The Point: Giri

John has been our next door neighbor for at least fifteen years. No one has seen him for about eight weeks now. His cars are gone. A neighbor called the police to check on him. The police told me his door was unlocked and it appears he took a few things and just left. They said he did not leave a forwarding address. Another neighbor said the City workers came by to shut off his water.

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Since his grass hasn't been cut since last year, I decided I should at least try and cut what I could. My wife said, "that's trespassing". I replied, "maybe in Chicago, not here." I have a great deal of spine pain and I was stopped by the first neighbor who has a riding mower. He offered to finish. I later told the second neighbor what the police told me and mentioned we had cut John's grass. The second neighbor said he will cut the grass the next time since he also has a riding mower. I really need to get one of those, maybe with heavy duty seat springs and a snack tray. Although John always kept to himself, he's a pretty decent guy. Without being asked, he helped the second neighbor pour a concrete driveway. John also started cutting my grass along the side where our houses meet. He said, "It makes sense, I have a riding mower and you don't." Last year, I chopped and dug out the weeds along side his house since he has an allergy of some sort. It was my way of repaying him. It is giri. Giri is the Japanese word for obligation. When someone does something for you, although they don't expect repayment, the obligation is implied. If I shovel your snowy sidewalk because you are ill, I don't expect anything in return. But, if my lawn mower is in the shop while my grass gets knee deep, the honorable thing for you to do is make a few swipes when you're cutting your own lawn. Giri demands it. Most Americans used to understand this, before we became a majority nation of teenage attitudes. Self reliance and obligation have become passé. It's nice to know there are others, at least in my neighborhood, who still get it. We will continue to take care of John's place until we find out what has happened to him. Giri demands it. The reason we have Japanese karate in this country is because our Japanese teachers were told America will be their new home. There was no questioning or whining. None of: "but sensei, where will I stay?", "but sensei, how will I eat?", "but sensei, I will miss my family." Self reliance and commitment were expected. The student held an obligation to the teacher. Giri. I don't really want to go to the GKK Fiftieth Celebration. My spine has deteriorated. I've been off work since August and was terminated a few weeks ago because of it. The five hour ride alone will be quite uncomfortable. I will not be participating in any of the seminars. But I will go anyway. There really isn't a valid reason why I shouldn't, because for every excuse I could come up with, everyone, deep down inside would know better. More importantly, I would know better. Giri would be violated. It would say to my mentors "thanks for helping me, but....." I learned years ago that I never regret forcing myself through a workout, regardless of how much it hurt, and I always regret not at least trying. Even if I put my workout clothes on and just do a few minutes of training, I can say to myself I made an effort. Sometimes you can't do all, but you can always do some. The funny thing is, many times I start with zero enthusiasm and end up doing well, glad that I didn't take the easy way out. So I have to attend. If not, I will regret it. I will hurt the feelings of those who have worked so hard for this momentous event. I would risk insulting those who have kept our organization alive and well all these years. Yeah, I'd be forgiven - my excuses accepted with a courteous nod. But it would also mean I have missed the entire point of traditional Japanese karatedo.....the development of character.