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It's okay to stand out.

I started martial arts when I was in my thirties. I already had a few major accomplishments: graduating college, starting a non-profit organization, and adopting a daughter. I was used to achieving, working hard, and even being a leader. But I had always been uncomfortable—even actively against—standing out.

As a child, my parents were proud of me when I was quiet. I was younger than the children of their friends, so when they went out to lunch or dinner with friends, the other, older kids, either sat at a nearby table or went somewhere else to hang out together... without me. The older kids didn't want the little sister around. That meant that I either sat with the adults, or sat at a separate table alone. Whichever it was, I was expected not to speak, fidget, or in any way call attention to myself. These early experiences (from my earliest memories through my late teens) had a significant impact on how I saw myself. It wasn't that my parents didn't love me or appreciate me; it was just that they appreciated me most when I was quiet background.

Along the way, I also learned to value being unseen in other ways. I loved giving everyone in my family "Secret Santa" presents—I delighted in sitting to the side while everyone tried to figure out who did it. It tickled me that no one ever believed that it was me. When I played outside, if a car drove by, I practiced invisibility; I was sure that as long as I quietly and unobtrusively stood against a tree or laid low by some bushes, no dangerous people would notice me.

I also believed in humility and being a pacifist. I felt good when working behind the scenes—achieving without recognition. In high school and college, I studied behavior and learned about canine pack dynamics. I recognized myself as a beta—comfortable either supporting the leader or stepping up to be the leader when necessary. I strove to serve God in anything I did and to do my best at any task I was set to, whether it was filing alone in a back office or teaching a class of dog trainers. I felt happy either way, although I certainly was more comfortable in the back office alone.

I never considered myself particularly shy, just quietly comfortable. I now recognize myself as meek. I feel powerful. But only in service to God. God has blessed me with a lot of ability and I have studied and trained throughout my lifetime to maximize the potential that God created me with.

I remember a poster in elementary school that said, “If you can’t be better, be different.” I thought that sounded good and I told my Mom about it. She pointed out that different isn’t always acceptable. If it isn’t in accordance with God’s Will, then it’s wrong. Being different isn’t necessarily a substitute for being better and sometimes being better should not be dismissed as the goal. We should all strive to be better—regardless of how we may perceive our limitations.

This is all to say that by the time I started martial arts, I strongly preferred to be unnoticeable. Then I started taking classes that were nearly entirely populated by children. I’m only 5 foot 4 inches—on good days. I’m not used to physically standing out. It made me self-conscious. I towered over what felt like a sea of small people. I could not fool myself into thinking that no one in the audience noticed me. On top of that, I both struggled more than the other students and excelled. It took me longer to learn techniques and to memorize forms than it took the kids. My health was poor, my joints unstable. The super fit and physically gifted twenty year old instructors struggled to deal with me and my limitations. On the other hand, once I learned, my technique was often better than those of other students. I

worked harder. I drove myself to perform fiercely at testings and to win in sparring. I became known as a head hunter. Instructors made a big deal to the other students about sparring with me—they set me up as a challenge for any of the other students to deal with.

And somehow, without consciously setting out to, I began to see myself differently. I began to see that standing out can be a good thing.

I don't know that I recognized this lesson at the time. But since I've opened my own studio and had to stand out every day in every class, I see now that those early years in martial arts were invaluable. Those experiences, some embarrassing, some frustrating, some exhilarating, trained me to be okay with being noticed.

God fits us for service, and it constantly amazes me to look back and see the ways that He has done that for me. I've even come to enjoy being up in front of people, so that now I pray to keep the humility that I started out with in life. It's okay to stand out... but for God's glory, not my own. There's nothing good that I'm capable of that God has not equipped me for. I thank and praise God for all that I've done that's worthwhile.