

## A Very Spiritual Teacher

Way back in the 1980s, a student of Aikido and T'ai chi, a lot more granola-crunchy in her attitudes than was comfortable for me, told me that I was a “very spiritual teacher”. Frankly, I was insulted. To me “spiritual” was only one step above “irrational”. Most religions made no sense to me, most new-age beliefs seemed like utter hokum, and I aspired to be as rational as Spock even if my preference in lifestyle was as romantic as a certain Boris Pasternak novel. Telling me I was “spiritual” was like telling me that I expected students to follow me as if I were a guru so that I could advise them as to how to navigate their lives in the universe.

Perhaps I reacted so negatively to her claim because I had just mentally abandoned the idea of my rôle as sensei being precisely that: an orchestrator of students lives, as if I knew, by virtue of a few ranks in a few martial arts, how to help students navigate their out of dojo lives. Just as likely, I reacted so negatively because I did not understand exactly what she meant. I had seen far too many martial arts instructors take advantage of their students (sometimes financially, sometimes sexually) because their students considered them “spiritual teachers” and, looking for their way in life, the students trusted that Sensei Spiritual would guide them. I therefore was not open to a softer, less imposing concept of “spiritual”.

Recently, I read a book by Mike Dooley called *Life on Earth*, an ambitious title that sounds much more biological than it is. Dooley is a regular Joe who happened to take a path in life that took him away from a career as an international tax consultant for Price Waterhouse and into a field that some consider “metaphysical”. His book is about spiritually creating one’s own destiny. In the recommended reading section, he cites many “spiritual” writers like Kahlil Gibran (*The Prophet*), Louis Hay (*You Can Heal Your Life*), Rhonda Byrne (*The Secret*), and Ayn Rand. What, Ayn Rand? He writes, “Although Ayn Rand was an atheist, I believe her books are extremely spiritual in that she...reveled in the glory of life and our ability to master life’s elements.” I had long been an advocate of Rand’s *rational* observance of the world and her ability to extend that into realistic albeit romantic fiction. That brought me back to that student’s claim that I was “a very spiritual teacher”.

Both Rand and Dooley, regardless of your evaluation of their “spirituality”, both advocate for the recognition of **positive human potential**, a concept that it is difficult not to support. And here is where my student recognized something in me that I did not recognize (or at least took for granted) in myself. To her, I was setting an example of aiming high and setting out on the journey regardless of the time it might take to reach the heights. Not only did I think I could make it, but I (evidently) imbued my students with the idea that they could, too. Ironically, again, even though I believe the journey is never completed, one does arrive at some plateau that is high enough so that those around you look up to it.

One more irony: after going through a divorce, I started dating the granola-crunchy student of Aikido and T'ai Chi, even though we disagreed about most major subjects. Not only did I feel she supported and respected me, but also she would listen carefully to my counterarguments and often say, “I never thought of it

that way." I doubt if I ever changed her mind about anything, but we could amicably agree to disagree and still respect each other. An additional reason that relationship was important to me is that there were probably other things that I did not see in the way she would have wanted me to see them. Since I always wanted to make sure I got as much of the whole picture as I could before settling on my opinions, having a friendly opponent who was also an advocate helped.

Is that being spiritual or rational? Maybe both.