

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about healing, and about becoming, and about developing an identity. This is a book about the vehicles of that healing, my journey in Aikido. In my Aikido practice, my instructors have taught me that without precise, clean technique we can never hope to gain this understanding in a meaningful way. I realized that by taking the path of Aikido, I was taking a step to take back power in my life and heal my sense of brokenness and isolation.

Aikido is also a journey that led me to psychotherapy, my profession and a medium through which I express the Aikidoka spirit. Aikido is a healing art and facilitated healing from a trauma background and a traumatic psychotic break from the moment I encountered the practice. But the profound sense of wholeness, and self-understanding, of coming fully alive, was a result of the integration of these two empowering practices. When I achieved black belt, it was the pinnacle of my life at the time, and my first patient in my own consulting office was another pinnacle. And it was my return to the dojo after a five-year hiatus pursuing my profession that has helped me to understand these practices are integrated, not only because they are similar, but because they together define who I am. My understanding of the human condition fostered by my training as a psychotherapist has made me a better aikidoka. My two decades of aikido training make me a better therapist.

And while these endeavors are healing for me, it is through the practices that I manifest the fullness of who I am, of who I understand myself to be. They are the vehicles of aspiration. An aspiration for connection, for compassion, for defeating an enemy through love, for vibrancy, unity, and living with joy

Aikido is an art of Healing, both the world, and oneself, and recognizing that in the end there is no difference. Aikido is authenticity. Aikido is a reckoning with oneself--a decision to cast out self-doubt, and instead pulsate with the power of the universe.

In Aikido, two people work together to practice a technique--*Uke*, who initiates the interaction through a grab or strike, and *Nage*, who blends with and then redirects the energy to transform what began as a conflict into a compassionate relationship. Rather than fight, or try to harm the aggressor, *Nage* creates a compassionate opportunity to choose connection over contention.

She is creating a bridge to the person's center – both the hara, or center of gravity three fingers below the navel; and the spiritual or energetic center, where a place of peace resides in all of us. In this way, *Uke* feels that while their intent to initiate conflict has been thwarted, they are protected and cared for by their partner, and have been saved from cutting their connection to the divine through violence. *Uke* attacks because they are in great distress and suffering in some way. Our loving redirection through connection helps alleviate this suffering. In psychotherapy, with both acceptance, unconditional regard and appreciation, my aspiration embraces this suffering in my own heart, to connect with my client and heal and transform this suffering through loving connection.

Aikido is about relationship. Aikido is about connection. Aikido is about compassion, and protection. When we choose to practice Aikido, we choose to practice these principles. Aikido is The Art of Peace, The Way of Harmony, and an act of Love. Psychotherapy is also about relationship, connection, compassion, and connection. I strive for my practice be An Art of Peace, The Way of Harmony, and surely an act of Love. To be truly effective as a psychotherapist, I believe authenticity is paramount. Authenticity, unconditional acceptance and regard, and connection.

I have been an Aikido practitioner since 2000. I received my first black belt in 2011, and in 2014 went to graduate school to become a clinical psychologist. after which I set up a private practice. Though I made it to class on occasion, with some longer spurts of regularity, before I went to graduate school there was an urgency to my training. Getting to practice was a matter of how and not a matter of if or when. When I missed a week of Aikido, I felt a sense of loss.

For the 16 years before graduate school, Aikido had been my life. Aikido was how I understood myself. Aikido was my heart and soul and all that it meant to be a good person. I did little else I had much of an investment in. The decision to go to graduate school after the conferring of my black belt was a harrowing one. A seemingly simple external decision, but a bitter inner struggle with the fear of abandoning that which was most important to me, that which defined me, and most of all was safe for me, and putting 16 years of technical and personal growth on the line. Indeed, my realized fears of regressing technically and losing my personal connection to the dojo were a painful price to pay for the right decision. The decision to grow in another way. To remember that the human language of connection and commitment to creating a compassionate world are everywhere, and that my years of training in Aikido were always at my core, would always inform my understanding of myself as a therapist and a human being, and to Aikido I would always return.

. In the first months of private practice, I became aware of how much my study of Aikido influences my work and shapes my relationship to my patients.

I began to understand that these two practices serve the same purpose in my life—to connect, to heal, to attain self-understanding, and to promote harmony. In Aikido, if we stay connected, spiritually, emotionally, and physically, a transformation will happen. Conflict will be transformed into compassion. In psychotherapy a transformation can also happen: a sense of hope and well-being can emerge from despair through authentic connection to another. It is the inner meanings of these two practices that link them.

Whether I practice psychotherapy, train on the mat, or connect with empathy to a stranger I am practicing Aikido. Aikido is a way of life. A choice about who you are, and how you want to live.

There are many beginnings to this journey. The beginning of stepping on the mat 20 years ago, and the many beginnings my first 8 years of practice with Leslie Russek Sensei. The beginning of moving to Burlington, changing dojos, and beginning my training with Aaron Sensei. The beginning of the injury that led to being invited to test for black belt and the beginning of the first day of training for my first-degree black belt. Every moment of grueling black belt training was a new beginning. The beginning of bowing to my partner as I began the exam, and the beginning of bowing out. The beginning of a gnawing desire to expand my horizons to find a life beyond the dojo. The beginning of the many conversations with Aaron Sensei about taking time away from the dojo to go to graduate school. The beginning of graduating and the beginning of my first conversation with my first patient. And each class I attend as I slowly rekindle my training is a new beginning. And of course, today's journey, a new beginning, a renewed decision that Aikido should take its rightful place in my life. Aikido is a journey with infinite beginnings, and a journey without end.

This book is also about the profound sense of loss I feel when I think back on my time away from the dojo. Every day off the mat is the loss of a loved one, a journey not taken, a beginning never known. And this book is about how essential choosing to become a psychotherapist is to the development to my Aikido practice. How the two are inextricably intertwined and create a richer inner life for me, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being, to struggle with suffering, to overcome fear, and to heal. Ultimately this book is about how I connect with myself.

I have come to realize that we practice principles of Aikido, no matter what relationship we are engaged in, to a greater or lesser degree, with or without intention, skillfully or unskillfully. Aikido teaches us that the quality of our lives is bound up with the quality of our relationships and that we exist in relation to others—the issue is not whether we are connected, but how we connect.

Disconnection is withdrawal, and fear, and a lack of understanding that we are not alone, a belief that we are isolated-- that others do not suffer and love as we do and so we have nothing in common with them. We live in a world of pain and beauty, and while we aspire to the latter, we cannot help but live in the former. We cannot get it right, but we cannot help but try. Through daily practice, Aikido reminds us that we are always reaching for a connection that is life affirming, safe, nourishing, and empowering, but do not always have the skills to be successful. Aikido teaches us to remember that this lack of skill is rooted in suffering, and a cry for help. So does psychotherapy.

We all share the same universe. We are in this together, whether we like or not. Our fates are bound up with one another. Our choices impact the entire human community.

And connection is our greatest weapon against fear.

Aikido and psychotherapy help us to understand that human beings are layered and complex, that rarely is a situation black and white, either or. Many creative solutions exist as we engage with experience in a nuanced manner and make allowances for the paradox and contradiction that define the human condition. Aikido and psychotherapy open our eyes to these many possibilities. In the pursuit of a just and harmonious world, we make choices in the context of relationship. . Human relationships require nuance and flexibility, and the ability to meet someone where they are at. Because in the end there is only one unequivocal choice. And that is the choice about the effort we put into connection. I have also learned from both Aikido and psychotherapy that when I meet resistance with fear, or tension, I fail. In our hopes to successfully confront hatred, and violence, and aggression, we must heed these lessons. We must choose peace, but we must choose peace decisively. The only other way is self-destruction. Aikido teaches the lesson of human nuance.

Everything we do, every choice we make, can set us further along the path of self-discovery and healing and has far reaching consequences we may never know about.

We are our partner. Their suffering is ours. Their joy is ours. And we belong to them as well. As I am finding in my work, the healing of my patient is also my own.

Through an exploration of Aikido, we can understand how much power we have and how much choice we must unify in a world that appears stark and divided. Psychotherapy and Aikido provide us with optimism and access to infinite possibilities.

Perhaps a world of peace and justice will always be out of reach. But if we pursue the teachings of Aikido, aspiration will always light the path.

This book chronicles the story of my journey in Aikido, starting with my encounter with my first Sensei, Leslie Russek. And this book is about how learning Aikido helped me to grow as person and heal from trauma. Most importantly this book is about how Aikido has made me the person that I am today, and how I have come to understand, that I in fact never left Aikido. The dojo has lived in my heart. For some years, I stopped practicing on the mat, but I practiced Aikido every day. And now, I return to the dojo, to my practice, with a new perspective and a deeper understanding of myself. For me, that understanding deepens when I train.

This is a story of inner transformation. A transformation from contraction to expansion, from living in a dissociated state to embracing the gift presence, from a pervasive sense isolation to the possibility of connection, and from living in a state of dread most of the time to recognizing that love is our natural state. It is a story of training to heal from a traumatic past that kept me stuck and alone, and it is story of healing to train with focus and, confidence, and connection, to polish my spirit, and as I train, to come into harmony with the divinity that is the birth right of all of us. Because that is the purpose of Aikido. I begin with the abyss.