little table had been intrigued by this English female artist of war, who had created traditional yet colorful designs in Arabic. I had been told by friends that it just didn't add up to people who didn't know me. I didn't fit neatly into the vast majority of existing reference points for a white English blonde, but who really fits into a neat box when we dare to scratch beneath the surface and find out who they really are?

Several women had paused a little longer, reading my biography. I had seen their bodies stiffen and knew from my years of karate training that something in what I had written had made them catch their breath. They didn't look at my work but they walked away with a thoughtful look in their eyes.

Packing up my stall, I remembered my promise to visit the couple who ran the combat sports showroom round the corner. Despite my ongoing fatigue, I felt excited as I made my way there. It was only now that the bright red flowing dress and high heels I had chosen to wear, which had seemed a perfect camouflage and recovery outfit for the fair, suddenly felt out of place.

Five minutes later, I was sitting in the company's office showroom lobby. Wall after wall was covered in sports equipment and attire and ahead of me was a corridor filled with black, blue and red shin guards, head guards and boxing gloves, and row after row of pristine white and dark blue martial arts suits. It was like a martial arts candy shop, and my eyes were popping in every direction. I was dying to stand up and look around, and try out some of the equipment, but didn't want to seem too eager either.

**“Come in!”** the wife laughed with a friendly smile. She had obviously caught me looking

around in awe.

The more talkative of the two, she ushered me into their head office where her husband was sat glued to his blackberry. They weren't martial artists themselves but they spent plenty of time around them at competitions, where they provided the teams' official attire. Judo was their main event, I learned, as they walked me around the showroom.

**"But we do karate too!"** the wife piped up, remembering that I was a karate practitioner.

She was an excellent sales woman with a meticulous eye for detail. Little did we both know that within months, this visit would inspire me to take up judo in the name of "book research" and, not long after that, question what kind of a karate practitioner I really was.

Keen to promote their business, they asked me if I taught martial arts classes.

**"No,"** I responded wistfully. **"I'm too busy building up my business, but I'd love to help create a martial arts and fitness event one day!"**

Inwardly, I felt deflated for a moment. My dream of being a martial arts and fitness role model still seemed so far away. In fact for every year of business that passed, I seemed to be getting further away from that starting line.

**"Well, when you're ready for that,"** the husband finally spoke up, **"drop us a line. We'll be happy to collaborate!"**

Driving home late that afternoon, the wintry sun had started to nestle its way onto the horizon. I wound the car window down. The air was cool and while my body was tired, my heart and soul felt uplifted. I realized that I was breathing deeply, slower than usual, all the way down to my belly and back up again.

After months of working on war and before that, months of writing my first book, I felt a tug of inspiration. Something was pulling me, demanding my attention, and it had taken the courage and faith to leave a regular income once more to find out what that message was.

More tests and trials awaited me, and the following year would almost break my spirit. My own war was not over yet; a ceasefire had simply been drawn. But in that moment, I was blissfully unaware and for a moment, felt free. That feeling was so much needed that I devoured it with all my senses.

A few nights later, I prepared for my trip to Konya. Out of habit, I had left it until the last minute to pack my suitcase. Years of being on the move had taught me to travel with barely a second thought. I also didn't own that much, at least not in terms of winter clothes, and Konya was set to be icy cold. The fact I didn't plan on meeting anyone there, other than the spirit of Rumi himself, further simplified the decisions around the packing process.

Into the suitcase I flung only what I needed. Two shawls, two pairs of jeans, five t-shirts,

three jumpers, two sets of pajamas, seven pairs of underwear, toiletries, protein shakes, my work out gear and a pair of trainers I'd wear on the flight. Being a sandal-wearing desert girl, it was just the socks that I forgot. Thankfully, I wore a pair on the flight and washing and drying them daily with the hotel hair drier would soon solve that problem.

An hour before the taxi arrived, I went to print my air ticket in the home office I had built in the lounge. Although I was excited about my trip, on the surface it sounded a little odd. I had effectively given up precious family time so I could sit at the feet of a dead man on the anniversary of his *'urs*, or wedding night, which in Sufi terms means his reunion with God.

Each year, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, Sufis and lovers and scholars of Rumi flock to Konya to pay their respects and honour this night of passing. Dervishes whirl in remembrance of God and pilgrims recite Rumi's poetic works in Farsi.

*'Allow yourself to be drawn by the beauty of what you love; it will not lead you astray.'* Those words of Rumi had guided me through so many dark moments of loss, defeat and despair and right now, they were a much needed flash light on my path.

Sufism was a mystical journey I had chosen to undertake years ago, as a younger karate student, and mysticism had always felt different to the practicalities of the traditional Japanese martial arts path, which seemed to fit more naturally with Zen. But like many areas of my life back then, I still had so much to learn. One of those things was to learn to look for the core of teachings, instead of getting distracted by the superficial layers.

Crouching under my office table, I bent down to unplug my printer from the wall. Distracted by all these wandering thoughts, I forgot to duck my head back under as I stood up. *Whack!* The top of my head ripped against the corner of drawer and warm blood instantly rippled through my blonde hair.

Self-control kicked in. Resisting the urge to curse, I quietly walked to the kitchen and applied pressure and ice. Years of having to operate under pressure had prepared me for such moments. It was just a small injury, just a blip in this much bigger journey. Caused by me rushing mindlessly.

When the top of my head hadn't stopped bleeding twenty minutes later, and I began to feel light headed, I reluctantly climbed into the car and drove myself to the emergency department at a nearby hospital. With just forty minutes left before the taxi's arrival, I was on a tight schedule. I calculated that the emergency department had just twenty minutes to stitch me back up and prayed there wouldn't be a queue.

**"You really shouldn't be flying,"** the doctor warned.

Missing my flight was not an option in my mind. I absolutely needed to go on this trip. My soul was about to break and nothing, not even a head injury, was going to hold me back.

*'The wound is the place where the light enters you,'* Rumi once wrote. Those were also the

opening words to my first book, *Wild Zen*, and I laughed at the irony of cracking my head open just as I was dashing to the airport to visit his final resting place.

**“This trip better bring some light into my life!”** I remember thinking to myself.

I made it home in time for the taxi’s arrival. On a whim, I ripped off my hand written business vision from the flip chart next to my desk. Konya wasn’t just about meeting Rumi or recovering from burnout. Nor was it just about whirling or meditation. There was a very real need for a quiet and neutral space to figure my business direction out.

I also needed a big dose of practicality to keep me on my business toes. That I brought in the form of my online workouts and several sports and martial arts podcasts, which I had already downloaded onto my mobile phone.

The dizziness continued hours later as I raced through Istanbul airport, just in time to catch the next flight to Konya. By the time I arrived, it was just before noon prayers and the frost had all but melted on the grey and dismal streets.

Although I was on a strict budget, I had purposely chosen to stay at a four star Hilton hotel. A week of rest and recovery was a must and I knew at the very least I’d be more likely to get a good night’s sleep in a decent hotel where I would also be safe. With a weary sigh, I collapsed onto the hotel room bed and held my head in my hands. I was glad I hadn’t allowed the emergency room staff to shave my head. It had taken a five-minute argument and time I could barely afford to lose but I had ultimately gotten my way.

From my bed, I could see the cultural centre where each night in the week leading up to the night of the seventeenth, Rumi’s dervishes would whirl in white tunics and skirts to the sound of drums and reed flute. I would be joining their audience the next night. Just a ten-minute walk in the other direction was Rumi’s mausoleum and final resting place. A bright blue pencil-like dome covers the area and tombs of other known Sufis surround him. On the other side of the mausoleum are historic artifacts on display, such as old Qur’ans and collections of his work, and to the far end are prayer and meditation spaces.

I quickly settled into a routine. Each morning at breakfast, I was careful to avoid the flow of strong Turkish coffee and sugary muffins, and choose the healthier options. After that, I would bind my body with my winter coat and wrap several thick and woolen shawls around shoulders, plug my podcast interview headphones into my ears for extra warmth, and set off for the short walk to Rumi’s resting place.

It should have seemed odd, perhaps even disrespectful or distracting, to be listening to fighters and athletes speak as I simultaneously reflected on Sufi prayers, Rumi poetry and *dhikr*, or the remembrance of God. But this was the combination my heart was asking for, and I was quietly trusting its pull.

Since my childhood, I had loved sports and martial arts with all my heart. I was also at one with my inner or spiritual life. Both lives lived in parallel made perfect sense. It was just in



my older years that life had seemed to lead me astray. The stress of living in the modern world and witnessing so many atrocities had made it hard to stay focused.

It wouldn't be long before I connected the dots. That to truly understand spiritual life and the martial arts, I would have to understand the art of beauty and the art of war. They are two sides of the same coin, beauty and war. We cannot have one without the other and yet both sides of the coin are still one.

Sufi practice and enquiry would help me to make sense of the deep longing of my heart for beauty and connection, while war and conflict would teach me that I could not live my life in a state of hermit-like bliss. There was work to be done and spiritual practice could not be an island unto itself. It wasn't enough to meditate, we had to make meditation a way of life. It wasn't enough to pray. Prayer had to become the way.

The material world was just as important as the spiritual world. One foot must be balanced in each. With each step forwards, we may lose our footing in the other momentarily but life was a process of figuring that out. Finding the right balance we need for each phase of our life to go where we are drawn, and do all that we must.

The other parallel I found in Sufism and the martial arts was the invitation to surrender. In both, it is possible to practice the aesthetics or shape of the art. We can sit in Sufi meditation, chanting or silently repeating the names of God, but if our spirits are not moved by the practice, we are only going through the motions. There will be no inner residue left over from our efforts or significant transformation, just an outer performance for the world to see and judge.

It is the same with the martial arts. Anyone who is able-bodied can learn the shape of a martial art but to truly embody it takes years of practice and ultimately, surrender. We will need to be cracked open or broken in other ways before the spirit of our martial art can move us. The more we resist, the more painful that breaking open will be, at least if we stay the course and do not walk away, or fool ourselves with its aesthetics.

Many hard lessons lay in wait for me on the other side of Konya. The next year would be one of my most difficult years yet and I would have only these few weeks of pause and respite. But in the warmth of my hotel room, I could lay my fears and worries down just for a moment. Ignorance was bliss and in that state of quiet surrender, I could finally get the rest I needed to see more clearly what to do about the state of my life and work.

One night, after a whirling dervish performance, I pulled out my business vision flip chart paper and laid it across the bed. Down the middle was a long vertical line moving upwards. It symbolized the next ten years of my career. On the top left was violence prevention and self-defense. On the top right was an intention to coach politicians. The idea of coaching politicians had arrived clear as day during my coach training.

**“Are you sure politicians can be coached?”** my coach trainer had enquired, raising her eyebrows and silently highlighting the need for pure coaching to have no agenda.

And yet my work had shown me that they could be coached, for they more than most were struggling to find a work and life balance. It just doesn't exist for people working on the front lines. Years of talking with political figures and prisoners had taught me that.

The sacrifices politics demands of us are difficult to explain to people who do not work in this field. Political people – and by this term I include all striving for a better world, including humanitarians and human rights workers – find it almost impossible to switch off and put themselves first.

The guilt that follows can seep out in so many ways with unhealthy addictions being one of just a few. Being coached to just think straight and process their often-complex emotions could certainly help create a better world.

On the flip chart paper, I had marked out at the bottom of the vertical line where I stood on each side of my career path today. On the left was my love of martial arts and past humanitarian work on prisons, conflict and violence. On the right was my political, media and communications work, coach training and current coaching practice.

I stepped back from the bed. Looking at my crumpled vision, I realized I too had felt flattened every step of the way. Every time I took a step forwards on the left I lost my footing on the right and vice versa. It was exhausting to keep both versions and visions of me alive. One of them had to go, or somehow, both needed to be transformed into one.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't keep living this double life any longer; it was taking all my strength to hold two visions that were so big and bright. I could not carry them both alone, nor had I found anyone with whom I could share their burden. I either needed a life and work partner to share this journey with – and such a person was nowhere to be found – or I would have to scale back to achieve a small part of it alone.

**“Tear the paper up,”** an inner voice quietly said.

**“I can't do that,”** I answered. **“I need it. How will I know where I'm going next?”**

**“You don't need it anymore,”** the voice responded. **“Your heart already knows the way”**

I scrambled for more words from this inner voice but it was gone. It had spoken so clearly and concisely then poof! It had escaped me and turned to dust.

Alone in the safety of my hotel room, away from the fatigue and burnout of my life, I gathered the courage to do what I had been afraid to do for so long. I picked up the vision of my work and life and gently tore it to pieces.

It took several minutes to let go of the visual that had driven and divided me in my everyday life and work for months on end. I let the torn pieces burn to ashes in my mind. When I was done, I carried the pieces of my dream to the bin and threw them away.

Now, in the emptiness of my room, there really was nothing other than that which already lay within. I took that emptiness back to Rumi's rose garden the next day. Frozen over with the winter frost, there wasn't a single rose in sight. I could only see the thorns dotted around the bushes and stayed well clear. I knew too well just how painful those thorns could be if I were to get too close.

After my daily visit to the tomb, I found my regular spot at a cafe on the other side of the mausoleum grounds, where I ordered a pomegranate tea. It didn't bother me in the slightest that I was coming to drink tea each day at what was essentially one big graveyard. In fact I felt quite at home in the surroundings.

Graveyards had never bothered me. I had had several early encounters with death and humanitarian work had only highlighted further the fact that life was temporary, and that we were all just guests passing through. Although I loved life, I was quite practical when it came to the final resting place of souls. The spiritual life had always made sense to me.

As I cupped my freezing hands around the warmth of my teacup, the words of one of my favourite teenage songs passed through my mind.

**"Every rose has its thorn, just like every night has its dawn"** Bret Michaels, the leader of an American rock band, Poison, sang.

**"Oh, yes, it most certainly does!"** I smiled to myself, remembering that little fiery girl who won so many swimming races and had heavy metal posters plastered all over her bedroom walls. How had I lost sight of *her* along the way?

Much of my return to Dubai a few years earlier had been about finding her. So much of my life had become fragmented and compartmentalized by the time I reached my early thirties, I knew I had to come home and figure it out.

Finding this younger version of myself was key to moving forwards with the rest of my life. But knowing that hadn't made the search and rescue part any easier for in order to find her, first I had to grieve. That grief had hit me like a sledgehammer.

In the frozen sanctuary of Rumi's rose garden, I connected with this younger self, the little sports girl who loved nothing more than throwing on her karate suit and taking herself off to class. She didn't expect anyone to give her a hand.

Sports and martial arts weren't the same thing to her but they did offer a comforting space for her fiery spirit. She had had dreams of swimming the English Channel one day and then, year after year, the tides turned against her.

First, there was a near fatal horse fall at the age of eleven. That, and watching the cult eighties movies like *The Karate Kid*, had pretty much led me to the martial arts. Then, there was the sexualization of my body before I was ready. A couple of near misses with British sailors at

the age of twelve had left me feeling confused. Stationed in town for the second Gulf War, which was unfolding in neighbouring Kuwait, our paths had collided in the most unexpected of ways, leaving crumbs for me to pick up almost two decades later.

By thirteen, I was attending a strict all girls' secondary education provided by the government. With a reputation for being the best in education at the time, I was fortunate to be given a place at the school.

While we had access to the best sports equipment money could buy, there were no further opportunities to compete externally. Without a sports outlet for the first time in my life, I began to feel restless. Trouble lurked everywhere I turned in that first year of adapting to a slower pace of life, where grades were the only indicator of success.

In the first year, I took my restless energy out on the tennis courts at lunch with a South African friend. But after she left, there was nothing to do other than get my head down and study hard. Besides, I needed to make up for the worry I had caused my parents in the first year when I had almost been expelled for bringing one of my heavy metal videos onto the school premises to lend my South African friend.

Her mother had lodged an official complaint when her daughter brought the video home. The next day, both of our bags were searched without our consent and we were both dragged into the English headmistress's office. One by one, we were called before her. My friend went first and despite a face full of freckles, came out white as a sheet.

I was nervous but I also couldn't figure out what on earth I had done wrong. Which incident was I in trouble for? Was it the other week when I had been told off for talking about oral sex in the corridor with the other girls? Was it for being moody in class?

**"Do you understand why you are here, Claire?"** the headmistress boomed in her usual intimidating voice.

Her eyes were stern and I wished I knew the right answer to her question as a part of me still wanted to play the role of the obedient student. But something about her tone told me I wasn't meant to open my mouth, at least not yet. When she pulled the heavy metal video out from under her table I was flummoxed.

**"What do you have to say about this!"** she demanded.

A blank expression washed across my face. I genuinely didn't understand what was wrong. That was my video and there was nothing unusual about it, except for the fact it was now on her table, and I was being interrogated about it as if I were a criminal.

**"That's mine,"** I responded quietly, racking my brains on how it could have landed on her desk.

**"And where did you get it from?"** she boomed back with a half wild look in her eyes.

My father had bought me the video from HMV records store in London during one of his business trips. Titled, *Hard 'n' Heavy*, it was labeled for persons eighteen years and over and covered with images of heavy metal stars with long hair and black studded outfits. I suspected it was those images were upsetting her.

While I carried no guilt or shame over liking such a video, her reaction seemed to insinuate that my father had done something quite wrong. Perhaps even criminal! Because I wanted to protect him, I wasn't sure whether to tell the truth or find a way to lie. Not one to lie, and being quite certain there was nothing wrong, I told the truth.

**"My father gave it me,"** I responded, looking her honestly in the eye.

**"Well then!"** she quipped, trying to conceal her horror. **"I'll just have to have words with your parents about that!"**

With that, I was dismissed and sent home early. By the time I reached home, there were thirteen messages from her on the family answer phone. My middle sister who attended the same school with me played them back when she came home later.

**"Mr and Mrs Higgins,"** she demanded, as if they were also twelve-year-old children. **"I kindly request that you call me back as soon as possible. Your daughter is in a significant amount of trouble!"**

I would survive that incident – my parents' perspective and sense of humour made sure of that – but there is no doubt that the subsequent "investigation" into my character made it hard for me to ever be myself again at that school.

Over the following days, I was threatened with expulsion, a terrifying thought for an expatriate child with a tendency towards catastrophic thinking. To my young and inexperienced mind, if I were expelled, our family's character would be called into question. My father would lose his job because he had bought me the video and, if that happened, we would all lose our residence status. Then we would all be homeless.

That was when a lifelong feeling of not being settled or safe set in. Irrational thoughts landed like aliens out of nowhere. Never had I felt so terrified and the worst thing was, I couldn't even understand why I should feel ashamed. I was one of the highest performing students in my year who just so happened to like Guns 'n' Roses and Metallica, as well as the more preppy boy bands, like New Kids On The Block. What was wrong with that?

I quietly resolved never to be a nuisance again. Little did I know that choosing not to speak up, and no longer feeling safe to be myself, would set a precedent for many years of doing the same in other places. The price I would later have to pay to get my freedom back would one day lead me to Rumi's tomb and rose garden, where I would pick this younger version of myself up, wrap her in my arms, and quietly carry her home, where she belonged. She had been wandering in the cold and dark for far too long.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 3

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*"Mental faculties are more important than technique. The former must rise above the latter."*

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### INNER STRENGTH 3 | *Authenticity*

Funakoshi is talking about a student's mindset here. A person can learn the movements of karate but if they haven't understood the meaning behind them and their application, and cannot bring their own spirit to them, they will not be able to think outside the box. They may become overly dependent on the rulebook.

In my life, I knew I couldn't be everything at once. Technically, I was fairly good at consulting and often, I even enjoyed it. But this was skills-oriented talent and based on competencies I had acquired, not my original self. There were other parts of me that lay dormant, and these parts needed to be heard if I was to find and express my authentic self.

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### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*What does your natural self look like?*

*When do you find it easiest to be yourself?*

## *Listen to your older, wiser self.*

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*“Karate goes beyond the dojo.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 8)

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**D**espite the scary threat of expulsion, my young spirit wasn't an easy one to tame. Because I felt I could no longer be myself, confusion, anger, and resentment began to seep in.

Several years of strict secondary schooling, coupled with dojo training, had taught me to tow the line. They had both chiseled me into a determined A-grade student and disciplined director of my destiny, which came in handy during my later studies and work. Those traits helped me to find good jobs after university, and they were often the cause of awe or envy among my peers. I came to rely on them only to find they weren't always enough. If they were my hard and fiery *yang*, I also needed traits that were softer and more flexible *yin*.

Over the years, life sent many *yin* lessons my way, inviting me to slow down and surrender but, like most people who are driven by fear, I blindly walked by. For many years, I was dealing with several unresolved and unaired traumas, which took a longer time than I expected to unpack and put to rest. Because of being wired for stress and uncertainty from a young age, my nervous system and insides had come to expect the negative pressure. I was well trained to perform regardless of whether those pressures were healthy or not.

For a while, I could handle an amount of stress that seemed to surpass the capacity of many people I knew at the time, and I suspect my early karate training and self-control helped there. So too did my stubborn and proud resolve. But there was a tipping point at which this kind of resilience began to break down, and the time it took to replenish its stocks got longer and longer. Mental toughness, my bedrock in chaos, was no longer enough, and I was depleting my spiritual reserves.

As a result of all the mental pressure I invited into my world, and my diminishing capacity to handle that, my body started taking longer to bounce back, and it was emotional stress that was at the core. No matter what I did in life, I just didn't feel safe. The fact it was now gaining weight despite me training over seven hours a week was literally a cry for help.

In my mind, there was the life I led before Konya, which was driven by a need for control and

certainty, and the life that came after, when I stepped off the beaten track of freelance work and wandered into a big unknown. In between stood a challenging transition that started with a bang on the first of January, just days after my return from Turkey. I had spent New Year's Eve at the beach with a French friend going through a nasty divorce. She brought baked brie and bread, I brought quinoa and broiled peaches, in my ongoing attempt to be a bit healthier.

We pooled our culinary delights, opened a flask of hot tea, and dug our bare toes into the dark, cold sand. Around us were many others waiting to see the firework displays, mostly families and young kids. As the clock struck midnight, the black ocean was suddenly set ablaze with a torrent of firework displays, catching us by surprise. For a few minutes, we all burst into brilliance with them. Children were laughing and people were hugging and kissing each other.

I turned to my friend and gave her a big hug. This didn't look like it was going to be the easiest year for her and the one just gone hadn't exactly been kind either. But she had the strength she needed to keep going. She didn't need pity and neither did I.

Just as quickly as the dance of fire had begun, the light went out, leaving us in near darkness. It was too cold to stay much longer and our conversation had run out of steam, so we packed our picnic up and parted ways. As we walked towards our cars, I tried to text my partner in his hometown to wish him a happy new year but I couldn't get a connection. The mobile phone lines must have been going crazy with all the excitement that comes with ringing in a new year. So I texted my family overseas and put my phone away. We could all talk tomorrow.

I drove home in a quiet mood and after giving my dogs a big hug each, dived under my duvet. I was cold and tired, and I wished my partner were there beside me. Since Konya I had been spending a lot of time at the beach, walking alongside the waves, wondering how to turn my business around. A walk on the beach with a family friend just before my trip had revealed a powerful image that hadn't left me, and I knew it held the key to where I must travel next.

When the family friend suggested I check in with my older and wiser self, the image that appeared in my mind was crystal clear. I saw myself as a woman in her seventies or eighties, kneeling in meditation in the middle of a large dojo with a yellow-tinged wooden floor. The room was sparsely decorated, in a simple Zen style. She had shoulder-length white hair, tied in a loose bun, and was dressed in a white martial arts uniform or *gi*. A worn black belt that was almost white was molded around her waist.

Peering closely, I could see her belly rise and fall with each deep breath. Her demeanor was one I had not seen or felt before, certainly not in me. Although she was old, her body was strong and sinewy with lean muscle, and her presence was quietly and unassumingly powerful. Her wrinkled hands rested on her knees. Something about the way she sat told me she was in deep meditation but should anyone try to attack her, those hands would stop him or her dead in their tracks.

A man was in the dojo, and I assumed he was her partner but I couldn't see him yet. I sensed



he was hiding behind a screen at the far end. I tried to walk to the back of the room to find him but I couldn't get further than half way, as the image abruptly ran out. I could see the screen from afar but I couldn't get closer to discover the man who stood behind it. He shared her passion for the martial arts but it was clear that he wasn't ready to be seen, and she was protecting him. She always had.

I willed my older self to open her eyes and look at me but she wouldn't. They remained closed, peaceful and alert at the same time. She knew I was there beside her but she too wasn't ready to meet me yet. Or probably it was I who was not ready to meet either of them yet. That would happen in her time, not mine, and there would be no way of rushing either.

I knew in my bones that this old woman I had seen in my mind's eye was a vision of my future self but the question that lingered was, how do I become her? How do I become this woman who seems to possess an inner strength from times gone by? How could I learn to sit with such courage and conviction, as if I hadn't a care in the world?

And yet I also knew she had weathered many storms. Her serene face was lined and each line told a story of where she had been, what she had seen, and all she had released. She possessed very little in life and that both fascinated and worried me. She was also ready to leave this world a better person than the one she had once been. Not better or worse than the next person, just better than the younger woman she had once been. The woman that I now was.

She didn't open her eyes until another eighteen months had passed. Each time I revisited the memory of my future self, she refused to give a clue until after I had been broken by a series of disasters. Even then, without looking my way, her energy would force me to stand back on my feet and regain my centre, before she faded away.

When she finally turned to look at me, almost six months after my trip to Konya, I realized there would be no turning back. I would be walking *her* path from now on, and that path would demand and take almost everything of me. It would force me to drop my self-pity stories and start becoming this fierce woman who could lead herself through barren and desolate times, and was capable of choosing a better partner who could match her pace.

My inner compass was set and the direction in which I was heading was clear. I would become strong and powerful like her, this was my fate and it was cast in stone. My karate story was no longer passing my second dan grading later that year, when I would have an opportunity to test again, but to deal with the many blows of life and work that would keep coming my way. Karate was to become my anchor in a very stormy world.

I was woken early on New Year's Day by a Skype phone call. Seeing my present day partner's name flash up on the mobile screen, I smiled, expecting a cheery message and news that he might miss me.

**"I divorced her,"** he said, before I could even ask how he was. **"In the street. Just like that. I hadn't planned to but I was so angry. I just couldn't stop myself."**

Although they had been separated for eighteen months, a custody fight over their children was holding him back from following through on divorce. As a devoted father, he couldn't bear the thought of being separated from them yet the legal battle to find a win-win situation hadn't worked out.

A peaceful and tolerant man by nature, he had finally snapped and uttered the Islamic divorce statement, I divorce you, three times in front of witnesses. Within hours, the official paperwork was processed and now, the three months waiting period for it to be finalized had begun.

What should have been a positive step forwards as a couple – his freedom – was a terrible blow for him and his children. Acutely aware that my presence could further complicate an already difficult process for his family, I took a deep breath, suppressed my feelings and stepped aside. I needed him more than ever but now was not the time to express that.

Later, in a moment of self-pity, I cried alone. Why did the people I love not have the ability to show up when I needed them most? There was always something or someone more important than me, and I was always stepping to one side. *You go first, I'll wait.* That was how I felt I had lived my life. I waited but my turn seemed to take forever to come.

It sounded like an old childhood story, of being the youngest child and feeling forgotten. I just didn't have the volume or confidence my sisters seemed to have, and so I had to find another way to find my self-worth. First I found it in sports and after, I found it in the dojo. My dojo training had always mirrored exactly what I was worth. There were no complications in the dojo, just the truth, and truth had always offered me a safe space from the storms around me.

A few days later, I sat down at my desk knowing I must follow my heart. It was calling for a more athletic foundation to my executive coaching work. The time had come to bring in my martial arts spirit if I was to continue any further as a coach. I had to be *more* of myself, not trying to dull myself down to be what the market expected. I had to share everything I knew about how to perform in life and work, and turn away from anything that could risk sending me elsewhere.

The phrase, *Performance, Mindset and Motivation*, appeared in my mind. No doubt the sports and martial arts podcasts I had been listening to had kick started this new angle to my coaching work. I didn't want to be a sports or martial arts coach - at least not yet - but I did want to draw on the principles I knew inside out to offer my clients a different angle to their professional and personal development.

Within days, I emailed all of my contacts, introducing my new performance-driven approach. In just ten minutes, I received my first response. A former one-on-one client and community business owner wanted to hire me to develop her executive management team. She said it was perfect timing, and asked if I could please pass by that very week to discuss the finer details.

Things appeared to be falling into place. By the time I turned thirty-seven, a couple of months later in Spring, my own coaching framework, *The Intelligence Map*, was born. Based on eight

streams of intelligence - psychology, emotions, somatics, environment, society, relationships, spirituality, and ancestry - the map laid out a framework of tools for people to acquire so that they could better communicate and perform at work. The map would later become a mapping tool for strategy, leadership, resilience and conflict but right now, it was just beginning to emerge.

Intelligence work wasn't an unknown area in executive coaching. Emotional IQ had hit the scene in a big way with Daniel Goleman's book on it, and empathy was now the big buzzword. A couple of professional coach training bodies had tried to recruit me into training in their intelligence systems. One followed a cultural intelligence path and the other focused on relationships. I found both quite narrow but interesting in and of themselves as pieces in a wider puzzle. But I had hesitated due to lack of funds, and a niggling feeling that my own background was calling me to develop my own unique system.

Deep down, I felt that with time and effort, my own intelligence mapping system could do a better job. It wasn't arrogance, as I knew I had several years of hard work ahead of me. Right now, I was still in incubation phase. Much of the foundation for this map had been laid during the writing of my first book, *Wild Zen*, the previous year. A self-published venture, the book had resonated with readers who had dared to pick it up and finally, word of it had made its way to the *Inspirational Creatives* podcast.

A friend had put me in touch with the podcast host, a friendly creative professional named Rob based in the UK. One afternoon, he carefully picked my brain on how I managed to stay creative in the face of fear. His question took me by surprise and I found myself sharing lessons from the past as well as those I had only recently learned. It was perhaps the first time I was sharing these thoughts aloud, and I didn't hold back.

**“The nature of coaching invites us into a conversation where we need to drop our guard,”** I said. **“To drop the bullshit and face what is and isn't working for us.”**

It's hard to feel creative when we're cooped up in layers of untruths as most of our energy is spent hiding rather than expressing. The first step to gracefully and confidently confront fear, I believed, was to express ourselves to someone who won't judge us. It could be a friend with a high degree of self-awareness, or a coach or other professional. Someone who could witness us without interruption or effort to “fix” the places in which we may feel unworthy.

When we hear back from our witness what we have said, without embellishment or distortion, we have a chance to decide if the story we're telling is really the only one. That can give us the perspective we need to identify other choices or narratives we would rather pursue. From there we can confront or move through the fear in big or small steps, breaking the steps down as much as we need to get where we wanted to go.

Throughout the interview, I found myself reflecting on the path I had chosen as a traditional martial artist. In my post Konya life, I started to feel safer to be a martial artist out of the dojo, without relying on my suit or belt to tell me apart.

Through overcoming many of my own shortcomings, I was better able to relate to those of others. While I had always been a high performer and effective communicator in my work, that didn't mean I hadn't struggled. Dropping the bullshit and facing my own demons prior to becoming a coach had made it easier to help others do the same.

By the time I sat down on my thirty seventh birthday, I was ready to once more do the same. Seated at a celebration lunch with my parents in the heart of one of Dubai's most eco-friendly reserves, I completely dropped my guard.

**“I'm not happy with my coaching business,”** I confessed out of the blue. **“I need to follow my passion for sports and the martial arts.”**

I had proven I was capable of engaging in performance, mindset and motivation coaching work, and that gave me a feeling of fulfillment. But I couldn't kick the desire to follow my first love of sports and martial arts. I saw myself coaching people in sports clothes and martial arts suits, not in business attire.

By leaving the humanitarian sector, I had definitely taken steps in the right direction but still, I wasn't there. I still felt lost at sea and it was frustrating. Why couldn't it be a straight line for once? Why did every step have to involve a battle or blow?

My unexpected confession was met with silence at first, and then my father spoke.

**“But how are you going to make that move in a market like Dubai?”** he asked out of concern, knowing just how tough the job market had become and how hostile it could be to someone like myself who lacked mainstream experience.

**“I don't know,”** I replied honestly. **“But somehow, I'm going to find a way.”**

Later that week, I picked up the only two business cards I had for contacts in the sports and martial arts world. The husband and wife I had met at the fair several months earlier had told me to get in touch if I had a concrete idea. It wasn't quite the big event dream I had mentioned but I figured what was brewing up inside of me was worth a shot.

**“You need to offer something with an edge,”** the wife said astutely, as she scrutinized my first business card.

It was a tastefully designed card with a creative logo and burst of colour. It looked good but it revealed very little about myself.

**“There are so many coaches out there in the sports world and corporate sector,”** she continued, as she listened to my initial pitch. **“You need something bigger to stand out in the crowd.”**

This time, I felt her looking me up and down. Suddenly feeling smaller and less sure than I really was, I pushed my glasses further up my nose and asked her what she meant. I was both

curious and astounded that after all I had done in my short life, to someone in her position it still wasn't enough.

**“Martial arts is a good way to combine what you do as a coach with what people need in the workplace. It would definitely appeal to some people but not everyone. You need to state more boldly that this is who you are. That's what it means to stand out in the crowd.”**

Making my way home, I passed by the garden centre. I had taken to stopping off there in between coaching sessions for a cup of coffee and this time, one of the statues caught my eye. A waist-high iron cast Tang dynasty warrior set in heavy stone met my gaze, stopping me in my tracks.

Instinctively, I knew that he was coming home with me. It wouldn't be the first time that I'd brought a warrior home but he was to be the first one I'd had to buy and was actually set in stone!

Minutes later, I heaved his heavy weight into the backseat of my car. Propping him horizontally on his side, I looked him in the eye and told him that his one and only purpose from now on was to protect my martial arts and athletic dream. Come what may, I must never waver from this path that would fuel my work and life.

I called him Mr Tang and for the next year, he stood on guard outside my bedroom and then, outside of the home. When I eventually moved houses, I positioned him in my new home dojo and gym. He never once let me down on my mission, his eyes ever alert to the many trials that came my way, to test my resolve.

He stood a couple of meters from the Samurai Princess, a larger than life Geisha canvas print that hung over my home dojo and gym. My mother found her sad and depressing but I thought she represented hope and beauty. I had brought her home the year after returning to Dubai, and tasked her with the process of helping me to rediscover my feminine self.

The different aspects of myself were naturally merging. The traditional warrior who didn't hesitate to go off to tend to the aftermath of war, the younger and more unruly sports girl who had once been threatened with expulsion, and who loved nothing more than to win, and the woman I was becoming, who was learning to appreciate her own beauty and rebuild her hope in life, love and work. Together, these parts were destined to take me somewhere greater, only I couldn't quite see it then.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 4

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“The objective of karate-do is to polish and nurture both the mind and body. The cultivation of one’s spirit and mental attitude begun during practice in the dojo should not cease after the physical and mental exertions end for the day. Rather, this should continue outside the dojo, in our daily routine.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 4 | *Integration*

Funakoshi is reminding us not to forget our mind in training. The body is important as a martial artist, for it is a vehicle for our expression and a weapon of defense, but so too is the mind. We are more than machines in the *dojo*, we are spiritual and psychological beings. Cultivating physical, mental and spiritual strength is really a way of life.

At the time, I was learning how to integrate the different areas of myself as a coaching professional. I had a dream but I didn’t know how to achieve it. Until then, my practice had been very much on the mental and emotional level. So much of me was missing, including my physical and spiritual sides. This required a better alignment in my professional life.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How do you cultivate your mind, body, and spirit?*

*Which dreams do you have that you are ready to act on?*

## *Following my natural strengths.*

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*“Perform kata exactly; actual combat is another matter.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 18)

~

**W**hen I was younger, my eldest sister bought me a small plaque for one of my birthdays. Written on it was the honorary title, *‘Award Winning Author At Work’*. I have yet to achieve anything so grand but the spirit of the plaque lives on in my everyday work.

If sport was my first passion as a headstrong Aries child, reading and writing were next. My sensitive Cancer rising nature excelled in anything related to languages and the written word. Unlike maths and science, which were an increasingly hard slog, with languages I put in what felt like very little effort in return for high grades.

Many years later, in Positive Psychology, I would learn that creativity is my top strength, followed by curiosity and love of learning. This clearly made it much easier for me to excel in the written and spoken. English was my mother tongue but, by the time I graduated at 23, I would also be fluent in Arabic with a good command of French and Farsi. Six years later, I would be managing a humanitarian communications department and six years after that, coaching and advising on media and communications and facilitating complex strategic processes.

I love digging deep and wide into areas I’m passionate about. Many people tend to do one or the other but I often have a desire to do both. For example, I couldn’t just attend yoga workshops and classes as a student. Nor could I train to teach just one style. I studied and trained widely, brought the lessons into my own practice, and then taught from there. It was the same in my coaching practice and it can be both a gift and a burden, although these days it is becoming much more of the former.

With a naturally inquisitive mind and a double dose of Aries spontaneity and fire, I only have to have my interest sparked in order for me to take action. The desire to write my first book, *Wild Zen*, had been calling me closer for years. People were starting to ask me why I didn’t share what I had learned about life and I began to wonder the same.

I saw there was an interest in what I had to say among a narrow group of people who were tired of ten step formulas to success that inspired them up for a moment, and later left them feeling short changed. They were people like myself who had endured challenges and were looking for a way to move beyond them. Intelligent people like myself who had realized life wasn't all that easy to figure out. They understood that complexity and nuances matter very much when it comes to making sense of the meaning of one's life.

But the desire and inspiration to write a book, and writing a few blog posts on that, are very different from actually doing the deed itself. It's one thing to contemplate a dream from afar and another to actually roll your sleeves up and do the hard work required. Writing my first book during the first year of my executive coaching practice almost killed both myself *and* my business with a single bullet, yet I was incapable of putting down my pen.

To make things feel more unfair, while writing *Wild Zen*, I contributed a chapter freely to a book of health recovery compilations. When the editor interviewing me asked if I would like to pay several hundred dollars to be listed as a co-author and have my website mentioned at the end of the chapter, I stared back blankly. *Why on earth would I pay to publish my own work? And why would I hunt for coaching clients through publishing a book?*

I declined and said she could freely use my chapter of healing from eczema and a teenage sexual assault. Then I signed a contract agreeing not to share that exact same story for a year.

It was mind-boggling. I was still relatively fresh in the coaching world and was only just beginning to understand that many online coaches literally paid to have their name known. When this book finally came out, just weeks after I released *Wild Zen*, sure enough, my name wasn't listed along with several others who had also declined. But my entry was chosen as the first chapter and the book zoomed onto the Amazon bestseller list.

This book hit the bestseller list due to strategic positioning tactics while my book was all but invisible. Writing this book's first chapter had taken all of one hour while writing took five months. During this time I had little time to coach and consult so I effectively operated without an income. It had also taken a lifetime to live. Once more I learned that the ethical way wasn't fair but deep down, it was the only way that felt right to me.

It was a bittersweet moment. Knowing several of the other co-authors, and having read their entries, I had to admit that it was a well-edited book with uplifting stories of health and healing. I supported its empowering message of taking control of our mental and physical health, but I just couldn't align my values with the strategy. That threw me into a flummox as a counter argument to this was that, as a result of the editor's positioning tactics, the book could now reach many more people who needed it. And that made sense to me too.

In my early days of coaching, there were many moments when I wished I wasn't so principled and intense. Why couldn't I be like other coaches with flashy PR-driven headlines, who (in my mind) seemed to copy and paste each other's work? Or drive a gimmicky online marketing scheme that targeted and magnified people's vulnerabilities, and make them think



that being coached by me was their answer to a better life?

My martial arts and family values of truth and integrity ran too deep. In all my professional roles, I had held myself to a standard of excellence. As I gradually figured out the ‘hit and run’ and ‘quick-fix’ coaching industries, my stomach began to turn. I believed in hard work and building a solid reputation over time. I was proud of my work but I did my best to keep it in perspective. I was a fairly new coach, at least in terms of running a practice, and a first time business owner. *Why wouldn't it take a while to get the hang of that?*

A vision of my older and wiser self flashed across my mind. This was her life too, the one that had left her hands strong and wrinkled from every blow she had blocked, and every punch she had thrown back. She had sat through situations much worse than this, and she knew that illness and death would come to us all. I knew I was seeing her kneeling and breathing in her final days and hours, and that was a sobering source of comfort.

None of us are getting out of here alive, that was for sure, so my personal philosophy was that I might as well stay true to my values and myself, even if it didn't make much business sense. There were many marketing tricks I should have been using in those early days but I just couldn't stomach the majority of them. Client safety and protection was my priority, then delivering a quality service, which entailed sessions, reporting, and correspondence. That alone was enough to juggle.

I didn't want to be fed the fast food equivalents of personal and professional development, nor did I wish to feed cut and paste rubbish to the people who I wanted to serve. If I couldn't do this properly, I wouldn't do it at all. I would rather fall into ruin or wash dishes.

Doing it properly meant listening to the messages of my inner world. My soul, who rules that terrain, and had led me to write *Wild Zen*, was telling me that another book was on its way. Writing *Cherry Blossom Dojo* was about six months away but I needed to start shifting myself towards it from now. She warned me that this would not be an easy path. As hard as it was to write *Wild Zen*, this piece of work would be harder, for it would demand every ounce of strength I had left.

To write a book about inner strength, and evolve my coaching practice, I would have to live that way first. I would have to understand what inner strength meant at every level – mind, body, heart, and soul – and that meant knowing what the opposite was first hand. For that, I would need courage to confront the disappointment, defeat, and despair that are near constant companions on such a road. But as the Brazilian author, Paulo Coelho, once wrote, I should not be afraid for those would be the tools God would use to show me the way.

Writing has always been this way for me, a message from my soul to the outer world. She has a habit of stopping time and separating me from the world around me. I knew this and so, it was with much trepidation as Winter transitioned into Spring, that I entered the *Cherry Blossom Dojo* writing cave.

Her message was to write a book on my own martial arts dream and journey. In the same way

writing *Wild Zen* had allowed me to get clear on my past, and construct new and more empowering narratives using the framework of Jungian Archetypes, *Cherry Blossom Dojo* would share in real time the making of myself into a stronger female martial artist. It would mark a turning point in how I lived my life, and it wouldn't hide any of the messy bits.

If the first half of my life had been about violence, conflict, and humanitarian work, the second half would be about business, academia and the martial arts. This journey would also be about returning to my childhood home. I would need to reveal the truth, and nothing but the truth, of what it *really* took to make such a U-turn halfway through my life.

There would be no overnight success story to tell. My readers would need to know why and how I failed, and why my sharing that mattered to them. There was also no guarantee of a happy ending. This book would be the antidote to the modern day quick-fix success story. It would be real and because of that, it would be quietly reassuring to readers who were finding that the search for inner strength was a multi-layered endeavor, rather than a five-step pursuit.

**“You have to be kidding me”, I whispered back to my soul. “Isn’t it enough that writing *Wild Zen* almost killed me? Do I really have to sit down and go through that process all over again?”**

**“This time it will be different,” the voice whispered back. “This time you will do *everything* differently. This time you will ask for help. This time you will pace yourself. This time you will learn.”**

After my thirty seventh-birthday confession to my parents, who now expected me to pack up my coaching business and find an actual salaried job in the sports or martial arts field, I knew I had to take another step. I had to follow my martial arts path but hard as I tried, I couldn't visualise myself showing up to a corporate sports retail job, and I couldn't think of an actual functioning dojo in Dubai that would take me on as a karate teacher.

Besides, I knew from helping my own karate teacher that teaching karate was tough. Most students were consciously or subconsciously looking for instant results and gratification, and the karate path promises anything but that. Especially Shotokan karate, the style we practiced, with the years it takes to master the lower stances. In some of my classes, I could spend over one hour practicing just one stance, searching for a millimeter of progress here and there, and for my mind and body to shift into a new space of mastering the technique.

I knew I had to write this book to understand how to proceed with my coaching practice, and I knew I needed help. So I turned to a successful martial arts author and English language university professor based in the States, whose work I had long admired.

Diane Dreher, or just Diane as I came to know her, had written numerous books inspired by the *Tao Te Ching*, a classic Chinese text in the martial arts. I saw a part of myself reflected in her gentle but courageous way of self-expression, which I took as a positive omen. She even looked like an older and wiser version of myself, with her long blonde hair and ready smile. Although she seemed worlds away in California, I instinctively knew she was the one who

could help me figure the messiness of this life-love-work quest out.

Being an Aries means that I don't hesitate to take big and bold steps. Although I can be introverted, life has taught me that if I don't speak up and ask I'll never know for sure. And I felt in my heart I should reach out and ask Diane to be my writing coach. My intuition told me that she was the right person to guide me through the process of constructing *Cherry Blossom Dojo*.

To my surprise, several days later there was a reply in my email inbox. She had responded positively to my email request. Not only that, but by chance, she was in the midst of a one-year training programme as a Positive Psychology coach, and was willing to take me on as one of her early clients at a reduced student rate.

I sat there staring at my computer screen in disbelief. There I was, wondering if she would even respond, and expecting that even if she did I would only be able to afford a few coaching sessions at most. And there she was, a long-distance and publicly regarded role model, opening widely with grace and generosity, inviting me to step right through.

My issues with trust kicked in. Good things like that just didn't happen to me. I was generous with others, especially with my coaching clients, but I hadn't yet noticed anyone giving it back to me. I was a stubbornly independent high achiever who tended to refuse help, and most people had probably either given up or hadn't been able to see through my fear that if I said yes, they could very well let me down.

Whether it was true or not, I felt I had struggled nearly every step of the way in my life and work and now, there was a sudden and beautiful parting in the clouds. But I would come to discover in my journey of writing this book, the more clarity, courage and strength I found within myself, the less I'd find myself banging on doors that weren't meant to open for me, and the more easily I would find the right doors that were ready and willing to open for me.

It was a stunning moment of synchronicity. I quickly responded with a yes and then, I sat down to prepare for our first coaching session. It was the most exciting thing that had happened to me in a long time, and I felt quite in awe and intimidated at the thought of not only meeting one of my favourite authors, but sharing my writing journey with her.

Diane was an Aikido practitioner and her writing flowed as beautifully and effortlessly as her fighting art. Aikido translates literally to *The Way of Harmonious Spirit or Energy*, and that energy was something I had been missing in my life until that point. Life had always felt like a struggle and while I had the strength needed to survive that, I wanted to learn how to flow.

Unlike Diane's wise and graceful fighting presence, I was a more confrontational and aggressive fighter. Years of karate - or karate-do, meaning *The Way of the Empty Hand* - had metaphorically trained me to finish a fight with one punch. Of course I was still working on that in reality but in an abstract way, that's how I'd made it to this point in my life. Blow-by-blow, block-by-block, and bruise-by-bruise.

I only knew the hard way of karate then, and I had so much to learn about the softer ways. While there are both softer and harder styles of karate, and styles that mix the two, the style I have been taught, Shotokan, isn't known for having a very soft or gentle side, at least not on the surface. It would take a further two years of writing to find this missing piece in my own karate puzzle.

Ploughing through her pre-session questions, I felt emotionally heavy, stylistically awkward, and positively ungraceful. *What did I want to achieve? What was my key problem or obstacle?* I didn't want to overthink this so I went with the first thing that felt true on my mind.

**“Since March,” I wrote back, “I have been learning that I do not have to explain or give an answer, especially in social settings. Silence is an option. I’m exhausted. I’ve run out of words to explain.”**

I went on to describe a new dimension of my personality that had emerged after my divorce, and why I was now feeling burdened by this change.

For almost five years, I had been fairly transparent with my mistakes, learning and pain. Through that self-expression I had been able to release so much grief. Through consistent enquiry and self-development, I had been able to gain perspective. Both of those had reduced my suffering but now, the scales were tipping the other way.

In being so visible with my story, some people had come to see me as someone who could also help them tend to their pain. A few even regarded me as a wise teacher, and had managed to work their way into my coaching practice as I struggled to say “no”. I just wasn't ready to be their teacher. I was too busy walking my own journey home, and that was tiring enough. Still, they returned again and again, assuming I had some secret answers. But all I had was my day-by-day commitment to heal and move on.

To go further on my path, for myself and for those feeling drawn to my work, I needed more inner strength. Yet habits and behaviours that had once served me well were now dragging me down. I craved a deeper connection with people while simultaneously needing a complete disconnection from the superficialities of the world around me. I longed for company and to feel less alone but so often, the company I found exhausted and dare I say bored me.

In other words, I was stuck in a desire to move forwards and an equally powerful desire to hide and retreat. Not only that but a recent Sufi meditation retreat a few months earlier with the head of my teacher's order had cast a harsh light on my life. I saw that my so-called friendships weren't serving me, nor I them, and my heart was riddled with confusion as I tried to figure out whether to marry my current life partner or not.

My pre-session notes to Diane continued openly and sincerely. I was tired of relationship after relationship not working out. First, there was the married man who had told me he was divorced. I realized things weren't quite as they seemed when he asked me to be his wife and presented a beautiful gem studded ring. That was when he told his real wife, and that was

when the real wife lost the plot and later threatened to have me killed. I learned not to take men at face value after that and take time to find out if they were married or not, as married men on the hunt often lie.

Then, there was the polygamous psychologist who had what I suspected was attention deficit disorder, or ADD. Yet he had taught me to speak up for myself. He also wanted to marry me as, in his eyes, I was the “perfect woman”. *We can be monogamous for the first year of marriage*, he told me, *and see if it works*. I swiftly said no to his less-than-romantic proposal and disconnected on all fronts.

After that, I found myself in a long-term relationship with a man on the Autism spectrum. Highly functioning, his special interests were yoga and martial arts. We quickly fell into a close friendship but the relationship part was too hard to work out. Yet with him, I learned to articulate myself with less emotional bias. He too asked me to marry him, but only so we could live together, which would please his parents and mean that he would no longer have to waste time driving over to my house. I said no to the logical offer, and was grateful for the honest friendship that remained.

As if I still had more time and energy on my hands to navigate complex relationships, I then fell into another one with a staunchly religious boxer who drove a Porsche. Boxing and a heated discussion on violence, coupled with a joint love of Arabic calligraphy, had brought us together. But gradually, I discovered all was not quite right. He was a kind and gentle soul but with we just weren’t right for each other. It also turned out that boxing wasn’t my sport.

One day, I would be grateful for these two men and what they had taught me about truth. But at the time, I had begun to question if I was really cut out for relationships at all. I was also in my mid-thirties and a part of me felt I should try being more practical. *Wouldn’t it just be safer to stick with my current partner, who seemed quite normal, even if we didn’t have much in common at all?* He wore a business suit to work, carried a briefcase, and talked about sales and numbers when it came to his work. *Didn’t that fit the definition of safe and ordinary?*

**“I plan to start writing this new book in the summer,” I wrote to Diane. “I’d like to complete this graceful passage into the next part of my life as much as I can before I put pen to paper. I’m thirty-seven years old and I’ve spent much of my life tending to others’ needs that are far greater than my own.”**

**“I minimized then maximized myself,” I continued, alluding to my life-long tendency to hide myself and then suddenly, after my divorce, allowing myself to be seen and not holding back. “I sense this passage is a spiritual one, and I feel its presence daily. I need to return to inner and outer silence so that I can more clearly hear and trust this new voice and aspect of self that is emerging. It is a self that feels less self-centered and is more about balance.”**

Looking back at my notes over a year later, I’m struck by the clear-sightedness I had as I started out on the journey of writing this book. I knew that it wouldn’t be easy, and I knew that grace would need to become my new best friend if I were to make it out in one piece to

the other side. Sub-consciously, that was probably a lost part of myself that I saw mirrored in Diane and why I was drawn to reaching out to her.

I smiled my way nervously through our first Skype session. Although I had opened up on paper, it had been a long time since I bared my heart in person with someone who was not only willing but also trained to listen.

As a coach, it was my job to listen to and support others. I often longed for a coach exactly like myself to do the same for me. Now, here was one who put me in mind of my older and wiser self. Although we had never met, and were connecting long-distance through a screen, the energy between us flowed beautifully right from the start.

Diane created the exact container I needed to step into in order to access the strength that already existed within me, waiting to be found. It was a strength that existed yet needed to be brought to light through the spark of creation. Yet to create something new, something would first need to be destroyed.

The more I engaged in my writing coaching journey, the more hidden doubts began to surface.

*I have questioned how I'm leading my life, I wrote in my journal. As summer approaches, I just want to retreat and focus on being a martial artist. I want a quiet life of integrity. I want to teach karate but sometimes I wonder if my loyalty to my teacher is holding me back.*

*What I have desired since leaving the UN is to teach. Even when I was applying for my executive coaching license I secretly hoped I would be rejected. If I were rejected then my next option would be to register as a karate teacher and coach from this status. How would life feel like if I did this? If I woke up in the morning and went to teach karate instead of coaching clients?*

It wasn't that I didn't want to coach people. I actually loved coaching people and still do, perhaps even more today, but I knew a big part of myself was missing in the process. Writing this book would help me figure out what that was.

Another part of my journey towards inner strength had just begun. I knew the old lady I had seen kneeling the dojo, completely at peace within herself, was my guiding light, and I knew that Diane was a teacher who was capable of leading me towards her.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 5

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*"In the words of karate master Yasutune Itosu, "Keep kata as they are without embellishing them" But in actual combat, it will not do to be hampered or shackled by the rituals of kata. Instead, the practitioner should transcend kata, moving freely according to the opponent's strengths and weaknesses."*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 5 | **Freedom**

Funakoshi is referencing one of his own teachers here. The message is one of freedom but it isn't the kind of universal freedom, or even the freedom to be ourselves. Rather, it is the freedom of the mind that is born of discipline. *Kata* could also be a metaphor for 'rules', and he is reminding us to first learn the rules, and then understand how to break them.

To progress as a coach, I needed to first learn the rules. I had to learn, adhere to, and apply the ethics of the profession and here, my karate training kept me safe. It helped me to sidestep quick and flashy routes to 'success' and instead, dare to walk my own path. My own path would eventually ask me to break all the rules but that moment was still a long way off.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which rulebook are you following, if at all, and why?*

*What does real freedom mean to you?*

# MY DOJO KUN

## CHARACTER

*I don't doubt myself,  
I honour my experience, strengths and abilities.*



# SUMMER

GROWTH

# DEFENSE

## *The Way of Self-Protection*

### The Warrior

*“Our greatest foe in combat gestates inside the womb of our ego. Ego is the mother of all fears. When we make peace with this enemy it becomes our ally in battle.”*

**Reece Coker, Combat Academy UK**

## *On the judo tatami mats.*

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*“There is no first strike in karate.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 2)

~

Not long after reaching out to Diane, and settling into our fortnightly chats on martial arts, life, love, writing and work, I reached out to another martial arts author, this time a karate practitioner.

Mike Clarke struck me as a no-frills *budo* practitioner, whose philosophy on training on life made me pause and question if I had ever learned anything at all in my own karate practice. I first came across his blog and then, one of his books, *Shin Gi Tai: Karate Training for Body, Mind, and Spirit*, fell into my hands.

Parallel to my training in the dojo, I had been searching for such a book for years. Yet all the karate books I came across in bookstores and online seemed to be divided into three categories. Technical explanations of the art, historical reference points, such as Gichin Funakoshi's *Twenty Guiding Principles*, and personal memoirs of training that were overwhelmingly written by men, and appeared to take little of the female experience into account.

Much as I appreciated all these genres, I wanted something deeper. I wasn't interested in gendering karate into male 'this' and female 'that'. The last thing I wanted was another battle of the sexes. Rather, I wanted to know if there was a spiritual aspect to training, and I wanted to know why my teachers had never taught me the inner aspects of the art. I wanted to know if I was expecting too much of karate or if I still had so much more to learn. I also wanted to tell the *yin* side of karate, and if so, what that looked and felt like.

Without any personal agenda or expectation of a response, I spontaneously sent Mike an email to thank him for writing his book. Then, in my direct and descriptive manner, I gave a short explanation of how and why I had found it so engaging. I knew that even if Mike never responded, he might one day appreciate knowing that someone somewhere had valued his hard work.

To my surprise, just like my email to Diane, a reply found its way to my inbox within days. It

was written in a very different tone and one that was more questioning of my thoughts and assumptions. That spontaneous email led to a few more exchanges on karate over the coming year, and I went on to read one of Mike's other books, *Redemption*, which tells his personal story of growing up and finding karate. After reading that book, I understood what I had found so riveting in his other book and blog.

Although I didn't know this to begin with, Mike had grown up in Manchester, my place of birth and origin in the UK. His early violent ways had led him to a short stint in Strangeways prison and from there, he found karate and straightened himself out.

I learned through Mike's books that after several competitive years in karate as a "sport", he travelled to Okinawa, the birthplace of karate, and later chose to follow a *budo* path. Budo is a martial arts code of conduct and means literally, the martial way. I soon learned that there were three paths a karate student could follow; karate as a sport, karate for health, and karate as budo. A practitioner can transition from one to the other but she or he cannot follow all three at the same time.

That teaching point threw me into confusion, as it called into question my own karate identity. What kind of a karate practitioner was I then? I had never competed in karate as a sport, not even as a child, and I had struggled to find a link between karate and health beyond basic mind-body fitness benefits. While the budo path spoke most clearly to my experience of life so far, it felt pretty flimsy in front of a seasoned practitioner like Mike.

The crisis hit hard. I still had so much more to learn and this wasn't a topic that I could easily open up on. What sense would it really make to the casual listener? And if it was of genuine interest to someone, and they had an inkling of what it felt like, then they would know that for such questions, there are very few words in return.

To my lofty ideals, a budo practitioner was the ultimate warrior. They could sit with pain and do the right thing, even if it wasn't the easiest option. They could go on the defense and attack when necessary but equally bring healing and beauty into the world. They stood for life and death, and walked a thin and honorable line between both.

I sensed I was still at the beginning of this path but I was holding back. At times, while I was loathe to admit it, I felt a lingering sense of self-pity at all I had gone through in my relatively short life. I began to wonder if I was cut out for the budo path at all, even if I could see an image of my older self as a seasoned warrior, just like Diane and Mike.

Much later, I would come to grasp a little of what Mike meant by his description of three karate paths, when I decided to apply the same concept to my adult practice of judo. With a quarter of a century in karate behind me, and more budo questions left hanging than I could possibly answer or implement in this lifetime, I had decided to pursue judo as a sport. There would be nothing enlightening of any sorts to be sought or found on the judo tatami mats, and that thought relieved me immensely.

Pursuing it as a sport with a competitive edge would teach me that honour-driven values must

be dropped in a competition in order to win, and my physical health would be compromised as I sought to train at a higher level.

My judo practice would become one of injury prevention and management, and getting stronger, faster, more powerful, and more strategic. It would lead me to revise my nutrition habits and eat to fuel my performance, rather than support my health. I would learn plenty by following judo as a sports path, and it would teach me much about myself.

But all of that was far ahead of me. Right now, I was in the early process of training to awaken. That meant identifying gaps in my own learning and understanding of the martial arts, and what it meant to live, love and work in harmony with myself and others so that I could become less vulnerable and prevent myself from burning out.

It wasn't a coincidence I had found either Mike or Diane. While Diane was the epitome of feminine strength, in Mike, I had seen a masculine strength that didn't need unnecessary frills or niceties. In psychological terms, both were projections of two parts of myself. Through both of them I was able to experience both parts of me – the *yin* and the *yang* – in new ways, and I had been searching for that experience for many years.

As martial artists, we had all chosen a harder but perhaps more fulfilling way of traveling through life. If Mike's presence reminded me of my desire to confront the truth, no matter what, Diane's presence offered a gentle container in which to process and embrace it. Truth can both please and hurt us, and it requires a certain kind of energy to hold it with both the seriousness it deserves, and the lightness needed to hold it close.

*If it's truth that you are seeking, I often caught myself thinking, then it's reality that you'll find.* And I was hell bent on discovering what reality actually was, especially through the eyes of a female martial artist. I wanted to know if the way I was living was true to who I was, and I wanted to know if what I lived each and every day was my only possible reality.

Amidst these thought-provoking encounters with Diane and Mike, tougher questions arrived like unwelcome strangers in my home late at night. *What was this life that I was living, in a huge empty family home in Dubai that I could ill afford, with a lifestyle that I never truly wanted, looking after two elderly desert dogs? Why was I spending most of my free time at Karate? Was I searching for something in or through my training, or was I just avoiding something else?*

I was acutely aware that while I enjoyed living off the beaten track, it wasn't that I wanted to leave civilization completely and live in a world by myself. I too wanted a family of my own and someone I loved with whom I could share my life. I wanted to feel safe at home and do ordinary things like disagree with those I loved, and cook for them.

It wasn't as if I had sat up one night and planned this life where I was in my childhood home, running a solo business, and feeling like I had no control over it. It had all just happened and that was probably a big part of the problem.

In previous years, I had been swift to tend to the dilemmas in my life. But my former marriage and my business challenge seemed to be emotional heavyweights that made it harder to figure out what to do and where to go next. They were both calling me to take leadership of my life, but that was hard to see at the time. To solve one problem, I had stepped into a lesser one. I had left a marriage for Gaza, downsizing the chaos in my life. Then I had left Gaza for Dubai, and eliminated actual war in my life. But the road wasn't getting any easier.

I couldn't seem to get to the root of my own dilemma, which was ultimately what kind of a life did I want to lead after my divorce, and once my years of humanitarian work were done? I knew I wanted to coach people and practice martial arts, and hopefully find – and keep – love and build a safe home one day. But an awful lot of detail was missing in between all of these steps.

In the gap between my deepest desires, more profound and abstract questions burned even brighter. *Was reality always that bad? Why did it seem to burn me every time I got too close? Why did it seem to be more or less pleasing for others? Why did life seem easier the less I knew and understood about it? Why was realism more painful to embrace than idealism? And why did self-awareness seem to come with such a heavy price tag?*

**“I think you should watch more TV,”** my sister told me.

**“You’re overcomplicating your life,”** a friend would tell me.

**“Don’t you think you’re overthinking?”** my mother would ask me.

**“There is nothing to be found in karate,”** Mike’s words would remind me. **“There is nothing special or mystical about it. It is what it is and nothing more. Just a way of life.”**

And yet I couldn't turn the questions off, or the burning desire to know the answers. The journey to truth had already begun and the martial arts were to be my path. But I would have to grapple for much longer, and quite literally, before the answers emerged.

Acutely aware that I needed to expand my little karate world, I searched for an opening. If I were to write a book on martial arts and inner strength, I would need to return to the beginning. I would need to remember what it felt like to be a white belt again, to go through the motions of falling down and getting back up, and explore what it meant to be a martial artist in today's busy and demanding world, which tells us we need to be or get “more” in order to succeed and feel ok.

Around the same time, my karate training schedule changed and the opening revealed itself as if on cue. With the new timings, I could now attend a judo class that had been on my mind for the past year. The timings had always clashed but now I had an opportunity to attend two judo classes a week, on top of my home fitness sessions and karate training schedule.

Whether I would have the energy to manage this on top of running my business was at the

forefront of my mind. I settled my doubts by telling myself I would join for a month and then give it up. It was book research, nothing more.

And so I hung up my white karate suit and black belt, and changed into a blue judo suit and white belt. Little did I know that by doing that, the younger athletic Claire, who I had reclaimed in Konya, was about to make her return.

Judo, which is a full body combat practice, was set to become a sports path for me and it would bring me much positive energy in the way of healing and getting stronger. Not only would my physical body get stronger but my mind would also strengthen to a degree I hadn't thought was possible.

Unlike my karate classes, which were held in a rented five star hotel gym space, my judo classes were held in a large Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ) centre that was also home to other martial arts, from aikido and muay thai to boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA). The first time I entered the open plan warehouse space, the stench of fighters' sweat almost made me choke. I had to fight the urge to wrinkle my nose and turn away. I could barely breathe and the angry red and black décor with larger than life size fighters plastered across the walls made me want to run away.

Summer had just started and the air conditioning units were working over time. The sound of fists and shins slamming against punch bags, bodies being pounded and thrown in the boxing ring and MMA cage, and rows of people grappling furiously on the thick black mats were almost too much for me to absorb.

I stood there in a moment of panic wondering what to do. I may have been a first-degree black belt in karate but never in my life had I entered such a fighting space. I suddenly felt very humble and saw that when it came to fighting and self-defense, I knew nothing at all. Yes, I could execute a flying roundhouse kick at speed, lunge, jab and punch quickly, and stay in deep stances for inhuman periods of time. But if anyone threw me or pinned me down in real life, what on earth would I do? *How would I get out?*

I already knew that answer. My past had already shown me exactly what I would do. I would freeze, just as I had done at fifteen as a purple belt. Or I would argue back, just as I had done at twenty-nine as a first-degree black belt when my then husband had thrown me on the bed. Neither were effective strategies for keeping myself safe.

My little world of karate had just exploded into a big question mark of what it was that I really knew about the martial arts. Making my way over to the judo mats, I wanted to cry. Instead, I sat there patiently waiting for the class to begin. Unsure what to do with my time, I settled into familiar karate stretches and kata training.

Suddenly self-conscious, I felt I stuck out like a sore thumb, and that didn't feel special at all. So I kept my eyes down and attention turned inwards. It was all I knew what to do in the face of stress. I was too scared to look around. It was too much to take in all at once and my heart was pounding too hard and fast to relax.

As a young girl and young woman, I had only trained in karate spaces. This meant that while I practiced a martial art, I had never experienced being around so many other fighters at the same time. And while I enjoyed watching MMA fights on television every now and then, and had attended a few other martial arts classes here and there, I had barely ventured beyond the karate scene. I suddenly realised how small that scene had been, and what a narrow-minded practitioner of the martial arts I had unknowingly become. I had never even ventured beyond Shotokan karate to experience other styles of karate. I had never asked questions or mixed widely karate practitioners of other styles.

It was a harsh moment of truth-telling, and I didn't like what I saw in myself at all. The anger and shame of just how much I had missed in my martial arts training was almost too much to bear. It literally brought me to my knees as I abandoned my warm up efforts and quietly sat on the edge of the mat, deep in thought.

No wonder I hadn't been able to defend myself properly. No wonder I had been raped and lived through a violent marriage. Neither of those incidents were my fault, but I was the one who had put myself in those positions. In the case of my marriage, I was the one who had taken so long to leave. I was the one who couldn't admit the truth of everything I had done wrong. Now, many years later, if I didn't feel strong, I had only myself to blame. Life had since given me opportunities to heal and move on, and find a better way of life.

I promised myself in that moment, sitting on the judo and BJJ mats, that I would do whatever it took to get stronger. Strong enough to handle to stress, and strong enough to create the conditions I needed in life, love and work for me to feel safe. I vowed to tear down every wall of unnecessary fear around me so I would never have to feel scared for no good reason ever again.

A whole half hour of feeling self-conscious passed before the receptionist found me to apologize. She hadn't realized that the teacher and class members were in the capital that day at a competition, and asked if I could please return in a couple of days for the next one. In hindsight, this was grace in action as it allowed me to return better prepared mentally for my first class and less distracted by the other fighters around me.

My first judo class started with a bang.

**“Are you fit?”** my new teacher asked me with a welcoming smile.

**“Yes,”** I answered, resolving that I would plough myself through whatever they threw at me. This was a question of honour, and I would not be quitting anything in my first class. I was here to overcome my fears and get stronger!

Looking at me with an open face, he then stepped back and handed the class over to one of his senior black belt students, who looked like he had just stepped off the cover of a fitness magazine. I later discovered he was a personal trainer and plyometrics instructor, which probably explains what happened next.



I took a deep breath and found my place on the back line, third from the front, and right at the end of the row of white belts. It was the first time I had taken such a position in over twenty-five years and suddenly, the anonymity of my martial arts background felt like a relief. Nobody here knew who I really was and that suited me just fine. I wanted to be invisible. I wanted to hide as I rebuilt my strength from the ground up, and tackled my fears.

Much to my surprise, the warm up drills lasted over half an hour. The rounds of push-ups, jumping squats, sit ups, planks, runs, flying somersaults, and throwing ourselves across the mats felt like they would never end, and my head was getting dizzy. It wasn't at all like karate where we did a ten-minute warm-up and stretch but I didn't allow the strain or surprise to show. I was so hell bent on not quitting that I also didn't look around.

My entire attention was focused on myself and whether *I* could get through this warm up in one piece. I was suddenly grateful for the strength and flexibility my mind and body had acquired in the past few years, after I had returned from working on war. Although I was about to get a lot fitter, I could see that my current state of fitness wasn't all that bad. Tough karate sessions on the beach and in the sea had made sure of that. Our warm-ups may have been light but our training most certainly wasn't.

Relaxing enough now to look around, I noticed that aside from a couple of brown and black belts, I was the only one who could keep up. The other students were bent over catching their breath or lying flat on the mats. Competitive by nature, this small victory motivated me enough to make it through the first part of my first judo class without passing out or giving up.

After training in karate alone for several years, I realized what my teacher had meant when he said I was strong. I didn't mean to be arrogant in having such a thought, it's just that my solo training had always left me feeling like I was bottom of the class, and that hadn't done much for my martial arts fighting spirit over time. Later on, I would see how it had created so much self-doubt and yet overcoming this doubt actually weld me deeper on this path.

I had started judo intuitively, not really knowing what it was. I knew that it was based on throwing another person, or getting thrown, but beyond that it was a mystery to me. At that point I had no idea that many judo techniques are hidden in karate kata techniques. I was just following my heart and instincts, which would prove to serve me better than they had in the past. I had also seen a documentary on the life of 'Mrs Judo', a senior Japanese practitioner and trailblazer for women in judo, whose real name was Keiko Fukuda.

**“Be strong, be gentle, be beautiful,”** Mrs Judo had said, piquing my curiosity at what seemed like an odd combination.

Judo, in Japanese, means *The Gentle Way*. Unlike karate, which mostly focuses on kicks, punches and blocks, judo is focused on body throws, pins and chokes. It is a full-body combat Olympic sport and art, founded by a Japanese scholar and physical education instructor named Jigaro Kano. Elements of it are found in karate, but I hadn't been taught in that way.

Something deep within me was ignited in that first class. It was as if I recognized the moves we were being taught and yet I had never really seen judo in action. At first, I couldn't explain why I had felt called to return again and again. While other white belts were there because some Olympic judo athlete had inspired them, I was there because my heart had told me to show up. I could have chosen to be a white belt in any other martial art but my book and heart had led me here, and I was simply following its way.

I had planned to only experience being a white belt for a month, figuring that this would be enough time to gather the information needed to write my book. Yet my plan to be an undercover writer was blown to pieces in that first month. Within less than three months, I had been promoted several ranks from tenth kyu, a total beginner to seventh kyu, an adult green belt.

Suddenly I was no longer a white belt and that changed everything. Unable to hide, I had to step things up. I had to demonstrate that I was worthy of wearing my belt in every single class. My other plan to hide out in the background had been disrupted too as my teacher had decided to address me as "Sensei", a term meaning "teacher" in Japanese, in recognition of my karate black belt status. He expected me to act like a black belt in his class, even if I was still learning my judo ropes.

Such mental and physical pressures that I had never anticipated worked in my favour, and I surprised myself by soon taking judo as seriously as I took karate. It had been a long time since anyone had put pressure on me to be more than what I thought I could be. It arrived in perfect timing, just as my performance, mindset and motivation work was developing. The sudden responsibility also reminded me that I wasn't progressing as I should in karate.

My second dan grading was several months away and to pass, I needed a stronger mindset. I was progressing towards believing in myself and my martial arts and sports-driven work, but it was a work in progress. Nobody was revealing to me the steps, I was simply figuring them out as I went.

Looking back, I was too afraid to drop everything and follow what I truly wanted. I thought I had to compromise somewhere, and that my coaching dreams were too far fetched to really be of value. Who really wanted an executive coach practicing from a mindset of the martial arts? Especially when that coach was still questioning for herself what it meant to be a martial artist! Once again, my lofty ideals had gotten me stuck in the sand, spinning my wheels.

Thankfully, it only took me several months to understand that much of judo is already written in karate. My martial arts journey was proving to be swifter than my business one.

As karate travelled the globe, teachers had to create methods of attracting and retaining students. The practice of teaching karate as a military or self-defense system, as well as an art, had shifted from something a teacher did as a calling alongside other work to something more along the lines of an industrial job.

At first, there was no official colored belt system in karate, just white and then black. Then Jigaro Kano, the founder of judo, created one and the idea spread. As karate spread further, the colored belt rankings made sense, especially to Western minds that like to understand where they are on the scale of progress and achievement.

As a sport, the deeper and wider essence and complexity of what karate had to offer was lost. The detail and years needed to acquire such mastery was probably harder to sell, and so it was perhaps left to one side. So too was the spiritual or inner side of the practice, which was something that I had longed for growing up but never seemed to find.

Raised and trained in the Middle East, it was even harder for me to get access to the spiritual teachings. The various religions of the region already provided a strong ethical container for most karate teachers and students and while my memory may be patchy, I don't recall a single teacher ever explaining the inner art of karate to me.

Nor did anyone explain to me who Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan karate was. Of course I knew he was the man in the framed black and white photo wearing an old fashioned kimono that was hung close to the ceiling in almost every dojo in which I trained, but it wasn't until after I turned thirty that I found out.

When I was younger and first learning karate, the Internet didn't yet exist. We either discovered facts through conversation with people or via books in a library. Being so introverted, I never thought to ask questions in my karate class and the kind of libraries I had access to didn't stock martial arts books. I just showed up and did what I was told.

That desire for perfection drew me to karate but it also proved to be my downfall. I struggled with the same inertia in my business. Each client session had to be "perfect". "Good enough" just wasn't an option when it came to positively impacting people's lives. Yet my desire to learn judo wasn't about perfection. It was about experiencing something new with a beginner's mind.

In hindsight, I also think I was intuitively led to judo through my years of karate training. It was as if I had a sub-conscious or somatic desire to gather the missing pieces. But back then, I couldn't know what I hadn't yet been taught or discovered for myself. I could only sense that judo was worthwhile and embark on a new journey to understand all that I had missed.

After the military-like warm-up, the class moved onto throwing.

**"Today we will be practicing O-Goshi!"** my new judo teacher announced, as he called me to the centre of the mats.

Before I could even wonder why I, the new student, was being demonstrated on, he reached behind my back, grabbed the back of my white belt firmly with his hands, grabbed my sleeve at the elbow with a firm hand, turned 180 degrees so that his back was against my front, bent his knees, squared his hips just below mine, then lifted me up as he bent forwards and threw me effortlessly over his body onto the mat.

I flew gracefully through the air. Thanks to his strong grip on my sleeve and gentle way of moving, I also landed gracefully on the mat beneath me. There was no whack or discomfort as I had expected, and I quickly stood to my feet for more of the same.

**“Action, reaction!”** my teacher continued, picking up his pace and explaining that Judo was a constant process of energy in motion as he threw me multiple times, quicker and quicker each time.

For every action, such as a push forwards, there had to be a reaction or a pull backwards. This was part of understanding *kuzushi*, or off-balancing an opponent. I was mesmerized as he continued to reel off the energetic components of the art. It wasn't dissimilar to karate. For every punch there had to be a snapping back into place of the arm. For every kick there was snapping back of the leg. *Action, reaction!* My mind and body knew the drill well from years of emergency oriented work, and training in karate to deliver and dodge fast punches and kicks.

Something that really stood out from my early judo classes was the speed at which I was thrown in and expected to learn. Looking back, I can see this way of instruction worked for me. It helped me to build my confidence in another fighting art. The slow and scenic route makes me doubt myself more; diving in and learning the details later on is more my style.

Unlike karate, where teachers had often paused to explain techniques at length before we practiced them solo and later in pairs, in judo I was shown the overall shape of the throw and expected to practice it on a real person, not practice with the air. I didn't have time to second-guess myself, I had to trust my body to watch, learn and execute without too many thoughts.

When pairing up with others, the drills were instructed so fast that our nervous systems were forced learn how to fire immediately. It was like being in a war zone and competition all at once, and I felt right at home. After, we would study the technique in more depth but it was never as lengthy an explanation as a karate demonstration could be.

As one class led to the next, I noticed that my judo classmates seemed different from many of the karate classmates I had known in the past. There was a strong team spirit, which isn't unusual in the martial arts, but I saw that they seemed to express themselves more easily and spontaneously. They didn't seem to think as much.

While karate practitioners, including myself, had always seemed a bit aloof and serious, these judo athletes appeared to be more laid back. It didn't look like they were contemplating the deeper meaning of the techniques and certainly not the bigger questions of life. In between the throws I saw the more advanced students relaxing completely. It was almost as if they weren't paying any attention. Then, as their turn to throw came up, their gaze turned laser sharp and their entire being focused on executing a perfect throw.

In *randori*, or freestyle training, their gentle gaze turned to fire. But unlike karate where we stared each other down in aggression, my judo classmates kept their gaze around the torso. I

soon learned to do the same as in close combat range, there isn't the distance to see the whole person.

In karate, we move swiftly in and out of range, altering our distance, so it makes sense to keep a steady eye contact. The opponent's eyes usually indicate which body part they're about to move next. But when someone's body is pressed against your own, trying to throw it off balance to the floor, it makes more sense to keep an eye on all of the body parts and look for an opening.

The judo students' upper body strength also came out in full force during *randori*. I discovered this the hard way when fighting with the stronger and more advanced men, who threw me around like a puppet. Brave enough to fight back, I would lunge to grab their suits but my knuckles would scrape across the rough fabric. I quickly learned that judo suits were not soft like karate ones, and I ended up with many bloody fingers in the first few months of training until my knuckles toughened up.

Had I trained in a more traditional karate style, I would have learned to punch by practicing on wooden boards covered in rope, called *makiwara*. I would have been doing push ups on my knuckles for years, and I would have already been introduced to strength needed for actual throws. But this had not been my karate path to date, and so it was to be through judo that my hands finally learned to toughen up.

Although judo shares many traits with karate, such as Japanese cultural tradition, timing, speed, and explosive power, it requires much more physical strength. It wasn't long before my body started to respond. For the first time in my life, my pectoral muscles were visible when I tensed my arms. Instead of being alarmed, I found it fascinating, at least at first.

For once, I didn't feel the need to squeeze myself into a smaller size. The size I already was worked perfectly in judo. It meant that I was solid and strong enough to train with the bigger and stronger men without always being flattened. There weren't as many women training with us but when they did attend, although I was often larger and stronger, I was able to tone that down without too much effort and focus more on technique.

I was also able to learn from them, as nearly all of them were senior grades. One lady in particular, a black belt rank from Japan, stood out the most. Each time I fought with her it was like playing with a bamboo stick. She was light and nimble, and while she struggled to throw me as I was a couple of weight classes above her, and able to root down, I very much enjoyed our *randori* sessions. I could tell that the spirit of judo flowed through her, and that intrigued me.

She seemed to be a living example of Mrs Judo's catchphrase, be strong, be gentle, be beautiful. Unfortunately, she left quite soon and this initial attraction to judo was lost, and my judo path went on to take another turn.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 6

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“It is only when faced with a situation so unbearable that one’s ability to tolerate it (or put an end to it without confrontation) is exhausted that the sword should be drawn... This is the real spirit of budo.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 6 | **Endurance**

Funakoshi is teaching us about endurance. He speaks of tolerance as a way of fostering the strength that may be needed to fight back. Act too soon and one’s action can fall into a reaction, weakening the confrontation. Act too late and action may not be a possibility at all. Only when one’s ability should one respond and in doing so, respond with full commitment.

In my own life, I felt I had endured so much on the martial arts mats. Karate had taught me how to endure physical pain and understand what lay behind it; mental and emotional pain. It raised my threshold to pain a little more each class, pushing me to and sometimes even beyond my perceived limits. With that mindset, taking up judo was much less of an ordeal.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*What are you currently tolerating or enduring?*

*At what point might you need to whip out your budo ‘sword’?*

## *Frying pans are better than fire.*

---

*“Karate stands on the side of justice.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 3)

~

The decision to take up Judo coincided with several very real throws in my personal and professional life. This was to be my summer of surrender and it arrived with a crash, half way through the holy month of fasting in the middle of June. I had long planned ahead, knowing that summers were tough on the business front, but God clearly had other plans.

A year-long leadership-training contract I had been due to start was suddenly cancelled with two weeks' notice. The nuclear energy client had been forced to cut its budget and as a result, the training team I was a part of was out. This meant I had no foreseeable income in the year ahead. Just when I thought I was going to stabilize and be safe in my third year in business, I couldn't have been more wrong. I had placed nearly all my eggs in one basket, thinking that it would be better to have one main client on a part time contract for a longer duration.

The leadership stint wasn't my dream contract, nor would I have been able to teach my own leadership work through it, but I had been grateful for it and seen it as a helpful stepping-stone. I would be able to pay my bills and save a little for the first time in two years, and still have time spare to train in the martial arts and develop my other coaching work. It had sounded too good to be true and it was.

From a business perspective, it was a disaster. The summer was notorious for slowing down on the work front. People travelled and decisions were postponed until September. September was when my trade license fees and office rent were due and having suddenly lost this contract, I wasn't sure how I was going to make either of those ends meet with no prospect of any reliable work on the horizon.

Being disaster-driven, I knew I needed to act fast. I had to save myself, nobody was going to jump in and do that for me. So I called a family friend working in recruitment.

**“There isn't a lot you can do, Claire,” she said bluntly, confirming my worst fears. “Your resume is so peculiar for Dubai and the job market is so slow and saturated. The only chance you probably have is to walk into a place you'd like to work and ask for a job.”**

*Action, reaction, I remember thinking. The clock was ticking. Don't give yourself time to think, Claire, just get yourself out there.*

And so I put aside all my fears and dived into the local job market headfirst. I had to find a solution to the financial crisis that was coming my way and there wasn't time to feel sorry for myself.

The first time I had asked for a job had been twenty years earlier, at the age of seventeen when I had walked into an English bakery and asked for the position of sales assistant advertised in the window.

**"Can you add up?"** the manageress asked me, explaining that theirs' was an old fashioned till that didn't do the counting for you.

**"Yes,"** I replied, thinking I could hide my math's A-level calculator on the side counter.

I started the next day and learned how to mop floors, clean the fridges and serve customers with a smile. Those skills came in handy during my Masters when I worked in a candle shop to help cover my living expenses, and they kept my feet on the ground throughout years of unpredictable humanitarian work when I moved up and down the career ladder, and often sideways.

Although it was the last thing I wanted to do, I knew how to roll my sleeves up and do hard work when it was needed. I wasn't good at asking for help but I did know how to find and ask for a job, and I had exactly three weeks to do that.

The pressure spurred me into action. A personal development centre nearby seemed like a good place to start. Having admired the therapist who had set it up a few years earlier, I decided she would be a great person to work alongside.

Without over thinking it, I fired off an email and attached my resume and a letter written from my heart, rather than my head.

**"I'm not quite sure why I've been called back to work in Dubai,"** the attached letter said, **"but work hasn't quite gone as planned and I feel called to reach out to you to find out why. I think I have skills and experience your personal development centre needs."**

After clicking send, I finally exhaled. I knew I had broken all recruitment rules but if I had learned anything about standing out, it was that I mustn't hold back. I may have been miles from my martial arts and coaching dream but I hadn't forgotten the martial arts equipment supplier's lesson. *The market is saturated*, Claire, she had also told me. *You need to stand out*. And how better to stand out than by being my real self?

My risky and unconventional approach worked, as it was honest and direct, and arrived right on time. Within hours the therapist responded to tell me she was on leave but that the new



owner and CEO of the business would be happy to meet with me that very week.

Unknown to me, the business was moving through a transition, out of her hands and into someone else's, and this would have significant consequences for my work path. It would ultimately change the course of my life and force me to answer the question if the life I was leading was the one I came here to live. But all that would be revealed later. For now, I just needed to show up and meet the new boss.

Within a week, I was taken on as the center's new business development director. The role couldn't have offered a more perfect fit for the kind of work I was already doing as an executive coach. Now, instead of delivering the coaching service myself, I would be on the frontlines bringing in business for other coaches. I couldn't wait to step into this role and step back from being the coach myself, just for a while till I figured things out.

My new role meant I could travel back to the UK to see my family, knowing that I had a secure job and monthly salary to come back to on my return. The painful fact that I was also being forced to close my own business was something I would deal with emotionally later on, I told myself. For now, I had to get on with surviving.

But back in the UK, I woke up every morning with knots in my stomach. I just couldn't relax and a heavy black cloud followed me wherever I went. Even a family get together in the Peak District, surrounded by rolling green hills and fresh air, couldn't quell the deadening anxiety that was building in me.

I should have felt safe but instead, I felt a sense of foreboding, as if something was about to go very wrong. I could feel it in my bones and after a long hot summer of being on edge, I was getting close to breaking down. *It's just the aftermath of weeks of stress*, I told myself. But still, the feeling that something was terribly wrong wouldn't let up.

The night before I had travelled to the UK, I had had a coaching session with Diane, who had been a witness to my summer of distress. *I feel called to write a spiritual manifesto*, I had blurted out at the end of this session, not knowing from where it came.

Every bone and cell in my body was warning me that a long spiritual retreat was coming, and I had felt called to write some words to guide myself through it. In between my growing sense of anguish, I had spent my time in the UK piecing this manifesto together, not realizing that it would come to tell the story of the next phase of my life, and a spiritual practice I would need to return to again and again to keep myself whole.

### ***Spiritual Manifesto***

*A long, deep, mental rest  
A place where I can hear my soul  
A strong and serene home for my Self  
At home in fire and water.*

*Silence  
Space  
Prayer  
Vitality*

*A place to rest my mind  
Long walks in nature  
Deep breathing and slow kata  
8 hours of sleep and plenty of water.*

*Laughter and soul food  
Herbal teas and tinctures  
No writing, no teaching  
No sharing, no seeking.*

*Unavailable to "help"  
Nobody can find me  
I'm closing my accounts  
Mentally, emotionally, energetically.*

*No planning, no fighting  
No trying, no analyzing  
No escape, only here  
And only now.*

*A place to still my mind  
Morning sweat and quiet meditation  
Evening gratitude and prayer  
Creative soul and rest time.*

*Calligraphy, mosques and prayer  
Simplicity of traditional ways  
Hard training, mastery of ki  
Water and bathing rituals.*

*No writing, no responding  
The accounts are closed  
Any debts are paid, the door is shut  
I do not owe you, I cannot be owned.*

*Conversations that matter  
People who know their soul  
Finding my way  
Back home.*

*Inner strength  
Inner light  
I am ready  
No distractions.*

*A new space  
A new way of life  
A soul at rest and ease  
And love that never ends.*

Boarding my night flight back to Dubai, a sombre mood descended as I reread those words. Waves of grief flooded my system throughout the entire journey. While other passengers slept, I stared blankly at the TV screen in front of me. Nothing was on it and I barely noticed.

I was frozen in a grief I didn't yet understand, and couldn't even bring myself to eat when the meals were served. I just sat there like a rock for over seven hours straight, focusing on my breath and reminding myself to breathe.

At the other end, I queued up like a zombie in the taxi line. As usual, there was nobody to meet or greet me at the airport. My partner was in his home country again, sorting out family issues, and I hadn't heard from him in a few days. Friends were used to me sorting myself out and I had left my family members behind in the UK.

The taxi ride home was a difficult one. The closer we got, the more deadened I felt inside. A small voice inside of me told me to smile, that I would soon be with my dogs, but my eyes were dead and unmoving. My mind was still preoccupied with my breath and the need to keep taking one breath after the other until the breath finally ran out.

A few minutes later, opening the front door to our empty family home, my eyes widened in horror. There, in the middle of the hallway was one of my desert dogs, slumped on his side breathing heavily and yelping every few seconds. It was an awful scene to come home to, and death was all around me.

I knew from losing dogs in my younger years what the impending death of a dog looked and smelled like, and without a moment's hesitation, I fell to my knees beside him. His eyes were glazed over and his jaw was locked shut. I could tell he recognized me but he was also in significant pain. I hid the part of me that was wincing and smiled at him, knowing that these were his final hours and the last opportunity we would share together. But inwardly, I was raging.

I loved my family dogs with a ferocity that I never publicly shared. They were my lifeline after coming home from war. We had effectively saved each other. They had saved me from a way of life that was no longer right and perhaps even safe for me. And I had saved them from being put down.

Nobody understood that these dogs were my world. They were all I had to love and be loved by after years of humanitarian work, which had come at such a high personal expense. In coming home, and taking care of them after my parents had retired, I had ensured they still had a home. This private and powerful bond between us had never been broken, until now. I lived for these two dogs and now, one of them was leaving us.

The other desert dog was hiding in the gym, watching us from afar. He looked frightened and confused but I couldn't pick myself up from the floor to reassure him. One hundred percent of my attention was on the dying dog.

*Why hadn't the maid called and told me!* I would have returned in a heartbeat had I known

earlier. I had trusted her and her husband to look after the dogs, as I did every time I travelled, which was rarely these days. They had all my emergency numbers as well as the vet's located down the road. The husband had a car. I had left money in the drawer. There was no excuse!

I cursed and berated myself for being away at a time like this. All my senses had been predicting disaster. It was not their fault for not acting, it was mine. I hadn't trusted my inner alarm bells again as I hadn't understood what they were telling me. It was my fault that the situation had deteriorated like this, in such a painful way.

I gathered my dying dog's body in my arms, standing up careful not to cause him more pain, and made the slow walk to the car. I lay him down on the back seat of the car for the last time and stepped into the driver's seat, leaving the other dog behind. I knew he would be ok and I would deal with him later.

At the vet's, I walked like a ghost into the waiting room and lay my dog down on the cold marble floor. Although it was only eight o'clock in the morning, it was already hot and I thought the cool surface may help a little.

**"My dog is dying,"** I told the reception staff, as I laid him down on the marble floor. **"He doesn't have much time left."**

A few hours later, I was forced to leave him for the last time. It was the kindest thing to do. A cancer check-up earlier that year where a biopsy had been taken had missed a big mass on his liver. The cancer had since spread so rapidly throughout his body that there was nothing they could do.

I drove home in shock. I hadn't slept in almost two days and my body was finally beginning to shut down. With nobody there to catch me or hold my hand, I fell to pieces in the shower, screaming and sobbing from the depths of my soul. There were no words to explain how raw I felt.

This was the weaker of the two family dogs. and I had done all I could to keep him strong over the past few years. I had sacrificed myself and my future to stay in Dubai with the dogs. I had put my own needs to one side. Nobody else in the family was able to do this and for reasons I couldn't quite explain, I wasn't in a position to move them elsewhere. Besides, where would we go?

As a former aid worker, I had led a nomadic lifestyle and increasingly found it hard to settle. At the time of my parents departure a few years earlier, Dubai looked like my best bet for a more stable life. I had put everything I had into building that but it seemed every corner I turned, I was met once more by disaster. It seemed I couldn't do anything right, and my dog's sudden death was proof of that. As his life slipped away, I felt my own wasn't far behind.

The maid's banging on the bathroom door brought me to my senses. Very slowly, I turned off the shower and stepped out of the bathtub to find my other dog. A heavy cloud had descended over me, one that I had never seen before in all my years of trials and adversities. Not even

the disaster of my divorce or the horrors I had witnessed in my humanitarian work had turned my world so black.

Three days after my dog's death, and still in a darkened daze, I received a text message from my partner. Although we had spent the summer discussing the possibility of marriage, and how it would be a logical next step for both of us, something had felt off to me. He had been so keen for me to meet his mother a few weeks earlier but her trip from to Dubai had coincided with my news of losing the leadership-training contract.

**"I can't possibly meet her in this state," I had told him. "I'm so stressed out, it's hardly a good starting point for our future."**

My relationship with my past mother-in-law had started from a stressed and burned out place. I had literally gone from visiting a prison in Israel, following up on torture allegations, straight to the airport and arrived totally exhausted at the other end. Feeling so tired made it hard to put a genuine smile on my face and my soon-to-be mother-in-law, who had more of a traditional role in her household, never managed to see the best of me. I was determined to not make that same mistake again. No, if I were to get married again, it would be from a place of feeling positive about myself and full of energy.

We were also stalled as he had requested that once we married, I would give up wearing a bikini. It had caused a mini standoff between us as I refused to be told one more time by a man what I could and couldn't wear. My last marriage had been one long tirade of what I didn't wear "right" and I swore I wouldn't be making that mistake again either.

In all other ways, he was a liberal man and he swore this was his only request on how I dress. But I knew deep down how these requests played out. They started with something simple for the sake of a more conservative community, and then they escalated year by year. The problem with changing ourselves to please people who have no business in dictating our lives is that we come to resent them and anyone who supports them. It leads to bitterness and contempt, two strangers I never wanted to see again in my life, least of all in my own home.

Then there was judo. He wanted me to give it up and focus only on karate so I could spend more time with him doing "normal" things that couples do, like watching TV and attending his live music performances. As I saw myself taking on more martial arts, he saw me scaling back. It should have been a clear-cut sign to end the relationship but I wasn't yet able to do that. I couldn't admit that we were like chalk and cheese.

While I was so disciplined and driven, he was so laid back and lacking in direction. So I stalled in order to sort my head out. I wasn't willing to budge on the basics anymore. If a man wanted to marry me, he had to be willing to marry me exactly the way I was! At my age, I just wasn't capable of fooling either of us that I could change, nor would I expect anything different of him. I could certainly compromise here and there, and change if I deemed it for the better – I was a coach, of course I would support that! But change for the sake of looking a certain way in front of others was an idealistic notion that smacked of cowardice.

Just as I was wondering if he would ever have the courage to stand up and be who he really was, another blow came my way. Like the last one, I could sense it coming, I just couldn't figure out exactly what it would be and had no idea it would be so big.

**“I’m so sorry,” he wrote. “My daughter almost died and as a result, I was forced to remarry my ex-wife for the sake of family peace.”**

In a tragic play of events, his family drama had come to a head. We had spent the better half of the year trying to move forwards together as a couple after his divorce and now, fate had intervened and determined it was over. All our efforts had crumbled to dust.

The children now had their father back and he was getting his head around being a married man again. The marriage had been resumed several days earlier, the day my dog had died. He had planned to tell me on his return to Dubai but I had confronted him with my sixth sense earlier, inviting him to take the easier option of telling me by text.

I remember reading the message, dropping the phone on the bed, and then stretching back to lie down and stare at the ceiling. I knew destiny had ruled again and there was nothing either of us could do. He had made the best decision he could and while it hurt like hell how could I be angry with him?

Other text messages were pinging from my karate and judo teachers. Where was I, they both wanted to know. For the first time in years, I hadn't made it to class, nor had I informed them that I wouldn't be coming. I ignored my phone, as it was all too much. Thoughts were swirling around my head. *How could I possibly be angry with him when his daughter had almost died?*

I thought of myself at her age, and I began to cry for that little girl I had once been who had also needed her father. A father's loving presence is so important to a young girl's self-esteem and knowing just how much her father adored her, I silently thanked God for intervening and putting things right. If her path could be easier in life, then I could bear any degree of pain that came my way, including the current reality that I now felt utterly alone.

I sank further into my abyss, reaching a depth I had never seen before. Survival had always been my strength and I trusted I would pull myself back together. I just needed more time here, I told myself, promising I would spring back into action forty eight hours before the new job began. While my karate teacher told me to take as long as I needed, messages from my judo teacher pinged several times a day. He didn't know the details of my “family emergency” but he knew it wasn't like me to bail out on class.

There was no choice but to pull myself together because nobody else was going to do it for me. It's a state many of us will pass through in our lives. The ironic thing is that it may not be the biggest moment of our life that sends us there. If you are an emergency responder like myself, you may excel at the bigger stuff of life. Like my own descent, yours may or may have been something relatively small and short but it could have left a lasting imprint and deeper appreciation for and understanding of life.

The reality of my life was plain and clear. I was alone in this despair, I had another family dog to tend to, whom I adored, and I had a new job to start in a few days. I also had my martial arts training to resume. With just those threads hanging I managed to catch myself within days and haul myself back up to the land of living. I refused to stay stuck as there was no hope of anyone coming to my rescue.

Forty-eight hours before the new job started, I dragged myself to a local salon and had myself made over. Highlights, hair cut, blow dry, facial, manicure and pedicure. My body went through the motions. Then I took it clothes shopping. Even if I didn't feel the part, I would damn well make sure I looked it on my first day at work.

When that day finally arrived, I woke up with a half smile. I had repackaged my outer self in less than two days and I didn't look so bad. Even the swelling under my teary eyes had calmed down. Things had been rough and while I was still grieving the loss of my dog, I had managed to make sense of the sudden end to my relationship and jolt myself back to life.

I couldn't fight the logic of it and so the only thing I could do was surrender. It was the same for my dog. I couldn't bring him back. I could only accept his time was up. That was the same attitude I needed for my coaching business, which was in the process of closing down.

Reflecting on the need for perspective during times of pain, I remembered something my now ex-partner would often say and it brought a smile to my pale face. *Relax, Claire!* he would tease me each time I began to stress out over anything, big or small. *None of us are getting out of here alive you know!* His humour had been a wonderful gift in my life, and I vowed to find a way to make that light-heartedness last. Never had his words been closer to the truth. I had to pull myself together completely and make this job work out, as I had nothing else to fall back on. There wasn't a Plan B, this was all I had.

Feeling more positive than I had in months, I showed up for my first day of work looking every inch the part. It had taken all my strength and more to whip myself into a presentable shape, only to find myself met by a disaster of another kind at the other end. I may have found myself a new job and steady salary, and left working on war and chaos behind, but my new work environment was set to be anything but stable or safe.

People and places always look different until you dive in and get to know them better. While I do believe distance can give us perspective, sometimes when we've been through or are carrying so much, our inner compasses can be a little or a lot off course. As I stepped in to my first day, the therapist I had admired from afar greeted me at the door, giving me a generous hug.

**"I read your book, *Wild Zen*," she told me, "and I absolutely loved it!"**

Disbelief washed over my face. I was stunned that one of my new colleagues, who had inspired me, had actually found and bothered to read a book that I had written.

That wasn't the only surprise in this new role. So much would happen between now and three days later, when I walked out on the spot. It would be the stuff of Bollywood movies. The CEO would be a famous Vedic astrologer who had written multiple books. He had also apparently harassed one of the staff members and now, instead of getting to know the nature of mental health work, was bullying other staff members to get their sales figures up.

**“What do you want me to do?”** the lead therapist had apparently barked at him in despair. **“Drop a bomb in the middle of town and create hundreds of mental health casualties to pour through our doors?”**

I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from laughing when she recounted the story to me on my second day. My dark sense of humour from years of working on war was still intact, despite the few difficult years of working in Dubai.

I had laughed as it was so clear that he just didn't get the nature of mental health and support work. Therapists and coaches aren't and shouldn't be a sales force. We don't go out to create problems and entice people in, as the psychology behind advertising commercial products and services does. We are about making people whole again, not tearing them down.

On the third morning, I woke up in disarray. My stomach was upside down and I knew this feeling well. Danger was lurking. If I followed through with the closure of my business, I would need to go on this company's sponsorship. Realising quickly that the new investor and CEO were calling the shots, and pressurizing staff on their sponsorship, I knew it was only a matter of time before I would be dragged into the mud.

I knew I wasn't one to lie down when I saw blows coming my way. I had always been one to take them, stand up, and fight back. But this situation required another strategy. With a dog to protect and family affairs to take care of, I couldn't afford to go under their name. Should anything go wrong, as my sponsors they could make life very difficult for me. They could even threaten and force me out of Dubai.

I was back on alert and, caught between a rock and a hard place, I decided to walk out on day four. Serendipitously, my own business closure had been held up at Dubai customs. This meant that I was back up and running within days. Back in the frying pan but at least, out of the fire.

**“Business is rough, Claire,”** my father said to me, as he watched me battle it out alone. **“Your instincts were right. You needed to get out and get your own business back.”**



## A MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 7

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Karate practitioners must stand on the side of justice at all times and only in situations where there is no other choice should their power find expression through the use of their hands and feet as weapons.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 7 | **Reality**

Funakoshi is reminding us to do the right thing, no matter what. He is inviting us to stay true to our values, even when we are being tested. But he is also heeding us not to ignore the realities that we may meet. Sometimes, taking up weapons and going to war is the only option, but it should only ever be a last resort, when all other attempts have failed.

I had been run through the mill and, against all odds, emerged on two feet. This is the reality of getting knocked down in life. Victory may sound inspiring but ask any soldier who has been survived a battle. How many moments of adversity and despair did he or she face? How many times did they want to lay down their weapons and give up?

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which realities in your life or work have tested you?*

*What have they taught you about yourself?*

## *Sometimes, you've just got to fight.*

---

*“When you step beyond your own gate, you face a million enemies.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 16)

~

**I** threw myself back into karate and judo training with full force.

Having lost my dog, my partner and almost my business in the past month alone, and experienced a swift exit from what I thought was an ideal job, I felt I didn't have much more to lose. And a fighter with nothing to lose is one who may no longer see the point in holding back. *It couldn't really get worse than this, or could it?*

During this rocky time, I was even more grateful for Diane's fortnightly presence. As a coach, I knew the only person who could transform my situation and save me was myself, but being able to talk to another martial artist on a heart to heart level made all the difference. She was a wise presence in my life during a time when I felt I couldn't talk to anyone else. She also understood the painful place I was in, having passed through her own moments of adversity, and come out stronger on the other side.

When she waived the fee for a few sessions to help me out on the financial front, it was then that I began to cry. I had given such generosity to others but I couldn't remember receiving it in return. I swallowed all my pride, which was screaming at me to refuse, and accepted these unexpected gifts from the universe. Because of them, I wasn't completely alone.

Instead of telling me it would all be ok, or offering any superficial advice, Diane encouraged me to see what I was going through as one long *randori*, or a fighting encounter on the tatami mat of life. My opponent kept changing but the theme was the same, and so was my strategy. For now, I had to constantly adapt and that meant I had to keep learning new skills.

The lesson was clear. I had to learn to work with the energy around me and use my intuition instead of my head. I couldn't think my way through this, nor could I waste my time fighting it head on. My headstrong Aries fighting tactics had to lie low. Instead of throwing back a punch or kick in self-defense, I had to learn to step aside and feel my way into new

opportunities, even when I couldn't see. In other words, I had to find a gentle way, just like in judo. Not from a place of passivity but rather, from a place of deep inner strength.

With fierce compassion running through my veins, I managed to get myself through each day. The family desert dog who remained was my first lifeline back into everyday life. Each morning, while I was lay in bed, tempted to hit the snooze button, he would pitter-patter into my bedroom, nudging the duvet cover to wake me up. Knowing I had to let him out into the garden and then feed him, I would stumble out of bed with my eyes half open. Then I would start my day, taking just one hour at a time.

Within days of being back in business, a new work contract came through. Just days after the employment disaster, and hours after the official reinstatement of my business, I found myself facilitating a room of thirty five renewable energy experts and statisticians on their strategic engagement with one another.

With only forty-eight hours to prepare for a one day event miles away in the capital, and an overly trained body still hurting from grief, I had somehow managed the impossible. I had stood back up with confidence and ease, as if nothing had ever thrown me off course, and I credit much of that to my martial arts mindset. You can't just learn this kind of resilience in a day. It takes years of very hard work.

Yes, I wanted and needed to rest more, but I also had to put food on the table for myself, and I had to get my business wheels turning once again. I couldn't just sit there feeling sorry for myself. Because of that, the martial artist in me yanked me up with the kind of confidence that could easily facilitate a room. It's this kind of confidence that allows us to perform seamlessly. No matter what we're feeling on the inside, we do not let it show in public. The moment we drop our guard, the game is over.

**"Where did you learn to facilitate like that?"** two of the participants asked me at the end of the day with bright and inquisitive smiles.

**"What do you mean?"** I asked, a little perplexed by their question.

They looked to be in their twenties and I remembered what it felt like to be that age, and assume that neat and tidy answers could be given to messy and complex questions. I also knew that they hadn't a clue what they had just asked. How could they?

It turned out that they wanted to study at the same place where I had trained to be a facilitator, and learn to do what I had just done. One of them was a training and development specialist, and she thought she had spotted lots of new techniques that she'd never seen before. The other one just wanted to have my ability to lead a group of people through a challenging intellectual space when I was not an expert in statistics or renewable energy.

I smiled wearily and said there were no tricks in what I had just done. Nobody had taught me to facilitate like that. What I'd done was simply be myself. They stared back at me blankly. To be themselves at work hadn't yet occurred to them as it seemed like the best way to get

ahead was to be anything but who they really were.

I also knew that me being myself meant something quite different from most people in the coaching and training circuit. I was the coach and trainer, the yoga teacher and martial artist, the humanitarian and social scientist, and the writer and artist, all at once. I managed the space like a black belt karate practitioner, communicated clearly like a coach, and taught directly like a trainer. I was curious and took care of the room. How could anyone ever teach that in a facilitation course? It had taken a lifetime to learn!

It had also taken years for me to learn the hard way that being myself as a facilitator was far easier than trying to be a version of someone else. Or worse still, trying to fit a superficial and unattainable norm expected by an organization. In the midst of chaos or uncertainty, my past humanitarian work had taught me to use my intellect, while martial arts had taught me to draw on my strength.

Only I knew that I had facilitated that day with the added pressure of knowing I had just twenty-five dollars in my bank account. Only I knew just how weary my body was from working till almost midnight the night before to get things ready for them. Only I knew deep down that when push came to shove, I had facilitated that day feeling like a gun was pointed at the back of my head.

What made it possible for me to keep going was perspective. I knew my suffering was temporary, and that the gun was not real, even if it lasted a few more months or years. I had seen the brutal grind of poverty, or life amidst actual bombs that rip homes and families apart. I would survive these small ordeals and knowing this gave me the strength to go on.

I also knew physical and emotional pain and suffering from training in the dojo. Karate had taught me to weather many storms, including the chaos in my own head, during the times when it really counted. I wasn't invincible by any means, nor was I delusional that I could take on board anything and survive, but I knew how to take a few blows and find the strength to get back on my feet, even after nearly all my bones had been broken.

Unlike these two women, I had learned how to speak in public at work in crowded army prisoner camps, deep in the heart of the desert, to hundreds of men some people would refer to as "terrorists". The extreme weather conditions meant I either had to put in more effort not to freeze in the cold, or melt in the searing heat. If I wasn't speaking there, I was talking in noising prisons or interpreting on stages for other people.

Work had long taught me to be resilient, but this recent triple blow of personal and professional challenges had hit me harder than the ones before. The financial uncertainty and hardship haunted me at night. Technically I could still pack it all in and look for a paid job but the likelihood of doing that in Dubai was slim, and I couldn't yet find a way to leave. With nothing in my hands or anything certain on the horizon in terms of love and money, I knew I would have to keep showing up each day, regardless of how I felt.

When an invitation from the State of Kuwait arrived a few days later to present my work on

post-traumatic stress and humanitarian work at a seminar in October, I didn't hesitate to accept. Although it was days before my second dan grading, and therefore a risk to my focus and energy levels, I knew I had to go. If I couldn't get up on a stage and present what I had learned through writing my first book, *Wild Zen*, and all my years of navigating trauma and adversity, what was the point of it all?

With the transparency of someone who has nothing to hide, I took to the podium before an audience of Kuwaiti humanitarians and several journalists. Standing there before them, I felt my eyes misting up. Many years and chance encounters, including with the person who had invited me here, had led me to this moment of opening up.

**“My journey through trauma began with yours,” I opened up. “When Iraq invaded your country back in 1990, my world also changed. I had just turned twelve years old.”**

I didn't need to tell them of the sexual boundaries crossed by two British navy personnel, and how that affected me, but I could describe what it felt like to live nearby in Dubai, witnessing the masses of US and British troops take over the town.

As they had lived through the atrocities of the war on their doorsteps and in their very homes, I had been a child of the same generation not too far away. The fact I was English and they were nearly all Kuwaiti was irrelevant. Kids' lives are torn apart and changed forever with war, that was something we all knew.

The war on Kuwait had militarised my young mind and sensitised me to the suffering that comes with war. When we have been run through the mill, we don't always need an expert on hand. Sometimes we just need someone who understands.

Instead of quoting facts and figures, I told them the story of a young athletic child who turned to martial arts and then, humanitarian work. I shared with them the real life story of someone who had passed through numerous situations of direct and indirect trauma, and who had not only lived to tell the tale as I was doing now, but who had also created a coaching framework to help others do the same.

Throughout this catastrophic year, which had flipped me upside down, I had quietly been developing my own coaching methodology, which I had called *The Intelligence Map*, which covered eight different areas of intelligence: psychological, emotional, somatic (or the body), environmental, social, relationship, spiritual and ancestral.

I had hesitated professionally to include the last two areas – spirituality and ancestry – as a part of me feared I wouldn't be taken seriously by my “bigger” clients. The words “spiritual” and “ancestral” sounds quite fluffy in most workplaces today. Yet for those of us working on the front lines of life where disaster regularly occurs, like the people in front of me, they were very often two of the most important streams of intelligence that could help them make sense of work and life, and move them forwards.

Despite the fact that I was the last person to present, and that my talk came hot on the heels of

two prominent psychiatrists and a university professor from New York, I didn't hesitate to present some of my soul's work for the first time in front of a live audience. *The Intelligence Map*, my coaching methodology, offered an educational coaching route for people looking to perform and communicate better. It wasn't just about eight degrees of intelligence. It also provided insights on leadership, resilience and strategic engagement that are equally applicable to life and work.

After the talk, several of the audience members approached me. They told me it was the most interesting talk they had heard in a long time. They appreciated my ability to come down to their level and talk to them as a peer, and to frame mental health issues in everyday terms. I hadn't labeled anyone. Rather, I had presented a flexible "way" that allowed us all the freedom to define where we currently stood and what we needed most to move forwards with our life and work.

I had also presented a framework that I was living each and every day, that was constantly being refined. The fact I hadn't presented a "quick fix" approach to dealing with stress, or post-traumatic stress, but rather a growth-oriented enquiry left the audience with useful questions that they could further explore. This was exactly what I wanted to create. The kind of work that taught people how to lead themselves and find their own way. But there was still so much to develop both in my framework and in me from here. I wasn't "there" yet.

That night, on the flight back to Dubai, I marveled at the paradox of the past couple of days. The State of Kuwait hadn't hesitated to treat me like a VIP, flying me in and out on business class, receiving me in the VIP lounge of the airport, and putting me up in a beautiful hotel. It was as if someone has whisked me away, out of the darker trenches of my life for a few hours, into another world. It was a world that was familiar from my past work with the United Nations but now, I was seeing it with fresh eyes.

After the summer's series of hardships, I suddenly felt overwhelmed. Quietly, in the dark anonymity of the business class cabin, gentle tears rolled down my face. I needed a hug or hand to hold, or just someone to sit next to me, but there was nobody by my side.

It was also a relief to cry. I hadn't done that since the day my dog had died and this time, instead of feeling traumatized, I felt hopeful. I still didn't know how I was going to make ends meet but I knew I had to keep going and developing my life's work. That grit and determination kept me in one piece.

Back in Dubai, I had to put my work on hold temporarily. The following week, I entered a five-day karate training camp. While yet again I needed to be out there promoting my business and earning money, I also needed to be here, pulling out all stops to pass my second dan, and that meant entering a zone of single-minded focus. I couldn't afford to worry about my bills and living expenses when I had a grading to take. My failure to grade the year before because I was worried about money still haunted me.

At that time, I didn't realise how much I had, all I could think was that I didn't know where I would be financially in six months time. Now, I didn't know where I would be in just a few

weeks, let alone a few months. If I allowed the fear of that to take over, I would miss yet another grading and where would that leave me next year? In debt and *still* having to find the courage to grade? I would have to fight this fear of being broke or broken some time, so why not start now? *What did I really have to lose?*

As if to answer that question, the fees for the second dan grading came at me like a punch to the stomach. My former self, who enjoyed a stable monthly UN salary wouldn't have batted an eyelid but now, in this state of having to scrape by, I was acutely aware of the risk I was taking. If I didn't pass this grading, it wasn't just money I would lose, that I could live with. It was a question of honour. To lose that money because I wasn't "good enough" to pass, when I could have trained harder, would hit me even harder.

I withdraw the amount from a small savings account overseas that was intended for a future home investment. I had to be frank with myself. There was no guarantee I would pass. Not only that, but the senior official from Japan would be grading me for both my second and first dans. As the Japan Karate Association hadn't yet endorsed my first dan, the pressure was two-fold. I had to pass my first dan again before I could officially pass the second. Two gradings in one, on the same day, and two lots of fees!

Never had I put myself so boldly on the line for such a slim chance of success. I had seen other people lose everything and find the courage to stand back up and fight, and win. But it had always been someone else's story, not mine. When we're on the outside looking in on someone else's grit through adversity, it is so easy to romanticize the challenge they must face to turn it around. The reality when it's happening to us is far less romantic. At times it can feel brutal.

I had waited sixteen long years for this moment to stand up and demonstrate I had what it took to be a black belt, not just on the tatami mats but also in life. From a practical perspective, I didn't care about the belt colour or rank. A belt is just a piece of material to hold a training suit together. But the journey it takes to get and keep a black belt is another story. It requires daily practice at every level to maintain that commitment to being a better version of ourselves.

My mind was clear. I would be walking out of this five-day karate training camp with my second dan, whatever it took or demanded of me. There would be no prizes or certificates this time for simply showing up, and I was not here to waste my time or money. I had spent sixteen years training under pressure of all different kinds. Everything I had faced in the past and overcome had been a part of this second dan grading.

I stepped into the training hall with a certainty I had never felt before in my karate practice. The senior examining official from Japan was a tall and agile man in his late forties. It was clear by the way he moved that he came from another world, one where strict order and discipline ruled, and that made me stand up and walk a little taller. Yet he was also quite funny and honest, frequently making us laugh over the course of the five days.

The training started with almost a hundred students in the room, most of whom I had never

met before. Being one of the more senior ones, I took my place on the front row and we all bowed in with respect as the training began. With a focus on deep stances, I was suddenly extra grateful for my Karate teacher's attention to detail over the past few years. All those classes he had forced me to stay in a low stance, when my mind had wanted to give up, had conditioned my body to withstand the kind of pressure this senior teacher was now putting us through.

It was easy to spot the black belts around me who had endured a similar degree of physical suffering in their karate journey. A Filipino father and son further up the ranks caught my eye. Their stances glided down to towards the floor, as they moved fluidly back and forth. They made it look so easy but I knew the amount of training hours they had put in. I wasn't quite at their level but I knew that if I didn't quit, I would make it there one day. Not so I could look good holding low stances. That part didn't attract me. Rather, it was knowing that I had the mental and emotional strength needed to train my body to such a degree. I wanted to feel that strength in my body and I still had some way to go.

That was the difference hardship had made in my life. While some people with weaker minds would prefer to quit when physical training gets tough, ongoing hardship had taught me to hang in and endure discomfort long enough to break through to a new level.

To transform a body, a person has to also do the nitty gritty work of transforming their mind. Once that is achieved, the emotional strength follows. That was my goal. That was what a second black belt and beyond symbolized to me. No longer would I seek mentally or emotionally to escape pain, rather I would train myself to face, endure and transform it.

The night before the grading, my teacher summoned me to meet the senior official.

**"What do you think?"** he asked him. **"Do you think she's ready for second dan?"** I was mortified that he had popped the question so abruptly.

**"Well, she has to first pass her first dan test before I'll consider her for second,"** the senior official responded with a blank look on his face.

Then he laughed and turned away, not in a malicious way but with the spirit of someone who was free. He wouldn't cave in to anyone's pressure, least of all my teacher's. He would make his own mind up and nobody could influence or rush that. He would decide in his own time based on evidence, not persuasion.

The next morning, I awoke in quiet and determined mood. I poured myself a strong cup of coffee and sat on the front step with my desert dog. Patting his back, I told us both that one of the biggest moments of my life was finally here. Today would be a turning point in how I saw myself. I had waited sixteen long years for this moment. I had endured so much suffering in that time and I was ready to leave it all behind. I was ready to stand up and be seen and judged for the fighter I had become. I wasn't yet the best fighter I could be but I was the best I could be in this moment. I knew I couldn't have done more.



Grabbing a banana, I picked up my karate suit and black belt, which was turning white through the past three and a half years of hard training. I still remembered the moment my Iranian Sufi karate teacher had handed it to me, at the age of twenty-two. I had carried it on every mission. It had borne witness to every one of those sixteen years and what they had made of me.

As I drove to the testing centre, memories of a younger version of myself floated through my mind's eye. There I was, seven or eight years old, balancing on a climbing frame some eight-foot up in the sky. Without looking down or holding on, I confidently made my way across the frame, one step at a time.

I saw my younger self leaping off high diving boards into the sea harbor beneath me, and then walking along wave breakers with a deep ocean on one side and still calm water of the harbor on the other. I was born a daredevil, a calculated risk taker. Quiet confidence had always been a part of me. It had driven me to work in prisons and war zones and now, it was rising up again to get me through today.

I quietly thanked my judo training for bringing that part of me back to life. The confidence that is acquired through learning full body combat training had been a missing piece in my karate puzzle. In just a few months, I had passed through several judo ranks and now held a sixth kyu, or green belt. Learning to throw actual people in judo had helped me to solidify my karate stance. Karate isn't just about throwing punches or kicks, there is so much more to the art when we scratch beneath the surface.

As a karate student, I had been forced to look elsewhere for the missing pieces in my own training but I didn't resent that one bit. I could have been angry with my teachers for not showing me the way. But I accepted that this is part of the karate journey. The secrets are hidden in kata, but the student has to know how to look.

If a student truly wants to learn something, he or she will find a way. If everything is handed to us on plates in life, we will only eat it all and feel nauseous. We may overeat and take what is on our plates for granted. But when we are starved, we will have to learn how to hunt. With limited energy, we will hunt and eat exactly what we need to stay alive.

By the time I parked my car outside of the training hall, the door to the rest of my life and work slammed shut. My breathing slowed down and a single pointed focus arrived. I had been here before, in this quiet state of ruthlessness where I knew I would survive. Everything else could wait. All that mattered was this task at hand.

The room was busy with nerves when I arrived. Unlike other mornings, when the atmosphere had been chatty and jovial, now it was tense and quiet. The senior examiner was instructing a children's class in at the far end of the mats. Of the ten students that had been presented for grading that morning, only four others and myself had been accepted.

That it wasn't a given we could grade had already sent shockwaves through the camp. If the senior examiner hadn't hesitated to reject some of the students before they even graded,

without so much as an apology, then that meant failure was a distinct possibility for those of us set to take the floor!

I made my way to the ladies changing rooms and carefully put on my suit. First, the loose pants, then the kimono jacket. Standing before the mirror, I looked deeply into my eyes as I wrapped my worn black belt around my waist two times, and tied it effortlessly into a knot without looking. I had done this so many times over the years I could easily do it with my eyes shut.

I was the only woman in the changing room. While I knew my karate teacher was rooting for me today, I also knew that I was otherwise very much on my own. My performance and whether I could hold myself together in one piece, and do my best, would be down to me, and me alone. Nobody was going to step in and make this any easier for me. Nobody was going to give me a hug or tell me not to worry; that I'd knock the examiner's socks off or pass with flying colours. There was absolutely no reassurance.

The senior teacher made us wait over an hour without any information on when we would start. The lack of certainty only heightened the nerves in the room but I maintained my laser-sharp focus. Like the others, I passed the time stretching and practicing some of my examination moves. But I knew it was pointless to practice now. All of the work had been done already and my fate was already sealed. When another senior student came over to correct me, I smiled politely and then turned away.

**"Who does he think he is!"** my karate teacher who was watching me later said. He was outraged that someone had tried to throw me off balance moments before I graded.

**"You must trust yourself, Claire, and how you have been trained,"** he told me. **"Never let anyone throw you off guard at the last moment."**

I knew the lesson of trusting myself by now. The memory of my missed grading the year before seemed worlds away. It was like I had been pummeled and pounded into a different version of myself. The parts that no longer worked had been shattered and like the gold that puts broken Japanese ceramics back together, I was now stronger in all my broken places.

Out of nowhere, the senior teacher appeared. **"Claire San,"** he boomed in his loud voice, addressing me with a Japanese title of respect in a heavy accent. **"You are grading first!"**

Without hesitation, my body led the way, before I had time to think. I took my place in the centre of the mat, directly in front of the examiner's table where he was now seated. The Filipino father and son duo were standing at the side of the mat. They were grading for third and fourth dan respectively. Next to them was a Lebanese man around my age, who was testing for sixth dan, and a younger Moroccan woman, who like myself was testing for second.

I stopped thinking and trusted my mind and body to do the work. With each command, they reacted instantly, in perfect harmony. I felt the power coming from deep within me and years

of hard training coming to life. Dozens of spectator's eyes were on me, and the examiner's gaze felt like a fireball on my chest and back. But I wasn't distracted in the slightest, not even during the final fight, when the Filipino son was called up to spar with me.

When the last test was done, we were all called up in order of our current ranks, in a horizontal line facing the senior teacher.

**“Claire San!”** he boomed again, in a serious tone. **“Congratulations, you passed.”**

Not only had I had my first dan status confirmed, but I had also passed all the requirements for second dan at one of Japan's highest grading levels for Karate.

He then mentioned a comment or two for improvement that I missed as my brain had already shut down the moment he told me I had passed. Until then, I hadn't thought to visualise how I would feel the moment I passed. Although I had told myself passing was my only option that day, I hadn't dared to consider how I would feel.

Only three of us passed that day, myself and the Filipino father and son. On the outside I appeared calm but inwardly, I was crashing to pieces. I had put everything on the line for this exam and what I had just put myself through over the past few years to make it this far suddenly overwhelmed me. First, saying no to domestic violence, walking out on my marriage and home with a suitcase and very little money, surviving a sudden divorce and losing another home, returning to work in war zones, healing the wounds of sexual violence, learning to feel again and eventually, speaking up.

Then, leaving a steady job at the UN to start my business so I could recover from burnout and find more energy and time to train, investing all my savings into the business only to struggle repeatedly, walking away from a reliable contract and monthly income like I had with medical NGO the year earlier, and enduring a state of financial devastation where I had been forced to gamble my future financial security all for the sake of a rank.

But it was never about the belt, or the certificate. It wasn't about an association in Japan endorsing my worth as a *karateka*. It was always about doing what I thought could never be done, so I could remember for the rest of my life that with enough nerve, and a little guidance from God, *anything* is possible.

I left the training hall in a daze, not realizing I was expected to show up for training later that day. Instead, I made my way to a local café, where I sat alone, drinking coffee, unable to think or feel. As usual, in my moment of celebration I was alone. I couldn't think of a single person who would understand the long journey I had undertaken to get here, and so I never picked up the phone to make that call.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 8

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*"Negligence is a great enemy when we leave the safety of our homes. If we are not in peak form in both our body and attitude, we will attract troublemakers and problems."*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 8 | *Attention*

Funakoshi is teaching personal safety and self-development as two sides of the same coin. Preventing chaos starts with being mindful in our own homes. If we cannot create the safety that we need there, we may struggle to find the mental and physical strength we need to cope with the unpredictable world beyond. Attention to detail on all fronts is advised.

In many ways, I earned my second dan against all odds. I had paid attention to my inner and outer worlds, and done all I could to create more safety for myself. Had I achieved that to the degree I needed? Not at all. In fact, I was learning the pitfalls of winning fights with my back up against the wall. Without further cover or protection, I was also wearing myself down.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which situations in your life or work are calling your attention right now?*

*How can you do the best you can, with what you have right now?*

*In life, you get what you need to walk your path.*

---

*“Think of your opponent’s hands and feet as swords.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 15)

~

The day I finally passed my second dan grading, instead of feeling on top of the world that I had achieved a significant goal, two weeks of heavy flu descended.

My body had been carrying so much tension for so long. I had walked away from a regular income to pursue this path and now that this part of my battle was over, my immune system had finally given way. At the very time I needed to turn my attention back to my business and find ways to bring in a decent and regular salary to support myself, I was practically bed-ridden with exhaustion. I couldn’t believe my bad luck!

A text message arrived one afternoon, as I lay flat on my back, unable to get up. My entire body felt like a quivering sack of lead and once more, I was alone with no distraction from the pain. All I could do was practice managing my mind and not let it get the better of me.

**“When are we going to celebrate?”**

**“When I’m over this flu,”** I responded, a little surprised by the friendly question.

The message was from a self-defense instructor I had recently interviewed for my blog. Several months earlier, a member of my Sufi meditation group had asked me which martial art she should enroll her two daughters in if they were to learn *real* self-defense. Without hesitation, I had responded directly from the heart.

**“Forget martial arts,”** I had told her, speaking from my own experience. **“Becoming a martial artist is a long and trying path. If you want your girls to learn how to protect themselves in today’s world, without any delay, put them in a self-defense class.”**

Not knowing where to find such a class, she asked for a recommendation. It was then that I remembered a supermarket advert I had seen a few months earlier on a local supermarket

notice board. It seemed like a good place to start but I told her to wait and let me check him out first.

I put myself in her daughters' shoes. What would I have needed when I was a teenager, still learning to protect herself? I knew a martial arts-oriented self-defense teacher wasn't enough. It certainly hadn't helped me to protect myself from men. What these girls needed was someone who understood crime and could educate them on personal safety as well as self-defense.

This teacher had extensive police experience, including criminal and terrorist investigations. Having worked closely with police on criminal rehabilitation in past humanitarian work, and with political prisoners, I felt more at ease with an ex police officer teaching self-defense. But something didn't add up and I was curious to find out more. *What on earth was someone like him doing teaching in Dubai?*

We met in a quiet café down the road from me. The relief I suddenly felt at being in the company of someone who understood my old professional world – one of crime and political unrest – fell like a tonne of bricks. For once in Dubai, I felt I didn't have to censor my words, dumb myself down, or hide who I really was. I was Claire, the executive coach, and I was also Claire, a woman who had once sat for thousands of hours with criminals from all walks of life and learned that quite often, the greatest danger to the life or dignity of a young girl or woman lay closer to home or work.

Because of my own journey through violence and crime, I knew emotional strength and mental alertness were critical for these young girls, as well as physical self-defense skills. They needed to learn to not trust so easily, and to not be afraid of abandonment, rejection, or doing anything 'wrong'. They also needed to understand how the cyclical dynamics of abuse and violence build up and actually work to tear a female down, and how easy it was for us all to get caught off guard.

Very quickly – all too quickly in hindsight – I aligned myself with his self-defense work. It had triggered a feeling of false safety and feeling of being understood, and I didn't know how vulnerable I was to both. I had thought to ask questions and check his work out but I hadn't thought to listen to the niggling sense of doubt in the pit of my stomach, telling me something wasn't quite right. Instead, I had fallen into the trap of assuming that was self-doubt and in my desire to make a positive difference, I raced right through it, missing self-defense rule number one. *Trust your intuition.*

On top of running my coaching practice, which was an ongoing struggle to rebuild but was thankfully picking up more speed, I freely offered this teacher's training academy professional advice and skills in communications. I could see what a struggle it was for him to run his teaching initiative on top of full-time work. Remembering how much I could have benefited from such self-defense classes as a teenage girl, I rolled up my sleeves far too easily to lend support, and it was hardly surprising he didn't say no.

But like many things in life, I was served a dose of goodness along with the bad. This person

was clearly placed in my path to help me rewrite my script, and he couldn't do that with kindness alone.

My heart took over my head and emotions ruled over logic. The image of my broken teenage self, lying on her bed alone the night after the assault, feeling out of sorts but not quite sure why, haunted me. With my second dan in karate, I was ready for a new goal and I wanted to put that dan grade to good use. Life after my return to Dubai had lacked the kind of meaning and purpose I was used to in humanitarian work, and I wondered if this was a sign to put that right.

Not long after our meeting, I attended one of his workshops for women. I had come straight from judo, where I had taken a blow to the back of my head when I was whacked onto the mat. Physically, I was still recovering from the nasty bout of flu and feeling less than my best self. But I had made myself come and observe the class because the niggling feeling inside of me kept coming back. I needed to see him teach to understand more.

Quietly, I sat down at the side of the class. There, I watched him interact with the young women. Something felt off but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. His teaching seemed mechanical and staged, which I sensed immediately being a trainer myself. His body language was off and I felt I could see through his teaching style. The atmosphere in the class wasn't quite right yet he seemed to be saying all the right things.

Again, self-doubt set in. *I* was the one who had taken a blow to the head that day and wasn't feeling good. Perhaps my negative state of mind was also influencing my impression and making me overly harsh. It was probably the negativity bias I was desperately trying to shake off, which expected everything good to go wrong.

My analytical brain went into overtime to escape the unease I felt in my body. I figured he was about as good as it got in Dubai, where the need to make money to survive is high. Here was a self-defense teacher not doing it for the money. He had a full-time job already to support himself, and this was being done at a low cost in his free time. If he wasn't doing this for money, then he would at least be in a stronger place.

Besides, I rationalized to myself, his website biography listed him as ex-FBI. Surely that must count for something? I understood the usefulness of a self-defense teacher having additional insights into criminology, and the workings of a criminal mind.

With a Masters in Violence, Conflict and Development, my past work and life experiences, and being a martial artist, I didn't take the nuts and bolts of self-defense lightly. I knew there were no bulletproof techniques and I trusted this inner knowing that people needed to be educated properly. They needed to know it was a long journey, not a three-hour self-defense workshop they could attend once.

That was why I had refused several times in the past to teach self-defense. Oddly, not long after my return to Dubai, people began to ask. Would I teach women's self-defense? The answer was always no. I wasn't trained specifically to do that, and even with all my

experience I wasn't prepared to make something up just because I thought it sounded right.

I knew how much it hurt physically to punch or kick a real life person if a person's limbs were not conditioned to absorb the impact of their own attack. I also knew first hand how the central nervous system could go into freeze in situations of extreme stress. When we are afraid for our lives, our bodies can feel like lead. Self-defense is about learning what to do in that state, and preventing that state from happening in the first place. And where on earth would I even start teaching that? It was so huge!

Watching from the sidelines, this teacher's messages seemed a bit simplistic but instead of listening to my instincts, I figured he must know better than me. Wasn't he the one wearing the self-defense teacher's hat? Wasn't he the one who had worked with the FBI on thousands of cases of rape, domestic violence, and homicide? Wasn't he the one who had trained police in self-defense?

Deep down, a more uncomfortable question threw me further into the pit of self-doubt. *Who was I to sit there questioning his techniques?* It's not like I had ever been able to defend myself in time. It's not like I had ever found the courage to figure out how to teach a real self-defense class. If anyone was going to be the fraud here, it had to be me. *I* was clearly the imposter, not him.

Still, I shared my doubts with Diane in our weekly sessions.

**"Something doesn't feel right,"** I told her.

By then, our celebration dinner that he had suggested weeks earlier still hadn't taken place. I had been looking forward to spending time with someone who I assumed might be able to understand what getting my second dan meant. On top of that, I was now serious about training as a self-defense instructor myself, and wanted the chance to ask questions about his experience. I had taken a leap of faith and enrolled in a self-defense instructor-training course in the UK, thinking that on my return I could teach under his umbrella, as he had suggested.

Both personally and professionally, I was beginning to feel let down. He had started dodging me while continuing to say all the right words. That he'd love me to train as an instructor and become one of his trainers, and that I was welcome at all his seminars for women. Yet he never seemed to let me know when they were happening until after the events had taken place, which was confusing to say the least.

*Why didn't you let me know the date in advance?* I would ask. *But Claire*, he'd respond in an overly friendly voice at the other end of the phone. *You know you're welcome any time, you don't need my permission to attend.* Attend? If I were going to learn to teach alongside him, why would my presence fall under the category of "attend"?

To complicate things further, he had invited me to hang out on his motorbike several times, which was not at all my cup of tea, but it was precisely because of this that I thought it could be a fun thing to do. After the sudden loss of my partner a few months earlier, life had been so



serious, and I didn't see the harm in us being friends as well as teaching allies. I was still too heart broken to even consider another relationship but I did like the idea of spending time with a man again, especially one who I thought was operating from a similar head and heart space.

But like the celebration dinner, the motorbike rides never happened. Eventually, I pulled my head out of the sandpit and snapped. One of the US marines from the Gulf War, who had known me since I was twelve and was a long-term family friend, had since been working with the FBI. I decided to pull my last card to figure out what was going on.

**“Claire, this guy’s never worked a day in the FBI in his life!”**

Reading those words over my Christmas vacation, just days before attending my self-defense instructor training, my heart beat slowed down and my stomach went cold. As if I hadn't known myself that *he* was the fraud, not myself. But I had done what so many people do in times of uncertainty and stress. *I hadn't listened to my wiser self.*

Just before the shock of this news, I had also received another two blows. After a few years of silence, my ex-husband had reached out with an olive branch.

**“Let’s make peace once and for all,”** he urged, as he shared the news that he would be passing through Dubai.

My default was to say yes without question, for I had been holding out an olive branch for years and each time, he had torn it to shreds. But after saying yes, I suddenly stalled. Something felt off inside of me, and so I asked the self-defense instructor the single most common mistake a woman in my situation would make. It was just before I found out that his policing career, while it had most certainly happened and was sufficient to do his job, wasn't quite as big as he had made it out to be. His answer was nonetheless insightful.

**“Thinking she needs to see that person again in order to forgive them,”** he told me bluntly.

Sometimes a person just needs to let go and move on. Years had passed since the divorce. I had owned my role in the violence that had happened in our marriage, done the therapy and inner work to take responsibility for my mistakes, and eventually wrote a few thoughts on it in my first book, *Wild Zen*, which had upset him greatly. I understood he wanted peace but right now, our past was the last thing on my mind. For my own wellbeing, I needed to cut the cord and move on.

In the perfect world, we would be friends and I would bless his new family and life. Isn't that what I had been offering for years and now, finally, he was reaching out to say yes? But this was a different time and place and now, my answer was no. It was too little too late for me.

Thinking that if we were truly seeking peace, he would accept my change of heart, I sent a response back saying I had changed my mind. With self-defense teaching on my mind, I

added an extra note to say I would continue to speak about domestic violence. It wasn't out of malice, rather I was sharing the message that our past hadn't been in vain, and that I continued to learn. Little did I know just how much that would trigger him.

The torrent of verbal abuse that he unleashed on me when I refused to meet him threw me back to the days of being an abused wife. But this time, with the perspective of all the years that had passed, I caught my reaction in time. Sitting on the beach with a close family friend, I read each message out aloud. *I was a fraud. I was bitter. I was a liar. I claimed I was all "that" and yet I wasn't.*

The list of insults and accusations went on and on. I received each one with curiosity, with no desire to react or respond. If this was how he still saw me, who was I to contest that? This was his experience of me and why would I waste another drop of my energy trying to defend that? For the first time since we had met, over a decade before, I had absolutely nothing to prove. He could throw all the word bombs in the world and I would still cut the cord, turn my back and walk away.

That was the first blow, and it arrived just two weeks after receiving my second dan. The second blow hit me harder, as I was much less prepared. As a member of an online humanitarian wellness group, I had initiated a sub-group of members to draft a background on standard ethical bodies overseeing the practice of therapy, coaching and other wellbeing services, such as yoga, to humanitarians looking for psychological and emotional support.

My drive to set up and lead this group was personal and professional. I remembered how tough it had been for myself to make my way through the heavy memories of aid work. I hadn't known where to start when looking for professionals to support me, and given I had struggled to find the right people, I thought it might help to make such information more readily available to others.

I was still trying to go by a book of rules in a very big and unfriendly sea. But fewer and fewer people seemed to care about codes of conduct. Protection, one of my past work areas, was always at the back of my mind. If humanitarians were aware of the ethical standards that applied to each profession, they could in theory make better-informed decisions about whom to hire to support them in their personal journey. This could lend more protection to them as they passed through their own vulnerable states, and it was that vulnerability that I wanted to help protect.

Before putting the group into action, I decided to check out each of the members who had put their names forwards to be a part of this small voluntary initiative. My old prison instincts still lurked in the background and I was aware that I hadn't yet met a few of the members in person yet. They seemed bone fide humanitarian wellbeing practitioners but could I really trust the long distance between us?

As I googled each one, a website I had never seen before that claimed to offer humanitarian support services popped up. How interesting, I remember thinking, as I clicked the home page link. Scrolling through, I noticed a life-coaching page and instantly clicked on it. There, a

couple of paragraphs flashed up. Reading through them took my breath away. *Goodness, I thought to myself, here is someone doing exactly what I do. In fact, not only are they doing what I set out to do, they're even saying the exact same thing I once said but quickly discovered was impossible for one person to execute alone!*

My heart stopped. *The same thing?*

Wait a minute, I thought, as I went back to the first paragraph and re-read the entire coaching page, my heart lurching more and more with each word. It was then that the penny dropped. Someone out there in cyberspace, and in the real world, had copied and pasted pretty much my entire business elevator pitch. Those two paragraphs had once appeared on an earlier coaching website that I had let slide. It had taken years to articulate them, and the likelihood of someone putting together the exact angle I had, using ninety percent of the same wording, was slim.

I couldn't believe someone else was selling his or her services based on my hard work. Not only that, but they hadn't even bothered to mention who they actually were on this website, or refer to a professional code of ethics, which they clearly didn't have. Instead, they presented themselves as a coordinator for other practitioners offering these services.

Rage swept through me and I began to shake. Within hours, I would discover who this person was and they would outright deny stealing my words. My confrontation of them and calling them out on the truth in a public domain would lead one of their supporters to call me a bully. As the confrontation unfolded, people I knew, liked, and had previously supported would stand by silently, not stepping forwards to support me back. Just two would reach out to me privately and of them, one said the same person had pinched her business concept too, but that she hadn't chosen to fight it.

This incident would teach me about betrayal and highlight whom my friends and allies really were, and there weren't many. It would highlight how I had a habit of supporting others but not receiving that same support in return. It would also make me aware of how my martial arts character and spirit could be seen by others, when I chose to make it visible. The fact I didn't hesitate to defend myself would be uncomfortable to those who hadn't yet learned to stand up for themselves, or who felt that my passionate defense was too much.

While my previous website had since been taken down, I knew those words were mine. I had memorized them in Gaza while creating a plan for my restorative health and fitness coaching practice that had never taken off. Then I had unearthed them for my first executive coaching website. They were etched on my heart and ran through my blood. That was what had triggered me. Those words articulated a dream I hadn't yet been able to fulfill in my business. They reminded me of my early coaching dreams, which I hadn't yet achieved.

It was a formidable two-paragraph pitch that expressed a coaching service for everyone who had encountered violence, conflict, stress, trauma and adversity, the exact theme of my first book, *Wild Zen*. My desire was to transform the threads of conversations from that book into an actual coaching service. Yet writing the book had knocked me out for the half year that

followed and by the time I recovered, I was in a very different place.

The people I had hoped to reach included humanitarians, human rights activists, community leaders, former prisoners and their families, yoga practitioners, fitness professionals, martial arts teachers and former military personnel. I had managed to reach quite a few of these but the vision was just too big for me to execute alone.

When I realized I didn't have a leg to stand on legally to prove my point, as this website was now offline and I had no archived records, I backed down and reluctantly accepted that I hadn't protected myself well enough. I decided to drop the anger and focus on what was really bothering me. Something much deeper was brewing inside of me.

Since receiving my second dan, a series of difficult lessons had come my way. First, the self-defense teacher. Then, the ex-husband. And now, this. Life was clearly trying to get my attention.

Full of despair, I turned to my older and wiser self. *They can take everything from me*, I heard myself saying to her, referring to the person who had taken my early elevator pitch. *They can take it all but they have not earned the right to coach the last two groups of people like I have*. But the old woman in me just stared back with fierce compassion. She didn't move to comfort me or try to make it ok.

There wasn't a doubt in my heart that this was where my unresolved pain lay. Memories of my younger self flashed through my mind's eye again. It was the height of the second Gulf War, when Iraq had invaded Kuwait, and my family had welcomed another group of US marines into our home to celebrate the festive season and enjoy some down time in between their missions out at sea.

Unlike the British Navy lads who we also entertained, who were a bit rough at the edges, these marines stood out. Their manners were impeccable, at least around us. From their neat and tidy appearance to their consideration of others and disciplined ways, their military composure had had a lasting impact on me. I decided that I wanted to grow up and be like them. A couple of them had wives in the military, and that made me think there could be a place for me in the military.

So I told my family and anyone who cared to listen that when I grew up, I was going to be a *PTI* in the US army when I grew up. A *Physical Training Instructor*, I emphasized, in case they didn't understand the abbreviation I had only just learned. As a child athlete with promising physical strength and mental discipline and determination, it wasn't quite the outrageous idea it may have at first seemed. I certainly had the potential but my passport posed an issue.

**“You can't join the US army,”** one of my family members quipped back, not realizing that I had been thinking this through for quite some time. **“You're British, not American, so you'll have to join the British army.”**

But my relationship to my English heritage had been rocky since birth. It was actually so bad that the dream was killed on the spot. There was no way I was joining the British army, as I hadn't met a single member who had had a positive effect on me.

As a kid with much growing up to do, I was probably influenced too by the friendly military ties between the Gulf States and the US. It was 1990 and this corner of the world was different. I was still too young to understand the nuances of politics and colonization, and had a terrible habit of being overly black and white, and as a result too quick to judge.

Growing up as a UK expatriate in the Middle East, being schooled in an Emirati system, and later marrying into and out of Arab culture had made me acutely aware of the devastating wake British colonial history had left behind, especially in some hearts and minds. I was already hostile to my British identity by the age of twelve, and that made growing up even shakier. When a kid doesn't know where they belong, or able to connect with the positive aspects of where they're from, they can drift for a very long time.

As this memory faded, I returned to present day. In a very roundabout way, I would come to thank the person who had felt so inspired to copy my work. They provided a much needed turning point in my journey, one that would lead me to follow my heart further and find more of the missing parts of myself. Once again, a lesson that seemed unfair on the surface was exactly the medicine I needed to find the strength I needed to follow my path.

For several weeks, a website link had been open on my computer. It was for a self-defense instructor training in the UK. During my search, I had two simple criteria. No martial arts-oriented self-defense training courses, and no pink, fluffy or flimsy training courses that used props like men in big bobbly suits for the attacker roles.

I wanted reality-based self-defense training and it had to be based in the UK, as that was where I would be over the Christmas and New Year holiday. That more or less left me with one option. To be trained by members of the British military.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 9

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“When trouble occurs, we should always remain careful and respectful in words and actions and never look down upon opponents or discount their potential. Rather, we should concentrate on defending ourselves with full awareness and commitment.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 9 | **Courage**

Funakoshi is teaching vigilance and prevention tactics. During troublesome times, he is reminding us not to under-value or underestimate people, as we can always be surprised. Some people are quite good at concealing their ability, and this is one of their tactical strengths. Because of that, in such situations we should never drop our guard.

This part of my life carried a series of back-to-back attacks and betrayals at a time when I was feeling more exhausted than usual. Instead of falling apart, and feeling like a victim, I chose to see beyond each story. None of these stories were mine to bear, at least not any longer, and now was the time to step sideways, and find the courage to continue on my path.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How much courage can you access in the face of betrayal or attack?*

*Which aspects of yourself or your life make you feel the most courageous?*

## *The wars are in our minds and hearts.*

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*“Do not think of winning. Think, rather, of not losing.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 12)

~

**D**eciding to train as a self-defense instructor was not a decision I took lightly.

Generally, I am not someone to do things in halves. If I commit to something, I follow it through to the end, no matter how long it takes me. My sixteen year-long wait for my second dan karate grading was proof of that.

I also had to contemplate the cost of flying to the UK, the accommodation and then the course itself. Then there were the course dates to figure out with the training centre. All of that had to be taken care of before I could even enter the state of mind needed to survive and pass a self-defense training course that was run by former and current members of the British army, navy, police and security services.

This wasn't about following a little girl's dream to join the army as a PTI, for that dream had never really taken off. It was about exploring the military aspect of the martial arts and the reason why we train to fight. Our training may enhance our character but if it doesn't include defense, we're only experiencing a small part of what the martial arts are really for.

Members of my own family had also served in the armed forces and I was repeatedly pulled towards their experiences. One had even been held prisoner of war by the Japanese army during the Second World War. His story had come to light while I was training to be a coach and show me just how powerful cross-generational experiences can be.

Walter, my great uncle, was caught by the Japanese army and sent to one of their secret internment camps. These camps were off-limits to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was mandated to visit prisoners of war and check that they were being treated according to international humanitarian law.

The ICRC could never visit Walter during his years of captivity, during which he was tortured so badly he returned home to England infertile. His story lived on quietly in our family and had sprung back to life within me.

Not knowing his story, I had spent my twenties working for the ICRC, searching for prisoners separated from their families due to war, and letting their relatives know where they were. Nobody thought to tell me that a very similar story existed in my own family tree.

With the hindsight of age and experience, I was able to look back on my years of humanitarian work and understand why I felt so different from my peers. Unlike many of them, who were driven to make the world a better place, I was mostly driven to take action when it came to prisoners' lives. On the surface, I seemed to lack the outrage my human rights colleagues had, and the degree of compassion my humanitarian colleagues possessed.

It's not that I didn't feel the outrage or compassion that my colleagues seemed to possess, rather that they weren't the core feelings that drove me to do my work. I felt a sense of purpose and a mission deeper than I could explain. I was also equally at home with the prisoners as well as the prison authorities. It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

I seemed to relax more easily around army and police personnel than those I worked with. My feelings didn't get in the way, and it wasn't because I was busy repressing them, as I was doing in my marriage at the time. I just felt at home in those environments with such people and I couldn't explain why. Dealing with authority didn't seem to intimidate me in the same way it did with others I knew, who hadn't followed a military route.

That feeling of ease didn't stop me from seeing the wrongs that were being done by people in authority. I neither sided with nor against them. I felt a strong sense of solidarity with prisoners who were being mistreated and didn't hesitate to stand up for them when their rights were violated. And I also saw the fatigue on the prison directors' and interrogator's faces.

When the story of Walter finally surfaced, the way I had been driven to work suddenly made sense. Then, when I remembered my early US army PTI dream, the rest of what drove me also made sense. That was the year I took up karate, right after surviving the near fatal horse-riding fall. So many events had collided to bring me to the martial arts. Karate had been my starting point but there was still much more to learn. In so many ways, I was still a complete beginner. The military part had always been there; I had just never allowed it to be seen or heard.

As buried truths came to the surface, I questioned my karate abilities more and more. Deep down, I knew that while karate had steeped in character and ethics, it had not taught me yet how to properly defend myself. Most likely, that was because I wasn't yet asking better questions, like the ones I was only just starting to ask now.

My second dan was proof I had so far survived the trials of life, love, and work. My karate spirit had made sure I hadn't quit. If my childhood dojo training had helped me to build discipline and endure difficult times, my adult karate training in the dojo, coupled with judo training, had translated into the inner strength I needed to survive this phase of my life. But it wasn't enough. It just wasn't realistic to think that my dojo training could pass for real world self-defense skills. I was being trained for tradition, not for modern times.



Every karate student's path differs from another, and for sure there are plenty of karate practitioners who learn the practical applications for karate as self-defense in a much shorter time than I did. Twenty-five years had passed since I first set foot in a karate dojo and the fact I was only just asking these questions now showed what a relatively shielded life I had led.

Even though I had worked in dangerous places, and survived a few incidents of violence and crime, I was still fairly protected, mostly by privilege. That privileged life had been gradually stripped from me as I tried to build my business. There was no fancy organizational title or logo on my business card, it was just me. There was no IT department to rely on when things went wrong, no colleagues to call on for support or to whom I could delegate work, and nobody but myself to blame when things went wrong.

That was only the start of me feeling truly vulnerable for the first time in my life. The financial vulnerability I felt was much worse. For over a year, I had lived with increasing hardship, hesitating to book doctor's appointments, as I knew I would struggle to pay the fees even though I knew my health insurance would eventually pay most of it back. Financial hardship takes the luxury items first and then, it slowly strangles you from every direction. Learning not to give into the fears that then arise is another act of self-defense.

Swallowing my pride, I made a vow to myself. I would complete this self-defense instructor's course with a beginner's mind. I would show up with empty hands, as karate had taught me. I would drop my ego and be open to learning whatever my future instructors had to teach me.

Like my second dan grading, I decided I would use part of my savings for a future home to pay for the course. What use was a home one day, if I didn't feel safe? Attending this course had moved far beyond a desire to protect my teenage self. She had survived and moved on. It was my current day self that was struggling and still didn't feel safe, and I had to sort that out. Some people would choose a different route but this one was to be my path.

Several weeks later, as the new year rolled in, I stood in a freezing cold field before my new instructors and alongside several other recently graduated instructors and instructors-in-training. Everyone was dressed in army combat fatigues except for myself. Instead, I was dressed in my old yoga clothes and wearing all black.

Although I stood out physically, nobody mentioned it to me. Nobody mentioned my gender either, or that with the exception of the lead trainers, most of us were female.

**"We don't patronize women here!"** was the only thing said in this regard, and it was clear we were expected to put in our best effort regardless of gender.

Taking my place amidst this combat fatigued group was an inwardly emotional ordeal. I may have made it this far, and I may have known I was on the right track, but emotionally I still had to catch up with where my mind and body were.

After so many years of doubting my English origins, and cursing England's military past,

here I was waiting to be taught how to properly defend myself by people who had fought in Britain's wars. Standing in line, awaiting the first training orders, felt like stepping into enemy terrain and betraying so many people I had loved and sought to protect in my thirty seven years. Logically, I knew my emotional reaction was ridiculous but some emotions tend to lack logic, especially in pressurized situations where they can fire all over the place.

While most people in my shoes might have feared first the demands of physical training, I was initially more fearful that I'd end up crying because I couldn't take the guilt. Although I had felt at home with the military in other countries, standing among them on home soil, quite literally, made me feel more vulnerable than ever. I now know that this is because a part of me belonged there, but at the time I was battling with my inner expat kid who, in her confusion, had rejected her identity in order to fit in.

Erratic and unhelpful thoughts raced through my mind as we were put through the initial drills. *What if they found out my political beliefs? What if they already knew who I was? What if they had already done some background research on me? What if they knew how much of my life I had spent rejecting my identity?*

But as the first day of training wore on, my thoughts began to shift from fear to compassion. I thought of the friends they must have lost in fighting overseas, in the very wars I had cursed. Perhaps they had cursed them too. Perhaps they could see the futility too of waging wars against each other. Wars where so many casualties these days are civilians. Wars where soldiers die fighting for causes they aren't really sure they believe in.

I remembered a couple of childhood friends from Dubai who joined the British military, only to be killed in Afghanistan. I remembered the British Navy lads who I hadn't liked and looking back, could see they acted as obnoxiously as they did because they were scared and far from home. They weren't as high up in the ranks as the US marines our family had hosted. They were a good ten years behind, and that was a significant difference in military terms.

Just as I was relaxing, my mind was once more distracted, this time by a field in the background, where several horses were grazing. What were horses doing on this old army site? Many years had passed since I had been around horses and it was something I hadn't expected, and my nerves unraveled again. I hoped we wouldn't be training too close to these beautiful creatures, who I had preferred to keep at a mile's length since my near fatal accident.

All at once, the memories of my past were colliding, making me feel weak and challenging me to be strong. And once again, I was due to stand before a grading panel with nothing in my hands and only the clothes on my back. I had to fight the paranoia that was taking hold of me and remind myself that whatever happened in the next few days, I would be ok.

**"It doesn't get easier,"** I remembered an old martial arts saying, **"You just get better."**

Thankfully, the icy January weather was now distracting me more than the conflict within. I turned my attention to being outdoors and the physical training tasks on hand. The run to the

end of the field and back didn't seem like such a bad warm up in light of this cold and I quickly shifted gears. Nothing else mattered in the hours ahead other than shutting up and doing what I was told. That much I knew how to do. The survival zone, again.

By the time we reached the self-defense drills, I had mentally dropped all the "rights" and "wrongs" of fighting that I had been taught. All the karate and judo I had spent hours practicing each week, all of it was gone in an instant. To stand a chance of learning what these men had to teach me, I had to be willing to let it all go at every level. I had to be willing to go right back to the beginning again.

Back at the porter cabin, which served as the makeshift office at the side of the field, we debriefed on the day's training, and then got stuck into self-defense theory. I swiftly put to one-side past work memories of being in dirtier army porter cabins that served as interrogation places and administrative offices for army detention. In such places, the coffee served would be thick as mud, silently choking me as I made my way through prisoner interrogation cases and allegations of torture and ill-treatment. Here, the coffee was smooth.

The conversation turned to political elements of violence and the state of mind of would-be suicide bombers. Having sat with many such people over the years, I was again thrown back into a past world, one that I wished I could leave behind. This time I refrained from sharing my thoughts. I let them float away. Those days were a part of me but they were also gone.

I knew I had to stop reacting and operating based on my past reference points. Instead, I had to rewire my mind and start opening up to the idea of new and more positive memories, if I were to stand a chance of enjoying life again. I wasn't quite in that headspace yet, but I knew I was heading there, one painful inch and blow at a time.

As the week wore on, I felt myself relaxing into a new rhythm of fitness drills, self-defense training and theory instruction. At the end of each day, I returned to the comfort of my hotel room in a state of mental and physical exhaustion but with a happy heart. I may have had no idea of what the near year would bring, or how many surprises were yet to come my way, but I knew was exactly where I needed to be.

On my day off, I completed the coursework needed to pass alongside the physical grading that would take place a few days later. The practical self-defense theory made perfect sense to me. It was like a flashbulb had gone off in my mind. The world was suddenly a brighter place where I could see more easily where, how and why I was personally getting screwed over.

I had known something was missing in approach to protection, and I had been searching for such answers for years. As a humanitarian, I had known protection from legal and social angles. As a martial artist, I had gone through some of the physical motions. But I had never grasped the core elements of psychological protection. Now, in just a few days, I was piecing together why I had let myself be a victim to life, especially in my relationships with men. In my mind, I was being strong but in reality, I was starting off strong and quickly becoming weak. Emotionally weak, that is.

With my coursework submitted, I closed my computer. I was due to meet a humanitarian lawyer friend for lunch and made my way to the train station. I showed up with a few bruises and scratches on my face and body, which made her laugh. The day before, we had been training in the forest next to the open fields. If fighting back down in muddy fields was new to me, fighting on a muddy and bracken forest ground was even newer.

Later that night, I lay awake thinking. I had barely scratched the surface of self-defense, that much was clear. Still a novice, still with my learning plates, even after all these years. I had trained for character and done an excellent job at that but this was my first real foray into training for defense. I didn't have to pretend I knew so very little, I only had to embrace that as the truth. Besides, it stood out as clear as day. To try to hide it would have been like telling the elephant in the room to stand anonymously in the corner. It wasn't going to happen!

Self-defense was really personal protection to me. It included personal safety, physical self-defense tactics, and the practical nuts and bolts of education for a better life. It could not be practiced effectively without some degree of personal wisdom. But those deeper reflections had to wait. I may have seen the entirety of self-defense in my mind's eye but right now, I was filling in the gaps, brick by brick.

Now that my coursework was completed, all I needed to focus on for the next few days were the physical tactics I was being taught. Practical ones that stood a better chance of working in reality-based self-defense scenarios. Every time I failed to defend myself from a physical assault, the instructors made me shout out loudly so everyone could hear that I had been hit, drop to the muddy ground, and do ten push-ups. This public naming, shaming and light punishment was actually a positive conditioning exercise to teach my brain to react quicker under pressure and get out of the way.

The push-ups were an additional reinforcement for my nervous system to remember it had to fire off responses at a faster rate. The fact I wasn't very good at them added to my motivation to move quicker under stress. I didn't mind the naming and shaming part but the physical punishment wasn't pleasant!

The night before my physical grading, which was to include a physical assault by multiple attackers, I sat quietly in my hotel room and reflected. I had already done everything I could so far. I had shown up with an open mind, set my personal fears and memories to one side, committed and applied myself, completed the course work, gone through all the physical drills, and participated in discussions and debriefings. I had had to learn new self-defense techniques at short notice and apply them under pressure.

I had also done all of this in the wake of realizing that the self-defense instructor I thought I would team up with in Dubai after this course wasn't the person I thought he was at all. Now I really was on my own because if I ever wanted to put these skills to use to help someone else, I certainly wouldn't be doing it with him and I couldn't think of anyone else in Dubai I would trust to work with. Even with one disappointment after the other, I could still manage my mind.

As I learned on this course, self-defense isn't about winning a fight; rather it is about not losing. There is no referee to count the points when we're attacked on the street. Most likely we will be on our own and our sole objective is to stay alive and get away without inflicting more harm on your attacker that could wind us up in court, even though we were the one that was being attacked.

Waking on the morning of the grading, my mood was quiet, just as it had been on the morning of my second dan grading. But unlike that grading, when I had a good idea of what to expect, this time there was nothing. I could be tested on anything, including fitness, which wasn't always a strength under pressure. If they made me run through that forest as a warm-up before the attack... I couldn't bear the thought and quickly put it out of my mind.

Needing to keep a steady mind, I turned to my former practice of yoga to quell the anxiety that was starting to build up. It had been years since I had maintained a daily practice but now, it offered a safe harbor before my little ship sailed out into this big unknown.

The morning of the grading started out leisurely with random drills and then, as lunchtime drew nearer, the mood changed and the atmosphere became more serious.

**“Be back at 2pm,”** the lead trainer instructed, giving us ten minutes to go to the washroom, freshen up and drink water for the last time.

Intentionally, he didn't indicate how long the grading would take, and myself and the other person being graded didn't bother asking. We knew there wouldn't be an answer. Knowing tardiness would be punished, I was back in the field seven minutes later, as ready as I could possibly be for an assault of any kind. I was grateful that I had taken half an hour that morning to ground myself in yoga.

This grading wasn't about my ability to perform or execute perfect techniques; rather it was about my ability handle stress, pain and uncertainty, and not bail out. If I walked out of the grading, that would be it. I might as well walk out on the rest of my work and life.

The trainers had simulated insofar as possible a real-life self-defense scenario. Using fitness drills at the start of grading to wear our energy down, they moved into single attacker and multiple attacker scenarios. The idea wasn't to traumatize or hurt us, but to give our nervous systems a fighting chance of reacting quickly under pressure, without knowing when the test would end. They did this safely but it didn't mean it was easy to be at the receiving end.

The first thing I cursed was not gelling back my hair. Within moments, my long fringe was flying all over my face, making it harder for me to see the flying punches coming my way. Instead of trying to pull it back, as I would have done in a regular martial arts class, I had to ignore it and trust my body instincts to kick in instead. My body had to “see” the punches coming because I couldn't rely on my vision alone, which in any case was quickly narrowing under so much stress.

Every time I missed a punch, I had to drop to the ground and do ten push-ups. Even as we

were being graded, the same punishment applied, except this time the atmosphere was tenser. The more I was attacked, the more I felt myself being separated from the other person grading that day. I lost count of whether there were four or five attackers. They took turns and sometimes came at me in pairs. At times, I was thrown to the ground and pinned, and had to leverage myself to escape, which seemed impossible as I could barely breathe.

It wasn't long before I was covered in mud and running low on energy, yet the attacks kept coming. I knew I wasn't doing well but I was still standing. I was nowhere near quitting and I could still get back up, and that was all I needed to know to keep going.

I couldn't compare this to any martial arts fight I had known in the past. In an open field, alone and afraid, my mind had no reference points. There were no referees, no soft landings, and no way to tap out if I wanted to give up, unless I wanted to fail. I couldn't feel my feet on the ground, as I was used to in the dojo, and my trainers kept slipping through the mud, making it extra work to balance.

After the initial burst of fight-flight adrenalin, my arms were also tiring, which meant I was slower to block the punches and quite a few passed my guard, knocking my face. If ever I had been fooled that martial arts training was enough for real-life self-defense, this simulated experience, which wasn't even the real thing, proved a point. I was much more vulnerable than I thought, and yet capable of so much more.

About half way through the grading, the lead instructor, who weighed thirty kilos more than me, and was by far much stronger, started throwing me to the ground and pinning my body down. There, I had to escape but with low energy reserves, it was getting harder and harder to do. Little did I know that I was being tested more, as my relative strength to fight back was quite high. One of the "attackers" would share that with me later on, apologizing for having hit me so hard.

It was what she had been told to do and it had been exactly what was right for that situation. But us women have a way of apologizing when the stick is used instead of the carrot. Both have their time and place in the learning process, and when it comes to survival-based training, I've learned the stick can sometimes be a better choice. But it needs to be used by someone who is capable of using not for pleasure, but for actual learning to take place.

The last time I was thrown, the lead instructor landed on my back just as I shot both arms out to break my fall. It's a natural instinct when panicking to lock joints and a huge mistake when falling or being thrown, especially when someone strong and heavy is on your back. In judo throws, we try to cartwheel or handstand our way out but in a real-life attack, our ability to execute such an acrobatic move is highly unlikely.

In the instant my elbows locked, my left elbow joint fractured. As the instructor flipped me off the ground and up into the air, the ligaments holding my elbow in place then ripped apart. Pain shot through my body as I got back on my feet without my arms, as I needed at least one good arm to defend my face. Now, I could no longer use my left guard, which was my natural and stronger side for defense, as I could barely lift my left arm to lead the way. And so, right

in the middle of the grading, I had to switch to my weaker right side.

*Whack!* Another punch landed on my face and I was down on the ground doing more push-ups with a broken elbow. Giving up still wasn't an option in my mind. I understood only too well that even if we got injured, this was a simulated scenario from real life, and in real life, you couldn't ask a real attacker to let up on you just because you've hurt your arm.

Eventually, the punishment shifted to squats, for which I was grateful. Years of karate training had given me a strong lower body and I could squat till the cows came home, relative to this ordeal. It was obvious I could barely put any weight on my left elbow and the last time I had been pinned to the ground, I had panicked as I only had one arm to escape.

For a moment, I couldn't think straight. The lead instructor reinforced the message that I had just panicked and climbed off me. The lesson had hit home that nobody is unbreakable, and he didn't need to reinforce it more.

It was then that I realized what it would be like to be violently attacked and wounded, and unable to get myself out. In both of my past attacks by men, they had been aggressive and violent, but not like this. Being on mission to war zones had been violent, but not like this. My grading is a memory of extreme vulnerability that I'll probably never forget, and a situation I hope I'll never have to face in real life.

Rounding us up, the lead trainer called off the attackers and told us to do five hundred squats. Instead of breaking my spirits, it only served to lift them. While I was beyond exhaustion, and ready to drop, that kind of a command was familiar to me from my martial arts training. It was usually one or two hundred squats but five hundred didn't seem impossible, especially if it meant I could rest my broken arm.

For the first time since the grading had begun, I saw light at the end of the tunnel. Surely this meant we would be finishing soon and if I had made it this far, that meant I hadn't completely failed. And if it wasn't the end, at least it was a welcome break from getting hit, thrown and pinned. But every time we went to count our squats, the lead instructor made us start again. For whatever reason he made up, we weren't doing them properly and twice when we reached fifty he made us start again from zero.

Understanding his mental game, I resolved to hang in as long as it took. Compared to the pain searing through my left arm these squats were nothing. That perspective saved me from giving into any negative thoughts that I might not make it. Our glucose levels were running low, probably even below zero, and the trainers knew that. It was only a matter of time before myself and the other person dropped.

When the squatting was called off, we were told we had both passed. There was no smile or party. It was as swift as the Japanese karate instructor's appraisal of my second dan grading. The trainers turned and walked back to the porter cabin for the final debrief. Following them, a quiet relief swept through me. I had to take another step on my journey to building inner strength

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 10

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“The mental attitude that considers only winning inevitably breeds excessive optimism and causes impatience and fretfulness. Practitioners who think only of winning lose their sense of humility. They begin to ignore or disregard those around them, an attitude that can create many enemies.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 10 | **Peace**

Funakoshi is teaching multiple points here, such as humility and patience, and avoiding delusion. When we get caught up in profit or competition, and only being the best, we stop focusing on how to be *our* best. Instead, we lose our sensitivity to ourselves and the environment around us and, over time, that can leave us more vulnerable to attack.

In my life, I was learning about the wider concept of peace, and making peace with my country of origin. There, I was learning that reality-based self-defense is not about ‘winning’ but rather, ‘not losing’. There are no winners in real-life attacks, only survivors, and in some situations, survival is really what we’re aiming for. Later on, we can focus on finding peace.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How are you learning, or have you learned, to stay humble and patient?*

*How do you find perspective during difficult times?*



# MY DOJO KUN

## DEFENSE

*I don't play the roles of victim or survivor,  
I protect myself and choose reality over fiction.*

# AUTUMN

LETTING GO

# COMPETITION

## *The Way of Self-Development*

### The Athlete

*“Karate-do is not a sport. There is no competition with others. The real competition is with the self.”*

**Tadashi Nakamura, founder of Seido Karate**

## *In a sea of competition, be yourself.*

---

*“The mind must be set free.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 6)

~

A few months later, sitting on a white sandy beach in the Caribbean, I pause to reflect on the lessons of the past year. A threshold had been crossed, and the inner and outer terrain of my life was changing.

Exactly a year has passed since I had first asked Diane to coach me while I wrote *Cherry Blossom Dojo*. Not even I, as the book’s author, could have predicted where this journey would lead me, or how many twists and turns it would take.

What had started as a simple enquiry by a karate practitioner into Gichin Funakoshi’s *Twenty Guiding Principles*, and her own martial arts journey, had quite literally turned my life upside down and inside out. Or perhaps all that had passed was bound to happen anyway, and this journey I was meant to be on.

I was reminded of the saying, *Where you put your attention is where you will grow*. If I were to spend a year or two contemplating and writing about inner strength, would that not attract the very things that would challenge me to become more inwardly strong? Sure, I felt stronger than many people I had known, but was that really true? Was I really as strong as I thought I was, or as strong as others expected me to be? And was it only me who was asking such questions?

I could have chosen much easier routes in my life, but that never seemed to be my way. The greater the challenge, the greater the lure. I could have exited karate when the going got tough. I certainly wasn’t a natural, at least not on the surface. For example, acquiring *kime*, the inner power that runs through a strong karate practitioner’s techniques, snapping all parts of the body and breath into place at one time, had been a life long quest.

With judo and self-defense under my belt, and increased fitness training, it had started to emerge. I had started believing in myself as a karate practitioner. That night when my Sensei had challenged me, telling me I couldn’t take my second dan grading, was in the distant past. It was as if it had happened to another woman, not me.

Now, I was a self-defense instructor. I had been training for months around a fractured elbow, which had left me unable to straighten my left arm. That had eliminated me from a kata competition season I had planned to enter. With my curiosity about competition piqued after the second dan grading, I had been training for months in preparation. But passing the self-defense grading had made sure I didn't, setting me on a very different path.

I could have made my life easier in other ways too, by dropping judo after a month, as I intended. I could have decided also not to take up Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), as I had done a few months earlier. My life was very different these days, with karate, judo, and BJJ classes back to back and in different parts of town. Long gone was the woman who only did karate in a five star hotel aerobics room too. My Sensei had lost that room and we had just started training in a boxing club.

By now, I was training most nights a week and on weekends, mostly with men. Much of my training was at night, and my nervous system would be so wired from all the grappling and striking that I would struggle to sleep before one or two o'clock in the morning. Technically, I was becoming a much better fighter. I was quicker and stronger, and my efforts were certainly paying off in terms of confidence and power. It was just the sleep that was an issue, and finding a way to fight the inflammation and fatigue in my body.

I was spending much of my time in fighting joints, surrounded by boxing rings and MMA cages and still, I wanted more. Dreams of running my own dojo or training academy had made me want to spend more time among different fighters. Taking up MMA was also on my mind, as I wanted to see if I could link my karate, judo, and BJJ skills in one place. So much of my training was compartmentalized and that was making less and less sense to me as a martial artist. But time and energy were constant challenges. So too was money as financially, I had reached a limit on what I could spend on martial arts.

Parallel to this, my professional identity was shifting and a new area of work was emerging. It was my own body of work, *The Intelligence Map*, and it was coming from within, and tapping into my life and work experience in violence, conflict, communications, performance, strategy, diplomacy, movement, and the martial arts. But it didn't come with a neat and tidy monthly salary and perks. Instead, it was coming in drips and drabs. A workshop contract here, a speaking contract there, but it was all starting to add up.

I longed for the financial resources to just put my work to one side and delve into this desire to really create a coaching system of my own. Looking back, what I needed was an academic container around me. I needed someone who could grasp the multidisciplinary nature of this mapping system, which I knew held the key to many personal and professional development challenges people face today. Unknown to me, I had just found that very person, but his role in my life and work wouldn't emerge for another few months.

*Cherry Blossom Dojo* had never promised me an easy ride. But a martial artist's journey rarely is. We toil and sweat in the dojo, only to find out that the journey is long and arduous. It is one that requires strength on all levels; mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. That

kind of strength can only be acquired in training, and much of training can be stressful, especially when we're going through a tough phase.

This journey of mine through inner strength was one of learning to balance vulnerability and strength, and leverage both to better protect myself and allow my true light to shine. It was about bringing a *yin* or feminine strength into my training, to complement and contrast the very *yang* or masculine strengths I was already practicing, and that seemed to come more naturally.

As the Winter of my life gave way to Spring and Summer, and as my own late summer beckoned, I had travelled here to this beautiful Caribbean island to be one of my sister's bridesmaids. Knowing how financially tough running my own business had been, my sister and parents had generously taken care of my costs. It was a dream come true for my stressed out state of mind and I was grateful for their support. Yet it had also triggered painful memories of my own wedding, and that was how I came to be here sitting on the beach, looking out over the crystal clear waters, onto the horizon, as I reflected on my past.

They say a woman's wedding should be the most beautiful memory of her life but mine was quite frankly my worst. Even with the passing of time and more challenges in my life, very little compares to the fear of losing my life that this day unfortunately brought. Since then, any invitation to a wedding fills me with dread and I find myself going through the same traumatizing flashbacks.

I know I'm not completely over this past trauma as the reaction is so physical, and a part of me thinks I'm going to die. My stomach goes cold, my heart freezes, my breathing almost grinds to a halt and then my mind gets stuck on a treadmill, hearing and seeing things that aren't happening in present day. I'm usually able to witness the reaction and let it go but here, it's wedding fever every day, which means non-stop triggers for my nervous system. It means I can't get away, which meant I was effectively in paradise but trapped in my own mind.

Expecting it to be tough, I had packed my gym gear and was sweating as much of my fear out in the gym every day. But still, the thoughts and memories hounded me. While walking to and from the gym, I passed one romantic couple after the other. They all seem so relaxed and happy, and *so safe*. For the first time in my life, I was aware of a deep feeling of envy, along with despair. *Where was it that I had gone wrong?*

Deep down, I still didn't feel safe. I was confident in the dojo and while working, but beyond martial arts and work, I was starting to feel lost. Juggling three martial arts had left little room for anything else and the free time I did have I spent painting abstracts. My paintings weren't bad at all. In fact some of them were quite spectacular, perhaps even better than my Arabic calligraphy works, and people were asking if they could buy them. But I always refused. This painting was an emotional process for me and I wasn't willing to share that. They represented the feeling of being utterly alone in this world, and always having to watch my back.

Even my karate teacher was concerned that after over four years of training with him, I still spent every class with my eye on my handbag. At the age of twenty-three, my first home on

mission to Jerusalem had been broken into and just before that, during pre-mission training, I had been mugged in Geneva. It had coincided with meeting my future husband and leaving the comfortable life of university, and his presence had created a false sense of emotional safety during a rough time in my life.

Our marriage had not been a safe one for me, particularly since the wedding day, but defining safety is relative when you haven't got much of it in your world. You start reaching out in all the wrong directions if you haven't got a strong sense of self, and that was most certainly my case as a young woman venturing out in the world.

Following the divorce, I had learned to be my own rock and, in everyday life, that had served me well to a point. I accepted the challenges sent my way, not always with grace but certainly with courage. I had evolved into a stronger fighter in the dojo and that appeared to be having a positive effect on my business. It seemed I could take on any battle but this one on the horizon was filling me with dread.

The bridesmaid's dress was a beautiful bright orange. My sister had put such care into choosing a dress colour and giving her bridesmaids the freedom to choose a design that suited their figure and taste. Hanging in my hotel wardrobe, it looked stunning. I had even found a beautiful pair of pale gold high heels to go with it. Deep down, I longed to be in the frame of mind to wear it. To wear it like I didn't have a care in the world. But I felt the weight of my little world on my shoulders, and the size of those shoulders only reinforced that.

On my way to the Caribbean island, I had passed through the self-defense academy in the UK where I had graded as an instructor for some extra training. An accidental knock from a nervous trainee who was due to be graded that day had left me unexpectedly with a black eye. This was also playing on my mind.

At first, it was just a tiny grey mark but the next day, the capillaries around my eye had burst, leaving me with a full-blown black eye. I looked like I had been punched in the face, which wasn't the case at all. Sympathetic glances from people in the UK en route to the wedding hadn't helped me feel any better. I felt like screaming that I wasn't a battered woman, as their looks seemed to indicate. It was just an accident!

My self-confidence had faltered as I remembered how I had let myself be pushed around in the past. It wasn't something that would happen again now but I felt vulnerable and raw. To top that, I would be the only bridesmaid with strong shoulders, visible biceps, and a sturdy lower body that could handle infinite squats. Training had strengthened my body and while that was an asset on the mat, it most certainly wasn't while wearing a bright orange chiffon bridesmaids dress.

Even the knuckles on my hands were chafed and permanently swollen from grabbing stiff judo suits. My judo jacket weighed three stiff and heavy kilos, and some of my training partner's suits were no different. My fingernails were also short for obvious reasons.

It's not that I wanted to look like the other bridesmaids, who were more petite. I more or less

liked and appreciated how I looked but the context of a wedding, where in many cultures, a woman is supposed to look delicate and demure, had made me more conscious of how martial arts training had changed my body. I couldn't hide my physical strength no matter how I tried now and as for the black eye, well that pretty much said it all. It was as if I had the words, "feeling un-beautiful" stamped all over my face.

Out of nowhere, I found myself longing to feel and look more feminine. It seemed like a frivolous thought, especially after years of humanitarian work where I had seen people killed, detained, tortured, and made homeless. It also seemed unnecessarily self-conscious. But I wanted to be deeply feminine for a moment, and experience what it felt like to be held and feel safe. Not as a damsel in distress, but as a strong woman, being held by a strong man.

I knew that I was pretty and that there was nothing wrong with my athletic body. Beauty could come in all shapes and sizes and politically, I knew my thoughts weren't helpful to women at large. But at an emotional level, I caught myself wishing I could shrink and be smaller, if only for the day, so that I wouldn't stand out so much.

My self-esteem was plummeting fast, and self-doubt was creeping in. Each morning in the Caribbean, I expected the black eye to fade but for well over a week, up until the morning of the actual wedding, the purple mark wouldn't budge. Had I not had to make a visible appearance at a wedding, such a mark wouldn't have bothered me but with hours to go before the big day, my nerves were getting the better of me.

That morning, sitting on the beach, contemplating my life, I felt as washed up as the seaweed at my feet. A long week of sympathetic looks from well meaning people and now, the need to cover it up and step into a flimsy dress filled me with dread. Flashbacks from the past were getting louder, haunting my days and dreams, and it was taking all the energy I had to push them back. Finally, the dam had burst and the memory of my own wedding day came flooding out.

The negative build-up to the event had started weeks before, and I had been given several opportunities to back out and change course. But like so many brides and grooms who realise they're on the wrong path, I had been filled with guilt and pride. I hadn't wanted to let guests down, who were flying in for the event, or admit that I was wrong. I didn't yet have the strength to say, *No, I've changed my mind. I don't feel safe and I want to get out.*

A week before the wedding, my insides were so stressed that the eczema I had first experienced on my face shortly after the teenage rape had reared its ugly head. With a face covered in hot red and orange angry blisters, my self-esteem had been torn to shreds. I was crying every day and struggling to pull myself together. My soon-to-be husband was threatening to call the wedding off and I was a nervous wreck.

Slapping on cortisol creams in a bid to fade the blisters as quickly as they had arrived, I had pulled myself together in a very brittle way. Instead of contemplating what was wrong about this wedding at a deeper level, and seeing my body as a messenger of that, I was trying to shove the well-founded anxieties and doubts back down. I refused to listen to my body, just



when it was trying to help me most.

**“You don’t have the arms to wear that dress,”** he had whispered into my ear, as we cut the cake in front of the entire wedding party guests.

After having survived a stressful day, which hadn’t gone at all as planned, I had managed to relax enough to take off my chiffon jacket and now, my shoulders and arms were bare. It was a small comment on the surface but the way in which it was whispered tauntingly down my ear in what should have been a happy moment was more than I could take.

Instead of throwing the knife down and storming off, as I had wanted to do, I had smiled for the video camera and photographer, who were now peering into our faces. Such was my degree of self-control that I refused to miss a beat but inwardly, I was crashing hard and fast. The taunts, pinches, threats and warnings had been going on for years but this was only the second time he had referred to my body. The first had been to my legs, a few weeks earlier, when he told me I didn’t have the legs to wear “that skirt”.

As soon as the cake was cut and I was free to go, I made my way to the bathroom and broke down in tears. My mother and sisters had found me collapsed and like any loving family would do, reassured me that my arms were fine. Because of their kind words, I managed to find the strength to exit and return to the party but I avoided my husband for the rest of the night. His father had to ask me to dance the first dance with his son, to save face in front of the wedding guests, and like a stiff board, I reluctantly agreed.

Later, in the car we had hired to leave for our honeymoon hotel suite, my angry husband had taken the wheel. Knowing danger was ahead, I still got in because I didn’t want to make more of a scene. Fueled with rage at my public show of disobedience, he sped down the country lanes. To this day, I don’t know how we made it to the hotel alive. It was the first time I thought he would kill me and I can’t believe how stupid I was to go along. To put my life in the hands of a man who clearly didn’t love me, and saw me as his emotional punching bag.

Now, a decade later, my biceps and triceps were even bigger than on my wedding day, and my neck and shoulders looked like many judo practitioners and martial artists who grapple, who are prone to building visible muscular strength. Because of that, I was terrified to put on a bridesmaids dress in case anyone commented. I was paranoid that just one comment about the size of my arms would send me into meltdown mode on what was about to be one of my sister’s happiest days.

I wanted to cry in shame. Is this the price I had paid to become a martial artist? Had throwing men who weighed over a hundred kilos made me appear less feminine? Was it really worth it in the pursuit of acquiring inner and outer strength, so that I could better protect myself should I ever need it again? Wouldn’t I have been safer sticking to my old practice of yoga?

The political and feminist judgment of my uncensored thoughts came hard and fast. I knew the “right” answers to these questions. That I should celebrate and be proud of such acquired strength, especially after all I had been through. Yet a part of me was still scared and trying to

figure out what it meant to be a woman in the fighting arts, who was capable of taking down large men. It wasn't that simple. Like most of life, it just wasn't black and white.

I longed for someone to protect me, instead of having to do that dirty work myself, but I knew I could not delegate my self-protection to anyone else ever again. Neither was anyone offering. This was my responsibility but surely, there had to be an easier way. A more gentle way. *Why must everything in my life always feel so hard?*

Not even my long blonde hair or pretty smile could hide the journey that I had embarked on as I chose to write this book. I wasn't only physically stronger but I was emotionally toughening up from the many throws I had received the past year. I couldn't hide that either, and I didn't want to. I was able to sit with the traumatic moments of my past and allow them wash over me and right off me. I could enter the pain of a decade gone by and decide there and then, to finally let it go. My body was mine and *nobody* had the right to judge it ever again.

It wasn't just my relationship with my body that was shifting in a more positive direction. So too was my relationship with certain corporate clients. A few weeks earlier, I had swiftly sidestepped a bullying attempt and bait to pay me extra money from a significant client to change the details of a strategic facilitation report, just so that they could look better in front of their HQ. But I could only report truthfully what had happened. The event had been a great success in terms of dialogue and reflection but the truth was that they still needed to put in more work. That's just how strategy goes. It takes time to evolve and produce results.

Instead of listening to my point, the client representative had childishly put the phone down on me when I stuck to my professional advice. Bearing considerable weight in the office, for reasons that completely eluded me, she made sure that our future work didn't go ahead. Instead of feeling insulted, I had reacted from a place of deeper understanding. They weren't ready for my kind of strategic work, which had a way of bringing difficult truths to the surface, and that was why they struggled so much. They just didn't want to deal with the mud.

A few days before the wedding trip, I had also drawn a red line with another client request. This time it was an old colleague who knew my work and ability to deliver only too well. Now, he was managing a huge enterprise and needed a strategic facilitation coach, and he was reluctant to work with anyone else. Facilitation was one of my favourite ways of putting the *Intelligence Map* into action at the time and, after the earlier contract had fallen flat, I was eager to find a more cooperative client to continue working with.

It had seemed a wonderful opportunity but the dates had clashed with the wedding trip flights. I suggested bringing it forwards by a few days but that was a no-go area. So too was amending the structure of the event to break it down into smaller events, with fewer participants. The hotel had been booked, and the fifty staff members were already allocated.

Again, I had put my foot down. While I could have changed my travel dates, it would have meant missing out on my self-defense drop-in and my wiser older self told me that I mustn't do that under any conditions. No matter how much I may have wanted to engage in my

intelligence mapping work with a major client, or how much I needed the income from that before a long and difficult summer on the work front set it. The lesson was to stick to my guns and allow some clients to fade away, at least for now.

As a single woman in business, with nobody there to support me emotionally or cover my back, I had to make a tough decision. For once, I had to say “no” and put myself first. Unable to change their dates, and with me unwilling to budge on mine, even when they returned a second time to ask, the contract didn’t go ahead. Again, almost twelve months later, I was starting the toughest season of business in a place of uncertainty but, unlike last year, I knew I had the inner strength to handle it, whatever came my way.

Unexpectedly, the day after saying “no” to this client request, I had received an email out of the blue from someone who had attended my *Intelligence Mapping* talk on aid work and PTSD in Kuwait some six months earlier. She had approached me at the end of the talk but, with several people trying to speak to me at once, I had only caught the word *British* and had assumed the next part was *Council*. She had also been in a hurry so instead, I had given her my business card and an early copy of the *Intelligence Mapping* system.

I had wrongly assumed she worked at the British Council in Kuwait. Now, here she was in my inbox, following up, asking if I could run a workshop for forty consular staff from the region on resilience just a few days after I got back from the wedding trip. Signing off at the end, I noticed her title. *Vice Consul of the British Embassy in Kuwait*.

By that afternoon, we were in a four-way conference call between members of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi and Dhaka, going through the content for the workshop.

**“I don’t do cut and paste training events,” I said. “Everything I do is tailored for the client and reflects what works from a coaching perspective.”**

By that, I meant that I put my heart and soul into all of my coaching events. Each one was different from the next as I also adapted any planned content to the participants who showed up on the day. I would put in hours of preparatory work, based on initial client discussions, then I would let it all go the morning of the event and just show up to do my work.

I was a living example, at least in my work, of how this *Intelligence Mapping* system worked. It was a dynamic coaching and facilitation process, not a list of teaching or instructional points. While I certainly had teaching points on each of the different areas of intelligence, they weren’t fixed or rigid.

For example, on psychological intelligence I frequently taught personality theory, as a way of introducing the group to an initial anchor around which to centre their discussions or thoughts. Then I moved into coaching mode, inviting them to explore what personalities were beyond theory, and how they showed up at work.

If there was anything I had understood from my coaching practice, it was the need to make

basic coaching psychology available to everyday people at work, so they could pick and choose which parts they needed to perform better. My intelligence mapping workshops and events had very little to do with what I thought worked and more to do with creating a space where they could explore in a group what worked for them. Like my coaching practice, it was process-oriented work, and this was essential for the results that would come later. This was why I didn't promise instant results and why I reminded participants that they would need to keep engaging in the work. Those who wanted to rush and didn't trust the process, like the client that had attempted to bully and pay me off, weren't ready for it.

People need to be in the driving seat of their own personal and professional development, and that demands a personal sense of responsibility and willingness to engage positively. Personal development fuels professional development, and the reverse can also be true. My coaching practice had only illustrated that, as I saw clients who showed up sincerely, ready to engage in their own process, and later benefit from the results.

The *Intelligence Map* framework had been designed in particular for frontline positions like consular work, where staff would be tested emotionally, morally and ethically on a regular basis. Diplomacy alone wasn't enough to keep them grounded. They needed to have a wider array of skills to navigate such complex terrain without burning out.

My willingness to be direct and frank about my work appeared to pay off.

**“That’s exactly what we’re looking for!”** the Vice Consul responded.

With the event details in place and a date fixed for a few days after I got back from my trip, we hung up. It had been so straightforward, as if falling into place. I could immediately visualize the event in my mind's eye and knew it would be both meaningful and enjoyable to run.

The day after that, I received another enquiry from a corporate client who had been going back and forth for months on how to best work with me. Now, they had an answer. *Could I please run a workshop on resilience for thirty-five engineers at their headquarters in Italy?* The week they had in mind was the same one as the consular event but I knew I could manage them both while also managing my post-trip jet lag and energy.

If I delivered the first event on the Wednesday, I would have three whole days to rest. Then I could fly to Italy on Thursday and deliver the next event on Friday. Without hesitation, I wrote back and asked if they could make the Friday. They promptly agreed and the event and another date was set. In just a couple of days, I had gone from losing out on a client contract and expecting to have no income over the summer, to suddenly having two cooperative clients who felt like a perfect fit.

Sitting on the beach in the Caribbean, I reminded myself of these small victories and how with each year I was starting to make bolder business decisions. That I could coach and facilitate well was obvious even to me but sadly, that isn't enough to keep a coach and facilitator in business. Acquiring the business mindset needed to keep myself afloat without

compromising my ethics and values had stumped me since day one and while I was now in flow, I still found it hard to believe that this could be a way of working forever.

And yet life seemed to have other plans for me, at least for now. After these two workshops would pass, and my third year in business drew to an end, people in more senior functions would begin to seek me out. With up to twenty years of experience, most of them would come from a corporate background. That I knew fairly effortlessly how to move fluidly in political spheres had caught their attention without any promotional efforts on my part.

Their interest was less about changing the world and making it a better place, and more about navigating complex corporate politics at the top. They had proven they had the technical skills to do their job but now, they were finding that their softer skills weren't enough. *How could they be more effective leaders? How could they be more influential without compromising their integrity? How could they communicate better?*

It was fascinating. Everything they wanted to learn were areas I had been evolving in since day one of my work path, some sixteen years ago. Now, as a coaching professional, I was bringing all of that together, along with my martial arts practice, into my *Intelligence Map*. For example, how to compose themselves and communicate under pressure, how to handle stress and stay resilient, how to manage their minds and emotions, how to be confident and assertive, and how to stand up for themselves and their staff members in the face of adversity.

I couldn't quite believe what was happening. It seemed the less I poked and prodded my business, the more it surprised me with rewards. The more comfortable I became with being myself and saying "no" to what didn't feel or seem right, and instead putting forwards my own coaching framework, the easier it was becoming to attract the kind of clients who needed, valued and were ready to engage in my work.

Reflecting on all the lessons of the past year from afar, I was struck by how I was changing in other ways too. The reason I was single wasn't because I had been left or forgotten on the shelf. In recent months, a couple of exes had tried to reconnect with me and there had been a couple of other options. But I had consciously said "no" and withdrawn my energy, turning away from anyone who would distract me from the kind of man I now wanted to know.

I finally understood the character and personality of the man I wanted to share the rest of my life with, and the kind of woman I wanted to be in that relationship. I even knew who this man was but I wasn't allowing my mind to go there too often. I sensed it was too soon but that we would find our way there eventually. My older, wiser self was telling me so.

This man wouldn't be afraid of my strength. On the contrary, he would support it. He wouldn't bat an eyelid at my muscles and bruises, he would accept them as part of who I was. He would be able to understand my English identity, my background in war, my desire to help humanity, and my passion for self-defense and the martial arts, and that understanding would be born of direct experience.

He would also know exactly what it was like to build a business and suffer repeat setbacks

and adversities, and have to get back on his feet again as a result. He would know exactly what it felt like to suffer, to know that he would have to find a way to save himself, and yet be open to the kind of love I could bring to his life. A love that didn't fear truth and one that didn't back down, even when the odds were stacked against us.

This man didn't have to be perfect. In fact, I was pretty sure he'd be anything but that. But perfection wasn't what I was seeking, neither in another nor myself. All I wanted was something real. Someone I could love, honour, respect, and trust, and receive the same in return.

I knew I couldn't control what would happen in my love life but I could have a clear vision of what I wanted for myself. And because of that, like my work, I was prepared to say "no" for as long as it took to find what I truly desired and deserved.

With a growing sense of conviction, I reassured myself daily that everything was going to be ok. It wasn't going to be easy but it was going to be ok. Instead of feeling sad, I felt relieved. *Things could only get better from here*, I thought, as I reminded myself to have faith, understanding this time that for anything to get better, I would have to be open to more change.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 11

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Our mind should be allowed to move about freely, even if it seeks muddy recesses. The lotus blossom is not sullied by the mud in which it grows. To reign in the mind tightly takes away its freedom. To keep our mind in close confines may be a necessary beginner’s habit, but doing so for our entire life prevents us from rising to a new level, and will result in a life of unfulfilled potential.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 11 | **Flow**

Here, Funakoshi is talking about the human dilemma of learning to manage our minds. Our minds will go to dark and negative places but that doesn’t mean that we are dark and negative too. Instead of trying to control this tendency of the mind, we should release control and trust that we can flow through and beyond these murky waters, to clearer and brighter places.

Half way through my journey of inner strength, I realized I had changed physically. This was causing some inner conflict as part of me wanted to be strong while another part didn’t like how being strong would make me stand out. It meant setting clearer boundaries for my work and saying “no” to contracts that didn’t work for me, and learning instead to go with the flow.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How do you find your flow?*

*Where do you need to set, or do you set, boundaries to be in flow?*

## *Failure is a powerful teacher.*

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*“Karate is like boiling water: without heat, it returns to its tepid state.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 11)

~

Within hours of returning to Dubai from the Caribbean, I was tested once again. I thanked the heavens that this time, it was a relatively smaller test than the year that had just passed.

Bruce Lee, the martial arts actor and philosopher known for his wisdom and mastery of wing chun once said, *Don't pray for an easy life. Pray for the strength to endure a difficult one.* I agreed with his wise words on many levels but the reality was rough. I wasn't seeking an easy life but there had to be a smarter way to walk the path I had chosen. Learning how to surrender and not resist the good that was coming my way seemed like a good place to start.

Amidst these thoughts, my phone vibrated with a message.

**“Can I call you?”** my karate teacher asked.

At ten o'clock at night, I wondered what was up. He rarely reached out between classes, unless he needed my help with something, and what could be so urgent that it couldn't wait until the next day?

**“Sure,”** I responded, without hesitation.

A few minutes later, I put the phone down and prayed for some of Bruce Lee's strength. Just for the next fifteen hours, then I could go back to being myself.

Unknown to me, my teacher had registered my name in a national karate competition for the next day, and I was expected to show up at a club a good half hour from my home at eight o'clock sharp. My fractured elbow had now healed and I could straighten my left arm. I had regained my strength and in his mind, was ready to compete. But his logical assumption caught me off guard.



*What?* I had asked myself in disbelief, as he ran through the logistics of the event. *Did he not realise that I hadn't trained for a month while I had been away? That I was out of practice and hardly in the state of mind to compete?*

I had flown in that morning with my mind on running the two work events later that week. In preparation, I had spent most of the day sleeping off my cross-Atlantic jet lag. I had planned to rest and recover for the next three days, so I could be fully energized and ready to lead the two events back to back, in two different parts of the world.

Working for myself and alone, it wasn't like I could delegate any tasks. Besides, even if I could have hired someone, the *Intelligence Mapping* framework was my work and I was still in the early days of figuring it out. It was a highly creative process and at this point, only I could sit down and prepare, and only I could show up and deliver.

Now, instead of catching up on some much-needed rest, I was awake, tired and groggy. A bad mood was descending fast and I wanted to say no but this was my teacher, and I knew he wouldn't call if there wasn't a good reason.

To combat my mental and emotional stress, I had worked out almost daily on holiday but I hadn't practiced much karate. I'd had every good intention of training myself, something that should be second nature by now at my level, but I hadn't quite managed to motivate myself. I had put in a few short sessions but that was to warm up or cool down. I most hadn't been fighting, which is what this competition was about.

My body was wired to fight and compete in judo but when it came to karate, that had always been more of an inner fight. On the karate floor, the opponent had long been my own mind. Being the only student most of the time, my training had focused on more traditional *kata*, a Japanese word for constructed fight scenarios. While these were physically and mentally tough, they had more of a *yin* feeling to them. Much more inward than outward focused.

To the surface karate practitioner, *kata* can seem like the complete opposite energy and attitude of *kumite*, or the more fiery and *yang*-like sparring. And this competition was about *kumite*, not *kata*. Another year would pass before I would see that these two aspects of karate, the *yin* and the *yang*, aren't as separate as they seem. At least not when practiced with their original spirit.

Like Funakoshi said, *spirit first, technique second*. I shouldn't have wavered in my decision to rest. Instead, I should have protected my energy like a warrior, and chosen to compete when I was ready. I felt confident overall as a fighter, especially with my newly-acquired judo, self-defense and BJJ skills, but my poor knowledge and experience of karate competition fighting suddenly made me feel weak. For a moment, they made me doubt myself and question if I could really call myself a *karateka* once more.

Forgetting Mike's point on separating the purpose for practicing karate into budo, sport and health, I felt lost and torn. The budo path had clearly been handed to me but there was still a sense of shame that I had never really competed in my younger years. I didn't have a

reference there so how could I ever teach karate one day? *Wasn't a teacher meant to know and do it all?*

On and off, I had tried to muster the enthusiasm to learn the rules of the game but the interest had never stuck, and as a result, I had absorbed nothing. While I enjoyed competing as a wider concept, karate just didn't have that energy for me. A medal would look good to others but I didn't do karate for that. In fact, I rarely mentioned my karate training beyond the actual dojo. Unlike judo, which I didn't hide, karate was such a private affair.

The fact I was jet-lagged and tired felt like a poor excuse, so too did not understanding the competition rules. Negative thoughts took over. *Why hadn't I memorized the competition rules when my teacher had shared them with me? Why had I stood there and repeated them back in the dojo, looking like I was retaining them only to ignore them right after the class had ended?* My teacher had been trying to train me as a referee and competitor, and I hadn't been clear with him that I didn't think this was going to be my karate path.

The negative thoughts snowballed further to my own training. *What kind of a karate student was I if I couldn't train myself during a month of travel? Was I really a second dan at all? Was I still worthy of that belt? If I could trust myself to practice yoga daily, and work out in the gym almost every day, why was it so damn hard to do karate by myself? Why was I continuing to self-sabotage and let myself down? Why couldn't I just show up?*

Deep down, I felt that despite my years of karate training, passing my second dan, and all the additional time in the gym and on the judo and BJJ mats, I was still skirting around the starting line of actually *being* a martial artist. I was still a beginner in karate in so many ways, albeit one who could throw fancy kicks and punches, and perform kata to a fairly good standard. *But did that really make me a karateka, a karate practitioner?*

I could have easily blamed my teacher for being unfair, and telling me at the last minute. He could have texted me several days earlier and at least given me a chance to prepare. But I knew that my commitment to karate should mean I am ready at all times.

Me not showing up to train myself while I was away on holiday was not his fault. Nor was the fact that I chose to train alone with him, rather than seeking out a more populated club where I could have had more sparring practice. *I* was the one who hadn't taken up his suggestions to do that on top of my own training. Instead, I had chosen to use that time and energy learning judo, self-defense, and BJJ.

I was getting tired of my own excuses and not really feeling like I 'owned' my karate path. But I couldn't yet see the storyline that was working its way out. Karate as a way of sport had been my teacher's path but it wasn't destined to be mine. Feeling confused, I tried to buy some decision-making time while I woke myself up. A part of me knew it would be futile as my teacher was persuasive, but another part needed to give it a half-hearted shot.

What happened next is typical when a person doesn't give a firm "no". It's easy to be led by the other person's wishes, instead of honouring your own. Because I couldn't muster a firm

“no”, I ended up with a half-hearted “yes”, and that isn’t a way to do anything in life, at least not if you want to do it well.

**“I can’t do it,” I said. “I don’t have a mouth guard let alone shin guards and chest protection.”**

The rules of the *kumite* competition were clear. No gear, no fight. I hadn’t managed to buy the gear earlier that year before breaking my elbow, and with the injury hadn’t seen the point.

To be quite honest, the thought of competing in karate had since faded as other parts of my life had taken over. I didn’t mind using the little money I had to invest in equipment for one event, but where could I get hold of the gear this time of night? Besides, my body really did need more rest. The last thing I wanted to do was get out of bed and into the car.

**“I will find a way to bring your body protection,” he said. “Just make sure you bring your own mouth guard. The sports stores are open till midnight in the malls”** he added, making sure I had no way out.

It was then I lost my flimsy defense and fell into the trap of making excuses. *But Sensei, I’m so tired from travelling. I have an important work event. I won’t be on fighting form. I haven’t trained for a month. We haven’t been practicing kumite in class. I don’t remember the rules. It’s really early. I’m not sure of the club’s location.*

**“If you don’t compete,”** he continued slowly, knowing exactly what he was doing, **“the other two ladies can’t compete. It’s a team competition and there is nobody to take your place. ”**

Although I didn’t usually train with the other two women, I knew who they were. *How could I possibly let them down?* Knowingly, he had triggered a strength and weakness in my character, my sense of loyalty and responsibility. He knew I couldn’t bear to be the reason why two young women, already in bed and ready to compete the following morning, would wake up to the news that they couldn’t, just because I wasn’t willing to step up.

And so, with nobody else able to take my place, and without a strong enough backbone yet to say “no”, I agreed. Dragging myself out of bed, I trampled over my fatigue, knocked back a strong espresso shot, and drove myself to the mall before it closed to find my mouth guard.

Along the way, I forced myself to consider the positives. *How bad could showing up for a small competition be, after all I’d been through?* All I had to do was programme myself to wake up on time, drive there, and give it my best shot. Being much older than the other participants, I perhaps had more perspective too. I wasn’t afraid to win or lose, or get physically hurt, and I could always catch up on sleep later on. There were still a few days to do that before the consular and Italy stints were on.

The next morning, I downed another couple of strong espresso shots and showed up bright and early. Unable to find my teacher or the other women, I went to change and then sat on a

bench on the sidelines of the red and blue tatami mats, watching the preparation for the event.

It wasn't long before my teacher found me.

**“What are you doing over there,”** he said, beckoning me to join him and the other women in the warm-up area. **“And why on earth are you wearing your black belt?”**

I knew that karate competitors wore blue and red belts but such was my jetlag and poor preparation, I hadn't thought to look for a coloured belt the night before, nor had he thought to mention it, probably as it was such an obvious point. A second dan black belt who had forgotten a simple rule! I would have gasped in horror had I been ten years younger and not been in such a positive mood.

**“Don't worry, we'll find you a blue belt,”** he said calmly, as he went off to find another competitor with an extra one in their bag.

Scanning the room, I knew I was a strong fighter who could probably take down any of the women I could see standing around me. But I couldn't quite imagine how that spirit would work out on the mats with all the competition rules and restrictions of what I could and couldn't do. I doubted that I could play by the rules, not just because I couldn't remember a single one but because I felt so out of place.

I tried to empty my mind of judgments and narrow thoughts. If I had learned anything the past year, it was that I needed to return to beginner's mind again and again if I was to ever learn anything new. While I hadn't wanted to come, I had at least arrived with a positive mindset and I was determined to do all I could to hang onto that.

By the time I was called up for my fight, an hour later, the caffeine was wearing off and jetlag fatigue was starting to kick back in. I knocked back some water, straightened my suit, and took my place on the tatami mat. I bowed twice as I entered, first to the judging panel and second, to my opponent.

I wasn't nervous in the slightest. My opponent looked like a solid fighter but she was still smaller and much younger than me. I could tell immediately that she wasn't as mentally or physically strong, just from her posture, which mirrored her breathing and how she felt emotionally inside. I had noticed this out of the corner of my eye, as we walked on to the mat. She could see I was visibly stronger and that had unsettled her.

Small things like posture and gait give a person's state of mind and inner strength away, and I've learned to read them in an instant. Being a yoga teacher for several years taught me to spot stress and unease in a person's body, while martial arts had taught me to sense fear. She was afraid but I could see her trying to block it out. All she needed was to score a few points and then her confidence would sky rocket.

I saw her eyes narrow in on me. While she was zoning in for a fight, I was unfortunately zoning out. I was ready to show up as a physical body, and I could observe what was

happening in slow motion, but I honestly wasn't in a fighting state of mind. To be quite honest, in the midst of what should have been an adrenalin-charged moment, I was bored. I actually didn't care about the outcome of the fight, not because I was scared but because I wasn't. It didn't hold enough meaning to me and I needed that meaning to kick in so that I could summon the energy to fight.

As a last minute attempt to get into the right frame of mind, if not for myself then at least for the team, I quickly reminded myself of the techniques I was allowed to perform. Punches and kicks only, and no judo throws, pins or chokes, or self-defense tactics. I mustn't allow my other fighting instincts to take over, as that would be an extremely poor form of etiquette.

Four judges were seated in each corner with flags and a referee was standing between myself and my opponent on the mat. Another fight was going on next to us and other competitors and spectators surrounded us. Sensei was watching from the sidelines.

**“Hajime!”** the referee yelled in Japanese, telling us to begin.

Immediately, I sprung into action. The fight would last no longer than four minutes and I was pretty sure that despite my fatigue and lack of fighting spirit, I had enough energy in me to last that long. Nothing could be worse than my self-defense grading, I figured, and compared to the intensity of judo and BJJ fights, karate fights sometimes allowed more opportunity to catch your breath.

During the first round, I threw multiple punches and kicks that reached my opponent but for some reason, I wasn't scoring as many points as her attacks did. Yet those attacks felt like little pinpricks compared to judo and self-defense. They didn't scare me in the slightest, even if they were coming in fast.

I knew I was the more experienced fighter overall, yet she was a more seasoned competitor and because of that experience, much more able to calculate when and how to score points. It was clear that I was losing and before I knew it, the match was over and she was declared the winner.

I stepped back, not understanding what had happened but also not really caring. Deep down, I knew that what we had just done was nothing like a real fight. Before bowing out, I shook her hand. I was happy for her as I knew the win would mean more to her than it ever would have to myself. She also deserved it as she was the better competitor of us two. There was no doubt in my mind about that.

**“You were too serene looking,”** my teacher told me later, reminding me of multiple criteria I needed to score a point.

It wasn't just about landing a punch with good technique. I had to actually *look* like I was in a fight. Apparently, I hadn't shown enough fighting spirit in my face or body. I had looked like I was going through the motions of a fight, rather than engaging in a fight, and I couldn't agree more. *How ridiculous*, I thought to myself. *I'm jet-lagged and tired, and this is hardly a*

*real fight.*

I was struggling to take the competition seriously but I brushed the loss off, reminding myself of my beginner's mind. I may have been a more experienced fighter but I was an absolute novice when it came to karate competition fights. Having a negative attitude about that was not going to add value to anyone's day, least of all my own. It was also a poor show of sportsmanship, and I needed to stop the negativity fast.

When the next woman in our team lost her fight, we were knocked out of the tournament. Secretly, I felt relieved that I wouldn't have to fight again that day. That meant I could just enjoy watching the other competitors fight, and see if I could learn something instead of being so critical and dismissive. That was hardly the right spirit for any karate practitioner in my mind.

It was a rational choice. I had made the effort to come, and while I wasn't sure the desire to compete in karate was in me, or if it would ever hit me in the future, I did want to understand how competition worked. I also respected the hours of training each of these athletes had put in and had the humility at least to remember that I had just given myself a month off.

The plan hadn't gone at all as my teacher had imagined. I later learned that he had expected me to win my round, for the next woman to lose her round, and for the third woman to win hers, giving us a chance to at least enter the semi-finals and possibly win a silver or bronze medal. For him, the strategy was to win, which of course was the aim of the game.

I felt bad that his plan hadn't worked out but there was nothing I could do. The guilt I used to feel over other people's disappointments related to me just wasn't kicking in. Perhaps it was the fatigue. Or maybe it was because I was finally feeling safe enough to be myself, even if that didn't please others.

I turned my attention back to the tatami mats. Of the women who were left in the competition, only one caught my eye. She had the aggressive look that my teacher had spoken of. Not only that, she looked like the only competitor here who could probably take on a real fight, other than myself.

**"She was on the national team of Egypt,"** my teacher told me when I pointed her out.

Ah, I thought to myself, as he explained how she managed to juggle full time medical studies with karate training. That explains a lot. This woman is used to fighting on and off the mat, and I could relate to that. Just not as a karate competitor.

With intrigue, I continued to watch the Egyptian champion's performance and quickly saw what she was doing differently. While I had gone through the motions of jabs, reverse punches and round house kicks, she was demonstrating a wider and more impressive repertoire of techniques that included karate sweeps and throws.

To my judo-trained body and eye, these sweeps and throws looked easy to carry out, and I

was pretty sure I could do them too, if given a chance. I knew sweeps and throws existed in karate, for they were hidden in many kata, but I just hadn't remembered that they could be used sparingly in competition events. In my ignorance, I had assumed they weren't allowed.

I asked my teacher why he wasn't teaching me these techniques in our classes, as part of *kumite* preparation.

**“Because they’re dangerous and I thought you didn’t want to get hurt as you have to go to work,”** he responded.

My teacher had assumed I couldn't afford to get physically hurt. He knew I relied on myself for an income, and that I struggled each month to pay my bills. He had seen me get injured in self-defense and how the pain of that injury had affected my ability to work, not to mention the cost I then covered for subsequent medical treatment and physiotherapy sessions. Even with my health insurance I still had to pay up front and pay a part of the fee.

Perhaps he didn't want to add more pain and suffering to my plate but still, it was an odd assumption to make, especially as he knew I had also spent a year on the judo mats being thrown, pinned and choked.

Later, when I challenged him, he told me that karate throws are not like judo throws. There is no padded mat to land on in class, as we trained on hard wood, and the person who performed the throw didn't catch the person who had been thrown to break their fall. In his mind, the risk of injury was much higher and he didn't want any of his students getting hurt.

I also hadn't thought to ask him to teach me these *kumite* moves because I was too busy being the traditional and obedient student. If he said the whole class would be spent in one deep stance, I did it. If he told me we were training in deep sand on the beach, I showed up and did it. If he said we were training with weights, I did it.

Never once had I asked for a specific lesson, instead I had let him choose my way to train. I had also never complained openly that I was usually the only student in the class. That I trained mostly alone was a constant source of pain for me. I lived alone, worked alone, and the one passion I had – karate – had then expected me to train alone.

Being the only student was also a privilege, as I received detailed technical instructions and received more individual attention. My teacher excelled here and this fast tracked much of my learning in many ways. But it was also a mental pressure to perform constantly for a perfectionist like myself. Had other students been there, I could have taken a few mental breaks and let them take the heat for a while. But training solo, that wasn't an option, and that way of training had continued for years.

For example, I would feel guilty if I wanted to miss a class, so I rarely did. That meant training through times when I was exhausted and might have been better off resting at home. I fought to hide this fatigue when I would have been better off admitting how tired I was, and asking how to practice karate when feeling absolutely worn out. I felt I always had to show up

and train physically hard to progress. He had taken care to slow me down at times but I don't think either of us realized just how much rest I really needed at the time.

Meanwhile, although I longed to be a part of a community of karate practitioners, I told myself to toughen up and get on with it. I didn't allow myself to complain, even to myself, and my loyalty to one teacher meant that I didn't seek out other karate classes. Instead, I accepted the loneliness of training as part of my path. It was the same isolated state that I had come to accept in my work and life, and it seemed an impossible habit to break.

Standing on the sidelines, watching the rest of the competition, my mind began to wonder why I wasn't being directing my own karate journey. *Why had I been so passive in my learning? I had the potential to beat many of these women at the competition, so why was I so ill-prepared to do that? Was it just because I wasn't willing to play by the rules, or was it because I had allowed my teacher to lead my way?*

These were such painful questions to ask of myself, especially twenty-five years after I first set foot in a karate dojo. I was also a certified self-defense instructor now, and carried much more visible muscle on my body these days. *Didn't my teacher see my strength, or how I had grown over the past year? Why did he think I was afraid of getting hurt? What message had I unknowingly sent to reinforce his belief that I wasn't strong enough?*

It was then that my relationship with my Sensei began to sour. Instead of being open to learning, I suddenly felt confused and shut down. *How had he expected me to win if he hadn't been teaching me the very techniques I needed to win in the first place?* None of it made much sense.

I knew I wasn't the best karate fighter out there, and that I never would be, but I did know I was capable of more. Judo, self-defense and BJJ had shown me that. They had taught me that I could grasp and apply a wider array of techniques and skills, and that I was stronger than I thought. I was stronger than the woman who came to karate class. That woman was still expecting to be led like a child, treating her Sensei as a father figure, instead of taking the lead on her own path.

I drove home that afternoon in an inner state of chaos. My negative thoughts had taken over again, and I started to forget the many positive ways in which karate had impacted my life. *What was I doing holding a second dan, endorsed by one of the highest karate bodies in Japan, and I couldn't even win a simple competition fight? What kind of a self-defense instructor was I to have lost in the first round?*

But these weren't my usual negative thoughts based on self-doubt. And they weren't a reaction to jetlag or not training for a month. No, these feelings hinted at something deeper. I wasn't being negative, I was finally getting angry!

Rage swept through me and out of nowhere, my love of karate was now my target. My training hadn't protected me from teenage rape. It hadn't taught me what domestic violence was. It hadn't taught me to better manage my stress. It hadn't taught me to stand up for



myself. And it most certainly hadn't taught me how to stand on my own two karate legs.

All karate had taught me was the ability to endure. *To endure lonely training. To endure tough physical training. To endure physical and emotional pain instead of stepping out of the way, and finding a better way.* And now, I was raging like hell.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 12

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*"In all our studies, continuous concentration and diligence are the hallmark of success. It is meaningless to begin the study of karate-do as if you were stopping by a roadside stand for a refreshment on your way home... Only through continual training will you be able to obtain, in mind and body, the fruits of the Way."*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 11 | ***Honour***

Funakoshi is teaching us the value of commitment and follow-through on our karate path. For anything to be worthwhile we must understand why we are doing it and if it is the right path for us. Once we are clear on that, we should find the time to show up and do our practice, with the understanding that any progress will require consistency and time.

In my own story, at this point I had learned to say "no" on the work front but I was struggling to differ with my karate teacher on what was right for *me* on *my* karate path. Instead of trusting my instincts and genuine need to rest and recover from travel, or exploring my hesitation to compete, I felt guilty. By not honouring myself, I allowed myself to be pushed.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*To what have you consciously committed in your life or work?*

*What has this commitment asked, or is it asking, of you?*

## *Winning fair and square.*

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*“Apply the way of karate to all things. Therein lies its beauty.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 10)

~

**I** was back on the competition tatami mats a week later, straight after my return from Italy.

This time it was for my first judo competition and I was given three days warning. With anger and rage still running through my mind, I was more than ready to say “yes” and step forwards to fight when my judo teacher delivered the news.

The event was to be held at the Armed Forces Club in the capital, which I found comforting. Finally, I would get a chance to compete in a military environment! It was also my first national competition and unlike karate, I had been trained in the rules of competition from my very first class. I understood exactly what was expected of me on the judo competition mat, and what I needed to do to win each fight.

This was an individual competition and there were two women in my weight class. A brown belted fighter from my own club had been bumped up a weight class to join us, as each class needed a minimum of three competitors to run. Judo still wasn’t a popular sport for women in Dubai and the local Judo federation had to search hard to find enough female entrants.

My brown belted classmate was at a slight disadvantage because of her lower weight, which was about six kilos. That is quite a significant gap in competition but it was expected that her years of experience over myself and the other woman, who like myself had only been training for about a year, would make up for it.

With it being the holy month of Ramadan, and this classmate being a practicing Muslim, she had also been fasting all day. While she would break her fast a few hours before the competition started, I suspected her energy would be low. Still, I didn’t give much thought to it. At least not as much as I should have.

**“Let’s make ours a friendly fight,”** she had suggested quite innocently on the drive down to

the capital.

I was one of the volunteer drivers, and was transporting myself and one of the assistant teachers to the competition. It meant my energy would be a bit lower and that I would have to drive home, but I figured it would all balance out in the end. In judo, we trained as a team. It was the complete opposite of my karate training, and one of the many reasons why I kept coming back. For a long time, it was the only social space I had beyond work.

This lady didn't pass by that often and I knew that like myself, she struggled with stress in work and relationships. As martial artists, we learn to read each other quite quickly without ever exchanging words. I had fought with her several times and knew she had one powerful move, which she tended to resort to each time. Because I was still learning, I had yet to figure out my own magic move but I trusted that would come, with practice.

I also knew that she could be somewhat aggressive and use anger and her desire to win over real team spirit. I had spotted this trait when fighting with her for the first time. At the time, I was only a few weeks into learning judo. As a much lower rank, it was expected that she would be more of a teacher than an equal opponent. Instead, she whacked me hard to the mat before I had a chance to practice anything I had recently learned.

To pull a move that I had yet to learn how to defend myself from could have suggested a lack of maturity and self-awareness. It could have indicated a lack of confidence, and a need to prove herself and establish her rank. Or it could have indicated a more ruthless character. All were possible but I had brushed the thoughts off, standing back and resolving to fight back smarter. Instead of feeling insulted, I had taken her sneaky tactic as a motivation to get better.

The assistant judo teacher, who was sleeping in the back of the car, was also competing. He had been cutting weight for several days so he could make a lower weight class. Weight cutting is common in combat sports and while it did exist in some karate competitions, I had never personally come across it. The most thought I had ever given to my weight in the dojo was that I should probably lose a few kilos, so I could be lighter and more nimble on my toes. But I never really had the drive to follow through.

As the assistant teacher slept, my teammate revealed her plan. Because I was a strong fighter, I would go first and beat the third woman, who was from another club. *Warm her up for me*, she had laughed, which I had thought sounded a little odd. She would then go in and beat her too, and then we would have a friendly fight. Each of us would then be guaranteed a first or second place.

I knew something wasn't quite right but being the less experienced *judoka*, or judo practitioner, I was willing to learn from her. In my mind, I was going for the experience. I had no expectations that I would do well. If I won just one of the fights, I would be happy. I just wanted to get out there and do my best and naively, I didn't realise that my attitude had made my teammate more nervous.

Little did I realize how low I was setting the bar for myself. If I had overestimated my ability

in the karate competition the week before, I would soon come to learn just how much I was underestimating my ability and desire in judo to win. My teammate seemed more afraid of losing than me, and along with my prior knowledge of her character, that should have told me something. Instead, while she was hatching a plan, I just wanted to focus on being friends. I was soon to learn how much of a mistake that would turn out to be.

The Armed Forces Club had set up a competition tent for the event, which looked like a white spaceship. Although it was summer outdoors, it was freezing inside, and I was suddenly quite grateful for my heavily padded judo suit, which added almost three kilos to my weight. When our weight category was announced, myself and the other woman were called up first.

**“Watch out, Claire!”** another brown belt in my team warned, pulling me to one side as I headed for the mat. **“Her upper body is very strong and she can rip you to pieces if you’re not careful!”**

This team member had lost to the same woman the previous year and her words sparked my curiosity. How could a new *judoka* take an experienced brown belt to the ground? That kind of thing didn’t usually happen in karate, at least not to my knowledge if the brown belt was properly trained. But I was about to learn that on the judo mats, belt ranks and colours don’t matter at all. Size and strength played a much more visible role.

I had absolutely no idea if I could win this fight but I did know that I wouldn’t be going down easily. Like my opponent, I was a physically strong woman too and used to fighting with bigger and stronger men. Not that I was usually able to pull off successful throws. I still had a long way to go with acquiring the art of *kuzushi*, or off-balancing my opponents. But I knew that unlike karate, my judo fighting spirit was strong, and I could at least put up a good fight. I wouldn’t be going down like a feather, that was for sure.

Just like I had done in the karate competition, I bowed towards the judging panel as I stepped onto the mat, walked to the centre, turned ninety degrees to my left, and then bowed towards my opponent. She was a solid looking yellow belt, and I could see from her frame that she clearly worked out. I held a higher rank, at least in colour, and for a moment I caught myself wondering why. *If we had both trained for the same amount of time, why was my grade apparently higher?*

As the referee called *hajime*, I was still stuck on this thought as the yellow belt lunged forward, grabbing the collar of my suit and shaking my body in a sudden burst of violence. I had planned to start the fight slowly, grabbing her suit a few times to test her strength and preserve my energy and then, when I had a feel for her style, move in for a technique. With four minutes ahead of us, I hadn’t expected such an aggressive burst of energy at the start. Nor did I expect her to have the strength to keep shaking me so hard.

She had the spirit of a lioness who was hell bent on killing her prey and, despite my teammate’s warning, it had still taken me by surprise. Her upper body strength could easily rival that of some brown and black belted men in our class. Once they had me in their grip, I couldn’t for the life of me escape unless I could effectively use timing, movement, and my

body weight as a counter-move, which is easier than it sounds.

Because they had done that to me so often, I knew what was coming next and I had to find a way out of her grip soon. I wasn't prepared to give in and lose, not yet, not as the fight was just getting started. It was the same energy and composure I had had in the karate competition but this time, I understood the rules.

I knew I was just as strong as her, only in other ways. Shoulder strength had long been my Achilles heel in fitness training but I was strong in other places. My lower body was powerful from years of karate training and I could root down with my weight, while made me harder to throw, while my self-defense instructor grading had shown me that I could keep going long after what I thought was my breaking point. Running my business had shown me that too.

Then there was the way I had been taught in judo. *Action-reaction!* The chief instructor had drilled us so well. Training us often to the point of mental and physical exhaustion, one of us would then take the centre of the mat while we were "attacked" by our teammates from different directions, one at a time. It wasn't anything like a real street fight, I didn't fool myself there, but it was certainly challenging. Especially when I had had to throw heavier men, or those much more experienced than me.

That he would film us and send us the video footage later had helped me to see where my strengths and weaknesses were. There is nothing like looking at yourself in action to see the gap between how you think you look, and how you really look. I knew that look in my eyes when I was under pressure on the mat, and how important my eye control was. So I shifted my attention to lifting and steadying my gaze, making sure not to look down at the mat, as that was the last place I wanted to go. That helped me to channel my energy, or *ki*.

It my have looked for a moment like I was about to lose, but what onlookers couldn't see was how swiftly I had overcome my initial surprise and how quickly I could tap into my *ki*. It hadn't always been this way. It had been my single biggest weakness in karate growing up. With all male teachers, and mostly male training partners, there was an unspoken expectation at least from myself that I should look and sound like them. But my *ki* was different and nobody taught me that. It is something I had to figure out alone.

When my *ki* is in balance, it is calm and serene, even under pressure. So too is my breath. That is why people often commented how *zen* I could come across as. When it is out of balance, I am wild and aggressive. I make mistakes and burn out. I burn bridges, slam doors, and feel weak. Calm and aggressive is more natural for me in a fight. This is how my first book came to be named *Wild Zen*.

And so, despite the initial disorientation from being shaken, I had quickly regained control of my mind. I couldn't yet break free physically but I already had mentally, and that is what determined the outcome of the fight. I knew I had about ten seconds to figure something out before she threw me and won the fight. It was suddenly a wonderful dilemma to figure out, and I relished having to think fast under pressure. It had been so long since anyone had challenged me that much.

A quick calculation told me her right side was well guarded and I couldn't move in to throw her with my stronger side. I also couldn't grip her as hard back and try to shake her in return, as I didn't yet have the same degree of gripping and shaking strength. It didn't mean she was going to win. It just meant that I had to find another way and to do that, I mustn't give up.

I steadied my breath, switched my mind off, and let my body take over. Without thinking, I stepped in with my left leg, placed my left arm under and around her left shoulder, grabbed her left sleeve at the same time with my right hand, twisted my body swiftly, lowered my stance and threw her perfectly over my hip to score a full point. It had happened so quickly, neither of us had seen it coming.

The match was over and I was announced the winner before I'd even had time to process what I had done. I had won not because I was stronger but because I hadn't allowed myself to be shaken mentally with her aggressive start. I had trusted my body and myself to perform and the fighting instincts that had been honed through hours of judo practice and training had kicked in when I needed them most. All I had to do was get my mind to step to one side.

That I had thrown her with my weaker left side was unusual. That I had managed to do that when I had spent most of the year protecting and not using that side in training, due to the fractured elbow, was a surprise.

Suddenly, I was grateful to my opponent for the lesson she had just given me. Being so strong, she had forced me to draw on one of my weaknesses in order to make it through. She was stronger in upper body strength and yet I had been stronger in my stance. While she seemed to have a ready-made strategy, I was the more tactical one. She seemed to only know her powerful opening move while I had the advantage of being able to think clearly under pressure and adapt my plan on the spot, at least on this occasion.

In some ways, it was the opposite scenario I had faced the previous week on the karate mat, where I had considered myself the stronger opponent and yet I had lost. This time I had summoned the fighting spirit I needed and that had helped me to not back down. I also had the humility in this situation to recognize my opponent's strength and how close I could have come to losing, had I not reacted so quickly.

Although I had won the fight, I knew that this woman had also tested and challenged me, and that I had plenty of judo training ahead of me to strengthen my weaknesses. But there wasn't time to sit back down and process these thoughts further as two minutes later, I was called up for my next fight.

The loosely agreed plan in the car, which our main judo coach sitting by the sidelines was completely oblivious to, had been for my brown belt teammate to fight the other lady first. But the panel in charge had chosen a different order. This had thrown our half-sketched plan into disarray. Instead of her now fighting the other woman, it was me fighting her.

Stepping onto the mat once more, the high of my recent win was still running through me. I

was on fire and I knew it! Having just seen me win in less than a minute against a physically stronger opponent, I could see the nerves in my teammate's eyes as we took to the mat and bowed each other's way. She knew I was not only stronger than her physically but with one win behind me already, I was also in a mentally stronger state.

**"Hajime!"** the referee shouted, as the match began.

I took a slower start, knowing that my teammate wouldn't charge in from the start. Then I spent the first minute playing around, testing her strength and reflexes, as we often did in class. I knew her signature move well enough by now to get out of the way each time she lunged for it. I was in a prime position to win but for some reason, I was holding back.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't a fair fight. I knew I could easily charge in and throw her but I wasn't doing that. With her being from the same team, I just couldn't see her as an opponent. We had also been friendly in the car and I had enjoyed the company of another female fighter. That so rarely happened as I spent most of my time with men and without realizing, I guess I had just wanted to make a new friend, and not be there to win a fight at her expense.

But there are no friendships on the competition mats, as I quickly discovered. When she motioned to me in the middle of the fight to give her a chance to rest, the look on her face made my heart wince. I could see how tired she was from fasting and how quickly the little energy she had was being used up with me using so little of my energy. Guilt pounded me from all directions. *What joy would I get from throwing a person when they're already down? Yes, I could win the fight, but would I have won it in my heart?*

At the precise moment when I should have gone in and scored a clean point, at least if I considered myself a competitor, I stepped back and gave her time to catch her breath. In that moment, I became distracted as I realized I might not have it in me to win this match. Self-doubt crept in and before I had a chance to catch it, she swiftly moved in and caught me off guard. She not only threw me, but perhaps because she was so tired and had to throw someone six kilos heavier than herself, she also crashed down on me with the throw, crushing my right shoulder into a painful position on the mat.

The match was halted while the referees argued the scoring of that point. I lay on the ground, grateful that I didn't have to get up immediately to continue the fight. Something had happened to my shoulder and thoughts of calling the paramedics waiting on the sidelines of the mats flashed through my mind. I had seen this happen to other fighters but I had never expected to be one of them too.

I knew I should speak up and say I was injured but I was too shocked and embarrassed to bring it to anyone's attention. I couldn't believe my teammate had pulled such a sneaky move on me and suddenly felt so stupid and naive at the thought of wanting to be friends. At my age, what on earth was I thinking! I was also used to soldiering on and hiding my pain, so I did what I had been doing for years. I smiled and pretended that I wasn't hurt.

Within seconds, the judges decided it was a full point and with that, the match was over. I



carefully stood up, shook my teammate's hand with a firm shake and warm smile that hid the searing pain in my right shoulder and clavicle, and walked diplomatically off the mat. I had another fracture but a few days would pass before I could admit that to myself.

In less than ten minutes, I had won my first judo fight, lost my second, and ended up with an injury that would plague me for the next few months. The price I would pay for my untimely moment of compassion would be weeks of physiotherapy and months of poor sleep. Together with building works next door to my home, this injury would eventually wear my nerves down, driving me frequently to tears and into a very dark week of despair. I would fight the pain off for as long as I could but eventually, my mind and body would break down.

If my self-defense injury earlier that year had taught me what not to do in a real life attack, this injury would remind me repeatedly of the price I had paid throughout my life for being kind to others at the expense of myself. I was always trying to find a win-win situation, and I wanted every conflict and confrontation to end in smiles. Even with a painful marriage and divorce behind me, I just couldn't accept that in the real world, this often isn't the way. Not every character we meet will be kind to us.

Because of this, compassion is not only a practice we do for the sake of others, and trying to heal a small part of the world, it is first and foremost something that we must practice for ourselves. I had missed this vital lesson in life and that was one of the many reasons why I had repeatedly been let down. I had let a few too many people in my life use and abuse me because I hadn't called them out on their weak characters. Instead, I had wasted my energy and put myself at risk trying to protect such people at the expense of myself.

My karate teacher was right, when push came to shove – quite literally in this case – I just didn't have it in me to win. The rage I had felt after my failed karate competition the week before returned and this time, I vowed to do something about it.

My fight on the tatami mats, be it in karate or judo, wasn't about winning a gold medal. It was about being smarter with and actually using my strength when it counted most. *If I knew what I should be doing to protect myself better, and succeed, why the hell wasn't I doing it?* As my self-defense instructor would say, *If I knew how to block, why was I still getting hit?* That applied as much to my work and love life as much as it did to my martial arts.

Back in my seat, nursing my shoulder, I watched my teammate take the mat with the more powerful yellow belt. The fight that ensued was a swift and nasty one. The yellow belt lacked the sympathy I had had for my fasting teammate, and it wasn't long before the match was interrupted. Someone had bitten someone and now a complaint was being made to the judges and referee. Both women were then accused of biting. I couldn't believe it, foul play? Not at our age. We were all grown women in our thirties. *Who does that kind of thing at such an age?* Naively, I figured it must have been an accident.

Back on the mat, the yellow belt quickly scored a full point, as I expected her to, and the match was declared over. Regardless of the biting claim against her, she had won. The competition was over and I thought of saying something about my shoulder injury but an

inquiry into the biting allegation was taking place, and people in the audience watching were starting to whisper. It didn't seem like a good moment to call attention to myself.

I soon learned that now, due to the distribution of wins, our weight division was in flux. We had all won one fight each and according to one interpretation of the rules, that meant the competition wasn't actually over. Depending on the judging panel's decision, we may need to start the entire competition from the very beginning. With many eyes on them, they took their role seriously and there was a chance we might all need to fight again.

Inwardly, I groaned. The smile was long wiped off my face. It was almost midnight and not only was I injured but my fuel tank had run out after a very long day.

While the referee and judges made up their mind, I went to buy a coffee. Injured, annoyed, and angry, I let a frown descend on my face. I decided that if I had to fight again, I would be taking both of these women down. No more being a nice girl for me. Instead, I would go in and get the job. No pity and most certainly, no mercy.

Fortunately for all of us, the panel decided to calculate our individual scores on points, and that stopped me from carrying out a stupid plan to get my revenge. With no penalties and a clean point scored early on in my first match, I was suddenly declared the overall winner for our weight class. My brown belted teammate came second and the yellow belt third.

I was positively stunned. That I had won through character and tactics was suddenly clear. It didn't mean I would win every match this way but it did remind me that I didn't need to stoop to lower strategies of revenge. I had absolutely nothing to prove and with an open mind, everything to gain.

We were all destined to have a place on the podium, as it was a small match, but that first place had still been a tough one to fight for. My initial reaction was to downplay the fact I had just won gold but I quickly caught myself. I hadn't "just" won this gold. I had stepped up and fought for it, fair and square, and I had paid a high price with my shoulder injury. That weakness I would be sure to take care of in the future but for now, I allowed myself to enjoy the feeling of having won.

When I learned that we would receive prize money because of it being a Ramadan tournament, and that all the gold medalists would receive the highest amount, I was taken aback. Not only had I won a gold medal, but I had also been "paid" to fight!

Such was my competition naivety and focus on just doing my best that I hadn't noticed that this competition came with prize money. Now it all made sense. Maybe that was also why the yellow belt fought so hard from the start, and why my teammate had tried to coerce me before the competition into making way for her to win. It was all about winning the prize money too, not just the medal. It perhaps wasn't about being the best.

Despite my shoulder pain, I smiled the entire drive home to Dubai while my assistant teacher and teammate slept. My naivety amused me but the gold medal in my bag took the edge off

that, as well as the pain shooting through my body. The road ahead was dark and foggy and at two o'clock in the morning, I was exhausted. The trip took over two hours but still, that didn't dampen my spirits.

I was learning a lesson I should have learned years ago but better late than never. I couldn't have scripted such a storyline as a writer, even if I had tried, and I was both overjoyed and overwhelmed. This was the life I had lived, one of loss and defeat, and if it had taken this long and a nasty judo throw to wake up and realise I needed better tactics to not be unfairly thrown or beaten down, then so be it.

Back home, I stumbled into bed but I couldn't sleep before the sun came up. I still had work contracts to tend to and a meeting at nine thirty that morning. I desperately wanted to take time off to rest and celebrate this moment of joy with someone who could understand. But there was no such someone by my side who would understand what this small gold medal meant to me, at least not just yet. But he was on his way. Of that, the older and wiser woman in me was quite sure. I was watching him from afar and knew it was only a matter of time.

Ironically, my life and work seemed to be picking up just as my karate path appeared to be going down the drain. I had been training in *Cherry Blossom Dojo* for a year now, unearthing my wider misconceptions of the karate way, and trying to understand what kind of a practitioner I really was.

Through studying Funakoshi's *Twenty Guiding Principles*, and not just reading them but actually trying to live some of them, I was beginning to find more and more fault with the way I had been taught. The nice part of me wanted to dismiss these observations, as she didn't wish to disrespect any of her teachers. But the wiser part was beginning to wake up and point out not only my own flaws, but also the gaps and inconsistencies in my own learning process.

Parallel to my judo win, a strange twist of fate took our new karate training space away. The boxing club was suddenly shut down and now, we had nowhere to go. Training had already been shaky over Ramadan, with many classes being cancelled and me being mostly away. Now, we were forced into a break. As it was summer, I decided to step back and take some breathing space.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 13

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“When practitioners confront hardships with the attitude that their life is at stake, it will reveal to them what can be accomplished through their own abilities. They will come to see the wonderful power that stems from polishing the mind and body through the Way of Karate, and will recognize the exquisite beauty of this path.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 13 | ***Integrity***

Funakoshi is talking here about a fine attunement to the fragility of life. Through vulnerability, we can learn to stand up and fight back. When something meaningful to us is at stake, we discover just how resilient and competent we are. Our training may have already created that fruit of labour within us but, without a real test, we may not understand that.

Winning my first judo competition was a turning point for me. It had given me the opportunity to leverage more dormant strengths, such as integrity its potential price, and my ability to think straight under pressure, and respond rather than react. It also brought to the surface my own competitive spirit, which existed beyond karate.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How would you define your more vulnerable strengths?*

*What are the positive and negative consequences of those strengths?*

## *A heart blown open on the BJJ mats.*

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*“Make adjustments according to your opponent.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 13)

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With my relationship to karate on hold, I turned to judo. I decided that I would be better off pouring my energy into competing while I figured my relationship with karate out.

The next judo competition was six months away and it wasn't guaranteed there would be enough women to compete in each weight class, so I took that as a positive source of motivation to try to lose weight. There were a larger number of women in the weight category below me and that would mean losing around five kilos.

I hadn't had much luck on any previous weight loss attempts and it seemed the longer I stayed in Dubai, the harder it became. My body had bulked up with training but like my mind, it was also struggling to release some unnecessary weight. The potential to compete again felt like a way forwards and six months seemed like a reasonable length of time.

I couldn't do this alone and it was time to look for proper nutrition support. But I didn't want to work with just anyone. Dubai is full of weight loss schemes on both the health and fitness fronts, and while I appreciated some them it wasn't the approach I was looking for. Although I wanted to lose weight, I needed to do that without my judo performance being affected. The last thing I wanted was to lose my physical strength and fitness ability.

With a clear plan of action in mind, I increased my BJJ training to get better at grappling on the floor. Then I looked for a sports nutrition coach. I needed someone who understood my aim of losing weight to compete, as well as my desire to fight. Based on past experience of working with a personal trainer, I also knew this person needed to be able to handle me. I probably wouldn't be an easy client as I had a habit of talking and processing a lot.

While in the dojo I could shut up and train, outside of the dojo I needed to reflect and process to understand myself better. I figured that any weight loss attempt would trigger some fears and I needed someone who was strong enough to take that. I wasn't in need of any therapeutic support but I did need this person to be wise and able to hold space.

Lee was one of two trainers I interviewed. Both had experience of training fighters for competitions but unlike the first one I contacted, Lee actually had first hand experience of being in the ring. As an amateur boxer in the British Navy, he understood what it was like to win and lose and fights. He knew first hand the psychology that went into a fight, both in the ring and out in the world as a member of the military.

He was also a professional engineer, which piqued my interest. Unlike me, he didn't tend towards emotional choices. The coach in me sized him up immediately in our first meeting, which lasted a good two hours. His structured approach to life and work was exactly what I needed to balance myself out. While I appreciated the positives of having an emotional character, as it heightened my intuition and sensitivity, at this stage in my dojo training I felt that enough was enough. I needed to learn from someone on stable ground.

Lee also understood the challenges of running a solo business, as he had left a path career to build his own. As an ultra-endurance runner, he had taken his passion for health and fitness into the professional domain, and in addition to his own competing in long-distance races in the desert, he trained and inspired many others in their sport.

If anyone in Dubai could help me to figure out nutrition and how to get my fighting weight down, while navigating the minefields of my past, I figured it had to be him. Our first meeting lasted over two hours and I found myself taking plenty of notes. In just the first meeting alone, he had reminded me of an earlier idea I had had a few years earlier to research the intersection of fitness and violence. But the idea had soon fallen by the wayside as the stresses of life took over.

A self-confessed training and nutrition nerd, Lee had pretty much tried it all. Fitness and ultra-endurance was now his life and he was someone who lived every inch of what he taught. I knew instinctively that whatever question I asked, I would receive a scientifically proven answer or an "I don't know, let me find out."

Soon, I was checking in weekly with my food diary, which tracked my training, food intake, and psychology. At first, I followed a food plan but he soon had me fishing for myself. Lee believed in educating his clients but he didn't hand us the answers on a plate. We still had to go out and do our own research.

Each day, much to my dislike, I knuckled down to count my macros. Calculating my fat and protein intake was quite straightforward but carbs were another matter altogether. As my stress levels went up and down, I also had to watch out for chocolate fixes, which had been a feature in my life for years. I hadn't grown up eating much chocolate but when the stress of my marriage had kicked in, I had developed a nasty habit of turning to sugar whenever I was emotionally stressed.

Since then, I had found many ways to cope with stress but I hadn't actually found a way to drop the chocolate habit once and for all, and replace it with a better one. I understood the process in theory, especially as a coach, but knowing something is very different from actually making it work.

So in between the food and training notes, there was always a long update on my psychology. I had included this third element with Lee's support, as I knew mindset was important in the midst of a competition fight. This coaching had gone far beyond weight loss and a judo competition. Without realizing it, Lee was now training me for the final leg of this ongoing fight or *randori* with life. Effectively, he was teaching me how to get out.

**"As an athlete, you need to learn how to use your emotions to your advantage,"** he reminded me often.

In his books, there was no room for guilt when it came to food and training. When we started talking about fueling me properly for an athletic performance, I realized how much guilt and misinformation I had absorbed from the media over the years. In my mind, there were "good" foods and "bad" foods. Yet to Lee, food was just food.

**"As an athlete, you fuel to train, you don't eat to live,"** he reminded me, emphasizing that I needed to be ultra clear on what I was training for.

Nobody had ever spoke to me with such clarity that I was initially lost. *What was I really training for? Was it really another judo competition? Or was my question for something deeper?*

Quietly, I put my judo competition dream to one side to focus on education. I wanted to study fitness and nutrition in more depth, and really understand their building blocks through applying their principles to my life. I eventually learned that a strict sports nutrition diet didn't work for me, or at least not at that time in my life. It added more muscle but it didn't help me to lose any weight.

I trusted that over time, I would find my way with food. My meals were now balanced and I was releasing my desire to eat sugar when stressed. I no longer saw chocolate as "bad" but rather a helpful or unhelpful choice of fuel. I also learned to enjoy it when I felt like eating it. Gradually, the judgment of what I ate was slipping away.

I loved the depth, discipline and simplicity of Lee's approach. It was rich in educational material but there was a lack of complicated thoughts behind it. I had yet to learn how to master this Zen-like skill of simplicity when it came to training and how to manage my work and life, but it would begin to kick in a few months down the line, when I realized just how much I missed academic work.

With sports at the forefront of my mind, I found myself reflecting on judo as a sport. It had been pushed in this direction by its founder, Jigaro Kano, who saw it as a way of life but also felt it had the potential to be an Olympic sport. He saw the positive aspects it held for building a person's mindset and helping them to make a positive contribution to the world. The latter was actually more important to him.

Like Funakoshi, Kano believed that character came first but while Funakoshi focused on the

aspects of martial arts and self-defense, Kano advocated for his art to be recognized as a sport. His efforts weren't in vain. By 1964, twenty-six years after his death, judo was introduced to the Tokyo Games. It was introduced for good at the fateful Munich Games in 1972, seven years before I was born, when eleven Israeli Olympians were taken hostage and killed by a Palestinian group.

My mind, which was so attuned to war was prone to noticing coincidences like this. Most people without my background in political violence would probably brush them off but old habits die hard for me. That I had spent over a decade tracking war and analyzing politics in my humanitarian work was a reflex that somehow needed to be put to rest. This part of my life was over and with it, sport had arrived. I sensed it may return but for now, I had to let go.

Judo was so much easier to figure out than karate for me, probably as I wasn't asking such big questions of it about life. I had started in a bid to remember what it felt like to be a white belt again so I could write this book from that place of not knowing the outcome. Then I had quickly fallen in love with the feeling of judo in my body. When I realised a number of judo-like throws are present in karate, but that I hadn't been taught them, it only made me more determined to stay.

Judo was straightforward. It also offered a positive social space in which I felt at home. It awoke the younger athlete in me and made me feel grounded, positive, and strong. I loved the athletic dynamism behind our training and the relative physical strength and power it demanded of us all. While the lighter ladies couldn't throw me and I, in turn, struggled to throw the heavier men, we were all being pushed to our limits and with each class, getting stronger and better on the mat and here and there, in life.

**"No injury, we are different!"** my Iranian teacher would announce at the end of every class, just before we bowed out.

He had a wonderful way of motivating us all to appreciate the unique qualities we each held. Many chats with him and his daughter, who was a brown belt, between classes had enriched my learning process. At one point, we had even brought karate and judo together for shared training on the beach. Both myself and my judo teacher were keen to fuse the two in more joint lessons but my karate teacher was less enthusiastic and the idea soon faded.

Judo also offered a much-needed outlet for my competitive nature, which had been lost or suppressed during years of humanitarian work. When I set up my coaching practice, I had failed to translate that energy into a marketing spirit, as I felt it clashed with my ethics and values. The topic of healthy competition also didn't feel right to bring into client sessions, at least not until more corporate clients arrived, and being the only student in karate meant there was no informal outlet for it there either.

The original impetus behind my drive to compete in judo was clear. Competition was a part of who I was. I had taken to it like a duck to water at such a young age and having a daredevil spirit, I didn't mind being thrown about on the mat. But the risk of injury in a sport like judo is high, and the outcome of my first victory a few months before still weighed heavily on my



mind.

Week after week, I had attended physiotherapy sessions for my broken shoulder. One of my clavicle joints had been fractured, causing referred pain across my pectoral muscles and leaving me with a very painful shoulder impingement. This caused further pain across my upper right arm.

The injury meant a loss of power in my right shoulder for several months and a long recovery process, which included painful dry needling and what my physiotherapist called “pecking”, where she poked the needles around searching for other trigger points. I’m not sure if it ever worked but it certainly brought tears to my eyes.

Reflecting on my competitive streak and injury with Lee helped me see how amiss my competition spirit was. It had started to wake up in the second competition but soon faded when I came up against a weaker opponent with a less ethical fighting strategy. My kindness and compassion, and dropping my guard, had left me badly hurt and months later, I was still paying the price.

Month after month, Lee received pages of typed up notes, not just on my food intake but my thoughts on my own sports performance and psychology, which often seeped over into work and life. I was tracking every inch of my progress and in my typically disciplined, self-aware and honest way, I had refused to hold anything back. This was my training dojo and I was here to awaken. I knew I would only get out of this learning process what I put in.

Lee had asked me to reflect on the kind of athletes who inspired me and what it was about them that had caught my eye. Immediately, my mind had gone to two of my all-time favorites. Both had spoken to me in similar and different ways. When I thought of their fight careers, what struck me most was their strong character.

The first was Ronda Rousey, a former judo Olympian turned professional UFC MMA fighter who had once dominated the women’s UFC scene and was widely accepted as the woman behind it taking off in the first place. I had read her autobiography a couple of years earlier and admired how she had worked her way up with very few financial resources. She may have had an Olympian judo athlete for a mother but her climb was very much off her own back.

The second was Laila Ali, the daughter of the late Mohammed Ali, a famous icon in the boxing world. She too had had a parent with a proven fighting record yet like Ronda, she hadn’t relied on that to get ahead. I ordered an autobiography she had written in her early twenties and my jaw dropped in awe of the experiences she had endured. Far from being Daddy’s little rich girl, she had endured challenges of her own to make her way into the ring as professional boxer herself.

As athletes, we will have good days and bad days and regardless, we need to be able to pull through when someone else is trying to pull us down. Both Ronda and Laila, had literally fought their way up to the top and stayed there long enough to dominate their respective

fighting scenes and be remembered. They went about it in very different ways but it was the human aspect to their characters, with all their flaws, that I respected most.

I wasn't fooling myself that I could be the next "Ronda" or "Laila", nor did I want to be. But something in Lee's question kept circling me back to them.

That they had both endured suffering and succeeded in spite of it was clear. So too was the fact that they dominated their opponents. They had a natural confidence that was difficult to knock. They also looked strong but hadn't lost their feminine beauty or glamour in being physically stronger than other women who didn't fight.

I paused on that insight. There were other female fighters out there who perhaps outshone both of them in terms of beauty and glamour. But while I appreciated their efforts and what it took to be a professional female fighter, they just didn't speak to me like Laila and Ronda did. They didn't carry the same presence and if they did share similar stories, I couldn't see it in how they fought.

Looking around at the more traditional martial arts competition scene, I came across Kayla Harrison, a two time Olympian judo medalist. In the same weight category as myself, Kayla was also visibly strong and blonde. There was of course a significant difference between us - I was clearly not an Olympian judo athlete by any stretch of the imagination, nor did I aspire to be - but I admired her fire, talent, and cool determination.

Kayla had also endured adversity on her road to becoming a successful martial arts athlete. One of her earlier judo coaches had sexually abused her as she was growing up, and this had left a mark on her life. As a result, she had established the Fearless Foundation to shed a light on child sexual abuse. Not only had she found the courage to speak out on her own story but she had also found a way to stand up for others.

To see a strong and fit female fighter advocate for the rights of children to be protected from sexual predators lent a whole new meaning to the power of positive advocacy to shape and impact young minds. It was the perfect expression of a judo spirit. Perhaps if I had come across female fighters like Kayla growing up, I might have had more awareness of my own power.

Growing up, I hadn't crossed paths with any positive and strong female role models, certainly not in the fighting sense. Because of that, I came to associate strength with boys men. As a female fighter, I had just accepted that I was a guest in their world, and that I would always feel like the odd one out. Never had this mindset and hidden belief been more clear than when my BJJ class was split in two.

**"Why aren't you training with the women?"** one of my BJJ coaches asked me, while another one warmed us up.

I had arrived a couple of minutes late to class, which meant that I had missed the announcement at the start. A new women's class had just started at the same time and the

handful of women who had once attended this class had re-routed themselves there.

I stared back at him with a blank look while the teacher in charge of the class spoke up. Having overheard the question and seen my confused response, he decided to step in.

**“Why would Claire join the women,” he asked, “when she can beat up half of the men in this class?”**

I was a long way from the intimidated woman who had first stepped onto the BJJ and judo mats, a year earlier. I had quickly grown in size and strength and now, on a good day when my energy levels were balanced and I was in the right mood, I could give most of the men I trained with a good fight.

For weeks, I fumed inwardly that the women had upped and left. I couldn’t understand it. Why would they leave when they could have the experience of fighting with men? I was thinking like a self-defense instructor and student. Practically, it just made more sense. But I was also angry that by leaving the class, I was left alone to fight with the men.

The men sometimes referred to the women’s class as “play” and didn’t take it seriously. That only fueled me to train harder and avoid looking in their direction. I just didn’t believe in the segregation of genders during training. In competition it made sense but in training, I couldn’t see why we had to train apart.

But my stubborn mindset was eventually worn down during exchanges in the ladies changing room after class. As I showered between BJJ and judo classes, I would inevitably get chatting with some of the women from the all-ladies class. Some of them had re-routed there to prepare for competition. Others preferred the smaller numbers as it gave them a chance to focus on learning. A few were much lighter in weight and were struggling to find decent partners to train. And a very small number were actually scared.

One day, chatting to an Emirati woman who was studying and working long hours for a medical degree. She commuted back and forth to BJJ classes from a northern emirate, and her dedication to coming to the ladies class broke my heart wide open. She was new to fighting and her frame was roughly the size mine once was when I was a young karate student. Being so delicate, she was scared of rolling on the mats, even with me.

I had noticed her nerves earlier in the year, before the ladies class was set up. In between fighting with the men, I had made sure to go over and ask her if she wanted to roll with me. I could see her sitting on the sidelines and wondered if she was scared or felt left out, like I had when I first arrived at the academy. She had said yes a few times and it was then that I had felt the fear in her body. It had slowed me right down and made me very aware of holding back consciously on my strength.

In BJJ I learned that it wasn’t about size or strength. It wasn’t just about mindset either. To a great extent, I needed to learn how to drop the desire to fight in me in order to acquire any kind of groundwork skills. That was much harder to do, especially during times of stress.

So much had changed since my self-defense instructor grading almost a year earlier, when my elbow had been broken and I had panicked on the ground. I still had a long way to go with fighting on the floor and yet I had also come so far.

Standing face to face with this smaller woman, with my heart being broken open, a sudden appreciation for how vulnerable I had repeatedly been and felt in my life washed over me. That led me to join the women in a few classes and inwardly, tend to more unspoken areas within myself. Compassion had found its way into my heart once more and this time, it also included myself.

As I pursued my sports nutrition goals, and reflected on my martial arts for life path with Lee, I kept coming back to *Kayla, Layla and Ronda*. Like them, I had a vocal side. I was strong and liked to dominate. I wasn't loud in the sense that Layla and Ronda appear to be. In that regard I could relate more to Kayla's quiet and determined strength. But for reasons I couldn't yet explain, I was holding back so much in Dubai.

There was so much I wasn't expressing and at times, it felt like I was even biting my tongue. There were words I was silencing and censoring because I was scared that they might hurt or inconvenience others. I knew I was protecting others at the expense of my own health and wellbeing, but I didn't yet know how to stop.

The universe had been throwing me around like a rag doll for far too long, challenging me to build more emotional strength, and I had been allowing it to. It was time to learn how to really fight back. To do that, I had to learn to focus on what I actually wanted and stop reacting negatively to the environment around me.

I had to stop believing my own fears and negative thoughts. I wanted to learn how to be more positive but I just couldn't figure out where to start. I was wasting far too much time remembering the past. I had to move forwards with my life and work, no matter what. I couldn't change what had happened or erase the unusual life I had chosen live, and I certainly couldn't undo the many mistakes I had made.

I knew I needed to forgive myself but there was still something I couldn't let go of. Some walls would have to be torn down within me if I were to move forwards. But to get better, I sensed it was about to get worse. The fight was ultimately inside of me, with myself and my own mind, and I still had another fight left to go.

With all the strength I could muster, I took a deep breath and promised myself that I would stay in this metaphorical ring as long as it took to figure this part of my martial arts journey out. If I were to emerge victorious, there was no question. I would have to take down every inch of this part of myself that kept beating me down. But I would need to do it gently and from a place of compassion and love.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 14

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“There are many well-known proverbs that stress the necessity of adjusting one’s actions to one’s opponent, such as “Adapt one’s speech to the audience” and “When in a village follow its customs.” The thirteenth and fourteenth principles have deep significance not only in combat and karate-do but also in confrontations and challenges in daily life.”*

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### INNER STRENGTH 14 | ***Diplomacy***

Funakoshi is talking about diplomacy here, and the need to respect other people’s ways of doing things. He is not talking about changing who we are deep down but rather, altering how we present that in our words and actions. This lesson is about using diplomacy as a means to conflict prevention, and de-escalating tense situations in life beyond the *dojo* mats.

As a humanitarian professional, I had spent years practicing the art of diplomacy. I had learned at a young age how to avoid and quell confrontation and now, I was seeking the exact opposite. I had needed to experience for myself the fire of confrontation to complete my earlier lessons and develop a new strength in what to do when diplomacy fails.

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### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which diplomatic skills have you acquired in life and work?*

*What do you tend to do, or how do you respond, when diplomacy fails?*

## *The healing power of hands.*

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*“The outcome of a battle depends on how one handles emptiness and fullness (weakness and strength).”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 14)

~

**D**epression hit me out of nowhere like a tonne of bricks.

It was a state I had always struggled to understand, and I had often wondered why people couldn't just snap out of it. Now, just as I had resolved to move forwards, it had sneakily crept up on me, and I suddenly felt helpless.

I thought of my younger self, trapped in an unhappy and abusive marriage, trying to make sense of the emotional confusion after the teenage assault, and feeling anxious and depressed. Being stubborn and resourceful, I had managed to drag myself out of those challenging times with my mental but emotionally, they had left their mark.

Strategic and dynamic planning skills had helped me to grapple with the unpredictability of life. In work, I was quick to pick myself up and over time, I had developed a deeper resilience to the uncertainty of the path I had chosen. I had learned to deal with financial instability and hardship, and was feeling stronger and more hopeful professionally. But I wasn't yet strong in every area of my life, and there was one area in particular that needed my attention. *Love*.

The trigger for my helpless state was my soulmate and the dynamics in his life. A beautiful and spontaneous relationship had been emerging for months, and it was unlike any connection I had ever known. We shared so many common interests and for both of us, the coming together felt like it had been written in stone. But he was a Man of War, as the Vedic astrologist had predicted, and just as I felt I was coming back to life, and daring to hope, some unexpected news had thrown a spanner in the works.

To him, it was a situation that could be addressed in time. But to me, it felt like someone had thrown a hand grenade into my world, shattering my hopes to pieces. At a time when I needed more safety to be able to trust and let go, I couldn't find it. Not only that, but the fault lines in my emotional life had been revealed.

With his situation, the worst of my younger insecurities – fear of rejection and abandonment – had been woken, and the fragile hope that I too deserved happiness in love and life was derailed. Instead of trusting that there would be a way through this together, catastrophic thinking set in. I thought I had lost him, and that's how the light in my world had suddenly gone out.

Negativity doesn't just drop a clean bomb and move on. There is usually a pile of debris to clear up afterwards and this case that was my thoughts. In the midst of this romantic suffering, more negative thoughts had arrived, weighing me down. *Of course bad luck would happen to me. Hasn't my track record shown me that I'm not cut out for relationships? Why was I being so naïve and stupid, thinking this could work out?*

I had an unfounded belief that I was doomed in love. Some people I had known had traced it back to a father-daughter wound, others to a mother-daughter wound. Then there were those who said it was a result of sexual and violent trauma. But I was tired of the labels and labeling process. Tired of looking for more answers to explain why this part of myself just didn't function with less drama.

Deep down, I just wanted to regain my sense of inner peace. With that, I could figure a way out. Karate training had helped me to build that kind of inner peace but four months had passed since I had had a proper class. The boxing gym where we had been building a new momentum in training had suddenly closed, and we hadn't been able to find an alternative training space that my teacher liked.

As a result, I had drifted further into judo and BJJ. But no matter how hard I trained there, I couldn't find this feeling of inner calm on the mats. There, my learning experience was quite different. The throwing and grappling arts helped me to build confidence and self-belief. I could literally feel and work with my strength and power in relation to other people, as they are full body combat sports. But my experience of karate had been very different.

The fight in judo and BJJ was always with my opponent while the fight in karate had always been with myself. This was a big reason why I didn't feel called to compete in karate. I just couldn't make the association of translating my karate practice to an engagement with another person. That I had mostly been the only student in my class for years had only reinforced this relationship between myself and the art.

Karate had taught me to endure pain, and find a way out of suffering by staying present and working my way through it. This was why I had kept going back. No matter what was going on in my life, my classes had been a bedrock. In many ways, they were a lifeline and my teacher had repeatedly thrown me a rope to catch hold of, when life turned me upside down. Using many mental performance training tricks, he had helped me to find steady ground.

I found myself remembering the hundreds of hours of kata training with my Sensei over the past few years. One particular kata, *Sochin*, stood out. It is built around a fairly deep stance that is quite difficult to maintain correctly with the explosiveness and fast-slow rhythm of the

kata. Training in this stance had been hell for me. Despite having a strong and flexible lower body, I struggled with the flexibility of my back to twist and keep my upper body upright.

Class after class, for years on end, my Sensei had brought *Sochin* training into the class. Motivated by difficulty and determined to master what didn't come easily, I had been a willing and committed student. He had trained my body with resistance bands, hand weights and footwork drills to build up my strength, speed and agility. In many classes, I had practiced only two movements from the kata. The stance and a subsequent punch.

Never once did I feel bored or want to quit. The challenge was great but there was always a possibility of me getting it right one day. I could see myself performing the kata correctly with *ki* in my mind's eye, and that vision kept me going. The challenge appeared very physical but really, it was a battle inside my own mind. At times, the victim in me cried and complained. Other times, my inner bully got angry and turned on me. But I refused to be defeated by either.

Interestingly, the meaning of this kata's name in Japanese is "Tranquil Force" or "Preserve the Peace", which was exactly the quality I sought in my dojo training. But I didn't practice it because of that. At the time, I hadn't actually felt called to look up the meaning of its name. Rather, I had practiced it because that was what my Sensei had decided, and I had always trusted his judgment.

Astutely, Sensei had told me that this was the kata for me. It was typically practiced at fourth dan level in our system, the level at which I saw my older, wiser self, and it turned out to be the one that my mind needed. As it had taught me, in the midst of suffering and pain, a clear mind is vital. When confusion sets in, emotions can go haywire and that is when moods like depression can hit.

They can catch us unaware, in a moment of overwhelm and exhaustion. Without pausing to question if they are really true, we can easily be led off course by the stories of the mind. That was exactly what was happening to me right now and for all my knowledge of the process, I just couldn't shake the depressive mood off. It wasn't as simple as putting on my karate suit and performing *Sochin* this time. I actually needed to create a new behaviour.

Lee and I had often spoken about the parallels between endurance-based martial arts training and his experience of ultra-endurance sports events. When I asked him how an athlete copes with fear and other difficult emotions, he had told me of the emotional difficulties a runner can encounter on an endurance-based trail. Although he was talking about one hundred kilometer runs in the desert, he was also referring to life.

At a certain point on the trail, after passing through many moments of pain, the long-distance runner can reach a point of suffering and despair. Out there on the road, alone and in the dark, they realise that suffering is just another station on the trail. Those who continue learn the lesson and move on. Lee likened this state to his past experience in British Navy submarines.

**"When the sub goes down, Claire,"** he told me during one of our weekly calls, **"it passes**



**through a phase of turbulence. But as it drops deeper towards the seabed, it becomes very still and calm. It can also be quite dark but our vision adjusts in time.”**

He likened this example to the turbulent emotions that we can pass through in life, both on and off the trail, and in and out of the dojo. When we realise that suffering is just a phase, then we can release and move through it. When we mistake it for the destination, we don't reach the seabed and we don't experience the kind of inner calm that comes with daring to drop deeper into the experience of life.

Without either of us consciously striving for it, my weekly chats with Lee were helping me to make sense of my life. Long gone was the drive to drop a few kilos so I could make a lighter weight class to compete in judo. Instead, I was being called to drop deeper into myself. I wanted to know if there was anything beyond my romantic suffering, and who I could possibly be on the other side.

As I picked up the pieces of my broken heart, I dared to let my soulmate come closer again. I loved him with a knowing in my bones and a feeling that this was different. I didn't quite know how yet but deep down, I trusted the pull.

Another story was unfolding for me too, and that was the physical pain left over from my judo injury. Stubbornly, I had refused to seek medical help the day after. It was a Friday, a day off in the UAE. It was Ramadan. I was tired. I kept telling myself that rest would heal on its own. But all those thoughts weren't getting me anywhere.

Instead, I was struggling to sleep most nights. I couldn't sleep on my broken side and lying on my healthy shoulder only seemed to increase the pain on the other side. If I lay on my tummy, I felt like I was being suffocated so that had left my back. But lying flat on my back meant that my injured shoulder would externally rotate in the night, and I would be woken by searing pain shooting through my right side.

At first, I just put myself back to sleep. But over the coming weeks and months, my mind was being challenged in other ways. Contrary to what I had expected, the new house was not at all peaceful. Just after I had moved in, building works had started in the houses on either side, which were both empty of tenants and now being renovated. Being a row of townhouses, that meant I was now living with banging on both sides.

As a freelancer, I worked mostly from home, and the banging and drilling meant my ability to work was interrupted. No longer could I hold Skype session with long-distance clients during the day. That meant I had to work at night, after seven o'clock, when the banging was over, and that coincided with in-person time slots at the Business Centre where I was based, where I saw my Dubai-based clients on their way home from work.

I also couldn't work on strategic planning or content creation during the day, and this was driving me to work from cafes. While that was a pleasant escape for a while, long-term it was driving me to feel out of place. Not only had I moved homes but I had also lost my office and my new office hours were all over the place. I was also further from the academy where I

practiced judo and BJJ, and round trips there several times a week were taking the better side of five hours each time, as I needed to wait in between classes to cut down on driving time.

All of this hit just as a revised version of my *Intelligence Mapping* system was unfolding. This had been the gift of the previous year and writing *Wild Zen*, and prior to the summer, I had been making positive progress on the work front. The summer had expectedly fallen quiet and I had planned this time for further content creation.

My soulmate, who was also my intellectual partner in work, had played an important part over the summer in challenging me to develop it. We had had many weeks or rich discussions where he had challenged me to think differently about it, and build on my initial understanding of how it worked. As a result, I was feeling inspired to take the system to another level, and create new educational frameworks around how it worked.

Interestingly, my client base had naturally shifted during this time and now, for the first time since starting my coaching practice, almost all of my individual clients were from the corporate sector. With work slowing down on their front too, they had more time to seek out a coach. As a result, my coaching style was being challenged to grow and change, and this was putting more pressure on me but in a positive way.

Compared to my non-profit and government clients, the new wave of corporate clients needed more soft skills. While they certainly had their own challenges to get through on the personal and professional fronts, they weren't dealing with the reality of understanding themselves and their work after war, trauma, and global politics, as my humanitarian and government clients were. Their political battles were more in the boardroom, and it was there that they needed my *Intelligence Mapping* work.

It was an exciting time professionally. I began to see new ways of applying my knowledge and work as I realized that my coaching skills and insights were needed and valuable elsewhere. The range of personalities on the corporate front was also quite different, with quite a few also being sporty in their free time. Some were boxers while others were into the gym, and I found myself coaching them on their fighting spirit and building healthier lifestyles.

They were also more emotionally stable and while not perfect, they just hadn't had their lives repeatedly uprooted by war. There were also more complex characters like narcissists that prompted me to call on my self-defense background. While we can all have traits of narcissism in us, it is quite different from being a full-blown narcissist with no empathy or remorse. Such people can be coached to more narcissistic heights and my ability to spot and sidestep those characters was helpful.

I understood the humanitarian and government worlds because of my past work but opening up to the corporate scene was a very different kind of learning curve. I wanted to empower my clients but I wasn't interested in furthering character traits that could cause damage to others. For the first time, I had to exercise more judgment in who I chose to work with and why. That's not to say humanitarian and government clients couldn't have unethical traits, for

they most certainly could. It's just that I could spot them much quicker.

My old world was being washed away and it was a mixture of both good and bad. I longed to focus on the good but the lack of sleep and physical pain was wearing me out. Mentally and emotionally I was becoming more fragile and my answer had been to train harder. But hard training wasn't to be the way out. This time, I needed to find a more gentle way.

Although I had picked myself up swiftly after the descent of depression, eventually, I broke down physically from the pain of the injury. When a friend who had once been my very first coaching client suggested hands-on-healing, I decided I had nothing more to lose. I didn't believe it could help but apparently mental resistance wasn't an impediment. I had also met the healer she had in mind at a networking event and felt comfortable around her. She was also a licensed healer, which was practically unknown in Dubai at the time, and that made it easier for me to take the plunge. If someone in the government trusted her work enough to endorse it, so would I.

Lying down on her healing bed, which reminded me of a dentist's chair, I felt defeated. I had so many creative ideas for my coaching work but my poor energy levels were making it harder to work. My judo progress was being held back as I could only throw with one shoulder now, my less dominant side. That was making me hesitate and hold back in class. For the first time, I was avoiding situations where I could be thrown as well as opportunities to throw others, just in case it hurt my injured shoulder.

I was also finding it harder to keep up with BJJ classes because of the pain. That was a blow to my ego and beginner's confidence as until then, I had had the strength and power to grapple on the floor with the larger men. Now, I could barely push back. Not only that but I was struggling to leverage myself to escape as I couldn't roll onto or push myself up from my right side because of the pain. That left fewer options. I was also afraid of re-injury and like judo, also holding myself back.

With my work and training in flux, and my love life slowly recovering from what felt like a hit, I wasn't in the best of places when I lay down on the bed. When she laid her hands on my head, I was half-hoping for a miracle. Perhaps a jolt of lightening would shoot through me and magically, everything would fall into place. But instead, I felt nothing. It wasn't even relaxing as there was no soothing music in the background and all I could hear was the sound of my own thoughts.

Half an hour later, I walked out of her office in a dehydrated daze. For the first time in months, I was almost pain free. Instead of going to the beach, I carefully drove myself home. My energy levels had suddenly crashed and I needed to lie down.

**"You may have mood swings for a few days,"** she had warned me, explaining that this was a normal side effect of being healed. **"But please don't worry, it's just your system working itself out. It's part of the energetic healing process."**

The next morning, I woke up feeling paranoid. My mind had returned to perceived obstacle

number one in my path, the man I loved. I began to doubt his sincerity. Before the mood could spiral out of control, I texted him to warn him that I had just received a healing session and was now feeling a bit off centre.

For a few days, I managed to lie low. I was battling an acute lack of trust and didn't feel safe, which led me to blow up on the one person I loved. Our connection was perfect, *too* perfect, and I accused him of not being the man he said he was. Instead of trusting that this was how soulmates can arrive, I accused him of being a spy.

Old memories from my past humanitarian work in prisons had emerged out of nowhere. While I had felt so connected to this work, I had also felt watched. It wasn't surprising, as I was spending long periods of time in private with men who were considered terrorists. Some of them included political leaders and names mentioned in the news. This wasn't the typical line of work for a woman in her twenties, especially not one who had been raised in Dubai. But it made perfect sense to me and I felt completely at home.

Contrary to what people may think, I never asked about their cases and they never talked about them either. We never stepped into the sensitive domain of politics or security. My role was to be neutral and offer humanitarian support, and I had always done that with integrity, but my uncanny ability to get close to them and get them to drop their guard around me had been noticed by the interrogation teams. That, along with my fluency in Arabic, had raised a few questions.

In their eyes, my instinct to empathize with the underdog could put me at risk of manipulation and, looking back, I don't blame them for reaching this conclusion. I was young and passionate about fighting torture and injustice, and it would be a few more years until I started working with prison administrations and learning about security from the other side. There was naturally the suspicion that young and female advocates of justice like myself could be vulnerable to being used, and that meant we needed to be watched more closely.

But while I was passionate and empathic, I was also stubbornly independent. Nobody could rule or influence my mind, and nobody knew how many control measures I had put in place there as a young child growing up. It had led to a stubborn character, which served a purpose at the time. Without other tools, it was my only way to stay safe.

At home, my then-husband also didn't trust me. He thought that on mission, away from him for long stretches at time, I would be unfaithful. I never was but that hadn't made a difference. My integrity was still questioned at times and that had led to a pattern of "confession" in a bid to prevent any tension or violence from happening. Mistrust was all around me and the worst thing was that I felt I couldn't trust myself.

Along with the Spanish inquisitions in my marriage, those years had left me feeling like I had to put iron bars on my own mind. I felt like I was so porous that anybody could invade it with force, and I had built my mental walls high with metal steel rods so they couldn't get in. That had been an asset in some situations, and it certainly helped me weather many storms, but in love it was wreaking havoc.

Unable to control the storm passing through me, I exploded on my soul mate. He knew too much about me and could follow too rapidly my thoughts. There had been a beautiful synchronicity in us coming together but his personal situation and my paranoia collided, turning it into something else.

After all my failed attempts at love, it was only natural that I would tend towards self-sabotage. When I realised how I had been hijacked by fear, the healing process could begin. I knew I was starting to change for the better but in order to get better it had to get worse. Hands-on-healing had achieved what I couldn't manage any other way.

**“That sounds about right,”** Lee told me, taking me by surprise.

Lee was the last person I expected to validate my experience and insight. I had expected him to tell me to pull myself together and stop barking up the wrong tree. But he didn't negate my rather unusual experience. Instead, he had found my reaction perfectly normal and quite healthy.

It turned out that his father had been a Tai Chi teacher, Reiki healing master, and Feng Shui practitioner. Lee had grown up in a world that understood yin and yang, and the power of positive and negative energy, and had naturally picked up a thing or two from his rather unusual dad. Because of that, I had the perfect witness on hand when I needed to drop this old story and move on.

**“You’ve been carrying so much for so long, Claire,”** he said quite frankly. **“The emotions had to come out somewhere.”**

Negativity had to release itself somewhere and if my mind was too stubborn, perhaps my body was the only way. Lee explained in his usual scientific way that the emotions behind my difficult experiences had probably been collecting in my body. Because I was resistant to feeling weak, my injured shoulder, which was already vulnerable, may have amplified those uncomfortable feelings.

I may have been downloading the details of my life and work challenges, particularly in writing, but I had never felt the full enormity of what had happened in my own somewhat unusual life. It just didn't feel safe to go there. What would I do if I did, and that broke me completely? How could I keep working? How would I pay the bills?

Then there was my pragmatic side. What a bloody waste of time it would be to *feel* everything. I'd cried enough in the past and done a decade of yoga and therapeutic work, and that hadn't resolved much. It had alleviated plenty of pain and reduced my suffering but it had never gotten to the root of the cause of why I felt so unsafe and anxious a lot of the time. So I had chosen to fight the anxiety and kick it to the curb each day.

**“Why don't you take a couple of months off, and figure out where you want to live?”** a medical intuitive asked me, during a reading I had booked on home.

Until then, she had been quite uncanny in her ability to pick up on some niggling health issues but when she suggested taking time off, I balked. How can anyone afford to do that when nobody has their back? It wasn't that I didn't long for such an idyllic way to rearrange my life, it's that I just couldn't deal with that amount of unknown. To not work for two months and to find the money to travel and feel my way into a new place to live, well that was absolutely ludicrous.

This tug of war between my pragmatic side, which pooah paahed anything remotely fluffy, and a wiser part of me that had once come to life on the yoga path, now struck me as interesting. It wasn't the first time I had heard this lesson of painful memories being released energetically from the body. In my yoga teaching years, when I had been passionate about the study of stress and trauma, I would tell my students how difficult memories could get lodged energetically in our connective tissue. Yin Yoga had been one style of yoga that could help alleviate this and it was a style I loved to practice and teach.

**“You may more difficult emotions in some poses,”** I would instruct my students, repeating what my teachers had once told me. **“Stay with them, breathe through them, and let them go.”**

I may have taught this theory for several years, and believed it intellectually, but I had never had a genuine experience of it happening to me. While I had sweated and stretched my pain and suffering out, I had never actually had a real-life experience of feeling negative emotions leave my body. That was what the hands-on-healing did, and it was nothing short of an exorcism of the past.

Sharing all of this with my soulmate in the wake of my explosion wasn't as complicated as I expected. I had feared negative judgment and total abandonment, but instead he remained. He understood just how difficult it was for me to trust, not only at the level of the heart but also the mind. We both knew learning to trust was a process that required time. Now, thanks to the healing session, I was one step closer to freeing my own mind.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 15

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“A leader’s strategy should be as fluid as water: flexible rather than fixed and unchanging. His army should move freely and skillfully and adapt to the enemy’s situation. The person who can gain victory in this manner is truly superb in military strategy and timing.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 15 | **Strategy**

Funakoshi is teaching us the concept of non-attachment. If we have put in prior effort to acquiring skills and developing our strengths, we will be more flexible and nimble in our responses. We will move more fluidly through situations of strategic and tactical engagement, without getting attached to fixed plans but rather, adapting to opportunities as they arise.

In my martial arts life, I was being given a powerful lesson in the need for recovery as a strategic response. While my mind wanted to fight harder, my body needed to rest. Without rest and recovery, I wasn’t able to think straight. Without clear thinking, my emotional state spiraled downwards. By taking time to rest, I was able to adapt my strategy and move on.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which parts of your life or work are inviting you to be strategic?*

*What could be the obvious and counter-intuitive responses to that?*

# MY DOJO KUN

## COMPETITION

*I don't fear challenge or confrontation,  
I value my focus, effort and hard work, inner and outer.*



# WINTER

STORAGE

# LONGEVITY

## *The Way of Self-Care*

### The Healer

*“Wars and social conflicts are symptoms of an imbalanced society, diseases caused by an unhealthy social order. By following the principles of Tao, we can create a healthier, more peaceful life for ourselves and for the world.”*

**Diane Dreher, The Tao of Inner Peace**

## *The polarity of hope and fear.*

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*“Calamity springs from carelessness.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 7)

~

**W**ith the arrival of Winter came the need for rest.

Closing my books and accounts for the year, I turned away from my coaching practice and clients for the Christmas break. All of the trials and tests of the past two years, and the many that came before me, were shelved while I turned inwards to tend to myself.

I had started studying Positive Psychology a month earlier and the question, *Are you flourishing*, had thrown me off centre. As a coach, I knew the answer only too well but I couldn't for the life of me explain why.

How could I not be flourishing in Dubai, when I had everything I needed right on my doorstep? I lived in a nice home in a safe part of town. The building works had stopped either side of me and I was now getting rest. I ran my own business, which meant I owned my time and could control my days. That meant I had time for fitness and martial arts training.

My clients were pleasant and making progress, and some were really inspiring me to reflect deeper on my own need to develop as a coach. I was looking for a professional development course at the exact time Reece was starting his first intake of Positive Psychology students for a diploma-level course, and it had seemed like a perfect fit.

By now, my sports nutrition coaching with Lee, and writing coaching sessions with Diane, had come to a natural close. Lee was preparing for the Winter ultra-endurance runs and Diane had graduated as a Positive Psychology coach. And I had moved into the final stage of editing and re-writing parts of my book.

It had been such a long and arduous journey, and the Positive Psychology had arrived right on time. A question from the healer as I left her office had been circling around my mind, and it was looking for completion.

**“Do you think positive thoughts, Claire”** she had asked, as I thanked her for the session.

The question had stopped me in my tracks. I wanted to say yes, of course, but I couldn't feel the truth of that in my heart. I certainly made a sincere effort in life and was fueled by hope. I had many moments of optimism and believing that things would work out, but did I actually think positive thoughts?

**"I'm not sure,"** I responded.

A few weeks had passed but the topic was still fresh on my mind. Why didn't I think more positive thoughts? What kind of vicious loop had my mind gotten into?

When training as a coach several years earlier, I had studied negativity. My coach trainer, Cherie Carter-Scott, who was well known in the coaching and publishing worlds, had coined a term "negaholics" based on her PhD work on negativity. She had found that negativity can spiral and feed many addictive traits.

Beginning with the thoughts and feelings, the negative cycle was locked into what she called a "triple imprint" through a physiological response. To break that cycle, a person would need to take action to change at the level of thoughts, feelings and the body.

For years, I had been teaching this point to clients in both individual sessions and group workshops. It had always sparked much interest as who hasn't passed through a negative phase of their own? I knew I most certainly had and I spoke from a genuine place, sharing that I understood how hard it was to move beyond a negative state.

Karate had been my way of processing negativity. It had given me a place to switch off from my world and enter the safe sanctuary of the dojo. Although I still worried about small things like if my bag would be stolen, for the most part I was able to be present and focus. It provided a much-needed anchor during some of the more difficult times of my life.

But classes had ground to a halt with the loss of training space, and I hadn't been able to recreate the same experience for myself on my own. Instead, I had turned to judo and fitness to find some kind of inner peace. Both had offered a welcome escape but I just couldn't find that same feeling of inner peace that karate had created in me.

As I mulled over the topic of flourishing for my first assignment, I came across the theory of wellbeing, developed by Dr Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology. He had developed this theory after looking at happiness for a number of years, splitting it first into hedonistic happiness, or the pursuit of pleasure, and eudemonic happiness, or the pursuit of meaning and purpose. This had evolved into what he termed the five pillars of wellbeing.

The theory is summarized in an acronym, PERMA, which stands for Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. Running my finger down the list, I was struck by how little I was experiencing of each in my everyday life. When had I lost my way? *When had life become so hard?*

The pillar that stood out the most was meaning. As a humanitarian, meaning had been a central theme in my life. Through it, I had engaged with other people and together, we had achieved certain goals. Because of that process, I had often felt good. But all that had changed when I returned to Dubai. Back in my childhood home, new stressors had arrived and I had struggled to stay connected to humanitarian work.

On mission I lived out of a suitcase. Life was simple. I worked hard, believed in what I did, and was paid at the end of the month. The amount was never of much concern to me. It paid my rent and bills, and allowed for further expenses like travel, study, and savings. I felt safe financially and that was enough. I also felt safe in my temporary homes.

There were many positive things about humanitarian work that went far beyond my drive to make a difference to the lives of others. But over time, the price had escalated. The longer I spent away from the “real” world, the less in touch I became with everyday life in non-conflict areas. By the time I returned to Dubai, I had all but forgotten the stresses and strains of modern life and, if I’m to be truthful, I had probably never known them at all.

I had taken up humanitarian work directly after university and professionally, that way of life with its thought patterns and emotional tendencies had been my way of life. My yoga practice and teaching had fitted so neatly into this isolated and self-contained world. It offered an essential stress buffer and helped me and my students to cope with the tension of war.

But back in Dubai, my yoga connection had made less and less sense, and karate had taken over. Looking back on my younger self, I see a restless woman of thirty-three, only two years divorced with a head full of dreams. She was leaving her last mission to Gaza to come home and live a ‘normal’ life. The fact she had no idea what that meant anymore was irrelevant as she had blind faith she would figure it out.

Conflict had broken out just hours before I was due to leave. I had spent nine months preparing emotionally for my return to Dubai, working with a mindfulness coach, and now, my state of mind was being put to the test. When the drivers called to tell me I had to leave now, or I couldn’t leave at all for a few days, I had no choice but to drop everything, say a few quick goodbyes, and make a dash with one of them to the border.

By the time I had crossed through Israel and Jordan, and landed in Dubai, eleven members of a colleague’s family had been killed. They included five children and I woke up the next day to see a photo of them squashed onto a morgue bed, on the front page of the Gulf News. Sitting at the breakfast table, still tired from the past few days of travel, I almost choked on my coffee when I read the family name.

The conflict erupted into one of Gaza’s worst wars, destroying many areas I had once visited as a humanitarian. It had weighed heavily on my mind as I tried to adjust to life in Dubai. The guilt of having left and having said I needed time for myself was hard to shake off.

I had sworn I would stay away from humanitarian work for at least a year while I re-settled. My dream had been to start a restorative health and fitness coaching practice in Dubai, and

then establish a non-profit project for creating related ‘breathing spaces’ in war zones. I had spent months before my departure going through my plans, setting my savings aside.

This dream had evolved out of years of inner enquiry and study. After my divorce, I had participated in further yoga teacher trainings, studied yoga therapy, trained as a health coach, and attended an introductory course on dance movement therapy at a university in the UK. I had worked very hard to collect and practice the skills I would need in this practice and, leaving Gaza, it all seemed to make sense.

But the war prompted a feeling of survivor’s guilt. Just as I was working my way through that, a period of financial difficulty passed through the family, and that meant I had to return to stable work sooner than expected. Now was not the time to take a leap of faith and set up a coaching practice, so I had put the dream on hold and done the only thing I knew how to do. I returned to humanitarian work.

The struggle of trying to adjust to a new job market was too much to even contemplate so I simply ignored it. Instead, I worked with a regional office of the United Nations based in the capital. There, I saved once more for my business and when I had the opportunity to leave and set that up, I had a better idea of how to do it.

Moving to Thailand for a few months, I had trained with Cherie Carter-Scott and her team. I had had dreams of chilling out and relaxing, and putting aid work behind me. But within a couple of weeks of my arrival, war in Gaza had broken out once more. Daily, my social media feeds were filled with stories of horror from old friends. By the end of the war, eleven colleagues had been killed. I hadn’t known them personally but the tragedy still affected me.

It seemed that no matter where I turned, war was all around me. Even my very first attempt to set up my business, teaching yoga and martial arts, had come with a personal war. I had laid the foundation during my marriage and taken my first steps just before it ended. With my new business cards still fresh in my hands from the printers, and a string of people waiting for me to take them on, a sudden divorce and geographical move had smashed that plan to pieces.

This time, I was determined not to let war stop me. I had pushed my way forwards, beyond the memory of war and violence, to follow my dream. I had poured half of my savings into professional coach training. Setting up my freelance coaching business as a legal entity in the UAE had also been an expensive move. In some countries the process is quite straightforward, at least if it is your home country. When living overseas, there is so much more to consider, like the visa process, and everything related to that. There were also trade licensing fees, office rental fees, and establishment cards, it made my head spin.

Too much red tape can strangle a person when they’re offering a creative or heart-driven process. Over the years, I had done my best to balance the administrative demands with the needs of my coaching clients. But the conservative and ethical line I towed in my practice made it very hard to make ends meet. That had only become more difficult over the years and the strain of financial instability and uncertainty had taken its toll. I believed in and trusted my coaching skills, and I was proud of what I had created, but there was only so much

financial hardship I could take.

Now, looking back on the path I had walked, I was able to recognize just how difficult it had been. I see how obvious it was that a character like mine would choose to fight. As the noose around my neck got tighter, I chose to train harder. Many times I longed for a hand to hold or someone to tell me it would be okay but that hand never came and the reassuring words were never spoken. At least not in a way that I could feel or hear.

With the arrival of Winter, and the last season of living and writing this book, I understood just how challenging the environments around me had made my experiences in life, love, and work. I had spent over three decades of my life as an expatriate in the Middle East. My identity was caught between the British and Arab worlds, and it had been a complex maze to find myself out of. The self-defense training had brought some degree of peace there but still, there was more peace to find when realizing that it was time to leave Dubai.

With the colder months being the favourite time of year in the Gulf States, I headed to the beach each morning. Swimming in the cold sea was a wonderful way to reduce the feeling of fatigue in my body from judo and BJJ training. It also lifted my spirits and reconnected me with nature. There, I reflected on where I could more easily flourish and how I could bring more life back into my five pillars of wellbeing.

There was a limit to how much stress I could take. It had eaten away at my need for meaning in life. From there, I had felt less engaged with the environment around me. Beyond martial arts, very little of the Dubai lifestyle appealed to me. It was very different to the city in which I had been raised and I just couldn't relate to how it had moved forwards. I understood politically and economically why this was necessary but it just didn't reflect any dimension of who I really was.

While I had certainly enjoyed several achievements in recent years, like setting up my business, successfully coaching clients, passing my second dan, taking up judo and BJJ, and training as a self-defense instructor, they hadn't felt as meaningful as I felt they should have. It's not that I didn't value them, it's that I had nobody with whom I wanted to share them. My family lived far away, my partners and friends couldn't relate to my business or martial arts path, as they had experienced neither. So I had let those achievements pass without any real celebration.

The absence of loving relationships was perhaps the source of much of my pain. After my divorce and later leaving Gaza, I had expected this part of my life to work out. But I hadn't anticipated just how complicated finding the right partner can be. Because I had been so unhappy in my marriage, I was determined not to make the same mistakes twice. Never again did I find myself with an angry or controlling man. I had found nice men to be with but there had never really been the right kind of spark.

Now, with my soulmate in the background, it had all started to make sense. For the first time perhaps in my life, I felt truly connected to someone else. With him, I could be *all* of myself. He understood my past and present, and where I wanted to go. We shared values and liked the

same things. Being English, he even got small but sentimental things from my past, like watching *Carry On* films.

Like me, he could quote so many lines from these comedies. Those shared reference points and values, and our ability to just get each other, felt like nothing I had ever known. It was like I had been searching for this man my entire life and now, here he was. Not to complete me, but to walk alongside me. The only real challenge we had was geography, for he lived in England and I lived in Dubai.

As I settled into the possibility that we could build a relationship one day, I knew I had to make some big changes. I couldn't control whether that relationship would work out but I control other areas of my life. By now, I had realized that there was actually nothing tying me to Dubai other than the family desert dog.

Watching him snooze in the Winter sunshine one morning, I dared to ask the question that put me the most on edge. At fourteen, he was old but strong. I estimated that he could live another year or two, but could *I* make it that long? Could I manage another year or two of living in Dubai? How many more personal sacrifices would I need to make to carry out the last family duty? How much longer would I need to fight?

I wasn't in my ideal environment and I hadn't been for a number of years. That wasn't anyone's fault but mine. I had volunteered to return to Dubai and take care of the family dogs, when my parents left to retire. My sister was meant to join me but her life had taken her in another direction. That had left me alone and year-by-year, my optimistic outlook had been tested. I thought that if I just tried hard enough, I could make it work out. But instead, I had only been worn down.

It wasn't in my nature to be so negative, and so the outcome of the energy healing the month before had taken me by surprise. And yet I couldn't remember myself ever being that positive either. When Reece asked me in one of our study sessions whether I was driven by hope or fear, I could only say I thought it was a combination of both.

**"That's perfectly normal,"** he had responded. **"Hope and fear are polar opposites. By nature of feeling one, you will inevitably feel the other."**

He had spent the past year researching hope and fear, and had developed a polarity model which he shared with me. It looked like a big X to illustrate the relationship between hope positive and fear negative, and fear positive and hope negative.

**"Think about it, Claire,"** he continued. **"The moment you hope something will work out is the moment you fear it might not. When you fear something will happen you automatically hope that it will not."**

Mulling over his words during my early morning beach swims, I realized that I had been caught in the trap of hope and fear. At times, too much hope had turned into delusion. In thinking I had the emotional strength to live alone in a lonely expat city like Dubai *and* run a



business on my own, I had bitten off more than I could chew.

I certainly had the mental, physical, and spiritual strength to do this, but the emotional stress of handling so much alone had escalated. The support I found in people like Diane, Mike, Lee and Reece had been a godsend. So too had my karate and judo teachers and classes. They had all provided precious guidance and wisdom, but I couldn't keep turning to others for my emotional strength. I needed to figure out how I could forge that kind of strength for myself.

It was then that I turned to the other teachings of Funakoshi. His *Twenty Guiding Principles* were just a part of the bigger "Way". While today we tend to speak of just karate, to Funakoshi it was always karate-*do*. The *do* part, more commonly referred to by its Chinese translation of *Tao*, was the *Way*, and the *Way* of karate looked very different from just karate on its own.

It was exactly the same with inner strength. We could come up with qualities of inner strength but it was so hard to translate to somebody what inner strength actually meant. They actually needed experiences to test them so they could apply the lessons and figure out what worked. *For them.*

To Funakoshi, it was all so clear. Karate was his way of life and from there, his wisdom flowed. His style of karate practice was strongly rooted in self-defense and philosophy. While I had always felt I was graded based on my technical ability, I realized that my second dan grading had not only been about that.

There was a vast difference between my first and second karate black belt tests. In the first, my Iranian Sensei was looking for my ability to endure. Could I endure the uncertainty of not knowing when my test would be that month? Was I willing and able to show up to every class? Was I willing to *endure* the relative hardship he had put in my way?

My second dan grading with the visiting Japanese Sensei had been very different. At my level, it was a given that I should be able to endure. What he seemed to notice was how I composed myself. Did I present myself with the right degree of humility? Was I present and focused on the task at hand? Could I handle the pressure of being the first person to test? Could I maintain my composure throughout the surprises he dotted throughout my test?

Neither of these teachers knew the details of my personal life but with years of practice and teaching their art, like my Egyptian Sensei, they could read the stories people carried through how they moved and how they reacted to their words. They didn't need to know the details if they could see the shape and spirit of each student.

Searching for the video clip of my second dan grading, I was suddenly curious to see what the Japanese Sensei may have seen. Why had he chosen to pass me and not the other first dan grading after me? What had been the difference between us?

Watching the clip almost eighteen months later, I saw the readiness at which I stood up and approached the mat when he unexpectedly called my name. My back was straight and my eye

contact steady. I moved with ease but there wasn't any arrogance. I was quietly confident but most importantly, I was ready.

I saw a woman who was humble yet determined. Her body was sixteen years older. It was stronger but it was also less flexible. At twenty-two, when I passed my first dan, I could sink deeper into my stances but they had no power or *kime*. My knees still wobbled as I transitioned between stances but it was overlooked as my first examining teacher had expected that to be corrected in time.

It takes time and practice to correct small things like this. Karate practitioners are detail-driven. They look for clean lines and symmetry, and the ability to perform intricate movements with the correct mindset and timing. If a karate student has not properly managed their breathing, it will show immediately in their form. Their movements will disintegrate and soon after, their state of mind will follow.

The older woman, now thirty-seven, moved with more power but less grace. She was asked to perform the exact same kata, *bassai dai*, or breaking the fortress, that she had been asked to at twenty-two, but the shape and spirit of how she presented it was entirely different. She was certain of each movement and it was clear that she had put in many hours of training to get that far. Even I could see and acknowledge that, and remembering the sweat and tears I went through to achieve that brought more tears to my eyes.

It wasn't a perfect performance and the Japanese Sensei had a few comments for me after. One in particular stuck, which was speed. My timing and rhythm was sufficient to pass but I needed to slow down and feel my movements more. That was the precise metaphor I needed in my life too. I needed to slow down and *feel* what was happening. It wasn't enough to only live in my head.

Watching the younger first dan take the mat after me, I winced as I watched her exam. Her body was large and out of shape. There was no solid muscle or power behind her movements and that meant she had not spent enough hours in training. She understood the shape of the kata but she had not yet allowed the kata to shape her, and that was the core difference between us. That was why I had passed and she had not. She wasn't ready and the Japanese Sensei didn't hesitate to tell her that after.

Following the way of karate is a process that not only shapes the body but also the mind. I was by no means there but twenty-seven years after I first set foot in a karate dojo, I understood just how far I had come.

Nobody had asked me to take up karate. It had all been of my own choosing. As a child I had only felt called to show up and go through the motions. I wasn't really sure why I was there. As a teenager and young woman I went out of habit, as a discipline had been formed. By the time I returned in my adult years, I was looking for a refuge from war. That refuge had led me to my second dan but it had still left me with further to go.

I brought my older, wiser self to mind. She was still kneeling there in the dojo and I felt a

little impatient for her. So much time had passed to catch just a few drops of the wisdom she carried. I felt a sense of urgency in her energy, advising me to keep going and to not waste time.

**“There will be many distractions on your path,”** she said, speaking directly. **“You will need to cut through them to find your way home.”**

Her lesson was one of timing, and now the time had come. After years of battling it out, the fight was coming to an end. With my decision to leave Dubai and return to the UK firm in my mind, I understood that a new phase of my life was about to begin. To be ready, I needed to tie up as many loose ends as I could from this phase in order to leave the past behind.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 16

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Ninety-nine percent of traffic accidents are due to carelessness. At work, a bit of sloppiness can undo exhaustive research and preparation, resulting in inconsistencies or an inability to obtain anticipated results. The same is true in war... Careless preparation, or outright negligence, is a clear formula for disaster.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 16 | **Contemplation**

Funakoshi is reminding us once more to pay attention to our affairs, specifically how we do things. Even if we start a venture with the right attitude, if we get distracted or stop caring for that venture, it can result in failure. Through proper planning and follow through, and attention to detail, we will stand a better chance of succeeding.

In my own life, this lesson was showing up in reverse. Through pausing to digest some of the lessons from my *inner dojo*, I was in a stronger place to contemplate what I could extract and learn. I didn't want to keep making the same mistakes with different details, and while I understood that changing my nature was hard, I vowed to be more conscious on my path.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*How do you revive your energy and attention during difficult times?*

*Which lessons in your life or work do you feel called to resolve?*

## *A warrior makes herself known over time.*

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*“Karate is a lifelong pursuit.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 9)

~

**D**uring my Winter of rest, I travelled to the UK for a Christmas vacation.

The family home was full of life and laughter. With my parents, my sister and her family in the house while their home was being renovated, the atmosphere was a complete one eighty from the one I had just left in Dubai.

Sleeping in a makeshift bed in the office, I settled into a holiday routine. Knowing how important fitness was for my emotional health, and how good it helped me to feel, I signed up at the local leisure centre.

Almost every day, I made my way there to swim or work out. The walk there and back was a beautiful one, cutting through a forest and fields on either side of the main road, and being so close to nature helped me release even more of my stress.

I knew my way around this part of the UK as I had lived here for a couple of years while studying for my A-levels. That had been a difficult time in my life and I remembered only too well the Methodist Church down the road where my karate classes were based. So much had changed since then but the church remained.

I also remembered the old bakery where I had found my first weekend job at seventeen. As a sales assistant, I was on the till selling cakes and biscuits to hungry customers who would flood the store at peak times. The other sales girls and myself had had so much fun, bumping into each other behind the counter, trying not to drop any cakes on the floor or any jaws when someone famous walked in for a bun.

By now, I had shared the news with my family that I was finally coming home. Both the family desert dog and I would be returning in less than six months, when the rental on the Dubai townhouse was up. After seeing how hard I had battled it out, and how tired I really

was, my family reached out with full support. My sister and her family would be moving out soon and my parents could offer a space for myself and the family dog while I found my feet.

I had also made other changes in my life. Gradually, over the past few weeks, I had dismantled my old way of working and shifted in a direction that reflected where I now was. While I enjoyed how I coached and facilitated, I realized I was leaving so much of myself and what I cared about out. For example, when coaching clients on performance, I held back on sharing any martial arts lessons. And when coaching clients through stressful times, I didn't share my knowledge on yoga, mindfulness, or meditation either, and it was frustrating to watch clients go in circles, fooling themselves.

This is a real issue with pure coaching strategies that don't involve teaching. In my experience, we can coach a client to a point of realization but after that, they need to actually put in the work. Many struggle to know how to do that, even with a carefully laid plan, and most struggle with just getting started. They don't know how to motivate themselves and I wanted to bring the science of motivation into my work, as well as many teaching points on how to perform under stress, and how to recover from long periods of stress.

Those reflections had led me to lay the groundwork for my future coaching practice, *Inner Athletics for Performance, Stress and Recovery*. With a focus on research first, and then coaching and consulting, this new way of working would create an ongoing academic space. Both Lee and Reece had been nudging me in that direction, while Diane and Mike had unwittingly made me see the positive aspects of specializing and forming a new niche.

By now, I was half way through my Positive Psychology diploma with Reece and had set my sights on continuing my studies by completing my Masters in Psychology, one of the many things that had fallen by the wayside when separation and divorce rocked my world. Back then, almost a decade earlier, I had been in the midst of a Psychology conversion degree, which would make me eligible for a Masters in Psychology of my choosing. It was in the days when I thought I wanted to train as a body psychotherapist or dance movement therapist, when yoga was still a very big part of my world.

I had moved on and therapy no longer seemed to make much sense to me. While I appreciated it, and felt it was essential for healing and growth, I had also seen how it kept people stuck. I had come to believe in acquiring and teaching real life skills, complimented by coaching techniques and an honest message congruent with therapy, that progress takes time and hard work, and that without ongoing effort, we will likely loop backwards during times of stress. How did I know this? Well, I was a living example of having pretty much done it all!

Studying with Reece and our many thought-provoking exchanges had prompted me to explore topics like motivation in more depth. Writing my reflective log and literature review on different kinds of motivation, my brain began to wake up. I began questioning how I could offer a better service to my clients. I knew that many were happy to continue with my old approach, which focused on communications, intelligence, and diplomacy, and offering an open and empathic space, but personally I felt I was evolving beyond those areas. In order to keep offering a good service, I needed to amend my approach to match who I was today.

Back in the UK, I also found time to train with Reece and his close quarter combat trainees in self-defense. Exactly a year had passed since my grading and my broken elbow had long since healed. Now I was happy to be back in the field, training outdoors and rolling around and putting to use some of my more newly acquired ground fighting skills. When I managed to get out from under one of the heavier men, I knew that I small corner in my own self-defense journey had turned.

I felt excited that living back in the UK, I would have access to more self-defense training sessions and different styles of martial arts. I would also have the option of continuing on my Shotokan karate path. I wasn't sure yet if I wanted to hang in for third dan. Even though I had seen my older, wiser self and sensed she was at fourth dan, she was also quite old. Perhaps in her seventies or early eighties. If sixteen years had passed between my first and second-degree black belts, perhaps a few more would pass between second and third.

One of the outcomes of training in *Cherry Blossom Dojo* was that I had taken a small step beyond my previously narrow karate world. I was a very different woman from the one who had thought that Shotokan karate was the only way. On the surface, it looked like I had abandoned karate altogether but in my heart, I was still figuring it out.

To be a better *karateka*, I had had to pass through a few ranks in judo. To be a better martial artist, I had then taken up self-defense. To be a better *judoka* and self-defense instructor, I had subsequently taken up BJJ. I had held back on pursuing MMA due to lack of time, energy, and money but my desire and motivation to learn more about martial arts was still strong.

I was also very aware of the fragility of life. With the arrival of the New Year, we lost a dear family friend. He had transitioned from his battle with cancer into another world and standing at his funeral a week later, I was reminded of just how short and precious life can be. Was it really about belt ranks, and did I really want to spend my life in pursuit of a third dan?

Perhaps if I had been younger, and if I had not taken such a long gap between my first and second dans, I may have thought differently. I hadn't consciously chosen this break from karate and I knew that for every month that passed, I would probably need another month of training to regain the level of speed and skill I once had. I didn't fool myself that my second dan level would last forever. Like my first, I would need to put in the effort to maintain it.

But if I had learned anything, it was that karate for me was now a way of life, but it wasn't *just* my life. What mattered more to me was how I put my karate skills and knowledge to use.

As a business owner, I wanted to develop a coaching practice with a clear teaching framework. The path I had followed in coaching, which was set by the International Coach Federation (ICF), had been very specific about clients finding their own answer. But the path I had originally trained in before that, health coaching, had allowed much more room for maneuver, as it had included educational tools, and recommended clients stick with their coaching journey for six months in order to acquire them. This was about the time needed for learning and real behavioural change.

Health coaching didn't promise wisdom or rapid routes to success. It was all about finding and maintaining balance. I had wandered away from it as it wasn't a recognized profession in the UAE, and not endorsed by the Ministry of Health. That meant I couldn't legally call myself a health coach, as I wasn't medically trained. But perhaps health was the wrong word, I found myself thinking. Perhaps it was just about lifestyle and helping clients manage their stress. In that regard, it was a much better fit than the style of coaching I had then trained in, which was more about untangling confusion and figuring things out.

I needed both approaches in my practice, along with positivity, motivation and behavioural science. Both Positive Psychology and Sport Psychology were backed up with evidence there, and I realised everything about the foundation of my work needed to change. Intellectually, I had struggled to find my tribe in a commercial hub like Dubai. There wasn't anything wrong with the city, it's that I couldn't develop professionally or personally as I wanted. These academic domains were better known in the UK and it was another reason to return.

By connecting the dots between coaching, psychology, and sport, I understood better as a professional how I wanted to do things differently. With nearly four years in the trenches, and following the spirit of ICF coaching as best as I could, it was well and truly time to change tracks. My earlier dreams in restorative health and fitness coaching still beckoned and while they had evolved over time, they were still going strong. Challenges had spun me off course but they hadn't completely sunk my little ship.

Through *Inner Athletics*, I designed my own training and coaching systems. The first system, training, was about mental performance skills. My clients, like myself, needed clear teaching points on how the mind worked. That meant understanding how the mind could be re-shaped with new experiences and different cues. As in the dojo, where our minds are continually shaped and re-shaped, I could create a parallel experience for my clients in their personal and professional development work.

The second system was based on pure coaching. It also had an education component but the process was much more fluid. In contrast to the *Zen*-like discipline of the training path, this one would be more of a reflective mirror of the *Tao*. Like myself, clients also needed to understand the harmony of nature and in particular, following one's true nature. I understood first-hand how complex that could be, and how multiple false selves could emerge. These very often got in the way of pursuing purpose-driven desires and dreams.

To compliment the training and coaching systems, I also developed a flexible and non-dogmatic framework for movement. Based on the sequential practice of sweating, stretching, stillness and surrender, it offered an energetic and non-verbal way to release negativity and difficult emotions. I had taught these principles as a yoga teacher and my understanding of them had evolved in the years since through my martial arts and fitness training.

My new business plan was beginning to take shape, and I fumbled a little for words as I introduced it to existing clients. I wasn't sure how to break the news of my leaving Dubai or that I would be heading in a new direction. Because my client base was global, there was the



possibility of them continuing with me. Many were supportive but a few fell away. Perhaps it was just their time to go, or perhaps the new approach hadn't spoken to their evolving needs. That was a concern I grappled with as it made me feel like I had let them down in some way, but eventually I accepted that I couldn't please everyone and so I laid to rest. I was changing the course of my life and work, and I couldn't expect everyone to stay on board.

Back in the UK, I also saw my soulmate. After months of connecting long-distance, we were now free to spend time together in person. Taking it slow, with coffees and teas here and there, we adjusted to the possibility of being closer.

I was grateful for these precious moments and while I wanted to move quicker, a deeper knowing inside me warned me to take it slow. Perhaps it was the Japanese Sensei's advice during my second dan grading, or maybe it was just the emergence of wisdom from having gotten love so wrong in the past. But I trusted it and trusted that our path and if we were really destined to be together would reveal itself in time.

So much of my life had been spent rushing in a bid to feel safe. That mentality had driven me to extend myself beyond my capacity far too many times. When crisis hit, as it inevitably did, I was all hands on deck. I had excelled at being a mastermind in such pressure cooker scenarios but I couldn't live my life as if it was one long emergency. At some point, I had to turn the alarm sirens off. I had to create the safety I needed for myself, instead of looking for it in the world around me.

Anyone with a history of violence and trauma who has engaged in a therapeutic process will understand just how long it can take to feel safe again. Love is a vital ingredient in this process and for those of us who aren't surrounded by it, or who don't notice its existence around us, we will need to dig deeper for emotional strength and reserves. Violence and trauma can shatter the experience of intimacy and especially, the ability to be intimate with ourselves.

Here, I am referring to the ways in which we speak to ourselves in our minds. Can we dare to pause and listen to what we are actually saying inside? I was very proactive with my thoughts but some of the deeper ones with negative neural pathways could run me in circles, keeping me stuck. They had become so familiar that I no longer noticed them playing out at the back of my mind, tingeing every positive action I took with a darker hue.

I had succeeded in achieving against all odds but did it really have to be that hard? And was fighting always the best way? Sometimes it is the only way to get through a tough time in our lives. Regardless of if we want to, there are times when we may need to step up and fight. But those moments should be few and far between and before engaging in any fight, we should stop to question if it is really worthwhile.

Those with warrior-like energy flowing through them like myself may relate to this lesson. My double Aries fire and ruling planet of Mars, the God of War, had perhaps put war in my path as a way to learn. Perhaps this is why I ended up so differently from my more Piscean and watery sisters, who have much more gentle natures. My own nature has been one of

struggle and strife and it was to be through the process of fighting that I eventually found my way.

Back at my parents' home, after the funeral, I headed to my makeshift room. Closing the door, I lay back on the bed with my hands resting on my belly. It was icy cold outdoors and my body felt frozen and tired, but the radiator next to me was offering some warmth. I switched on a guided meditation from a forty-day yoga nidra practice that had just begun, and settled into myself.

Over the next forty days, I showed up almost daily for this twenty minutes of rest. After fifteen days, the recording extended to thirty minutes and by day thirty, I was lying down for forty minutes of rest on most days. The journey had begun with relaxing the body but towards the end, the teacher had invited us to connect with our inner council of woman.

Out of nowhere, I heard a clanging of armour and clashing of swords of shields. Lying down in my imaginary safe cave, I was surrounded by women warriors of days gone by. Some were dressed like Vikings, others were wearing Chinese Kung Fu-like uniforms. It was quite unlike the solitary vision of my future, older self, kneeling alone in *zazen*, and their presence made me feel comforted and safe.

I started each meditation practice with the intention of being a woman at peace. I knew that stress and uncertainty would happen in life but I no longer wanted to be beholden to either. With the passing of each day, my inner council of women widened. By the fortieth day, not only did the women warriors show up but also the healers and teachers.

Their strong and reassuring presence helped me to tap more deeply into the warrior, healer and teacher within myself. I had spent my life being a seeker. That seeking had led me into battles, both within and beyond myself. From there, I had received the gifts of healing and now, I was keen to activate more often that healing energy of myself. With healing came the desire to take off my own armour every now and then, and step forwards to teach.

This imagery was powerful and meaningful, and it prompted me to explore the martial arts path more widely. Were these the kind of visions that the older Masters had received? How had *they* found their own path?

With my curiosity piqued, I dived into some of the martial arts literature on my bookshelf. I had read many of these books over the past few years, ever since the founder of *Budo for Peace*, Danny Hakim, had introduced me to the concept of *budo*, or the warrior's way.

Sitting in an outdoor café in Tel Aviv, on a weekend trip out of Gaza to find a karate teacher, I had met with Danny as part of my search.

**“There are principles and values in the martial arts,” he had said, “and these can be used for the purpose of building peace.”**

Danny, an Australian immigrant to Israel and a former coach on the national karate team, was

referring to the Palestine-Israel conflict. Through his network of karate teachers from all backgrounds and faiths, he was spreading the message of peace and co-existence through the practice and teaching of karate values.

He had invited me to train with his teachers and their students a couple of times and each time, I had come away feeling humbled. It was the first time my mind had connected the dots between my humanitarian work and my martial arts training. Both carried a clear code of conduct but unlike humanitarian work, where I had been introduced to that conduct early on, in karate it had taken over three decades for someone to mention it.

That conversation and the subsequent seminars had transpired into reading books here and there. I longed to understand what they said but while I found them interesting intellectually, without a lived experience of them in my heart and body, they were just concepts to float around.

Now, with almost two years of *Cherry Blossom Dojo* training behind me, I pulled out a few books, blew off the dust, and sat down once more to learn. The first book I picked up was titled, *When Buddhists Attack*. Written by a Japanese martial arts scholar, Jeffrey Mann, it looks at the relationship between the practice of *Zen* and the Samurai fighters of the past.

The concept of *Zen* had long called me. I had used the word in my first and second books, *Wild Zen: An Inner Roadmap to Humanity* and *Wild Zen Journeys*. The name *Zen* had emerged once more in my outlines for future books, *Zen Leadership* and *Zen Rituals*. The books in between these and *Wild Zen* were *Cherry Blossom Dojo*, and a subsequent guide to personal protection and developed, titled *Inner Sensei*. Together, they offered a three-tiered warrior's path to healing, awakening, and empowerment.

My mind had laid out a trilogy of writings that came in pairs. The first book was the personal memoir while the second an interpretation of or compliment to the memoir's teaching points. I sensed I would write many more pieces but that these six books would remain the closest to my heart. Together, they would be the books that would lead me to my older and wiser self.

Turning the pages of Jeffrey Mann's book, I came across the concept of *mushin*. I had first heard this term when listening to an interview with a former US Navy Seal the year before, who had started out his fighting path as a martial artist. He had described it as a feeling of being fully present in the midst of battle, and attuned to everything around him. This combination of presence and attention helped him to react on instinct in the right way.

*Mushin* wasn't a feeling he could just muster up. Rather, it was one that had had spent many years cultivating in training. He had literally trained his mind and body to pay attention to the extent that they were programmed to do that even in a real-life situation of war.

Reading Mann's commentary, what struck me most was his comparison of *mushin* to mindfulness. The latter has become such a buzzword today, particularly in therapeutic and yoga circles. It has also gone mainstream with the abundance of "mindfulness" coloring books, which to my mind are simply coloring activities to detach and zone out. They're a

healthy interruption to a stressed mind and certainly offer the potential for mindfulness, if the person is in the moment and in flow, but the concept of mindfulness is so much broader.

Mann described *mushin* as a state of awareness, or mindfulness, where thoughts occur but we aren't being carried away by them, or caught up in a stream of consciousness. As the US Navy Seal had said, it is a quality cultivated by long hours of discipline. It can't be summoned at will; it must have former programming into a person's self.

**"It is only through training that (you) develop such strength,"** he concluded.

As I reflected on the last couple of years, several related experiences stood out. Mindfulness had been the main theme of the personal development centre in Dubai where, as the newly appointed business development director, I had done a swift U-turn the year before. On noticing the poor atmosphere and the potential risk to myself, I had exited quickly. That had left me in a fight to re-instate my business, the closure of which had been held up at Dubai Customs. Now, with my impending departure and return to the UK, that fight had come to a natural end.

Through a trickle of information and strong instincts, I had realized that working in this centre wasn't a good or even safe move to make. I had wanted to take on the role not only to escape the pressure of running my own business for a while, but also so I could help bring concepts of mindfulness into the work place.

Naively, I had seen a natural fit between my profile of executive coach and martial artist, and the profiles of the center's life coaches and therapist, several of whom were yoga practitioners. Between us, I knew there wouldn't be any conflict of interest. I was happy to hang up my coaching belt for a while and instead, put their work forwards on the front line.

In hindsight, I see how my gut instinct preserved my martial arts strength. At the time, they had kept me safe but I had also cursed them and my unshakeable commitment to following an ethical path. Resigning so suddenly had meant my ongoing battle with finances would continue, and they most certainly did. The worst of that battle was yet to come and it would wear me down, month-by-month, adding more stress to my plate.

All I had wanted was a little respite from the non-stop pressure to make ends meet. I wanted a break from dealing with this pressure while also juggling client cases. It was such a heavy burden at times and it broke me many times. But each time I stood back up a little taller, and a little stronger.

I saw how my training in mindfulness differed from the practice that this centre promoted. While theirs' was more of a loving kindness based practice, mine was one forged in a warrior's heart and mind. It wasn't that one was right and the other wrong, rather that in life, as well as training, we need both.

Had the coaches and therapists understood and been trained in the concept of *mushin*, they may not have stayed so long in the grip of a bullying director's hands. Had they understood

the strategy of warfare, they too may have dared to exit and move on.

I understood that not everyone had the privilege of this choice, for it can be a difficult and painful one to make. Some had families to support back in their home countries and they couldn't risk losing their visa. To them, this frying pan was better than a fire elsewhere yet to me, my old frying pan was better than this fire.

Looking back at some of my dojo lessons, I see how much I have been learning and yet, how much learning lies ahead of me. I understand my place as a second dan and that this is just a metaphor for my life and work. I can only know as much as I have trained for and embodied, and everything else is just information waiting to be put to use.

Thumbing my way through the familiar pages, I come across another Samurai concept, *zanshin*. Straight away, my mind returns to my Egyptian Sensei's lessons on this.

**“You must stand strong and be ready, Claire,”** he would tell me at the beginning of a kata.  
**“Your whole being must be absolutely present and alert.”**

At first, I had thought he meant that I must tense my body more and look a little tougher. But that only threw a spanner in the works, making me overly tense for the kata. I would subsequently deliver a poor performance.

Mann described *zanshin* as a state where the practitioner is completely aware of his or her surroundings. Like *mushin*, it is not a concept that can be read and understood; it must be experienced and lived by the practitioner. A teacher can point the way but it takes time for the student to truly learn.

I had always struggled to grasp what my teacher meant but now, reading Mann's words, it made perfect sense. He likened the state to the alertness at the end of the kata, and the state of mind a calligrapher is in when he or she finishes the last letter and takes the brush off the page. It is a continuous flow of *ki* and as an artist, I finally understood.

In my Arabic calligraphy practice, which had fit so beautifully alongside my karate training, my state of mind would determine the outcome. If my energy was scattered or low, I wouldn't be able to breathe steadily to ensure a fluid stroke with my reed pen. If my energy was strong and my mind present, I could easily control my breath and create a beautiful piece of art.

That was the state I had entered just before my trip to Konya, when I had created multiple pieces of calligraphy for the Christmas fair, two years earlier. I knew instinctively that this practice was relevant to my karate training, and I had even attempted to write about it the following year in a creativity and martial arts leadership blog, but the penny hadn't completely dropped.

Now, I understood *zanshin* as total awareness of the inner and outer worlds. It is an energetic state that is produced through a highly engaged process of flow. To be present and attentive to detail in *kata* required *mushin*. This created the experience of *zanshin* and it is that

combination of attention, energy, and awareness that turned a series of movements into a martial arts kata.

Before closing the book, my eye caught one more concept, *zazen*. It stood out as I had repeatedly seen my older, wiser self kneeling in *zazen*. I knew it as a seated meditation posture and often wished we could practice it in class, but there never seemed to be any time.

On days when my energy was stressed and scattered, and my kata all over the place, my Sensei would stand me in the centre of the room. Blindfolding my eyes with a towel, he would ask me to perform the same kata without any sight. This would initially throw my balance off and send me in all kinds of directions but over the course of the class, my breathing would settle and my mind would become clear. By the time I removed the blindfold, all would be calm and still.

The withdrawal of senses was a technique I had come across as a yoga teacher in the eight-limbed path. *Pratyahara*, a Sanskrit term for it, had also implied non-hoarding and I sensed there was a small overlap in meaning with the practice of *zazen*.

Mann described *zazen* as the mindfulness of “no-mind” and, more interestingly for me, as a pathway to *kata*. It was a substantial missing piece in my martial arts training and one of the core reasons why I had struggled to manage my mind and consequently encountered unnecessary stress.

Laying the book down, I was aware of how my mind was creating new links between my past and present. I had left a decade of yoga practice and teaching to focus on karate and now, over five years later, I was starting to grasp how ancient wisdom-based practices overlapped. Much more learning lay ahead of me but for now, I was satisfied with where I had reached.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 17

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“There is no single point that marks the completion of karate training; there is always a higher level. For this reason practitioners should continue training throughout their life. The true path of training is a boundless road with no end.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 17 | ***Tradition***

Funakoshi is reminding us that karate, like any serious endeavor or traditional pursuit in life, is a long and winding road. He's emphasizing consistency once more, but also trying to motivate us from a deeper place. That motivation could be to aspire further along this path, or simply to put things in perspective and not give up. Nobody promised us an easy ride.

When pausing to reset my martial arts and life path, I realized how far I had come. I was proud of my evolving business venture and feeling steadier on my toes. I was also searching for advice on how I could proceed. By turning to the wisdom of times gone by, I was reminded that this is a warrior's path and that a warrior state of mind was needed.

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### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*Which words of wisdom are motivating your life or work today?*

*What would your older, wiser self advise you to pay attention to right now?*

## *Sometimes, you need to meet lessons head on.*

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*“Kamae (ready stance) is for beginners; later, one stands in shizentai (natural stance).”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 17)

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One month had passed since my last judo class, and since I had done any martial arts training at all.

Pulling down the overhead flap in the car, I checked my appearance before stepping out. My skin was clear and my eyes were bright. The scar down the side of my brow bone was still there but it seemed to be fading. Instead of turning away from it, I smiled back at myself, accepting in the way one only can with the passing of time how things had turned out.

Not long after returning from my trip to the UK, I was back on the judo mats. The class had changed considerably in recent months, after my first teacher left. The academy had chosen not to renew his contract and instead, promoted the assistant teacher into his place.

**“Come with me, Claire,”** he had urged, sharing his plans to set up a new judo school even further away from my home. **“You can teach self-defense and karate there!”**

He knew how much I wanted to teach but he didn’t understand the state of grieving I was in over the loss of my own training space. With a positive attitude, he had bounced back from his own loss of space and, with a resilient mindset, simply shifted gears.

I wondered if he was angry with the club for letting him go. It was unfair and I thought I could read between the lines. The assistant teacher was younger, fitter, and a seasoned competitor while my first teacher was an older man with a health condition that sometimes left him dizzy. It didn’t affect his ability to teach but it wasn’t quite the image that the academy seemed to portray. There may well have been other reasons I wasn’t privy too but this was a logical guess from the outside.



Unlike me, my judo teacher had kept rolling with the punches. He had long figured out his relationship with his martial art and to him, judo as a Way of life was a question of getting back up every time you're thrown. He had already shown me that side of his character a year before, when I had lost my dog, partner and new job at the same time.

**“Come back to class!”** he pinged me daily, while I was fighting to reinstate my business. **“We’re waiting for you!”**

When I didn't respond immediately, he would ping me again with all kinds of motivational messages. By the end of that week, I was back in class. He knew something big had happened but rather than ask what, he told me not to give up.

This teacher had been responsible for much of my judo growth. He also understood how passionate I was about martial arts and now judo, and it should have been a no-brainer that I would join him for training in his new place. But at the time, my gut said a firm and consistent “no” and for once, I listened and been clear in my response.

I had hesitated not only because of the driving distance, which would add stress to my day, but because he had also promoted me quite quickly. There was both an advantage and disadvantage to that. On the plus side, it had built up my confidence rather quickly, and that had paid off. On the down side, it had also created some doubt.

At purple belt, and fifth kyu or rank, I was just two steps away from the first brown belt, for which in this system there were three ranks. I had been practicing judo for eighteen months and while I had some strengths, I also knew I had plenty of weaknesses. I was nowhere near brown belt level. My techniques weren't as solid as they should be and my karate mindset had well and truly kicked in. I had begun to question the lack of basics in my training and if I should be holding this purple belt at all.

To add more weight to my doubts, the purple belt I held wasn't recognized in the official judo system. Each country has their own ranking system and the one he adhered to had a purple belt while in others it was blue. The colour of my belt in a BJJ academy, where purple belt is a fairly senior belt achieved after several years, had sometimes sent mixed messages that I was more experienced than I was. Very few females held this rank and being noticed was always an added burden at a time when I just wanted to be anonymous and train.

Because of my background in karate, I understood myself on the judo mat better than most new students. I had known I was being promoted rather quickly but I hadn't wanted to offend my teacher by refusing the belt. So I had gone along, ignoring the colour of the belt and seeing it as just another part of my training suit. I hadn't attached myself to it, perhaps because I had the confidence of having already earned a black belt in another martial art.

At the academy, most of my training partners didn't know I held a black belt in karate, as I had trained elsewhere. Nor did they know I was a certified self-defense instructor. I had kept both facts to myself as I had wanted a neutral space in which to train, where I could more easily tap into a beginner's mind. I wanted to keep that element of humility as long as I could,

not because I was afraid of expectations or judgment but because I wanted to know what kind of a martial artist I could be when nobody knew who I was.

To a trained observer, it was clear that I knew how to fight. I didn't fear confrontation and I could pick up quite a few things up with ease. That had usually set me apart from other women who would hesitate, especially when fighting with men. But in other regards, I was like any new student learning a martial, and this was particularly true when fighting on the ground. That was why I had taken up BJJ. To get better at fighting on the ground.

As a stand-up martial artist, I liked being on my feet. Being a karate practitioner, I liked being able to control the distance around me. When throwing in judo, I could move in and out of my partner's space. In floor grappling, I was in constant contact with my partner on the floor. While that didn't bring back any unpleasant memories, and I wasn't nervous about full on body contact, I did find it much harder to think straight.

The intricate layering of movement strategies on the ground is a lot for a beginner to take on, at least at first. Having once done contemporary dance on the floor, and being proficient in yoga, I had the flexibility and agility to move around. With a technical mindset, I could also pick up the movements one by one. Where I felt challenged was layering those movements on top of one another. I knew I could manage to get better at it; it was just a question of time, and energy, and that was always a challenge.

So when my teacher had asked me to join him, I had hesitated. I knew a brown belt promotion would likely come in the next six months, and that out of politeness, I would probably find it hard to say no as my teacher wasn't a person who would accept a no. That would only reduce my confidence further as I would feel like a brown belt who wasn't up to scratch, and the last thing I wanted in my martial arts training was that.

Judo had been fun to play around with for eighteen months while I figured out my karate path but it had also worked its way into my heart. Unlike BJJ, where I was happy to come in and out without much attachment, I had started seeing myself as a *judoka*, instead of a drop-in student. With that shift in mindset had come an awareness of a code of honour. I couldn't disrespect judo's lineage or myself by being tempted to move too fast.

I also knew it wasn't the right phase in my life to teach karate and self-defense. With karate it was clear. I needed to sort my own path out. It would have been irresponsible to start teaching without a teacher of my own to oversee what I did. So I had suggested my own teacher, but for reasons I couldn't grasp, that hadn't worked out. I wasn't prepared to be a teacher who handed out belts to kids without any oversight so I had said a very firm no.

On the self-defense front, I actually longed to teach and felt ready to teach beginner's workshops. I had taught a few workshops earlier that year and while the turnout had been low, I was pleased with the outcome. With a clear curriculum and many years of working on protection-related topics behind me, I was confident that I could do a good job. I had also been interviewed on the radio a couple of times. But I just didn't have the energy needed on top of running my own coaching practice to market the workshops and find students.

There was also another reason for my hesitation. I could only teach self-defense theory as my coaching trade license didn't cover any physical practice, and I couldn't afford to change that. That meant I couldn't apply for the right kind of insurance for physical training and, should a student get hurt, I would be liable and they wouldn't be protected. I was simply unwilling to put myself in that situation. What kind of a self-defense instructor would I be if I entered into an arrangement like that?

Lack of confidence wasn't behind my hesitation. I knew what kind of a set-up I needed to excel as a martial arts practitioner and teacher, and I wasn't ready to compromise. But still, it was frustrating, especially as my teacher's new place was absolutely stunning. Set in the middle of a small forest, it had floor to ceiling windows on two sides of the room. The other two sides had floor to ceiling mirrors. That made it feel like the room was in the middle of the forest itself.

It was the most idyllic place to practice a martial art, and my stressed out mind certainly needed such a place. I also liked my teacher in many other ways. He was positive and funny, and his can-do attitude to life was refreshing to be around. He was active on the competition coordination scene, even arranging for me to be a presenter at one of the men's events. Those connections could have been a bonus, should I ever wish to return and compete or be involved in presenting at more events.

Had I not been so clear-cut with my goals and ethical lines, I could have taken the easier option and put up with the longer drive. Instead, I had stayed at the academy, which was still a forty-five minute drive away. I knew it wasn't the ideal space for a traditional martial artist but it was meeting a few other needs I had.

Not only could I continue attending BJJ and judo classes back to back, but I could also be around other martial artists. Perhaps because of my years of isolation on my karate path, I longed to train alongside fighters who were different to me. I didn't want to be isolated in the woods and return to a narrow martial arts mindset.

At the academy, we were all on the mats and in the ring and cage together, in an open plan space. In the middle was a gym where people trained in between classes. Next door to my judo class was BJJ. To the left was the MMA cage and just behind us were the boxing and kickboxing ring and Thai boxing punching bags.

I felt at home in this space and the more I trained there, the more I understood what kind of a fighting spirit I really had. It was a spirit that, much to my regret, had been hard to access while training alone in karate. I'm not a timid fighter by nature. My energy veers towards a healthy sense of confidence and aggression, but years of stress and violence had thrown that spirit out of balance.

Everywhere I turned, in life, love, and work, it seemed there was often the expectation that as a female, I should be weak, or at least weaker. I had laughed that assumption off at work in my younger years and disregarded gender politics most of the time, as it was so ludicrous.

Professionally, I was a natural performer and was often a few streets ahead of colleagues, including my bosses. So I was less vulnerable to any attempts to undermine me or create self-doubt, and that meant I had more control over my environment. I would have to face those doubts as a business owner but compared to my personal life, it was much easier.

In my personal life, and specifically relationships, I had been weakened again and again. The absence of emotional support in my life had been a constant struggle, and my lack of guidance there had led me into murky waters. Violence at the hands of two men I had once trusted had shattered much of my ability to trust, making any kind of relationship more complex. Because of that absence of trust, I didn't ask for help when I needed it and, because of that, I had accepted that if I wanted to do anything, I would have to do it myself.

Looking back, I had done the best job I could at all times. It hadn't always been a great job but I had pulled myself through. I was still standing but with the ongoing stress and isolation of running my business, and a few post-divorce relationships that hadn't worked out, I felt vulnerable. The fact I had been repeatedly thrown and had had the strength of character to stand back up and try again was a source of pride but, to better protect myself, I needed more than that. I needed to be pushed to my limits to find out who else I really was.

That was what the academy did for me. It gave me a space to be tested and find a new kind of inner strength for myself. I knew that the assistant teacher wasn't going to be a Sensei for life but that he would be a teacher of another kind. He came from a family of judo teachers and professional fighters. Fighting had been a way of life for him since he was five. Beyond judo, he competed in MMA and other fighting events.

He was the kind of fighter who could be sent into any ring or cage, or onto any mat, and not waver, and it was that spirit that I was looking for within myself. Because I saw it in him, I knew I had it in myself, and I knew he would inadvertently push me in that direction. Not to compete like him, for I wasn't looking for that, but to access a spirit that had been dormant within me for far too long. I needed to bring *all* of my fighting spirit back to life if I was to ever *change* my life, and feel happier overall.

It wasn't long before the new class began to take shape, and I watched it fall apart and come back together step by step. The new teacher had a very different leadership style. If students wanted to come, they would need to fight their way to class.

Uncertainty arrived first. With a less motivational style, students had to dig deeper to find their belief and desire to train inside themselves. Those who had been enjoying the class as a social activity that made them feel good about themselves were the first to falter and doubt themselves. Without the constant praise and feedback, did that mean they weren't really that good?

Then there were those who lacked discipline or a clear 'why' for their training. They struggled more and more to make it to class. Finally, there were the senior ranks who understood what was going on, and took the new class style for what it was. This was a fighting ground and if you wanted to be there, you would need a more ruthless mindset. You

would need to show up for yourself and be your own leader.

Control over the class was falling apart with this new style. Senior BJJ ranks began attending but without any formal introduction of new students at the start of class, as the former instructor had done, we didn't know who they were. They also wore their BJJ belt to class and, with a similar uniform, it was impossible to tell until we began training which rank they really were. Even then, they may have picked up a few judo moves through BJJ training and it wasn't always easy to figure out at first. At least not unless we were fighting on the ground.

On the ground, those who trained or had trained in BJJ were easy to spot. From the very first move, I could feel the difference between a judo and BJJ ground fighter in my body. That was how I knew the blue belt I was now rolling with was not a blue belt in judo at all. As a blue belted *judoka*, he would be fairly average on the ground but being a blue belted BJJ practitioner, he would have spent at least two years training *only* on the ground.

He was swift and agile in his fighting but with a stronger and heavier body, I could hold my ground. I also had explosive speed from karate and judo throws, and often used that to my advantage. Understanding he was a better ground fighter, my strategy was to resist as many pins and chokes as I could and leverage my only relative strengths – my speed and strength – to catch him off guard. It almost worked except in his attempt to counter the move, we had both moved the same way and as a result, our heads had smacked into one another.

**“It’s okay,”** I told him, while he stared back at me in horror.

I genuinely hadn't felt any pain and instead, was looking at him to check if he was injured. He was fine but as warm blood trickled down my neck, I realized that I probably was not.

The brow bone is especially fragile to hard knocks and mine had whacked right into his forehead. That had caused a six-centimeter gash to the area just under my left eye. I knew blood could spurt easily from this place but the amount of blood rushing down my neck and now chest was of some concern.

**“You need to check that out, Claire,”** my teacher said as he walked over, having noticed that we had stopped rolling.

In the bathroom, I had done my best to mop up the blood but the wound was wide open and the bleeding just wouldn't stop. So I sat down on the bench outside the bathrooms while a first aider came over with ice. When it still hadn't stopped a few minutes later, he taped a piece of gauze over the injury and told me to go to ER.

Several people had been watching me, including my teacher and one of my BJJ coaches, who was off duty. Not a single one could offer to drive me to the hospital as I was the one with the car. The rest of the class was busy training on the mats. But I only noticed that much later as in the moment, driving myself to ER seemed like a perfectly normal thing to do. The fact I had just received a nasty head injury and could get dizzy on the road didn't even occur.

Without having shed a tear or felt an ounce of pain, I calmly drove myself to ER. In my mind, the injury had been a genuine accident and in many ways, it had been the perfect collision. We had both been fighting well and doing our best to be safe. I understood that the risky move I had pulled hadn't worked out and that this sometimes happens in life. Learning to leverage our strengths is exactly that, a learning process, and how could I learn any other way?

In the hospital waiting room, I was suddenly grateful for so many things. I was grateful for my training partner and the lesson he had just played a role in for me. I was grateful that I hadn't felt any pain. I was grateful for the first aider, who knew exactly what to do. I was grateful for my health insurance. I was grateful that my teacher hadn't molly coddled me or wrapped me in cotton wool. And I was grateful that nobody had thought to arrange transport for me, because that forced me to face how alone I really was in Dubai.

This was the second time in just a few years that I had driven myself to ER. While the state of my friendships had improved, not a single friend understood my martial arts world. At the academy, people were friendly but we weren't what I would have called friends. Nor were we close training partners, although I had grown to know a few. We were just there to train together and I took it for that. A social space where we were all working parts of our lives out, trying to get better in some way. I didn't fool myself that it was anything more.

Dubai is a transient city full of expatriates, and it can be a hard place to make friends. Especially for people who are single. If you are single and work for yourself as a freelancer, that means you are even more alone. As an expatriate you're most likely living far away from your family, in a different time zone, and your friendships will need to be rock solid for you to ever have a hand to hold. My parents had had that in the old Dubai but in the new Dubai I had come back to, that sense of community and support just wasn't there.

Lying on the hospital bed, feeling the sting of the anesthetic before the skin was stitched up, I had never felt more alone in my life. The kind ER doctor had suggested plastic surgery to ensure that no scar would be left but since it wouldn't be covered by my health insurance, I had declined. There was no way I could afford such a procedure and because of that, I would need to live with the scar.

While my confidence in myself as a woman had been crushed the previous year by the black eye at my sister's wedding, this time around it was different. This time around I vowed to make peace with the injury, no matter what it looked like.

Several months on, the scar is still there. It will probably never go and always serve as a reminder of the martial arts path that I once chose. Surprisingly, I have remained grateful every day since. The scar follows the direction of my eyebrow and because of that, it doesn't look so bad.

It certainly doesn't make me feel bad, or any less beautiful as a woman. If anything, the scar reveals a kind of beauty that I have managed to own. I probably didn't need the injury to see that but somehow, it sped a part of my learning process up. There is beauty in my strength,

and strength in my beauty, and that feels very much like me. Now I was just fitting in the gentle part.

The scar also reminds me of a time in my life where I struggled immensely, especially on the financial front. The old me employed by the United Nations on a good salary, who was raised as a privileged expat, would have automatically chosen plastic surgery. Now, I made very different decisions and accepted my fewer options. Instead of making me narrow minded, having to make tougher choices actually opened me up, particularly to gratitude.

I was back on the judo mats a few weeks later, after the risk of infection had passed. Not an ounce of confidence had been lost. Instead, what I had was a quieter and more self-assured attitude. I had a better understanding of my abilities and where I could go wrong, and because of that I was more astute and less prone to over-estimating myself. No longer was I there to win but rather, I was there to *learn*.

There was a healthy sense of caution when calculating my risks and that was a trait my overly headstrong character had needed to learn. With my practice of yoga nidra, and taking daily time to rest, there was also a growing sense of awareness that my time on these judo mats would be coming to an end. With the move to the UK just a few months away, I knew I needed to step back and tend to other areas of my life.

I couldn't fight my way right through to the end. I needed to finish this book and bring my training in *Cherry Blossom Dojo* to a close before I opened up to the next phase of my life. The past couple of years had brought some powerful lessons my way. They had woken me up to many aspects of myself, both good and bad, and taught me how strong I really was. But it had been a long and exhausting process most of the time.

Now, I needed some time to step back from martial arts training altogether, and reflect on all I had learned, and where I wanted my karate path to go. So I had taken a month off to reflect and digest, and decide if karate was really what I wanted at all. Finally, with that month drawing to a close, the answer of where to go next couldn't have been clearer.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 18

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“The confused mind is the cause of injury, the basis of error. It is only the constant cultivation of a composed, tranquil, immovable mind that, like a crystal clear mirror, captures the moon when it appears, or reflects a bird flying overhead. It is only the tranquil mind that can allow fair and clear judgments free of error.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 18 | **Wisdom**

Once more, Funakoshi is reminding us of the need to take care and pay attention to detail. He is referring to the need to organize ourselves and our lives in such a way that planning, sincere effort, and endurance can create the conditions needed for inner calm. With a calm mind and body, we can better see ourselves and others, and our environment, reflected back.

To cultivate my own inner calm, I chose to step back completely from martial arts training for a month. My eye injury was a harmonious reminder that now, as I packed up the first half of my life in Dubai and the Middle East, and prepared for the next leg of my journey in the UK, was a good time to reflect on the path I had walked and the hard-won wisdom I had earned.

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### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*What life or work lessons have you extracted through reading this book?*

*How are you creating, or have you created, the conditions for your inner calm?*



## *Own your path, or somebody else will.*

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*“Do not forget the employment or withdrawal of power, the extension or contraction of the body, the swift or leisurely application of technique.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 19)

~

**“You still haven’t owned your karate path.”**

Staring at the email, Mike’s words cut right to the point. As usual, he didn’t hold back when he had something to say. He was responding to an email I had sent about four months earlier, sharing my struggle to take over training myself in this art and discipline that been on my mind for twenty seven years.

His response was three months old, and I had stored its message in my heart. Holding off on any knee-jerk response, I had dared to question if he had a point.

After two years of training in *Cherry Blossom Dojo*, and trying to make sense of Funakoshi’s principles, had I learned anything of value at all? I was a fighter, that was for sure, and I had become a *better* fighter, I reasoned with myself. But what else had I become? Why was it so hard to take over the responsibility of training myself? And why hadn’t the real fruits of my karate labour fully transpired into the rest of my life?

I could get on my yoga mat alone with ease. That I managed almost daily. I could also get myself to the gym alone several times a week, and could drive to the Olympic pool almost an hour away to swim lengths alone. I had the discipline and desire to do all of this, and I enjoyed it, so why couldn’t I just pull my finger out and *train myself*? After all these years, was I really still waiting for a teacher to do that for me?

Then there was the rest of my life. I had certainly moved forwards in business. Financially, it was still a daily struggle but in terms of the quality of my content and service to clients, I was progressing more and more with every month. I was beginning to understand their wider needs and how coaching approaches outside of the International Coach Federation could be of more support. I had understood that I was a teacher as well as a coach, and that this

combination was *my* style of coaching.

I was also clear on where my own professional development lay. By moving back to the UK, I would have more access to further development. Alongside the personal training and fitness instructor course, which I was due to attend that summer, I had also applied for a Masters in Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology, and was in the midst of completing my Positive Psychology diploma.

In work, if I put my low income to one side, I was pleased with the outcome of hanging in against all odds. I believed in myself as a professional and that I had value to offer the coaching world. But in my personal life, I was still struggling. Emotionally, I still felt so very alone and while I had the strength to handle that, I knew I needed to change how I related to and connected with others in order to improve. It wasn't just a case of the world being against me, and men and friends letting me down. *I* was the common denominator in my unhappiness here, and only *I* could change the rules of this game.

If karate had really taught me anything about leadership, then why was I still fumbling in my personal life? Why was I not more settled emotionally?

In less than two years I would be forty and on the personal front, I had so much more I still wanted to experience. So many dreams and desires were being pushed back or cast aside as I fought to survive and protect myself. *Why hadn't karate taught me how to play a stronger role here, and make better choices in my support network? Why hadn't it taught me how to form healthy relationships? What had it only reinforced the feeling of being alone? And why was I always expecting so much?*

Those thoughts and my lack of action made me wonder if I was really destined to be a *karateka*. Maybe I should pack my black belt away and accept defeat. It had been a part of my life for so long and I had fought tooth and nail for my second dan, but who was I kidding when I couldn't even train myself? Maybe I just didn't have what it really took to dare to associate myself with this art.

It was easy to think like this and ask such hard-hitting questions. I had ventured so far off the beaten track of a formal dojo space with positive training partners and a reliable teacher to turn to. Without structure, I had had to create my path myself. And that brought me face to face with my own struggles, again and gain.

So much had happened in the past two years. The sweat and inner labour it took to reach my second dan. The financial uncertainty I had taken on by restructuring my business so I could exit demanding consulting contracts with the aid sector and get my head out of war. The financial hardship that had then followed, and the many tests on my character and self-belief as a professional that had ensued.

Then there was the moment after receiving second dan where I dared to dream I could now train for third. Because isn't that what we're meant to do in a hierarchical order, keep moving from rank to rank? But who was I fooling there, thinking I could now get my head down and

move up the ladder. What was I thinking there, when that was not *my* Way.

While I was traditional in many ways, I also wasn't one for following the hierarchy, nor did I believe in following the crowd. While I had followed linear systems in school and university, by the time I was flung into humanitarian work I had learned to operate quite differently. In the real world, life is unfair and unpredictable, and the ranking systems don't always make sense. Sometimes they are even quite unjust.

I had learned through war and conflict not to trust ranks. The highly ranked army official didn't necessarily have the best character at heart. The director of an office wasn't necessarily the most influential person in an organization.

In my own professional life, I had moved from job to job, sometimes up the visible ladder, sometimes down, and I had seen it was always relative. One of the toughest jobs I ever did was setting up an office for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Jerusalem yet on paper, being new to the UN, I was a fairly low grade and my job title reflected that.

When I was head of media and communications for another organization, my job title seemed to carry much prestige. But I wasn't fooled. I knew my team of three had no budget and that at every turn, we were up against the tide. I knew that our lack of budget meant I had to resort to other tactics of influence and persuasion.

In my post-university studies, I had also seen my education for what it was. On paper, my Masters in Violence, Conflict and Development may sound impressive, at least in some circles. It shows I can think critically and present my ideas on violence and politics in a logical way. Yet everything I know about violence and my ability to gauge it was learned first hand or through direct observation.

Because I had so often found myself in fancy sounding places only to realise how much substance they lacked, I had stopped being impressed by mainstream versions of success. Money didn't define success to me, character did. And being a winner had less to do with gold medals and more about the ability to endure, accept, transform and grow.

Social norms hadn't worked out well for me, and I was getting too old and tired now to keep being beaten down. Over the past two years, I had finally brought that part of my character into my martial arts training. After years of obeying my martial arts teachers, and expecting them to lead my way, I had finally come to accept them for what they were. Human beings, *just like me*, doing their best to teach what they had learned.

It is so easy to put figures of authority onto pedestals and for some reason, I did that more with karate than I ever did with anything else. Karate brought to the surface again and again so many fights and weaknesses I had within myself. Why hadn't judo or BJJ ever done that? It was then that I laughed and realised my folly. Of course they couldn't do that. I hadn't even scratched the surface of either to every really come face to face with true. But a quarter of a century after first setting foot in a karate dojo, I could say that karate had well and truly done that.

I decided it was time to dust off my karate and martial arts books once more. While I had once been so passionate about reading these books, many of their words clearly hadn't stuck and that was beginning to annoy me. I realized that so many of their precious lessons had been too abstract, as not enough time spent in sincere pursuit of the "Way" – the "do" in karate-do – had passed.

Opening up Gichin Funakoshi's autobiography, *Karate: My Way of Life*, a long paragraph I had underlined several years earlier jumped out. In the mid-1950s, and in his old age, Funakoshi was reminiscing about his earlier teaching days.

**"One thing I often say to my young pupils they find confusing. "You must," I tell them, "become not strong but weak." They want to know what I mean, for one of the reasons they have chosen Karate-do is to become strong."**

I smiled, remembering my twelve-year old self, in the same mindset as his students. But the smile quickly disappeared when I realized how little had really changed. Wasn't I still looking towards karate to become strong?

Funakoshi continued speaking and, over sixty years later, I continued to listen closely.

**"It is hardly necessary, they (the students) tell me, to train in order to become weak. Then I reply that what I am saying is indeed difficult to understand. "I want you to find the answer within yourselves," I tell them. "And I promise you that the time will come when you truly understand what I mean."**

Here, I recognized from experience what he was saying. For years, I had cursed my karate practice, hating it at times for making me feel weak. I felt I was not a natural *karateka*, and that I had to fight harder than others for the smallest amount of progress. There were no gold medals or fancy certificates, at least not until I received my second dan and even then, the moment was marked by the examiner and my teacher with just a smile.

Instead of building me up, karate had often felt like it was tearing me down. And yet I kept going, again and again, because I couldn't let that feeling of weakness remain. Rarely had I ever shared this inner experience with anyone, as I felt they would not understand it. It had been part of my own private journey, until now.

Eager to find out what Funakoshi had to say said next, I continued reading.

**"I am convinced that if young people practice karate with all their heart and all their soul, they will eventually arrive at an understanding of my words. He who is aware of his own weaknesses will remain master of himself in any situation; only a true weakling is capable of true courage. Naturally, a real karate adept must refine his technique through training, but he must never forget that only through training will he be able to recognize his own weaknesses."**

Finally, the penny dropped. In order to find a deeper well of inner strength, I had had to fight my demons. Karate had been a training ground for that and when my Sensei could carry me no more, I had had to find such courage elsewhere.

I had stepped into judo, self-defense, and BJJ with a beginner's mindset but how could I deny the years of karate wiring in my mind and body? How could I just expect years of training and a deeper love for this art to simply go away?

Although I had been training in different spaces, I had still been a *karateka*. My attention to character and ethics, which Funakoshi held most highly, had been evidence of that. While this was reassuring, there was no getting away from the fact that I couldn't ride on my past training efforts forever. Just because I had a black belt, it didn't mean I would be one forever. I still needed to actually put in the hard work of physical labour.

With a fresh perspective, and less emotion, I could see my path more clearly. The fact I was only a second dan was just an indication that there was further to go. The hierarchy wasn't there to control me, rather it was there to offer structure.

Of course, if I chose to return to formal karate classes, I would be judged by my physical performance as well as my character. Character alone was not enough to get by in the world. I still needed to physically train so that I could embody the values of martial arts, and ensure my spirit would stay strong.

But this training didn't always need to look like a formal class. At present, being in the midst of a move between Dubai and the UK, that opportunity didn't really exist. I could have dropped in on another karate class, of course, but that didn't make sense. The last thing I wanted as I was leaving town was to establish a fleeting relationship with another teacher and group of students.

In the UK, there was a possibility that things could be different. With so many karate schools, continuing on a formal Shotokan path with a more senior teacher was possible, if that was what I wanted.

Lying on the beach one morning, with the waves crashing to the shore, I reflected on all these choices. I could see my life and martial arts path so clearly in my mind's eye. I could see my flaws and weaknesses in character, as well as my many strengths, and I understood that Mike's question wasn't actually a question at all. Rather, it was a confrontation.

Mike was not a Shotokan practitioner but he was widely considered a karate expert. Enough to be able to write books on karate and be recognized for them, even though I sensed he would contest the use of the word "expert" himself. In our exchanges, I had found him to be a humble person who valued truth and directness more than fancy words. He wasn't impressed by superfluous detail, he preferred to overlook that and focus on the substance.

Back home, I reached back into my little martial arts library to pull out the very book that had prompted me to reach out to him in the first place. *Shin Gi Tai: Karate Training for Body,*

*Mind, and Spirit*. Published in 2011, the same year I left Gaza to return to Dubai, it was a mammoth of a book that had taken me several months to read. I had bought it two years earlier and underlined many paragraphs but, as with my other martial arts reading, had I really retained anything at all?

I turned to the introduction, reading the first sentence I had underlined, some two years earlier.

**“...regardless of how many people you defeat in combat, the deeper aim of karate training since times long ago has always been to conquer your own ego, and by doing so, you increase the likelihood of avoiding conflict. When you can do that, you have an opportunity to establish a sense of balance in life...”**

My mind and heart began to race but I made myself slow down to read and absorb more paragraphs I had underlined.

**“...traditional karate training has the capacity to change lives for the better, but only if you are prepared to move past the obvious. If you are prepared to swim in deeper waters than the shallows most people splash around in, you will discover more about yourself than you can imagine... Your life is yours, your karate is yours too, so accept ownership of both and reap the rewards.”**

Re-reading these words a few years later, I saw Mike’s email in a new light. Whether he meant it or not, I heard a sense of surprise in his voice, when he had stated that I had yet to own my karate path. He had watched here and there from afar my journey take shape, and had probably understood that I was learning to take ownership of my life. With that ball rolling, why wouldn’t I do the same in karate?

Like Funakoshi and many other martial arts teachers, Mike emphasized the point of direct experience. Karate, like life, couldn’t just be read about. It wasn’t and couldn’t be a purely intellectual affair. While we can read and memorize a lot, without application, how much of it do we *really* understand?

**“People get lost in their own cleverness and ignore the value of personal experience,” he wrote. “*Budo*, of which karate is but one expression, has never been merely a collection of techniques to be learned, memorized, and then regurgitated upon demand. It is instead an appreciation of certain combative principles and ways to live your life in harmony with your surroundings.”**

I caught my breath as I read and re-read the next sentence several times.

**“This appreciation is born from the inner struggle endured over many years by the individual *budoka*, but should that endurance falter and the continuation of the training become too much, then progress also comes to an end.”**

While Mike and I had never actually met in person, I felt his presence in the room. *Endurance* had been the initial title for this book, before I settled on *Cherry Blossom Dojo*. Along the way, I had felt so tired of enduring and perhaps this had also prompted me to step away from my training for a while.

I had *endured* the physical discomfort of training. I had *endured* the longing to return to training when my humanitarian years had made that quite difficult. I had *endured* the decade and a half that had passed between my first and second dan belts. And all the while, I had endured an awful lot of chaos in my life and work beyond the dojo. I didn't want to *endure* a moment longer, at least not like this.

Moving through the book to its conclusion, I found more paragraphs underlined by my younger self.

**“...the choices you make in life dictate the experiences you have; you won't find budo where budo can't be found... Not many people want to deal with their own negativity on a regular basis and struggle with the ensuing confrontation. Budo places you squarely in the cross hairs of your own shortcomings, then steps back to see what happens next. It does this not only once or twice, but constantly. It's a tough place to stand on a regular basis, but this is the essence of budo training – going to the dojo and standing in the full glare of your own inadequacy.”**

Mike wasn't claiming to have all the answers, nor did he position himself as being an authority of the karate “way”, but he did have some final words of hard-won wisdom to share that I had also underlined.

**“You have to stop depending so much on the drip-fed information provided by others, start thinking for yourself, and begin learning from your own experiences. I want to encourage you to stand on your own two feet and take responsibility for your failures and your success, and grow and mature into a capable and accomplished human being; a person who is respected by his community for his humility, not ridiculed for being timid; admired for being principled, not despised by being arrogant; and well-liked for being fair, not derided by being naïve.”**

He didn't claim to have arrived at such a place himself but his pursuit in this direction was clear. I most certainly wasn't there either but for the first time, I sensed in my bones I was already on my way.

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 19

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“Employing and withdrawing power, extending and contracting the body, executing techniques quickly and slowly, inhaling and exhaling, and so on – all of these are critical elements in actual fighting and must be understood completely in order to avoid defeat.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 19 | **Progression**

Many of Funakoshi's lessons are echoes of others. This one is a lesson on strength, timing, complexity, and control. In the *dojo*, we do not learn how to perform everything at once. Instead, we acquire complex skills step by step, learning how to layer and integrate these with time and training. It takes time to understand how to avoid defeat.

In my own life, I was looking at the concept of progression and noticing that for a long time, my path of development had not be a linear affair. I had danced back and forth, climbed up and down, and circled round and round. This prompted me to explore whether I wanted to return to karate classes for my third dan, or if I wanted to continue a little longer on my own.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*In which area of your life are your layering complex movements?*

*Which skills have you acquired by following your own path?*



## *Take responsibility for your path.*

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*“Be constantly mindful, diligent, and resourceful in your pursuit of the Way.”*

Gichin Funakoshi (Principle 20)

~

Cherry blossom season had arrived in Japan and with it, my thirty ninth birthday came to pass. I had spent the turning of the clock from thirty-eight to thirty-nine, knee-deep in work at my desk.

Just as the clock struck ten the night before, and I was switching off the appliances in the house for the night, I had felt called to sit down and revise my coaching website. I had created the website several months earlier, but I hadn't yet found the right layout or choice of words to express myself.

Delegating the task to someone else wasn't an option, and I had been too tired and distracted to get it done myself. Deep down, I was also grappling with confidence and commitment. I knew I was a good coach with much to offer, and I knew that this direction was good for me and my future clients. But could I really make a final commitment to find out?

**“This is your livelihood, Claire,”** the voice said firmly. **“Sit down now and do a better job.”**

It was five o'clock in the morning by the time I was done. In seven hours, I had reworked the content and presented the information in a more user-friendly format. Staggering to bed, I smiled at the professional energy and attunement that was running through me. I was proud of my work but I knew I would pay the price later that day in terms of energy.

Since setting up my business, I had always struggled to communicate what it was I actually did. My website and other online professional profiles rarely reflected the substance of my work but I wasn't sure how to amend that. In my mind, I just showed up and got the job done. How I did it wasn't really any of my business. I just couldn't put that part into words.

But now, it was all so clear. I hadn't had an intricate plan for my coaching practice, nor a

clear development path for myself. Instead, I had a general direction and with only that, decided to set sail. It wasn't at all strange then that I had entered such stormy waters along the way. Yet looking back, could I really complain? Wasn't that also how my karate journey had begun?

While some students begin karate or a martial art with the desire to earn a black belt, that hadn't actually been my goal. I'm not sure if I didn't crave it or if I just couldn't see myself ever being that good to take on that role. I suspect it was a mixture of both and that was the same spirit that I had brought into my coaching work.

Like karate, I had felt pulled towards coaching but I wasn't entirely sure why. It wasn't as if I had had some powerful experience with a coach and felt that this was also something I could do. While I had certainly appreciated the inspiration of the lead coaches in all my coach training courses, I hadn't ever seen them as role models for my work.

Instead, I had struggled and fought to find my place and now, almost four years on, I had reached a new place. It could have certainly been easier with a less stubborn and more peaceful mindset, but I just didn't have the emotional support I needed for that. Instead, I had had to become emotionally resilient and *strong*. I'm not sure I could have learned that any other way. Had I not been blessed with disappointment, despair and defeat, I might have always expected a hand to hold. Was it right to not expect that? I don't know but the journey had certainly taught me what I was worth.

I knew what kind of a coach I was, and what I could deliver on. Now, I just needed to shift my environment so I could put that new energy to work. With my website done, that left only my book to complete before I moved on from Dubai. That, as well as all the logistics entailed in moving countries with an ageing desert dog. Having already put the logistics in place, it was just a question of pressing go in the final weeks. Just a few steps remained and I was almost there, but not quite.

I had often joked with Diane that writing this book had been my major *misogi*, or purification ritual of my mind, heart, body and soul. It had forced me to grow up and mature as a martial artist and professional, and find the courage to leave my childhood home behind. I was happy with my progress on both fronts. Now, it was just the rest of my life to tend to.

Karate had mirrored back my true nature and instead of running away, I had stayed present and done the difficult work of attempting to change what I didn't like. While progress had felt slow at the time, and I had certainly faltered, looking back, I could appreciate just how far I had come. I understood that a karate path was a lifetime endeavor and that with this round of lessons learned, I was ready to step back into my training.

This time, there would be a formal and traditional dojo in which I could train. To get there, my *inner dojo* would have to continue and my training practice would need to look different, at least for a while. As I transitioned back to the UK, I would need to slow my pace and intensity down in order to preserve my energy, and stay emotionally strong. I wasn't yet sure

how I was going to do that but a walk later that day with a family friend would help me figure that part out.

With the sea breeze running through our hair, we walked side by side, trying to make sense of our lives. Both of us had grown up in Dubai and both of us had returned to patch up difficult memories of violence. We had both chosen demanding lines of work after we left, and eventually burned out when the emotional stress had become too much. That had led us back to Dubai to make sense of the past we had left behind.

As one year rolled into the next, we had also been tested again and again. It was to be in very different ways but the theme of developing emotional strength was the same. While I had turned to self-defense and martial arts, my friend had turned to meditation and spiritual work. Because of my forays into Sufism, and earlier journey into yoga and healing work, I could relate a little to her path but she had found it harder to relate to mine.

Several months earlier, she had sat me down and laid it out straight.

**“Claire,” she had urged, “isn’t it time to slow down and be more compassionate with yourself? Enough is enough, this fight that you’re in has to end.”**

She was worried that I was carrying too much without enough support. My own stresses, my clients’ stresses, the old family home in Dubai. With a wise heart, she was trying to tell me that a person could only take so much.

I remember the loving kindness in her words. I also remembered how different we were. While her way was the gentle way for now, mine was still the hard way. The gentle way would come in time, when I was ready, and now it finally had.

**“You seem at peace with yourself now,”** she commented with a smile.

**“Yes,”** I smiled back. **“I seem to have found my way, at least for now.”**

Ironically, we had both reached the same conclusion that to make peace with our past, we needed to leave Dubai. We had returned and done all we could to make things right but sometimes, you just have to let the past go and move on. It doesn’t pay to stay stuck and keep spinning the same wheels.

Looking ahead onto the horizon of my life, there was still so much uncertainty. My home in the UK with my parents would be temporary, as I was keen to find my own place. But realistically, that would take at least six months as I needed to get back on my feet financially first. We also had to figure out the care of the family desert dog, and I highly suspected that he would be staying with me.

On so many days, his happy little face had brought a smile to my own. While he had an aggressive streak that I did my best to manage, he was also a loving dog and could easily make my heart melt. Loving him had kept my heart soft and reminded me of my more playful

side. He had been such a gift in my life during a difficult time, as had his little brother who we had lost a couple of years before.

The next morning, with the age of thirty-nine well and truly flowing through my veins, I sat down to drink a cup of strong black coffee. Some habits like my coffee addiction would probably never change but other habits were shifting, like my tendency to turn to sugar the moment emotional stress or fatigue hit. Instead of getting all shaky and needing an urgent fix, I was getting better at choosing a healthier response.

I was seeking the real-life experience of one of karate's so-called immovable stances, *fudo-dachi*, or immovable stance. Related to the term *fudoshin*, it also means an immovable or peaceful state of mind.

The reason why I walked the Way of Inner Strength wasn't so I could just be strong. Rather, it was so I could experience this state of inner peace more and more. Being serene in my strength was *my* way, but I had learned that inner peace couldn't be a permanent feature in my life. It was something I could deepen with practice and time but I couldn't hold on to it and I certainly couldn't control it. Instead of controlling threats, I needed to cultivate the confidence that I could re-centre myself at any time.

Centering is the Warrior's Way, and Diane had often reminded me of the need for centering practice over the past few years. With each throw I received, I had gotten back on my feet but that was *reacting*, not centering. I needed both abilities in my life. Ultimately, it was Diane's unwavering support that had helped me find the strength to regain my centre. I knew how to survive and through our chats, I was also learning how to thrive.

People often speak of thriving after bouts of adversity, and I've often wondered if resilience is really just the ability to bounce back. Sometimes we may need to do a little detour to understand a lesson before we get back on track. To always bounce back suggests a rapid response and in my experience, that was not only naïve but it could also wash away many precious moments of learning.

Instead, I had come to appreciate the expression of centering and re-centering as a way back from adverse times. While that could be as simple as a breathing or meditation practice on the tatami mat, it was also psychological and emotional one. When we have been so violently thrown or pushed around, it can take time for our inner lives to settle and catch up, and realize that we are now safe. The aftershocks can continue for quite some time, and that was pretty much my experience on my return to Dubai.

Now, with a stronger centre, and stronger ability to regain my centre if it was lost, I was feeling hopeful about the road ahead. I was excited about my future studies and the challenge of exporting my coaching practice to the UK. I hoped the market would be in need of my services, and I was open to new ways of finding that out.

I was hopeful too about my soulmate and how a relationship between us might work out. We had once discussed the possibility of marriage but put the topic to one side. It would have

been easy to get lost in the kind of romantic dreams long-distance relationships can create, and I knew that we would need time in person to figure things out. We wouldn't be living close by at first, and an element of distance would remain until we decided if and how we could make a shared life work out. But I knew we had built a strong connection and I believed we were on the right track. I just needed to trust it a little more each day.

Looking back, it was fascinating to see how it had all worked out. With just a simple framework of twenty guiding principles, I had somehow found a few more steps on my way. Two years ago I knew so little. Now, I was aware I knew even less and yet, I had come so far.

Just as I was editing the final parts of the book, doing my best to catch every last typo, which I know is impossible, Reece called to say hello. He was checking in on my Positive Psychology studies and I had plenty of new insights to share.

**“I’ve been learning all about positive neuroplasticity!”** I said with excitement.

He laughed as I reeled off the lessons I had been learning about Buddhist practice and neuroscience. Last month I had handed in a paper on positive emotions and somatic practices, building a bridge between scientifically-grounded facts, my martial arts training, past yoga teaching, and my self-published books.

My academic direction wasn't about self-doubt. Rather, it was about harnessing one of my natural strengths, my love of learning. To be happier, I needed more outlets for this and for now, returning to academia felt like a good match. I had spent so much time over the past decade pursuing other kinds of wisdom and now, I needed a solid ground where I could tie all of my insights together.

It had taken a while for me to figure out that I don't have to sit and suffer, and that with a fresh outlook and new environment, and different people around me, I could actually take positive and empowering steps to reduce my own pain. I *was* on the right path, I just needed to follow my own inner map.

Like much of my karate knowledge had been, the concept of positive neuroplasticity wasn't a new idea to me. I had first picked up a book on the topic almost a decade earlier, just weeks before my marriage ended. Lying on the sofa, reading *The Buddha's Brain*, I had flinched as my then-husband had shouted at me, questioning why I was reading such a book in our home.

At the time, he was fairly narrow in his spiritual practice and quite averse to me learning anything that didn't fit his belief system. He found it threatening and, for the first time, I had found his reaction truly irritating and thrown the book down.

Rarely did I feel relaxed enough to lie down on the sofa and read. Not only that, but I was actually reading something that was making sense to me. The *power* of managing my own mind. Little did I know that within weeks, I would be divorced and just weeks after that, on mission to Gaza. My entire world was about to be turned upside down, leaving that book by the wayside. Now, a good eight years later, I had managed to find my way back.

By some strange twist of fate, the author of that book, Dr Rick Hanson, had become a popular figure in the Positive Psychology field. He had a wonderful knack of breaking neuroscience down into a digestible format for non-scientific people like myself.

Through an assignment on positive emotions, I had come across his work once more. This time, I noticed he had a new book out. Titled *Resilient*, it was due for release two days before my birthday, and it was all about cultivating *inner strengths*.

I caught myself laughing at the irony of it all. Once more, I had found a sign that I was on the right path. My journey through karate had led me to so much more. It had led me to change my work, discover judo and BJJ, train as a self-defense instructor, cross paths with my soulmate, take up Positive Psychology studies, and find the courage to leave my childhood home and violence behind.

Now, my karate journey had led me back full circle to a book I had once wanted to finish but which had ended up being a casualty in a world I had left behind.

**“How’s your book going?”** Reece asked, moving the conversation forwards.

**“It’s getting there,”** I said, as I shared a few concerns I had left on my mind, surprised that he had called at exactly the right time.

Similar to myself, karate had been the first path Reece had taken in the martial arts. Unlike me, he had taken up Seido karate, a style of karate that included meditation. He had then explored the combat arts much more widely from a young age, before joining the military at sixteen. He too had seen war, even more so than myself, and what he had learned had led him to Positive Psychology.

**“Does a person always need to fight their way to strength,”** I asked him, looking for an additional insight as I ended my book and this two-year long fight.

**“Not at all,”** he responded, reminding me of lessons we had discussed around martial arts and self-defense in the past.

**“There is also submission and surrender,”** he continued. **“You can fight in hard and soft ways. Don’t you have *heian kata* in Shotokan?”** he asked as an afterthought, referring to the kata of the coloured belt ranks before black belt.

**“Of course we do,”** I answered, somewhat confused. **“Why?”**

He laughed, suggesting that I look up what *heian* actually means in Japanese. I opened my computer and did a quick Google search. *Heian* meant peaceful or harmonious mind. I groaned out loud. One more obvious detail that I hadn’t yet fully grasped!

As a young karate student growing up in Dubai, we hadn't had access to books on the topic and the Internet didn't yet exist. My teachers had all been Iranian and very little passed between us by way of words. I had learned karate through copying their movement but, as my Egyptian karate teacher would later tell me, the installation had not yet been completed.

I hadn't really understood my Egyptian teacher's point either, even when we were speaking in Arabic. I had thought he was referring to the actual techniques and perhaps he even was. But what I saw now was an attention to detail and the subtleties of the karate path.

**"The world is moving, Claire,"** Reece said. **"It's always progressing. Instead of sticking rigidly to Funakoshi's words, why don't you question why and how he built that style of karate? What were the foundations of this practice, for example?"**

Once more, there was an invitation to return to the beginning. To return to a beginner's mind. But this didn't mean throwing away what I had learned. Instead, it meant carrying that wisdom gently within me, allowing it to be shaped by the ongoing journey of *my* karate path, and my own way in life, love, training, and work.

**"Seek what the Masters sought,"** he said, reminding me of a Japanese poet's reference to wisdom. **"Don't blindly follow their path."**

## MARTIAL ARTS LESSON 20

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### FUNAKOSHI'S COMMENTARY

*“These principles should not be thought of as applying only to karate-do. If they and their overriding concepts of mindfulness, diligence, and resourcefulness are applied to your dealings in society as a whole, your understanding of life will be greatly increased.”*

~

### INNER STRENGTH 20 | *Evolution*

Here, Funakoshi seems to make a humble point that the outcome of a committed karate path won't lead us to riches or fame. Rather, a diligent application of *The Way* will lead to a significant improvement, not only in our training but also in the rest of our lives. The degree of that improvement will be relative to our effort, environment, and purpose in life.

On my two-year journey through *Cherry Blossom Dojo*, I learned that much of my training was about *unlearning*. I had to release so many old habits and patterns of thought and emotions that were clouding my vision and way forwards. It took time and many trials to polish myself and still, it is a journey that evolves and continues with no apparent end.

~

### YOUR REFLECTIONS

*As you prepare to leave Cherry Blossom Dojo, what is the insight that lingers most?*

*In which ways will you stay open to evolving in your life or work?*



# MY DOJO KUN

## LONGEVITY

*I don't invite burnout in my life or work,  
With discipline, I put my health and fitness first.*

# MY DOJO KUN

## WAY OF LIFE

*My life is not a rehearsal, but it has a delicate timing.  
I am not rigid or impulsive; I trust my natural instincts.*

*I perform misogi of my mind, relationships and space,  
To ensure that my wisdom flows freely.*

*“To find out what karate-do means to you, what it does for you, and what it holds for you, is a deeply personal process. Each path is different and we all have to find a personal rhythm that fits us individually, according to what surrounds us.”*

**Jose M. Fraguas, Author of Karate Masters II**

~

*“Don’t think you are superman because you know karate-do and you walk around quoting some budo philosophy – because one day you’ll have a rude awakening. Don’t lie to yourself. Life is a repetition of confidence and emotions. I believe that through karate training we can find the way to spiritual and physical exercise and exertion. That you will believe in yourself and have a life based upon solid links of confidence.”*

**Yoshiaki Ajari, Karate Masters II**

~

*“A person must always confront his fears head on; otherwise fear will overwhelm him... Karate is for life. It is a way of life and a way of thinking. I use it and practice it everyday. It has to be used for when you find yourself in times of crisis. Karate teaches you to concentrate and to think calmly under stress and strain.”*

**Seiji Nishimura, Karate Masters II**

~

*“Our enemy is not some other place. Our enemy is in our own minds... The fundamental element of Shotokan is that we try to be strict with ourselves because there is no limit to what we can accomplish. We must be straight and honest with ourselves. This is the tradition of Funakoshi Gichin.”*

**Tsutomu Ohshima, Karate Masters II**

~

*“It is said in Japan that it is better not to practice for two years while you search for an ideal instructor... Train every day, but keep the practice segments short so your interest stays high for a long time”*

**Koss Yokota, Karate Masters II**

“Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought.”

Matsuo Basho, Japanese Poet (1644-1694)

# JAPANESE GLOSSARY

BASSAI DAI	A powerful Karate kata meaning “storm a fortress”
BJJ	Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, a grappling-based martial art
BUDO	The code of conduct for the martial arts
BUDOKA	A student or practitioner of Budo
DAN	Black belt ranks in traditional Japanese martial arts
DOJO	A place to train and awaken, usually for martial arts
DOJO KUN	The code of conduct for dojo students
GICHIN FUNAKOSHI	Founder of Shotokan Karate
HAJIME	Start, usually announced at the beginning of a tournament
JIGARO KANO	Founder of Judo
JUDO	The Gentle Way, a throwing and grappling-based martial art
JUDOKA	A student or practitioner of Judo
KARATE	The Empty Hand, a striking and kicking-based martial art
KARATEKA	A student or practitioner of Karate
KATA	A sequence of fighting movements
KIHON	Basic movements
KI	Energy
KIME	Inner power or focused strength
KUMITE	Sparring
KUZUSHI	Off-balancing a training partner or opponent
KYU	Colored belt ranks in traditional Japanese martial arts
MAKIWARA	Padded striking post
MISOGI	Purification ritual
MUSHIN	Present and alert
RANDORI	Free-style practice
SEIDO KARATE	Style of Karate founded by Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura
SHOTOKAN KARATE	Style of Karate founded by Gichin Funakoshi
SOCHIN KATA	A powerful Karate kata meaning “tranquil force”
ZANSHIN	Maintaining presence and alertness until the end
AZEN	Seated Zen meditation
ZEN	A Japanese school of Buddhism*

\*Please note I use this term in the urban and secular sense throughout the book to express a state of order and calm.

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## ABOUT CLAIRE



**Claire Higgins** writes about the intersection of politics, psychology, somatics, and spirituality, and the crossroads of life, love and work. Her first book, *Wild Zen: An Inner Roadmap to Humanity*, presents a personal journey taken through and beyond violence, conflict, stress, trauma and adversity. It includes a series of interviews with survivors within the framework of Carl Jung's archetypes. Its accompanying toolkit, *Wild Zen Journeys*, offers readers a creative route to telling and rewriting the archetypal stories of their own lives.

Claire's third book, *Cherry Blossom Dojo: The Way of Inner Strength - Training & Awakening to the Reality of Life, Love & Work*, is a female-centred martial arts memoir. It is told through a modern interpretation of Gichin Funakoshi's *Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate*. Its forthcoming guide, *Inner Sensei: 20 Lessons on Personal Protection and Development*, offers readers insights and strategies on how to practice personal safety in today's world while also furthering personal growth.

Beyond writing and martial arts, Claire is also the founder of *Inner Athletics Research, Coaching & Consulting for Performance, Stress & Recovery*.

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