

Wisdom comes after the fall

By Ruth Ostrow

AS a child I had a fantasy. When people asked me what I wanted to be when I was older, I told them point-blank: I want to be a ninja.

I grew up watching *The Samurai*, a Japanese serial about a warrior who would roam the land doing good. He was flanked by ninjas who were dressed in white and there to help him achieve his goals or dressed in black, nefariously hiding in trees or on roofs, leaping out in mischievous triple somersaults, flying through the air and landing feet first to engage in amazing acts of physical prowess.

Sadly, at that time in Melbourne, there were scant employment opportunities for ninjas. I settled for journalism instead. This was before the martial arts explosion that hit the West in the wake of Bruce Lee movies, so I couldn't even indulge my fantasy by way of after-work kung-fu classes.

So when, more than 20 years later, I discover that there are classes for children in the Japanese martial art aikido just round the corner, I'm overcome with excitement. My daughter will become the ninja I could never be.

She will somersault through space, land on the roof of our house, jump down and thwart evildoers with one thrust of her swift leg. She will develop calf muscles to die for and strong arms that ripple with intent. She will be a mighty warrior.

Thankfully, she likes the idea -- or perhaps she just prefers it to the alternative: staying home and playing with the cat.

So off we go to her first aikido class, full of anticipation. The room is a fantasy come true. A large blue mat the size of 10 rooms inspires feelings of freedom. I want to go leaping over it but, like other parents, must content myself with sitting on the sidelines.

The master, or sensei, gives his introduction to newcomers: aikido is a highly refined martial art, developed last century as a means of self-defence and spiritual training. Central is the idea of being in harmony with your opponents, rather than in conflict with them. The movement and energy of an attack is redirected without the need for collision or the use of force.

The movements of aikido flow like water. They are designed on the principles of nature and move in circles and spirals. Sensei is teaching the students to be relaxed, to avoid conflict by not tensing up and going into battle, rather moving the opponent out of the way using the energy or life force (ki) of opposition -- blending with it rather than resisting it. He's teaching them to get out of harm's way by falling down. When you hold yourself rigid, you break. Follow nature, follow the flow of water. Surrender into the centre of your body and feel your strength.

I'm impatient for some action. When are they going to actually learn to fight? To throw those fabulous kicks? I jokingly ask him when the children are off practising.

Sensei smiles. It is a smile that speaks a million words. The smile of pity. In the West we are taught exactly the opposite to what the children are learning here.

Baby Rambos, we are groomed to fight, to be strong, courageous, to stand tall and resist all attempts to knock us off the path. We are taught to beat the odds, and the way of power and domination in a capitalist hierarchy.

Falling, not fighting, is the most important thing your child will learn. To fall properly, in an accident, in a car crash, in a fight -- to curl up in acceptance and land gently -- will prevent broken bones and even death.

And suddenly a light comes on in my head as I watch the children tumbling and falling and tumbling again. This is a metaphor for life and it moves me deeply.

We fall and fall from the time we are children. We fall a thousand times a day.

And we break from the rigidity of our expectations, our negative attitudes, our desire to control others. And slowly we grow tired and defeated with each splinter to our soul.

To fall with dignity, to fall softly like leaves fall from the trees, is as important as breathing. It's about learning to surrender to what is, to let go and collapse into the natural order of things. To accept the disappointments, absorb the hurts and humiliations of life, to let go of our opinions, friendships, things and people we treasure, our looks and even, finally, our lives, as we roll down, gracefully down, the other side of the great mountain of our years.

My ignorance has tripped me up. But I let myself tumble gently before rising up to meet the teacher's eyes. Thank you for the lesson, sensei, I say, dusting myself off and reaching for the brochure on adult classes. Not to learn to become a mighty warrior, but to learn what The Samurai really had been teaching Western TV viewers all along -- the grand, invaluable, heroic art of falling down, with honour.

www.ruthostrow.com

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