Warriors and Dreams

Roger Zelazny

A teacher affects eternity;  
he can never tell where his influence stops.

Henry Adams

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In the only photo I have of Phil Cleverley, he is throwing me to the ground with an effortless aikido technique which perfectly controlled my attack. He is somewhere in his mid-thirties. His shoulder-length hair is unmussed, his hakama draped, almost artistically, over hip, thigh, leg. My feet are high in the air; his expression is emotionless above his neat beard. The photo was taken by a passing photographer for the New Mexican, out early on a Saturday morning looking for human interest material.

It was a balmy spring day, sunny, with a bit of birdsong and a small breeze about us, as I recall. There had been some rain the night before but the ground was not wet, only a little damp. There would be a few grass stains on the gi. Nothing that a little bleach wouldn’t remedy. Nobody else had shown up for class that morning in the park, and I was getting a private lesson. I think I had my brown belt at the time.

Phil taught a very soft style of aikido; that is, there were no jerks, wrenching movements, hard grabs⁠—except from the person doing the attacking. There were times when I didn’t even feel his touch, just felt myself suddenly off-balance, turning, falling. Not at all like the judo I had studied back in college. As effective, though.

I spent seven summers with Phil in that place, Patrick Smith Park, between Canyon Road and West Alameda, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. April through October, usually. Winters, Phil would rent space in a dojo, Kerry Li’s or Cody Templeton’s, where we would throw and be thrown on mats. He liked the grassy ground of the park best, however⁠—often remarking that it was our real school⁠—partly because one is seldom attacked for real when standing on a mat, partly because he was very fond of the outdoors. I never learned till the day of his funeral that he’d been an Eagle Scout as a kid.

Soft style. Hard style... I remember Bill Gavel, a former Marine unarmed combat instructor, telling me in my earliest judo classes that when you are pulled you push, that when you are pushed you pull. He taught a lot of pure combat stuff, too, as opposed to the sport, things involving crushing larynxes, breaking necks and spines, and it all seemed good and useful, and the push-pull business really did work⁠—after lots of practice. Later, Phil was to tell me that when you are pushed or pulled you turn. He was aware of the push-pull response as well, and when I questioned him upon the distinction he’d shrugged and said, “Not better. Not worse. Just different.”

Phil had come to aikido with a background in Shotokan karate, kenpo, and t’ai chi. One day when I was hunting for more distinctions he told me, “In karate when you block and counterpunch, you reject the attack, you reject the attacker. In aikido you embrace the attack, you embrace the attacker, and you turn.”

“What’s wrong with rejecting the attack and the attacker?” I’d asked.

He shook his head.

“Nothing,” he said. “Neither way is right or wrong. They’re just different approaches. Look at them as metaphors.”

So, later, I did tae kwon do for six months, twice a week, on the side, to improve my attacks for aikido. It was not so much that I wanted the first, beginner’s, belt in that art, but Phil’s attacks⁠—and those of the other people in the class who had done some form of karate⁠—were so much cleaner than my own, that I felt a need to improve my attacking half of things. While it is true that aikido is mainly a defensive art, half of the time in class is spent being an attacker (uke), so as to give one’s partner (nage) a chance to practice the defenses.

The concept of blocking and attacking was not totally unfamiliar to me. It had been there when I fenced for four years, as an undergraduate at Case Western Reserve (then just Western Reserve, as it didn’t get together with Case till 1967), receiving varsity letters in the sport in my sophomore, junior, and senior years. I’d taken fencing in lieu of regular Phys Ed, as I couldn’t stand team sports. Individual performance was something else, though. After the first year, the teacher had suggested I try out for the team, and I did. I wound up as captain of the épée squad in my final year, possibly by virtue of a certain double-jointedness which permitted my drawing my elbow back at an unnatural-seeming angle out of reach of riposte while going for a wrist touch. And parrying and attacking, beating a blade aside and attacking, is but an extended version of blocking and punching: Reject the attack, reject the attacker. Point!

Somewhere along the line, I learned the Japanese martial arts term for what I’d always sought in all affairs: suki. It means an opening. One can get all philosophical about yin and yang and mutual arisings, but basically it means that whatever you do you make yourself vulnerable somewhere. A skilled defensive player invites the attack and moves into the opening, the suki, which it creates. Even powerful, focused blows create their own suki, for strength is put forth in a wavelike pattern⁠—exert, relax, exert, relax⁠—and a soft-style martial artist will tell you that every moment of strength in the hard-style player’s effort is followed by a moment of weakness. Avoid or parry the blow, and there is the suki. The soft stylist tries to avoid personal moments of strength and weakness himself by letting his strength flow at the same level at all times. No exertion, no lapse, enter the opening, embrace the attack, turn.

I am facing one of the pupils in the class I taught. I ask her for a munetski punch to my midsection. Initially, I face her squarely. As the attack commences I am moving forward and turning. If the punch connects, it does not matter. It will roll off of me in the course of the rotation. I apply the technique. I reverse my turning. She is on the ground.

Hard, soft, push-pull, reject-reject, circular-linear. None of this was unfamiliar, once I understood what the terms meant in practice. “The martial arts are a microcosm of the big world,” Phil said. “It’s all there.”

“So what do you do if the person attacking you has studied silat or capoeira or some kung fu form you’ve never heard of ?” I asked him.

“You can’t learn them all,” he told me. “I’ll tell you one thing not to do, though: Never enter another man’s universe, because in there he’s God.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t try to play by his rules. He knows them better than you do. Try to make him enter your universe.”

“How?”

“You might have to provoke his ki.”

“What do you mean?”

He gave me the finger.

End of Zen parable.

2

Winter, in the late fifties: The skies were ashen and sober and there were small ridges of snow at the curbsides on East 185th Street. It was a Friday. My parents always did the week’s shopping on Fridays, in the stores that lined that thoroughfare. While they were about it I browsed the Woolworth’s and Neisner’s five-and-dimes, the one bookstore, and the drugstores’ magazine racks. At one point, I waited for a break in the traffic and then hurried to cross the street. Partway over I struck a patch of ice and felt my feet go out from under me. I was pleased that I did a breakfall without thinking. My right arm struck the pavement at a forty-five-degree angle out from my body simultaneous with my turning my hip and spreading the force of the impact along the outside of my right leg just as my left foot made contact with the street. It was a good breakfall, and I picked myself up, brushed myself off, and continued on to the store I was headed for. I recall thinking, “At least I’ve gotten this much out of judo.” I’d been doing it for a year or so then.

A few years ago I was walking down my steep, blacktop driveway one winter day to pick up the morning papers when I struck a patch of ice. This time, as I felt myself slip forward I relaxed my upper body; it felt as if everything from my shoulders down to my waist instantly drained into my center. I sank into the slide and rode with it as if I were skiing. When I came to the edge of the ice, I stepped off, straightened to my full height, and continued on down the hill. Later I tried it again intentionally, just for the hell of it, and I responded the same way each time. I embraced it and went with it. I had been doing aikido for three or four years at that point.

One does the same ukemi (breakfalls) in aikido as one does in judo or jujutsu; one also does a rolling version which brings one back to one’s feet. The appropriate species of ukemi depends on the vector of the throw, and after a time one’s body just knows which sort to employ, from somewhere down at the level of the spinal nerves. One learns to fall from one’s center as well as to move from it in the vertical.

One member of my aikido class was Leroy Yerxa, Jr., son of the old Ziff-Davis science fiction writer of that name. Later, widowed, his mother had remarried⁠—William Hamling, who soon had Leroy reading the slush pile of his magazine, Imagination. Leroy and I are the same age, and he was reading it in his teens at the same time I was writing and trying to sell. It is likely that he’d rejected some of my early stories, though I’ve never mentioned the possibility to him. I wonder, after all these years, whether he was the one who penned me the “Sorry, try again” on one of those early slips. One of life’s odd turnings or returnings.

Behaviorism strikes me as an awfully cynical view of human nature: We run the maze because we’re paid to, or because we fear the consequences if we don’t. But, on the other hand, I’ve often wondered whether Freud himself believed, as so many of his followers seemed to, that every human action is the result of some hidden compulsion. I wondered whether some people might not simply choose values and conduct themselves in accordance with them. Or was that too naive? I remember my Political Science professor, Dr. Hotz, cautioning the class never to place too much trust in any system which relied heavily on the rationality of the human animal for its operation. He refused to guess as to the exact nature and extent of human irrationality. Just being aware of its existence is sufficient, he’d once told me. It was obviously there, though, I later came to realize, as humanity’s collective suki.

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I was impressed by Noel Pertin’s book, Giving Up the Gun (“Japan’s Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879”), wherein he tells of firearms first being introduced into that country in 1543 and during the next thirty-some years pretty much replacing the sword save for a few diehard samurai. But this produced a reaction, when the warlords realized that they could spend years training great fighting men and then have them shot down by someone who’d learned only how to aim and fire, before the warriors could even close with them. So, the last engagement of the period in which firearms played a major role was the Shimabara Rebellion in 1637, wherein Christianity lost its last chance for success in that country. Afterward, the warlords licensed all of the gunmakers, regulated and purchased their total output, and locked the weapons up in warehouses; and the samurai went back to fencing, the monks to making arrows, the smiths to armoring. Firearms were then used only for hunting and display. It wasn’t until the breaking of the samurai in the Satsuma Rebellion in the late 1870s that firearms came back⁠—this time to stay⁠—well over two centuries later. The author makes no overt comparisons concerning this and any voluntary abandonment of nuclear weapons; he simply describes what once happened, resulting in a culture’s putting aside a form of military technology.

But never place too much trust in any system which relies... I am reminded by memories of my Morgenthau-trained mentor. And there are plenty of holes to be found in attempted comparisons of one culture with another.

I do find stories like this fascinating, though, possibly only because I’m a technology junkie. The Greeks had an aeoliple, a rotating steam-powered novelty machine. With that technology, they could easily have learned to distill wine and make brandy, adding to the amenities (not to be confused with the Eumenides), but look how long the wait for spirits really was. The interaction of technology and society is one of the fascinations science fiction has always held for me. Even if there are no easy answers.

While doing push hands with a friend a while back I gave a very liberal answer to a political question he’d asked me, and it made me think of something much more general.

People have told me that they can’t tell my politics from my stories. The reason is something that probably smacks of perversity, save that I was the way that I am long before I’d thought it through: When the country’s political climate is conservative I tend to grow liberal. When it swings the other way I find myself feeling more conservative. This goes back to a basic mistrust of extremes. I don’t know whether, ultimately, this makes me radical or extremely conservative. More likely, it shows me as being basically mistrustful of both government and the temper of the times in general. I am aware of a somewhat paranoid element in my makeup when it comes to anyone or anything capable of exercising power over me. Whether this reaction is push-pull or turning, it is hard to say. Whether it is hard style or soft style depends upon how active, and in what ways, I choose to become on any matter. I mistrust principles, too, and tend to stick to values. That is as close as I can come to a principle.

“Aikido is purely defensive,” Phil told me one day, as yellow and gold cottonwood leaves blew by us in the park, “teaching one to respond to aggression. But when does an attack really begin? When the other person takes a swing at you? Or when that person forms the intent to do so? Are there ways of detecting this intent before it becomes action?”

“If you’ve got an example, please give it to me,” I said.

“I once worked in a hospital,” he responded, “where a patient who seemed disturbed cursed me and began moving toward me while we were waiting for an elevator. That might be taken as an intent to attack.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I raised my hands before me,” he said, “and I smiled.”

“And the man?”

“He changed his mind. Maybe it was the hands. Maybe it was the smile.”

I read A Brief History of Time by Stephen Hawking a while back, because I feel obliged to read popular books in this area when written by anyone with such impressive credentials. While most of the book summarized general matters familiar to everyone who writes science fiction, the final chapters, which gave his cosmological thinking, were of interest. Even more interesting, however, was the man’s triumph of sorts over that terrible wasting disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS)⁠—Lou Gehrig’s disease⁠—which, while it racked his body, did not stop his mind in its turning through time, space, gravitation, from the quantum to the relativistic, in search of unities. In Neuro (“Life on the Frontlines of Brain Surgery and Neurological Medicine”), author David Noonan says:

...[I]t is generally recognized that ALS has three different rates of progression: the typical rate, in which the patient survives two to three years; an accelerated rate, in which death occurs in a matter of months or even weeks; and a very slow rate, in which the patient survives for ten years, twenty years, or even longer.

One doesn’t know whether to bless or curse in a case like Dr. Hawking’s. One can but wonder at the warrior heart that continues to face the cosmos down that slow rate, working, working for maximum understanding, unable to push-pull or reject his own accelerated entropy, able only to turn, between riddles personal and universal.

“Once some guys attacked me on the street,” Phil said one chilly evening after class as we pulled on street clothes and gathered our gear at the picnic table. “One of them threw a Coke bottle. I blocked automatically. The bottle shattered against my left forearm⁠—still a few slivers in there⁠—and the pieces flew off to the side. It was rather spectacular. I must have looked as if I knew what I was doing, because they backed off.”

“Sounds like rejecting the attack rather than turning with it,” I suggested.

“Yes, it was,” he agreed. “Everything you know in the martial arts eventually flows together. What you’re left with is your own style. You will do what is most appropriate.”

Phil died on Monday, February 26, 1990, of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, at the typical rate. It had eroded him for about two years. He turned with it, embracing the attacks and putting forth the best responses he could to each of its grapplings, with his own diminishing energies. He did block and punch, too; he did push and pull. But he had no choice but to enter its universe, to play by its rules. I taught his classes, under his guidance, during that time⁠—and later by general consent of the class itself when he was no longer able to come in, periodically reporting back to him by telephone and seeking advice. I continued the teaching for several years after that, also.

He was buried in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on Thursday, March 1. He was survived by an amazing lady, Karen, a lovely daughter from a previous marriage, Carissa, and by all of those whom he had taught. Leroy Yerxa, Jr., Jamfi Corley (herself an aikido, kenjutsu, and aikijutsu sensei), Claudia Hallowell, and I were at the service and the graveside with the family. Donna Lubell (a karate sensei) was there in spirit, as were some of the others I could not reach in time, or who could not travel the distance.

Notes

In the 1990s Zelazny wrote an autobiographical essay “Aikido Black”; the title refers to the black belt he earned in aikido. Jane M. Lindskold quoted from it in her book Roger Zelazny (Twayne, 1993). Zelazny used excerpts from it in creating this introduction to his 1995 anthology Warriors of Blood and Dream. The full manuscript of his autobiography remains unpublished and in a private collection.

Various martial arts clothing (hakama, gi) and techniques (munetski, silat, capoeira, etc.) are mentioned in the article but will not be defined here. Hans Joachim Morgenthau did pioneering work in international relations theory, diplomacy, and political realism.