

Virtue of the Sword

by James Williams

Training in various, seemingly antiquated, military arts is becoming increasingly common in our 21st century society. Why pursue these arts that require so much effort, discipline, and often pain? Why do we seek to test ourselves in struggle and training for combat? What brought us to these arts, and what do we hope to get out of this training?

I am frequently asked why I practice and teach classical warrior skills and adhere to a philosophy that appears outdated to many. The sword has defined the warrior for thousands of years. It has defined the power, ethics, duty and self-defense of a class of people who have shaped the face of civilization on this planet. The skill, exercise, mental development, and sheer pleasure of using a sword is unique. Hand-to-hand combat with edged weapons is the most demanding form of human physical combat. It not only requires the most skill, both physical and mental, it develops in the adept abilities that separate him from others and elevates intuition, reflexes, and technique to the highest degree. For the warrior, the sword represents his duty, his honor and his responsibility.

This is, for the most part, no longer a society that values the warrior and his virtues. Ours is a society that has forgotten the sacrifices and struggles of so many who came before them, the fruit of whose effort and sacrifice we daily enjoy; it is a society that will ask of its military, but not honor or care for its men. It is a society where virtue is often looked at askance, where character is not required of those who would seek to lead us. A society that enjoys enormous plenty yet denies its military the necessary munitions to train to protect this very wealth. Why do a significant number of its citizens seek training and embrace virtues that seem passé? Perhaps not all have forgotten that less than 60 years ago the entire world was involved in a great struggle to determine if a free nation could exist. Most of us know someone who participated in that struggle and through whose efforts we have the gift of choice and plenty which seems to be taken so lightly by so many.

Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.

Winston Churchill

"For without victory there is no survival." These words define the role of the male in history, his service to life. The harsh reality of freedom in a nation, a fact that is overlooked or denied by many, is that our freedom is the direct result of our strength. It was by struggle and conflict that we became free and have kept ourselves that way. We have received from our ancestors, at great cost, a precious gift that must be cherished and nurtured if we are going to pass it on to our children. It must be protected, fought for if necessary, and we must not let this gift be taken from us by those whose rhetoric and actions are nonsense. These are people who seek things for themselves at the expense of the whole.

Freedom means responsibility and that is why most men shun it.

George Bernard Shaw

Everywhere that you look in history this is the case. When our strength goes we will no longer be free. We will be dictated to and ruled by those stronger than ourselves. Does this mean that it is necessary to cultivate aggression and belligerence? Absolutely not! It does, however, mean that we need to cultivate in ourselves those virtues that guide a free people:

courage, honor, truthfulness, responsibility, perseverance, charity, strength tempered with compassion, discrimination tempered with tolerance.

Virtue as a prerequisite for freedom

It is the very cultivation of virtue that ensures the will and ability to be a free people. A society degenerates with the loss of virtue and the high regard in which it is held. This has been the lesson of history. It is always surprising to me that the events and lessons learned from the past are so quickly forgotten. It is as if we deliberately purge them from our memory. Human history is fraught with the folly of this peculiar mechanism, yet we continue it at our peril. "If you lose the past," the 9th century Chinese poet Meng Jiao says, "The will easily crumbles." This blurring and removing of the past is a valuable tool of social architecture as is evidenced in modern China, one of many such examples in the 20th century. The misinformation and dis-information that make up so much of our current social and political agenda separates us from our past. This deliberate perversion of truth should be anathema to those who value virtue. It is anathema because those who use it seek to change the order of society with falsehoods. As warriors we do not have to go far back into history to find instances where the courage and sacrifice of a few have so benefited the whole. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." These words were spoken by Prime Minister Winston Churchill in reference to the debt owed by the British people to the RAF during the Battle of Britain.

The reason we are called to cultivate classical warrior skills and virtues is out of a feeling of duty to the whole of society. We prepare ourselves for those times when we may be called upon to protect and defend. Any other reason is selfish and ultimately self-destructive. Being tough and a good fighter is not in and of itself noble. For me, training in kenjutsu and related military arts prepares me to be a good citizen. It enables me to be of assistance when it is necessary to protect and defend. It teaches me self-discipline that I may moderate my behavior. I learn perseverance and courage in the face of difficulty so that I am not easily deterred. All of this adds up to the courage to live life not just for oneself but also for others. For me, teaching is giving to others what has been given to me. Like having children, it is the completion of the cycle. What a benefit it will be to society as a whole if those of us who aspire to a noble nature strive to imbue society with care, commitment, and positive action! Look out for and protect those in need! Support each other when faced with those of evil nature who would prey on the weak and defenseless!

The noblest aspects of human consciousness, our virtues, become passé ever more quickly as we find substitutes for living a life connected with the reality of our existence. The less we grow, hunt, and gather our food, the less directly involved we are in protecting ourselves and our families and nation, the more readily we lose our virtue. The less we know of and value our past, The less we honor those who, with their courage and sacrifice, have bequeathed to us our current state of freedom and plenty, the less likely we are to pass this enviable state on to those who follow us. Are we so self-absorbed that our decisions are made on the basis of our personal wants and our ease? Are we as a people so easily bought that we will sell our freedom and that of our children for comfort?

The Warrior as protector of society

The warrior protects and defends because he realizes the value of others. He knows that they are essential to society and, in his gift of service, recognizes and values theirs. This responsibility translates to children as well. When in a public bathroom, keep an eye on any

children that may be in there. Even wait an extra moment or two to make sure that they are safely out of the restroom before you leave. It is an unfortunate fact that public restrooms are frequented by pedophiles and potential kidnappers. Being a father myself I feel a serious responsibility to all children and hope that other males will help look after mine when I am not present. I cannot count the number of times that I have seen nervous mothers waiting outside of a public bathroom for a young son. Make a point, even to telling the mother, that you will keep an eye on the safety of her child in an area in which she cannot go.

There are other ways in which we can be of daily use. For instance, take the extra moment in dark parking lots at night to make sure that a woman gets into her car safely before leaving yourself. Daily involvement in acts such as these are as much a part of training as time spent in the dojo, and indeed should be the reason for that time spent training.

The role and ability to protect and defend does not give the warrior-protector the right to misuse this strength and knowledge. You are not superior to nor do you have the right to take advantage of others by means of this strength and ability. If you breach this trust and your sacred responsibility then you are not a warrior-protector. Over the centuries this power has been misused all too often in societies to dominate and control others. This is the dark side of power and has no place in the life of the warrior seeking to live a life of virtue.

When faced with a woman or child in a situation in which they are vulnerable, there are two types of men: those who would offer succor and aid, and those who would prey upon them. And in modern society, there is another loathsome breed who would totally ignore their plight!

I remember the first time my friends and I read about an incident that happened in New York City where a woman was attacked and eventually killed over an extended period of time. This was in the early 1960's, and I think the duration of the attack was 15 to 20 minutes. Neighbors in the area could hear her calls for help, however, no one had the courage to go to her aid. My friends and I were incredulous that something like this could take place in America. How could anyone, most especially men, hear a woman being murdered and not involve themselves in her defense. Many current laws actually place the person who would come to another's aid in legal jeopardy. Is this a sign of social and psychological health in a society?

In 1977 I was teaching and competing in boxing and kick boxing and teaching women and seniors self-defense through the Institute for Better Health in Santa Rosa, California. An incident took place in Rancho Cordova, California that had a big impact on me both as a man and a martial artist. This incident was a home invasion rape and murder. A husband and wife were both home when they heard a noise in the master bedroom. The man went to investigate and was confronted by an intruder with a knife who had entered through the bedroom window. Being threatened with the knife the husband capitulated and allowed himself to be led into the front room and tied to a chair. The criminal then raped the wife in front of the husband who could do nothing but watch. After finishing with the rape, the criminal got a hammer from the garage and proceeded to beat the husband to death in front of the wife. After he had brutally killed the husband he turned the hammer on the wife leaving her for dead. The wife, who was not dead, managed to crawl out of the house where neighbors heard her mewling and came to her aid. She suffered physical and emotional scars that marred her for life.

I often wonder what would go through a man's mind when he fails through fear and lack of training to fulfill his responsibility in such circumstances. We all have fear. That is why it is necessary to prepare, to train, to understand the part that we play in the dance of life.

How much more honorable, more noble, to have engaged the assailant, even if there was slim chance for personal victory, and in doing so give your wife the opportunity to escape! Preparation for such an eventuality could have provided a better outcome for both.

In 1984, a good friend of mine, Toby Threadgill, who now teaches samurai arts in Texas, was faced with a more difficult situation. He was awakened from sleep by two men who had followed his wife home from her nursing job late one night with the intention of raping her. One held a gun to his head while the other went looking for his wife. Realizing their intent, and at the risk of his life, my friend managed to disarm the gunman by driving him through a sliding-glass door. Then confronted by the knife wielding second man he managed, although sustaining a serious wound, to disarm and incapacitate him. Although a likable and easy going person, Toby had prepared himself mentally and physically so that when faced with a dangerous situation he had both the tools and the courage to use them. How much better the outcome!

Society becomes vulnerable to every kind of threat when men no longer feel the need to prepare themselves by acquiring skills to protect and defend society, especially women and children. When men no longer take responsibility for being male and when a sense of duty is replaced by self-concern and self-indulgence, society loses its greatest strength- the mutual caring and commitment of its citizens for each other.

Courtesy: a show of respect

Courtesy is an essential element for the warrior. It should be a defining act that can be practiced daily.

To be a samurai is to be polite at all times.

Hojo Nagauji

Chivalry frames an ideal of heroic character. It combines invincible strength and valor, justice, modesty, loyalty to superiors, courtesy to equals, compassion for the weak, and devotion to God; it is an ideal which, even if never achieved in real life, has been widely acknowledged as the highest model for emulation.

These acts of courtesy are first and foremost for yourself. The respect and care that you have for yourself can then extend to other human beings. This altruistic value and most virtues are being sacrificed to the right of the individual to every form of indulgence. And, in that very process, the individual is then pressured to conform to the mores of the current political thinking of the State.

Showing courtesy is indicative of inner strength and security as a male. Courtesy is the lubricant of a culture, and should be the hallmark of the warrior. No situation is made worse by the exercise of courtesy and many situations are made the better for it. I enjoy showing courtesy towards women in the many ways that are available. When I hold a door open for a woman or help her carry an object, it is not that I think that she is not capable of doing it for herself. I do it in recognition of her intrinsic value to society and to me. Men are respected and shown courtesy as they earn the right. This process of earning respect is an important part of its value. The word loses its meaning and value in an atmosphere where many think that respect should be given just because a person exists regardless of his actions or value to the society.

An attitude of self-concern has grown more prevalent as our lives have become easier. Risking oneself for others or for a principle is less and less common. We have become less

committed to each other and have created a world in which we seemingly do not need each other to survive. Virtues such as courage, honor, and integrity even carry a stigma in some circles. The very foundations of character are under attack by those who do not understand that there is nothing noble in being human without these virtues

It is not the role of everyone to be a warrior, however, those of us who respond to this calling should train and study to be the best that we are able. There are many guides and heroes that we can look to as warriors, and not all are male. One of mine, Mother Teresa, has just recently died. I find great inspiration in her life. Here is someone who found her life purpose and lived it steadfastly and, from my standpoint, even gloriously by giving to those too wretched for others to even consider. The courage, love and selfless sense of service that she displayed should serve to inspire us all. If I can live my life while giving just one fraction of what she gave to others it will be an accomplishment. Teaching then becomes a means whereby we can pass on to others the knowledge and wisdom acquired from those who have preceded us. It is not about self-aggrandizement or superiority. It is not about titles and rank, or organizations or profit. Most of the time I feel that I am learning more from my students than they are learning from me. The teacher becomes the student and the student the teacher. Neither can exist without the other.

As human beings we are all different. Having different skills, strengths, or abilities does not mean that an individual does not have abilities that benefit himself and society. I shun the sameness that is a part of much of modern social theory. It is abhorrent and detracts from what makes us human. I am a large, strong male, over six feet tall and weighing over 200 pounds who has spent the majority of his adult life involved in military and combative activities, studies and training. My wife is a foot shorter and over 100 pounds lighter. We are physically suited for different tasks in life. I respect and cherish her strength and femininity. And the more so because I have been at her side, in what limited capacity a man may provide, while she bore our two children with only her courage and my meager assistance and encouragement to sustain her.

When the choice is between cowardice and violence, I would strongly recommend violence.

Mohandus Gandhi

We are no longer training our children, especially our young men, to deal with pain, defeat, and discomfort with a brave heart and stoic spirit. We seem to think that by removing consequences for their actions we are actually benefiting them. They do not build true character based on trial and effort.

When there is no pain, no death, no challenge, no struggle, no adversity, and no disappointment we will lose the best part of being human. When we structure a life and society devoid of every human challenge there will be no courage, no perseverance, no honor, no compassion, no caring, and no commitment. We will have lost the best parts of who we are because we will have let our fear steal them from us. We will no longer need each other and this will be the greatest tragedy.

Being a warrior means being committed to making the ultimate sacrifice and also committing the ultimate act. The gentleman warrior must take responsibility for his actions and use his power for the good of society and his fellow human beings. As the old samurai saying goes, "To kill when it is right to kill and to die when it is right to die!" In a similar vein, the code of the Sumerian warrior-king stated that he was to act as the shepherd of his people. The role of the warrior as a stabilizing influence in civilized society and protector of the weak is as old as civilization itself.

Sparta vs. Greece

Many, women more often than men, feel that being a warrior means being an oppressor. History, however, does not necessarily bear out this idea. In Sparta, the strongest warrior culture that the Greeks produced, the woman had the most freedom of any Grecian woman of the time. The women, received much the same education as the young men, and shared a life with their men far closer than did the women of Athens.

In sexual matters, the Spartans, true to their nature, seem to have had the highest rate of monogamy in all of Greece. They held their woman in high esteem and Spartan women had greater equality than their Grecian sisters who were treated according to the more Oriental standards towards women of the rest of Greece.

The Spartans were also renowned for their virtue and being the most pious of all Greeks. There is a story told by Plutarch about the Spartans at one of the Olympiads. In the crowded throng at the Olympic games, an old man was looking in vain for a seat from which to watch the events. His stumbling attempts to find one were noticed by many Greeks from other states, who mocked him for his age and difficulty in finding a seat. When, however, he came to the section where the Spartans were seated, every man among them rose to his feet and offered him their seats. Somewhat abashed, but nevertheless admiringly, the other Greeks applauded them for their behavior. "Ah," the old man is reported to have said with a sigh, "I see what it is. All Greeks know what is right, but only the Spartans do it."

Woman also fared well in other warrior societies. Viking woman owned their own property and could divorce their husbands if they were mistreated. The Celts of Britannia often had women as rulers and many tribes were matriarchal. It is false to think that because men are warriors that it follows that they look down on women.

Peace and pacifism are not congruent with each other. Albert Einstein realized the 1930's that his pacifistic approach to Nazi Germany would not work.

"He experienced that the ultimate ethical values, on which all human existence is based, must, as a last resort, be defended even by force and with the sacrifice of human lives..."

Max Born on Albert Einstein's realizations prior to the Second World War.

How can we forget the courage and sacrifice of those that have gone before us in providing us with freedom and plenty. How can we not take up the torch to provide this same freedom to those who come after. We should honor all who have given of themselves with the ultimate sacrifice that provides us with what we not enjoy, even if this sacrifice was long ago and far away.

"Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here, according to her laws we lie."

Epitaph written by the poet Simonides at the ancient monument celebrating Spartan courage and sacrifice at Thermopylae that was instrumental in holding off the Persians under Xerxes and preserving the concept of democracy for the world to come.

Virtue must be taught and practiced; it must be nurtured and passed to each generation. Freedom must be taught and practiced as well. If not, it easily perishes. Virtue and freedom

go hand in hand. Not to cherish the one is not to cherish the other. A society that loses the warriors' virtues is the poorer for it and will soon be a society whose freedoms are lost. The male has a genetic prime directive—a service to life—to protect and defend. In this service he is historically more expendable than the female and the children. Every man is responsible for defending every woman and every child. When the male no longer assumes this role, when he no longer has the courage or moral responsibility, society will cease to value honor and virtue. Neither laws nor government can replace this personal caring and commitment. In the absence of the warrior-protector, the only way that a government can protect a society is to remove the freedom of its people. And in such a society, the sons and daughters of lions become sheep.