

Just Me

By Beth Frykman

I train in Aikido because it fills a space in my soul. It brings a balance, a center, to my life that I've never known with anything else. When I train, I feel joy. I feel frustration and fatigue and lots of other things, too, but I feel at home in myself on the mat. I don't see anything particularly special about what I do; I see myself as just another one of the students. I believe that is how I am seen by the others in the dojo, as well. This is us; this is who we are. We train. It defines us.

A few times a year, we participate in public demonstrations in which everyone goes up and shows techniques for a minute, give or take. At those functions, I am no longer viewed as Beth. I have become, in the eyes of the audience, one of The Women. I stick out. I do the same thing that the men there are doing, and most of them can do it more precisely, know more techniques, and have spent many more years dedicated to the art than me. Yet because I am a woman in a martial art, somehow it's viewed as something of consequence.

I've had more than a few women tell me that they were inspired by my throwing a guy into the air. I find that incredibly humbling. For me, this is just what I do. I didn't set out to even the gender tables in martial arts. I didn't set out to do anything, really; I was curious about a class, I took it, and I'm still showing up. I was bound to get better at it eventually. I honestly don't see anything remarkable about what I do, but when women see me do it - see me just being myself - it gives them courage. Women who have been physically abused by their partners have told me how deeply affecting it is to watch me both take a hit and get back up as well as take on a man who dwarfs me by ten inches and pin him to the ground. Some women who see me demonstrate wind up training regularly themselves. Some of them are a little braver after that - at least for a while (hopefully a long while). Some of them, especially women who grew up in cultures drastically different than that of the U.S., have never seen a woman be so strong and didn't know that it could be like that.

It's amazing to know that without pretense or artifice, I have a place in this world making it just a little bit better for others.

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