

## Polishing Your Sword "Use the One to Strike the Many"

by

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For many the image of a sword connotes brutality and violence. In her book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, for instance, historian Riane Eisler associates the sword with those people throughout history who have used “the lethal power of the blade” to oppress and dominate others.<sup>1</sup> Today, she suggests, this lethal power has been “amplified a millionfold by megatons of nuclear warheads,” threatening “to put an end to all human culture...”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is so, that nuclear bombs have evolved from swords, but I dare say it would be a far more peaceful world today if men used swords instead of bombs to fight their dirty little wars. As Aikido Master, Mitsugi Saotome has complained “[Modern] military technology is an escalating sickness infecting our lives, an expression of fear and mistrust. At the touch of a button millions of people die, whole cities are destroyed and poisons remain to defile the earth for all our generations to come.”<sup>3</sup> Saotome saw the devastating impact these weapons had in his Japanese homeland, and, as a U.S. immigrant, he has also witnessed the callousness many Americans feel about what happened in Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War II. “We cannot see or feel the pain of the enemy,” he complains, “Our hands are clean and unstained by his blood, but the invisible stains on our spirit can never be erased.”<sup>4</sup>

If there truly is an “art of war,” as the Japanese Samurai believed, then guns and bombs have wrested it from the hands of its true artists and made it possible for cowards and bumpkins to engage in this deadly game with the simple push of a button or squeeze of a trigger. But it takes someone of true courage, who knows the brutality to others and dire personal risks of warfare, to fight with a sword. Alas, some might rightly argue, it is too late to turn back the clock—too late for us take up the sword again—and make honest warriors of ourselves. Yet this is precisely what happened in feudal Japan a hundred years after Europeans first began importing guns to that country in 1543. By the late 16th century guns were more common in Japan than any other country in the world.<sup>5</sup> Although there was never a formal abolition of firearms in Japan, by the early to mid 1600’s gun makers had all but gone out of business, while swords, spears and bows were still being made in great numbers. This was due, in part, because the Japanese believed swords, unlike guns, had souls and were an extension of their own bodies. As Noel Perrin notes in his book on the subject, *Giving Up the Gun*, “the sword was not merely a fighting weapon in Japan, it was the visible form of one’s honor—‘the soul of the Samurai.’”<sup>6</sup>

I don’t mean to aggrandize swordplay, which was obviously brutal and bloody. Certainly all violence is to be avoided. But this doesn’t mean that any of us can escape the constant conflict that accompanies life. As Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido said, “When life is victorious, there is birth; when it is thwarted, there is death. A warrior is always engaged in a life-and-death struggle for Peace.”<sup>7</sup> Aikido, which is sometimes

translated, “the Art of Peace,” is actually based on the movements of the Samurai sword. Yet Aikido is decidedly based on nonviolence. As Ueshiba said, “a warrior is charged with bringing a halt to all contention and strife<sup>8</sup>... to injure and opponent is to injure yourself. To control aggression without inflicting injury is the Art of Peace.”<sup>9</sup>

The Art of Peace does not rely on weapons of brute force to succeed; instead we put ourselves in tune with the universe, maintain peace in our own realms, nurture life, and prevent death and destruction. The true meaning of the term *samurai* is one who serves and sticks to the power of love.<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi, perhaps the most peaceful man who ever lived, and also one of the world’s greatest warriors, who called his “Passive resistance and all-sided sword,”<sup>11</sup> loathed cowardice, and once responded to the men of a village who ran away while the police were looting their homes and accosting their families by hanging his head in shame. “I expected them to intercept the mightiest power that might be in the act of harming those who were under their protection, and draw without retaliation all harm upon their heads even to the point of death, but never to run away from the storm centre.”<sup>12</sup> Gandhi understood that if we associate the sword, which is also a phallic symbol, only with violence and aggression, then nonviolence can only mean impotence. To take up our sword, on the other hand—by claiming the warrior spirit within each of us—gives us the courage and wisdom to sustain and protect all life. As Gandhi put it, “I would risk violence a thousand times than the emasculation of a whole race.”<sup>13</sup>

If then, as Gandhi understood, and Master Ueshiba stated, “Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life,”<sup>14</sup> each one of us is called in our own way to take up our swords in order to protect life. What is important to remember, however, is that the sword is only an extension of ourselves and is, therefore, merely a metaphor of the power of life within each of us. Each of us has such a sword, the power to sustain life, whether or not we ever foster it. It is easy, especially given today’s technologies, to engage in life from a distance, apart from full awareness of the consequences of our actions. We go to the grocery store and buy a pound of beef without having to butcher another creature ourselves, or hold ourselves accountable for the 5200 gallons of water it took to produce that pound of beef, or other environmental issues regarding meat production, or for those in the world who must go without eating because so much of our cropland is used for growing animal feed instead of food for humans. It’s easier to enclose ourselves in our air-conditioned homes and cars than concern ourselves with our own carbon footprint in an age of global warming. It’s easier to wage war from Washington than to step onto the bloody battlefield with sword in hand, taking a good look at the lives we devastate, risking the potential loss of our own lives. Our technological advances have made our lives easier, but have also made it more difficult to see what impact we’re having on the world around us. Warriorship means “giving up the gun,” returning to our swords, to struggle and stand for life.

To this day the Japanese still speak of selfishness, of acting without thought for the world or others, as “the rust of my body,”<sup>15</sup> which is a metaphoric reference to the

unpolished sword. Today our swords have lost their luster. We have forgotten how to care for the sword in each of us, how to make it shine. “Polish the heart...” Ueshiba exclaims, “free the six senses and let them function without obstruction, and your entire body and soul will glow.”<sup>16</sup> So polishing our sword is really a metaphor for making our lives shine forth with love. The word *core*, which means, “heart,” is the root of the word *courage*. When we love our rage, the warrior part of us, we find our courage. Likewise, the word *rage* is the root of the word *large*. Courage means to enlarge our hearts. Courage makes us bigger than we are, which is why one peaceful little man like Gandhi was able to accomplish such big things.

The thing to remember, however, is that each of us can manage only one sword, and it is our responsibility as warriors, as sustainers of life, to polish that sword. “If the senses are clogged,” Ueshiba explains, “one’s perception is stifled. The more it is stifled, the more contaminated the sense become. This creates disorder in the world, and that is the greatest evil of all.”<sup>17</sup> *Contaminated senses* refers to the confusion that comes with doing too much, with being so busy with activity, distraction, and play, that we can’t focus on what’s important in life, or on our own unique purpose in life. This is why many spiritual traditions practice meditation and stillness in an effort to quiet the senses and see the world more clearly. We often get so busy, so preoccupied with all the things we think we’re supposed to do, that we forget the one thing we are supposed to do, nurture and protect life.

Thus, in my own life, I have come to see my ministry as my sword. It’s the means by which I work to promote the forces of life. Toward that end, I’m always polishing my sword, making it shine brighter and brighter, by reading and studying in order to improve my understanding. Since beginning my ministry at Clifton UU Church, I’ve completed a Master of Arts in Religious Studies, worked on a Doctorate of Ministry in Creation Spirituality, completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, have become a certified affiliate in Client Counseling with the American Philosophical Practitioners Association, am currently working on becoming a certified Way Chi instructor, and am in the process of applying for additional Doctorate of Ministry programs. I also use my sword a lot, and find my ministry often engages me in conflict, sometimes with the powers-that-be, sometimes with people outside our community who are challenged by my ideas, and sometimes even with folks inside my church community. I cannot escape conflict, and often tease that the one thing I’m really good at in life is making enemies! I can almost do it in my sleep. As much as I prefer and love peace, it seems impossible for me to avoid conflict, at least not without running away, without being cowardly. So, instead, realizing I must engage in conflict in order to promote my love of life, I continually polish my sword by finding ways to improve my ministerial understanding and skills.

I have no doubt all of us has a similar sword, a vehicle through which we can courageously promote and protect life. For some it might be as a teacher helping to shape young minds, or as a hospice worker assisting others as they pass from this life, or volunteering at the crisis hotline offering compassion to a troubled soul, or as a research scientist discovering new medicines and cures, or a musician reminding us all of the pleasures life has to offer. “Iron is full of impurities that weaken it,” Ueshiba said,

“through forging it becomes steel and is transformed into a razor sharp sword. Human beings develop in the same fashion.”<sup>18</sup> Whatever our sword is, it’s essential that we discipline ourselves by polishing it, making it shine, reflecting our love of life through service to life.

It reminds me of that great line in the film *City Slickers* when an old cowboy asks, “You know what the secret to life is? ...One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean shit.” When asked what that one thing is, he responds, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.” Certainly life isn’t so simple it can be reduced to “one thing.” Life is always complicated and complex. But maybe, in his own way, this rugged old cowboy was referring to the proverbial sword all of us carry inside us. Maybe, in the midst of everything else required of us, the one thing we can’t lose sight of is our sword, our ability and obligation to promote and protect life. What is your sword? Well, maybe, as Curly explained, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

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<sup>1</sup> Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995, xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Saotome, Mitsugi, *Aikido and the Harmony of Nature*, SEDIREP, Courbevoie, France, 1986, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Perrin, Noel, *Giving Up the Gun*, David R. Godine, Publisher, Boston, MA, 1979, 1999, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, John, trans., *The Art of Peace*, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 1992, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, Krishna Kripalani, ed., Continuum Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1980, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Stevens, *ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Perrin, *ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ueshiba, *ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 56.