Karate Spirit and Limitations

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However, the common element is now clear to me: it is that our mental state determines how we deal with loss; whether we suffer needlessly, or whether make the most of what has been provided to us. I’ve seen people with end-stage AIDS fighting to live every day, and finding meaning in their lives, even if that life is made more difficult by the ravages of disease. I’ve learned that these people display true karate spirit. When I first began my goju studies, I was older than most beginners. I was over 40, flabby, and out of shape. I turned to karate out of disgust with my physical condition. Of course, karate has helped me become physically more fit, but the mental and spiritual benefits were unclear to me in the beginning. For the first few years, as I slowly advanced, I would often look at the younger, more athletic karateka and think to myself, “what am I doing here? I will never be able to perform as well as those others. Therefore, I am a failure in karate.” What’s even harder to own up to is my envy of my more athletic colleagues; I’ve wished over and over that I could be more like them. Over the years, by confronting myself, I’ve developed a stronger sense of my own value and kept the envy at bay. I now know that many other karateka suffer with that kind of self-negating thinking; most of them just quit rather than confront themselves. My first big lesson in the dojo was to understand that karate is not about beating others or gaining external praise or acclamation; it’s about a personal, internal journey to make oneself a better person. My first Sensei, Jim Hagan, had a valuable policy — no student was promoted until sensei Hagan perceived that student to be working to get better, not for promotion. And I gradually realized that while I may not have great athletic ability, I have the perseverance to stick with something as long as it takes. In fact, it took me a dozen years to reach Shodan (1st degree black belt), a longer journey than anyone else in our dojo’s history. I now feel good about this rather than ashamed. From Sensei Bill Kane I learned this lesson: the true spirit of karate is to make the best of the cards you have been dealt, to find a path to self-development no matter what obstacles lie in your path. And thereby help others by example. I began my study of Tai Chi Chuan as I approached my Shodan. My main purpose was to help me become more fluid and graceful in my karate practice. I got that and a lot more! Tai Chi has helped to bring out the “softness” in me, to my great benefit. It has helped lower my stress, reduce my blood pressure, improve my karate practice, enhance my strength and balance, and even helped me sleep better. I recently found out from an international Karate Master that Tai Chi is a strong influence on the karate that I practice. Our dojo joined GKK (one of the largest national goju-ryu organizations) 7 or 8 years ago, and this was another major step forward for me. Kyoshi Brad Smith visited us regularly, and helped reinforce the idea that karate spirit is what it’s all about, and each student has to find her own path to development, powered by the karate spirit. One of the most treasured compliments I have ever received was a GKK award for “the most improved student”, which I took to mean respect for my commitment to karate. I strongly resonate with the GKK principle of helping others; this principle helps to guide me in my role as instructor within the dojo, and in my life outside the dojo. To me, helping others is not just to show them the correct techniques, but at least as important to help them to understand the karate spirit. Two years ago, I was diagnosed with a severe arthritic condition in my hip, which prevents me from executing strong kicking techniques. My first reaction was to feel sorry for myself, and that my karate career was over. Sensei Bill Kane reminded me of the Chinese wisdom that every disaster brings opportunity. Feeling supported, I have become more of a teacher and less of a performer. It’s not that I don’t have feelings of inadequacy because of my performance limitations; I do have these feelings and also pain, but I press on anyway. And I have come to accept and even embrace my changed role. I realize that because of my own physical limitations, I may be in an even better position to understand and help other students with limitations.