The Point: The Sixty-third Page

by Bill Handrin "Cognitive Dissonance: When people recognize inconsistent views within themselves, they tend to alter their thinking to remove the conflict. A mundane example is the tendency of people to value a product more highly after they buy it. It's hard for people to think of a product as worthless, and think of themselves as smart consumer at the same time, so they often come to think of their purchases as being worth more than they would if they hadn't bought the item." - Clara Moskowitz My ninth grade English teacher reminded me of Robert DeNiro in Taxi Driver. I swear she got up early and practiced her icy stare every morning before school. She seemed to hate kids and I had to wonder why she chose teaching as a profession. But then again, it was a rough school and for all I know she was a nice person when away from that place. At the beginning of each school year, we were given our textbooks. We were to inspect them and then sign our names on the inside of the book's cover. My name would be the 14th. English doesn't change all that much, so new books were a rarity.

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My name would be the 14th. English doesn't change all that much, so new books were a rarity. Uh, oh! My book was missing the first 62 pages! That meant I would have to tell the teacher and I didn't really want her to notice me. In a class of fifty, I figured I could Ensign Pulver my way through the year and stay hidden. However, I would be held responsible for the missing pages at the end of the year if I didn't say something. I had no choice. The air temperature felt fifteen degrees colder as I reached her desk. She knew I was standing there but didn't bother to acknowledge my presence. "Uh, Mrs. Conner?" She looked at me over the rims of her glasses and didn't say a word. "I'm missing the first sixty-two pages in my book." She took the book, inspected it, and handed it back without saying a word. She went back to working on whatever it was she had been doing. After a minute or so, I said: "Uh, Mrs. Conner, what should I do?" This wasn't going to be my day. "What should I do? What should I do?" - her voice rising in pitch and loudness. "How about sitting with the person next to you until we get to page sixty-three? Do I have to do your thinking for you?" I skulked back to my seat muttering profane insults under my breath. All the bars of soap in town wouldn't have washed out my mouth. Yet, I sort of understood. I wasn't asking her advice on what to do. I had already figured out I could wing it until that sixty-third page. I just didn't want to get blamed for the book damages. It wasn't a stupid question. The only stupid question is the one that isn't asked. And the most cowardly thing one can do is to let their fears keep them silent. Yet, when most students study karate they shut down their minds and blindly believe. Perhaps the black belt intimidates. Perhaps when they question something in their own minds, they are afraid of looking stupid by asking the question. After all, everyone else is going along with the program. Even those who have the intestinal fortitude to raise a question will accept a silly answer and let it go. I am amazed how many who are asked a question which they are unable to answer won't say "I don't know." They give an answer which is almost comical and defies the laws of physics much less common sense. So much for being humble. After awhile cognitive dissonance sets in. The student has spent so much time and effort perfecting the very things he has doubts about, he must justify those efforts. So he alters his line of thinking or simply ignores that inner voice that keeps saying: "what the..?" By the time most reach dan grade, there is no longer room for differing opinions. The little voices have been comfortably silenced After a couple of years in tae kwon do, I walked away. I could no longer make myself believe. The kata, or hyungs had nothing to do with the sparring techniques. Not surprising, since the kata were taken from Shotokan, and a colorful history was cobbled together to give them a Korean lineage. The self defense techniques were optimistic - against a knife attack - crescent kick the arm, turn and jump side kick, drop and do a spinning foot sweep. The Shaw brothers would have loved it, but one would get shish-kabobbed if it were for real. Considering the hours and effort I spent every day for those years, it wasn't an easy decision. But it was a wise one. I eventually settled on Goju; not because it isn't without flaws. It just has less than most. It is like a drafty, bouncy truck that gets one where he wants to go. Funny thing is, the tae kwon do gave me a leg up in a way. One of the weaknesses of Goju is in kicking and I kept up with those, mostly because I thought they were cool. Maybe there is no such thing as completely wasting time. All arts have their strengths and weaknesses. I'm not writing anything new here, we have all heard this, although those who say it are vehemently dedicated to their art. But, many eventually realize they can keep their core art and round out things by adding a bit in their own personal practice. Sort of like a major in college with a minor in a related field. One can't wear a suit that doesn't fit and it's not practical to alter the wearer. Most high ranking Japanese karateka have dan rank in judo. It demonstrates that many will eventually come full circle. They rediscover their beginner's mind. Mrs. Conner is dead now, probably teaching in hell with steamed over glasses. Who knows, maybe we will meet. Then, since I am no longer a young student in her class I can answer her question: "No...you don't"