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Rank Gains Meaning by Being Meaningless by David M. Valadez

The mysteries of life have always amazed me. The complexity of relationships that come to create one thing, or to give another thing meaning, etc., have always caused me to pause and wonder in awe. Under such moments, my mind echoes with the phrase, “I don’t know,” as I face the greatness before me. The phrase is an expression of how little I truly understand. The phrase is a by-product of the humility that is forced upon me as I come to realize how much of nothing I truly am in light of all that is around me.

As a teacher, I have a belief, a position I adopt for reasons I hold to be valid concerning how and why we train. That is to say, I aim those that train under me as I aim myself in a particular direction. It is merely one direction out of countless others, but it is mine and I am responsible for it. I design it. I tweak it if and when necessary. I add to it, I subtract from it, and if need be, I reject whole parts of it. As teacher, I am equally engineer and equally artist as I come to construct this pedagogy and apply it on an individual basis. Yet, with my hands in the mix, the product or the result that comes about still always puts me in that same state of awe where I face a greatness that is no doubt beyond me. I am in awe of how many things went in to making that end result, and how little and meaningless I truly am in lieu of that great multiplicity. I see the surety of such things as equally as I see the fragility of such things. I see how things could have gone no other way as I can see how easily they in fact could have, and again, the phrase enters my head, “I don’t know.”

I do not know truly why some things fit together just right at just the right moment, and at other times not. I can see my hands in the design, but I can also see how meaningless that all can be. At a moment’s notice, for reasons often too small to notice, things can be different; the placement of my hands can become completely irrelevant. At those times, I sit back and realize how small my role truly is in this training – in the grand scheme of things. This I am able to notice at those times because it is easy to see how irrelevant my own will is to such processes. Increasingly, I realize that training is about what one brings to it themselves. Thus, my role as teacher has to be a matter of merely being a place to which folks can bring great deals of themselves. Teaching thus requires much more receiving than we would first think. By contrast, learning must also involve much more giving than we would first think.

Giving and taking, receiving and offering, these things intermix in a ballet of productivity that can only be known and/or deemed efficient at the moment its elements are the most beyond our individual control. It is most likely that we will seldom be able to follow one effort, or one action, directly to its corresponding end-result. In this way, we come to training as farmers to a field. We plant what we long for, knowing we can only reap what we sow, and we await upon a platform of faith that such will again be true – that Nature

in its complexity will again come out in our favor. This faith should be understood in practical terms. Faith should always carry with it a sense of work, of investment. We are proactive in our Faith, or we have none.

We, teacher and student, alike, must have this same proactive faith in our training. Like the farmer, we can only reap what we sow. We are both caretakers and takers of care when it comes to our training. We are both planters and plant. We train like this, or we do not train. A teacher makes sure his/her fields are healthy and fertile. In this way, a teacher grows in his/her capacity as teacher. A student must come to this fertile field and seek to make ample use of it. It will not nurture one on its own, and it will not grow what has not been planted. In this way, when I look upon my own students, I see that their accomplishments are a product of their own work, their own faith, their own investment. Without such things, as a teacher, I stand only over a field of dirt. For this reason, I am always in an awkward balance of pride and humility when I see all that people have accomplished or have been able to accomplish at the dojo. I am a part of it, and yet I am not a part of it.

I am able to stand back, as if I have played no role whatsoever, and look upon the glory that has sprouted because of someone else's hard work. It is the kind of glory that is self-evident for all that gaze upon it; it needs not my approval or my authorization – as it should be. It is the kind of glory that makes my awarding of rank, or my commending of any kind, post hoc. Under such considerations, one may then look upon the awarding of rank as meaningless. However, the opposite is what is true. It is when the awarding of rank becomes meaningless that such an act has fulfilled itself the most. This is because it is only when such has happened that a deshi can honestly say that he/she wears not a belt, a rank, or a title, but instead wears a true recognition of what is one's own regardless.