

Moving off the Line

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As told to Malory Graham, March 9 2020

I first watched an aikido class at New York Aikikai in June 1980. It was beautiful, graceful and looked like something that I could never do. There were a lot of women on the mat. It didn't even occur to me that there shouldn't be. And it looked like everyone was having fun so I decided to try it. I've never looked back.

I went every day. Using harmony to create power involves developing both the physical skill and the emotional willingness. 40 years later I was still biking over to New York Aikikai almost every day. There aren't too many people in my age group who train on a daily basis.

My teacher, Yamada Sensei, was fond of me in the early years. After I got my Shodan he gave me a class to teach and another class to cover. For many years I taught twice a week. Teaching at New York Aikikai, which was thriving at the time, was life changing. I will always appreciate Yamada Sensei for giving me that opportunity.

Teaching was both exciting and daunting. I didn't think I was worthy, not an unusual feeling for women if they're given some kind of position of authority. Once I settled into it, it went to my head for a while. But over time it taught me the importance of generosity, treating everyone kindly and valuing everyone equally no matter her or his skill level or natural ability. The combination of training and teaching helped shape who I am.

Yamada Sensei was incredibly supportive of women at that time. When he added an extra class on weekdays at 4:15, he chose some of the younger women to teach them. Senior women taught other classes and he called a lot of women for ukemi.

In September 2019 someone sent me a petition. It was written by a coalition of women instructors requesting that the governing body of the United States Aikido Federation (USAF) address issues of gender equality in the organization. It was respectfully written. I feel that women need more representation in leadership everywhere including the aikido community. I signed it and I forwarded it to people in the aikido community whose email addresses I had. I included a message about how it takes courage for women to speak out in all areas of our lives because we fear retribution, ridicule or disparagement.

The following week I was told that Yamada Sensei wanted to see me. I went to the office. It was a 30 second meeting. Yamada Sensei said he was very angry at me about the petition and he didn't want me to teach anymore. I was shocked. I opened my mouth to speak and he said, "I don't want to hear a word you have to say," and then walked out of the office. I wanted to talk to him, understand why he was so angry and explain my feelings about the petition. I was obviously very upset. But after that interaction I knew talking to him would be futile. I continued to train like I've always done. Except, it didn't feel like it used to. I felt dissociated, depressed, and afraid of further retribution. A week later I got an email from Yamada Sensei. He said that the email I sent when I forwarded the petition was an attack on him, that I was destroying the harmony of the dojo and he kicked me out of New York Aikikai.

I went totally numb. A million emotions welled up inside me. It was like I wasn't in my body. I was completely shaken. I didn't know what to do or think. It was surreal. I knew his reaction was not appropriate. I was one of hundreds of people who signed the petition. Around 30 of them were from New York Aikikai. The note I wrote was not about Yamada Sensei. It didn't mention him. It was about the fear women feel speaking up and how we live with that fear on a daily basis. Getting kicked out of the dojo demonstrated just how legitimate that fear is.

Aikido is about harmony, but it isn't an art that everyone is doing without an agenda. It's a power structure, a hierarchy, and you have to conform to a certain kind of behavior. At New York Aikikai we were encouraged to study the art seriously but also express it as individuals in a respectful way. The contradiction between the structure of the organization and the art has been a troubling thing to try and reconcile.

After I got kicked out I went to train at Aikido of Park Slope. At the same time Yamada Sensei was telling other USAF dojos not to allow me to train, including a dojo that I had a very close relationship with. I didn't understand why he was trying to prevent me from training anywhere and destroy relationships that I cherished. He was also posting letters publicly to tarnish my reputation, and to disparage and humiliate me. It was deeply painful.

I had no idea what to do about it except live day to day and do what I normally did. Family, friends, and people in the aikido community were shocked by what happened and offered their support. Some of them planned to talk to Yamada Sensei and speak up on my behalf but the atmosphere at New York Aikikai was so hostile that they feared retaliation. That fear silenced them and from what I heard, silenced discussion about it at the dojo.

I also heard that people who I thought I had a nice relationship with at the dojo were saying things like "Ruth should have known this would happen if she signed the petition." A number of people commiserated with me and said it was too bad that I was "collateral damage." I found that term deeply upsetting. It's dehumanizing. Collateral damage means unintentional damage as a result of an event. What happened to me was deliberate. It didn't take long for the spin to shift reality and a new normal to take hold. The aikido community is small in the scheme of things but it is a microcosm of society at large. This mirror is a disquieting reflection.

A month after I got kicked out I got an email from the dojo letting me know that Yamada Sensei said I can come back to New York Aikikai as a member or as a visitor. It was a one-line email. There was no attempt at discussion, reconciliation or healing, nothing. It felt cold. I didn't want to return to New York Aikikai. What would be there for me? Hostility from Yamada Sensei and many of the people I considered my friends? I'd be wearing this incident. It would never be the same. It's not where I want to train anymore.

I wondered, why this change of heart a month later? What I've heard, and I don't know how accurate this is, is that there was no good public excuse for kicking me out and it was the cause of a lot of social media posts critical of the USAF and Yamada Sensei. They thought it would fix the problem by letting me train there again. If they really wanted to fix the problem they would have asked me to meet with them with the intention of working out some kind of reconciliation. But they didn't.

I'm trying to move on but it's hard. It's like losing a loved one. New York Aikikai was a major part of my life for four decades. A friend got my things from New York Aikikai, met me on the northwest corner of Union Square outside Petco and handed me a bag with my hakama, belt and kneepads. And then it was over.

Even for people who weren't impacted by the petition like I was, the trauma of what happened sits with everyone on some level. Instead of using it as an opportunity to seriously address the issue of gender inequality, the USAF tried to divert the conversation to side issues and sweep the heart of it under the rug. That won't make the issue go away. It will be with us until it's addressed in an inclusive way. But nothing changed. It's affirmed that you have to keep quiet or there will be consequences. What happened made it uncomfortable to keep quiet and frightening to speak up. It hangs over us like a fog.

I do aikido for fun. But it doesn't always go that way. It's like having someone you're training with wildly attack you. It wasn't what you wanted but you have to figure out how to deal with it. You don't deal with it by running away.

Since this has happened people who have questioned decisions made by the USAF in the past are stepping forward and telling their stories. They decided to leave. One thing that has been uplifting are the connections I've made with the people who see it through similar eyes. Many of these courageous people tried to address difficult issues and if they didn't get a good response made a conscious decision to make this major life change whereas all I did it was sign a petition.

It's time to actively discuss how we're going to move forward, and find a way to practice in an environment that we're proud of, where we support each other, where we listen to each other, where we interact using all of the things we've learned on the mat. By adding my voice to all the voices that share this hope maybe it will contribute to helping the community heal.

It's important to live our principles, even when it's way riskier than to comply with the status quo. Many people in the community felt that they couldn't do anything about the fallout over the petition; but there were also many people who left because they couldn't support a culture where there was retaliation toward people expressing differing viewpoints in a respectful way. Aikido is about mutual respect, and I hope we can finally start practicing that ideal. If we can do that, aikido will thrive. This kind of restructuring will obviously be one where women have an equal role. If that were to happen, then the whole thing will have been worth it.