WINTER INTENSIVE 2008

My personal path in aikido began many years ago, when I studied for a few months in the city I had grown up in; as it turned out, I only lived there for a few months, when I was between jobs...and that change of career, involving a move to very remote country, would interrupt those studies for many years. Somehow, though, I remained drawn to the aiki path...it was the subject of reading and research, and was always one of very few things I ever regretted about living quietly and alone.

Years later, and following another career change, I found myself living in Edmonton, Alberta; a much larger center than the last, and home to three aikido schools. After checking out my options, I chose the Abundant Peace Aikido and Tai Chi dojo; it was the closest to my home, but more than that it offered Tai Chi as well, which was another of my interests. Most particularly, I was drawn to the teaching style of Sensei Brad Schultz, proprietor and Chief Instructor; I was made welcome, and immediately given the opportunity to watch, and then participate in, a few classes... so that I might decide if I were truly interested! My first class was great, and I was surprised by how much I remembered, of the limited studies from years ago; well before that session ended, I made up my mind that I would at last seriously pursue the study of aikido, beginning immediately.

That was some eighteen months ago; since that time, I have done my best to attend, as often as I can. My work is demanding enough that it occasionally keeps me away, but for the most part I have managed to be pretty regular. With each class, I have become even more drawn to the Art. Ours is an easy school to attend, and within those walls to feel welcome and at home; there is a remarkable aura of respect and mutual trust between the students, and Sensei Brad is skilled in technique, well grounded in founding principles, and possessed of enough patience to be able to provide his students with the guidance they need.

I attended my first seminar only a few months after beginning my studies; it was at Aikido of Missoula, with Hiroshi Ikeda Sensei. This was my first exposure to the higher level of intensity in training that seminars offer, and I was hooked; on returning to my regular course of study, I could not stop talking about the experience, in result of which seven of us drove to Missoula to study with Saotome Sensei, in September of 2007.

It was at this seminar that I first heard about the Winter Intensive, planned for Florida between Christmas and New Year; I was immediately interested, although unsure if my skills were developed enough to keep up. That worry aside, it seemed a perfect opportunity to immerse myself in Aikido study, while enjoying a Christmas vacation on the beach... it was the beach vacation part of this adventure that sold it to my family, and by the end of October we were registered and our flights were booked.

As the weeks passed, I would check out the web site; I was looking forward to going, even while worrying about whether or not I was ready for the experience. I attended classes as often as I could, and pushed myself as much as possible, focused on being well prepared. Sensei Brad was a great resource for me during the months leading up to the Winter Intensive; always encouraging, and ready to work with me, one on one, after our regular classes had ended.

Finally, it was December 24th; our family enjoyed a quiet meal at home, then early to bed in anticipation of our flights the next morning. Almost unbelievably, our trip from home to Tampa was uneventful, although long, but at the end of the day we were all smiles when we picked up our rental car and headed for the Sirata Beach Resort... Canadians are always happy when we can drive with the windows down in December! The warm, humid night air was wonderful, and after a quick thirty minutes on the road we settled into our room at the resort, and enjoying our Christmas dinner.

The first session of the Winter Intensive took place late in the day on December 26th; I had registered during the day. All sessions were held in the same place, a large ball room at the resort; mats were set up across the entire floor area, braced in position. Unlike previous seminars I had attended, the training space was more than large enough for the entire group, so for the entire seminar we would be able to both learn technique as well as practice ukemi without any need to hold back.

Winter Intensive, was exactly what they meant; from that first session, it was clear that the focus on the martial aspect of aikido would be direct and undiluted. There were approximately 100 students in attendance, from as far away as Germany; many of these had studied for decades, and were very capable practitioners. The schedule was intense as well; three to five sessions each day, presented by a variety of instructors. Each of these brought their unique experience and perspective, and for that reason every one of the sessions was worthwhile in their own right.

I did as I had planned, and threw myself into each session; that first evening was followed by four sessions the following day, and then five the next. Each day began with an hour long early morning practice, from 6:30 to 7:30; they were great, and they were the only session that included any real warm up time... which at my age is important! I have long been an early riser, so the time of day was no problem, and I am sure my family appreciated my quiet exit from our hotel room each day.

It was on the third morning, that I walked down to the beach and saw the pelicans hunt for fish. My body was sore, but my spirit resolved to see the choice I had made through to the end. Each morning since the seminar had begun, I attended the early morning session, with Sensei Pee Wee Jones from Sarasota, Florida; he is an interesting instructor with a great story of his own to tell, and his classes were always quite vigorous. After each of these I would take a dip in the pool, soak briefly in the hot tub, then take a walk along the beach to reflect on the challenges that each new day would bring.

Florida's Gulf Coast is the winter home to a diverse range of sea birds and water fowl; with great weather, we had seen many different species already, and had watched them from a distance as they went about the routine of survival. That third morning, though, was slightly different; although the temperature was still decent, it was very windy...which pushes schools of small fish in closer to the shore line, in search of refuge from the pounding surf. This in turn had attracted three large pelicans, who plied their trade less than thirty feet from where I stood.

The pelican is a large bird, not especially graceful in most circumstances; that lack of grace disappears completely when they hunt. They glide gently, fifteen to twenty feet off the water's surface, until their raptor's eyes spot a likely target; then, in that instant they fold their wings around their bodies and point themselves down, dropping through their prey as a missile falls to earth. Succeed or fail, they rest for only a brief moment, then repeat their daily search for life.

Watching this raw, beautiful display held my complete attention, until the pelicans moved on...as the winds died down, following the fish they left me to reflect upon what their example could mean. The broadest of these is that the pelican is a simple creature; in hunting, they were not so much doing anything as they were just being what they are. From this we learn that true aiki must be studied and practiced until we are able to move beyond the considered and to the instinctive.

Second, in the moments before their dive the pelican glides, with wings still...their actions relaxed and effortless. From this, we derive with certainty that it is only when we are at ease that we can attain sufficient awareness and focus to truly respond as the moment demands... as the pelican does when, their attention caught by the flash from below, they centre themselves and plummet down.

In the dive we find their third lesson. Not fancy, it is straight and direct to, and then through, their target. First, they collapse their wings around their centre and use the weight of their bodies to carry them down...that is the technique. But, wrapped within that technique is the simple power they generate in that act; from this we learn that true aiki will only be achieved when we move beyond technique and develop the ability to harness, focus, and then in that elemental moment unleash that power that lives within the centre of each of us. In the end, it must be about our commitment to that action.

Perhaps these lessons did it not come from the pelicans alone, but by watching them I was finally able to clearly understand at least a portion of the lessons that were contained in the seminar...and, because of this insight I was enabled to return to our grueling schedule filled with a new energy and confidence. As another of our instructors, George Ledyard Sensei of Seattle, told us at one point: "we learn by imitating our teachers, so when we are working on something unfamiliar, perhaps a technique that challenges or intimidates, we should 'act' as though we have the ability...until the act can end and the technique becomes real".

That lesson, at least, I heard loud and clear; inspired by this simple statement I worked even harder through the second half than I had through the first. This idea also led me to approach the rigors of training from a different direction...I was able to feel more relaxed, and in that absence of tension I became more open to learning the techniques and principles that were presented. So, if you ever find yourself considering attending this very special aikido event, I would encourage you to go. It is a remarkable and unique experience, one that will accelerate your training on a number of levels.

At the end, I don't know how much 'more real' my technique became; all I know with certainty is that the challenges of my personal journey will continue, and that I can take these lessons away, to apply in my own quest to vanquish the true enemy...our own fear and uncertainty.