

From the Teacher's Corner:

Journey

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I recently watched an old movie which some of you might remember called *Quest for Fire*, an underrated but absolutely brilliant film. The story takes place 80,000 years in the past and introduces us to a tribe of primitive men who guard their most precious possession, which is fire. They know how to tend it and how to use it, but not how to make it. A rival group comes and attacks their tribe and their fire gets extinguished. The tribe then tasks three men with a journey to go find fire and bring it back. After a series of adventures, eventually the men discover another tribe, a more advanced tribe, a group of people that live in primitive huts and know how to make fire and have even developed values, culture, arts, and a rudimentary system of language. The leader of the three men learns how to make fire from the fire master and brings the secret back to his tribe.

The story is quite simple. It is, at the core, a basic man versus nature survival story. But there's much more to it than that. It's also a story about the journey from being crude and base to becoming more enlightened, from being naïve to becoming wise and experienced. The trio's journey takes them to places and circumstances that alter their world and their view of that world forever. When they return to their tribe, they are no longer the same people as when they had left. On the surface, you have physical signs of this transformation. The leader Naoh brings back a fiancée/ mate, a girl from the advanced tribe who befriended them. They learn the secret of fire. But on the inside, they have a greater and new sense of confidence, having survived various trials such as escaping from saber-tooth tigers, fighting cannibalistic tribes and even rivals from their own tribe, and being held as prisoners by another tribe. So, their story is one of many journeys, physical but also spiritual. The young travellers grow up and become more mature through their travels.

The day after I saw this film, I found that I was still thinking about it. I couldn't put my finger on it right away but the movie had made a powerful impact on me. But once I started thinking about the story of the three travellers, I saw parallels to my own life and those of my students. Every martial arts teacher will have gone through a journey similar to the one portrayed in this story of the three tribesmen, albeit a metaphorical one.

The tribe then tasks three men with a journey to go find fire...

If we put this into martial arts terms, it is a journey in search of knowledge or discovery, to learn something. Some martial artists do plan these trips with the express purpose of going to learn their art further. The knowledge in the world outside of the original birth place of the art is typically, though not always, scarce and limited. To learn more about the art, they have to travel to the place of origin.

“To reach a house, you must first enter the gate. The gate is a pathway leading to the house. After passing through the gate, you enter the house and meet its master. Learning is the gate to reaching the Way. After passing through this gate, you reach the Way.”

*Yagyu Munenori
Heiho Kaden Sho*

*Do you want something special and unique?
Then you have to make that journey.*

I know that the advice given to many prospective students is that they should study at whatever is the local dojo. For the vast majority of students, yes, I completely agree. That is the most logical choice. Most ordinary students are really not that interested in pursuing a certain style or teacher. They may wish that a particular style was close by to their home but that is only wishful thinking. Would they make the journey, even to the next city or the next state to pursue training? In reality, no, they wouldn't.

Would they give up their lives for swordsmanship? To completely uproot yourself in the search for a particular style or teacher? No. 99% of the people out there would not. They would do what is either the most cost-effective or the most convenient, or both. So, for these prospective students, yes, find the closest teacher and go study there.

But for those special ones, the 1% who are really driven, to get that something special, you must put the Herculean effort to make that journey to get the prize.

Here's an analogy. My son who is finishing his last year of high school now faces a choice of which university to go to. You can check out each university's home page and watch their promotional videos online in the comfort of your home but to get a sense of the university and whether it will work for you or whether you like the ambience, you need to go see their campus, check out the department that you are applying to, and talk to some of the professors and graduate students. In our case, we must make that journey to go check them all out.

Later, my son himself will need to make a journey, that Herculean effort to go away from home, away from that comfort zone, to go seek his destiny at whatever university he ultimately chooses. Unfortunately, for the program he is applying for, there is no local university that has that specialty. If he just wants to do an ordinary degree (like economics or psychology or English literature, for example), every university has these programs. But he wants that one special program and it is only offered at three universities in Ontario. If he really wants it that bad, if he wants to be that kind of specialist, and wants that special learning and experience, that special professional designation, then he must make that journey.

Yes, most people are lazy and don't want to make that kind of supreme life-changing kind of decision. I don't want to say lazy but I can't think of a better word to substitute for it; perhaps indifferent or not driven? Regardless, it is too much sacrifice: of time, of money, of relationships (family, friends, girlfriends or boyfriends, etc...). But there is an old saying: if you put nothing into whatever it is that you are doing, you get very little out of it.

For example: would you uproot yourself and go to Japan to study under a certain master or a certain style? Most people would not. It's just too much commitment and too radical a change to one's life and lifestyle. Added to that, the uncertainty of a job situation and the resultant income. So, the decision comes down to what is most cost-effective and most convenient.

Let's get back to the university issue. Some people just want to go to the school (college or university) closest to their home. They feel comfortable there. You know the community, you know what to expect, you are close to friends and family in case you need help. Maybe you can live at home or else, you know the cheapest place to live or some friends you can live with, so it is more cost-effective for you.

Now what if you were given a choice: to go far away to a prestigious institution to study in a very specialized field with an excellent faculty, or stay close to home at a local university to study a common program with a standard faculty, which one would you choose? A tough decision.

In *Quest for Fire*, they had to make the journey to get that something special. The alternative was to continue to scrounge around locally (and eventually freeze to death – it is debatable whether they had the mental ability to be able to predict what would happen if they were unsuccessful in creating or finding fire nearby). But the wise man in their tribe knew they wouldn't find anything extraordinary close by. They needed to travel far to seek for this special something; in this case, it was special knowledge and technique. Ah ha! Just like my son's university issue.

Now there are other cases. If you are lucky enough that your local university is of a pretty good quality, like the University of Toronto or McGill, and they can get visiting professors from top-class universities to come and teach for a short time, like from Harvard or Princeton, you're in luck.

But it's not the same as going to Harvard or going to Princeton, to study there. There, you become part of the tradition, you feel the ambience, you live it and breathe it. You become it. It becomes part of you, that spirit, that knowledge, that tradition. It is completely different. And it is life-changing. Essentially this is exactly the story of Naoh and his companions.

So, *Quest for Fire* is a story about how even though our intrepid seekers are forced to travel to find a new fire, their experiences expand their horizons in ways they could never have anticipated. If their own fire hadn't gone out, they would never have met the clay people, the people who ultimately hold the key to their survival (the knowledge of the secret of making fire).

I want to elaborate on one thing in that previous paragraph that I just wrote. Notice that in their travels, their experiences "expand their horizons in ways they could never have anticipated". Yes, leave home. Expand your horizons. I was recently talking with someone at work, an older colleague, a very experienced teacher and told her about my son's situation where he would have to attend a university far from home. She said that was good. And then I mentioned that he would need to stay in residence or in off-campus housing; either way, on his own and far from home. Yes, she said, they need to experience it to learn how to grow up. That struck a chord with me. Yes, she is right. He needs to expand his horizons.

In my own case, when I had finished university the first time, I got an offer to go teach English in Japan. I wasn't sure what to do since I had no knowledge about Japan at all, except what

little we saw on TV back in those days, which wasn't much, and what we did see was the hokey Western view of Japan, like the mini-series Shogun. So I asked my Dad what he thought. Up to then, at that age, I was so cocky I thought I knew everything about everything. Well, now I was faced with a great unknown and I think subconsciously knew I was out of my depth here. He could have said many things. But here was a life-changing decision, one of those crossroads you come to in your life-path from time to time. You must choose a path and that path ultimately sets your life direction for a while, opening certain possible future pathways and closing others. He thought about it and eventually he said to me, "You should go. See another part of the world and expand your horizons."

To be honest, I was afraid. That's a big life-changing decision. I had been away from home before but never that far!! I guess I always knew that I could come home if I was really in trouble but here, in this case of going to Japan, there was no coming back. I would be signing a 2 year contract of employment and I am not one for breaking promises or commitments.

My father could have said, stay here and look for a job in Toronto with a big company. Get in and start to establish yourself. That would be the logical choice, right? I know. Many university students just want to graduate and get a job and get on with their life: making money, getting married, climbing the corporate ladder, establishing yourself. That's the typical life-path, the logical, conservative, cost-effective, most convenient choice. That's the answer I was expecting from my Dad.

But he did a complete 180 on me. He said something I had not expected. He told me to go seek my destiny. Basically, go find yourself. I was astounded and taken aback. But I had faith in his advice. He always gave good advice. Well, to make a long story short, he was right. It did change my life... completely. And it changed me completely too.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I had stayed. How it would have turned out. Well, I can say with some certainty that I would not be teaching Japanese swordsmanship, that's for sure. I wouldn't have had the pleasure of meeting some wonderful teachers in Yoshio Sugino Sensei (Katori Shinto Ryu), Takemi Sasamori Sensei (Ono-ha Itto Ryu), Masao Mutoh Sensei (Yagyu Shinkage Ryu), Takehiko Izawa Sensei (kendo, Muso Shinden Eishin Ryu iaido), or Yasushi Kajitsuka Sensei (Yagyu Shinkage Ryu). I certainly wouldn't be writing this article that you are reading.

So where is this meandering story going? Well, back to the original premise. Yes, you can stay and learn from the local teacher around the corner. And for the 99% of the people who venture into the martial arts, this is the best course of action. It is definitely the correct course of action for a beginner to take. Get into a martial art and learn something: how to coordinate and control your body, how to do kata, learn how to learn. Those are valuable things to learn.

But for those who complain or bemoan that fact that they cannot find a particular teacher or style nearby, well, the answer is simple. Go on that journey and seek out that master of that style you want to study.

There is an old saying in Japan: "Only the losers complain..."

The winners are the ones who are too busy working towards that goal to have time to sit around and moan and complain. If you want something bad enough, you will go get it.

So you just have to ask yourself a very simple question:

How badly do you want it?