

The New Door

“Old ways won't open new doors.” I finally walked through a different door when I stepped into Challenge Martial Arts. I discovered truth about the troubles of my life, building good character, and the importance of finding purpose in living my life well.

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“Old ways won't open new doors.” A long time ago I thought that I could pedal hard enough and long enough on my bicycle to figure out my life. I started in Washington on the West Coast and 49 days later, I finally arrived in Bar Harbor, Maine. After riding my bicycle 4,200 miles I knew one thing. I was tired! I was searching for truth and answers. I believed in God and I often would ask him to help me. I didn't stop searching. I ran marathons and I traveled. I traveled to 10 different countries, and I ran 11 marathons. Eventually, it became clear to me that what I was doing was not working, and after years of searching I finally opened a new door. I walked through the doors of Challenge Martial Arts. While searching for an activity for my children I found Challenge Martial Arts in Nikiski, Alaska. I had the option of sitting on the bench and watching the kids or joining the class. Around this time my oldest son had given me a paper that he had colored for me. I have it framed today, and it is hanging on my wall next to my row of colored belts, hanging medals, and cards of encouragement. He had no idea the impact that quote would have in my life. It reads, “Old ways won't open new doors.” There was no way that joining a taekwondo studio was what I was searching for, but it was a new door, and I was desperate for a new way. At that time, I was unable to recognize that the new door was a gift from God and that He wasn't asking me to walk through it alone.

I was very hesitant, but I put on the white uniform and made myself vulnerable enough to feel like a complete idiot. I joined taekwondo. I struggled to fold my arms across my body and block over my head. Everything I did was strange and unfamiliar. I didn't stay in taekwondo to get better at kicking, although it did bother me that I could barely kick above my knees. Learning how to kick

higher, though, was not reason enough to stay in the class; instead, the class discussions and activities were the reason that I came back each day. The class discussions provided an opportunity to ask questions without judgment and also to express my own beliefs and opinions.

In White Belt I learned two very important truths. Number 1: Life is hard! Number 2: It is okay to experience pain. I had never heard the first truth and I definitely did not agree with the second. Life was hard. Life is hard. I could breathe deeper saying that. I felt it, but I hadn't known it was okay to say it. I believed in God and that makes everything in life okay, right? It turns out that I wasn't crazy for feeling that life had been hard, unfair, and at times very painful; it was all true and in light of this truth my life made more sense. My goal in life had always been to avoid discomfort and find happiness. At a very young age I started to use drugs, alcohol, and an eating disorder to avoid emotional pain. When I walked through the doors of the taekwondo studio, I was still carrying addictions, chaos, panic, belligerence, hate, lies, and isolation. I wanted to get rid of what I had been carrying with me for most of my life and pick up the qualities of the Character Components that were being taught there. Two big words are printed on the wall of the studio: CONFIDENCE and CONNECTION. Above Confidence and Connection are the twelve Character Components: Compassion, Diligence, Grace, Integrity, Love, Patience, Peace, Respect, Self-control, True Humility, Trust, and Truth. Each month we study one of these Character Components. A White Belt is the very first belt you receive on your first day of class. For me it represented everything I had to learn. I didn't even begin to understand the monumental journey I had begun. I didn't even recognize how white my White Belt was. I was 38 years old - I knew things!

After a few months I tested for my Yellow Belt. Around this time, I started to feel some connections. I did not realize the importance of connections. The motto for Connections at the studio is

“Relationships shape me.” I was interacting with the other students and also with my Taekwondo Master. I would stay to talk to her after class or I would text her. I struggled through the class discussions and meditations. She would talk about being truthful and we would meditate using mantras. I wondered, “Why would Mrs. Fritsche tell me not to lie, but she would ask me to sit with my eyes closed and repeat, 'I like who I am'?” She explained to me that it didn't have to be true to say it to yourself because it was part of the process of teaching yourself to like who you are.

In Orange Belt, students start sparring with other students. I was not only ready to fight other students, but I was ready to take on my own personal battle. It wasn't going to be easy; I had fought this personal battle for decades and had lost. With my taekwondo training, my new Orange Belt, and this great big word, CONNECTIONS, I was willing to give it a shot. We earn character stars in taekwondo for demonstrating the Character Components outside of the studio, off of the mat, in life. These stars are tiny gold embroidered stars that we sew onto the sleeves of our uniforms. I wanted to try to have enough self-control to not engage in an eating disorder behavior for 30 days. Mrs. Fritsche agreed to give me a star if I was able to complete 30 days of self-control in an addiction that I had never been able to control. The accountability and connection were key to my success with self control during those 30 days. After the 30 days I received my star. It is sewn on the sleeve of my uniform next to my other stars. I had no reason to return to my old ways, but after the 30 days my distorted thoughts and illusions got in the way; I stopped having self-control and chose to go back to my old habit. Recovery from most addiction is not a straight path. My connection and accountability at Challenge Martial Arts gave me the strength to get back up and try again. So on September 29th, 2021 I again stopped. I have not completely defeated this eating disorder, but I have been able to control a behavior for the last two years that used to control me. Mrs. Fritsche shared a quote with me by Doe Zantamata, “Starting something new, or making big change requires effort, persistence, and motivation...doubt, fear, and

worry will only slow you down. Focus on doing your best now and celebrate every step of the way.”

In Purple Belt something changed for me. I was at home getting ready when I looked into our full-length mirror. I was so thrown off by what I saw that I went to find my husband. I asked him to look into the mirror. I asked him, “Is that reflection correct? Is that what I look like?” He was very confused and slightly concerned. He said very slow and deliberate, “Yes.” I asked again, “The mirror is okay? It isn't broken?” In the same slow and deliberate voice he answered, “No.” Hmm...this stuff at taekwondo must really be working. At the studio I had been saying, “I like who I am.” I didn't wake up that morning and look into the mirror to proclaim I like who I am. But I definitely noticed a slight, but significant change. I have struggled with my body image. Words I had used to describe parts of my body were, “ugly”, “fat”, and “defective”. This time looking at my reflection was different. I didn't have thoughts of self-criticism. For the first time, I was okay.

It wasn't just the mirrors at home that changed. I tested into Blue Belt and as I was preparing to move from an Intermediate to an Advanced Belt, I heard the same constructive criticism from most of the students and instructors: “Don't look down!” I didn't even recognize why my imaginary opponent was always down at my feet. One day I was working with Mrs. Fritsche in front of the mirror, and she told me to look up and look into the mirror. I explained to her that I didn't like looking at myself in the mirror and I didn't feel comfortable. She explained to me that I was looking at the wrong thing. I was not supposed to look into the mirror to criticize the way my uniform fit or my frizzy ponytail. I was looking at my front stance. Is my knee over my toe? Are my feet straight? Where is my block? Am I striking at the right level? For the first time I learned how to look into a mirror objectively. I had been a bully to myself my entire life. That taekwondo class didn't just teach me how to look up during my forms and improve my techniques, it taught me how to get up every morning and check myself in the

mirror without any of the negative self talk. Do my clothes match? Is my hair combed? That was it.

Brown Belt was the beginning of the Advanced Belts. I started to ask more questions. How had I accomplished biking across the United States, running marathons, and traveling the world without building confidence in who I was? I recognized that I had physical strength and endurance, but when it came to controlling my emotions, I was weak. Life was hard and my character lacked structural integrity; under the slightest pressure my character would crumble. I wanted to like who I was. In order to achieve that I had to make who I wanted to be line up with who I was. I wanted to be someone that I was proud of. Yasuhiro Konishi said, “Karate aims to build character, improve human behavior, and cultivate modesty; it does not, however, guarantee it.” Martial arts was the path to building my character, but I was the one that had to put in the work. Nobody could do it for me.

As I moved through the Advanced Belts, life didn't stop being hard and I hadn't completely stopped running from it. I was homeschooling my sons, working, and caring for my mother-in-law with dementia. I had made positive shifts in my life, but I was still working hard to avoid pain at all cost. I had ways to cope with the stresses of life that would allow me to escape the discomfort. In Red Belt during a drill, I heard Mrs. Fritsche say, “The longer you do hard things, the easier they get.” She was talking about a physical drill, but I knew it applied to another area of my life. I didn't consider myself an alcoholic. I wouldn't drink that often or that much. However, I did often drink for the wrong reason. I wanted to escape the way I was feeling. Not drinking alcohol felt harder than other things because I thought it was the last thing. I soon realized that this is a lifelong journey where I would continue to choose to do better every day. On February 3rd, 2023, I stopped drinking alcohol. All of my old ways of coping were gone. I was left with the pain. When I stopped drinking it didn't suddenly fix my problems. What it did was give me the opportunity to start working on them. It was time to get used to being comfortable with discomfort. It was time to build fortitude. This was definitely in line with my journey

to Black Belt.

Have you looked at the Challenge Martial Arts logo? The black on it represents the goal of martial arts training, a Black Belt. Do you know why the logo doesn't have straight lines? It is curved. Often in life there are unexpected curves in our journey. My Red High Belt had a curve in the path. It would be more accurate to describe this curve as a ginormous cliff. I dropped off the edge of the cliff and I fell so fast that I didn't know I was falling. I have struggled with anxiety. I had been working with a team of professionals outside of martial arts to improve my mental health. I was diagnosed with ADHD and started taking prescription medication to treat it. With my background of drug addiction, I came crashing down. If it wasn't for my connections at taekwondo and the people I have helping me, I would still be falling. Mrs. Fritsche encouraged me to get the help I needed from my medical doctor and get back on the path to Black Belt. She was not going to allow me to move into the next belt until I was back on a good path. I had a couple months to make better choices and climb back up onto my path to Black Belt. I made it. I was angry and tired, but I had already started to learn *in nae*. *In nae* is the Korean word for perseverance. I had learned to persevere and I wasn't going to give up now.

Having a White Belt tied around my waist was a new door and through it I found a new life. For so many years I thought I was chasing after happiness, but I had been running. I was running away from who I was. I know that I will never have perfect character, but I have decided that I will not use that as an excuse to do what I feel like doing instead of doing what is right. Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." I am still becoming familiar with this new way of life. Thirty-five years ago, I prayed and asked God for forgiveness and to "be in my heart". I was even baptized. I didn't grasp the gravity of that decision and what it meant in my life. I understand

more now than I did before, but I will never stop learning. I want to live my life trusting and obeying God. Maybe Christianity is similar to the Black Belt journey. I didn't really know what it meant to be a Black Belt. I couldn't wait to get my Black Belt, but the process between White Belt and Black Belt is where the transformation happens. You not only earn your Black Belt, but you *become* a Black Belt. I can't earn my salvation. Jesus already did that for me on the cross, but as I make the choice to live my life in obedience to God, I am transformed to reflect who He is and not who I used to be. The longer I stay on this path the more familiar it becomes. I am beginning to trust that this is the path that I want to be on.

With perseverance I passed my Black Belt Recommended test. My next test will be for my Black Belt. I often think about what will happen in my life after my Black Belt test. The lens of my life continues to expand. As my view expands outside of myself, I anticipate a lifetime of serving God. I want to make a difference in other people's lives in the same way that Mrs. Fritsche has made a difference in my life. After my Black Belt test, I am going to work just as hard to be a Black Belt as I did to become one.