



Hidden Gifts: What Aikido Can Teach Us About Conflict

(Adapted from, *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*)

by Judy Ringer

Conflict stories are our most interesting stories. When you see two people deeply engaged in conversation, chances are that one of them is telling a conflict story. They're fascinating. And we have such strong opinions about them, especially when they are *our* stories. We live them again and again as we revisit the events, the feelings, the thoughts about what we should have said, and how perfect things could be if only our adversaries would change.

The moment of conflict holds such promise—the opportunity to approach life creatively, make a different choice, visit another planet—opportunities we would not otherwise be offered if it weren't for the conflict. Conflict is one way in which we come to know the world and understand each other. Conflict offers an opening to our most powerful selves. It also offers the opposite. Like two roads diverging, one leads toward connection, the other toward separation. Our habitual patterns of reaction leave us thinking we have no choice but to do what we've always done. Then, when the conflict is over, we look back, asking “*why did I do that, what was I thinking?*” having once again missed the opportunity to take a different path.

Making Choices

Conflict too often provides the bricks and mortar for walls that keep out the world and those we love. Constructed of fear, judgment, defensiveness, and misunderstanding, our walls are meant to keep

us safe and maintain the rightness of our opinions. The problem is that walls work two ways.

Our carefully assembled grudges, justifications, and attitudes are, at the same time, barriers to what we desire most—connection to our wisdom, to our humanity, and to the source of universal intelligence that supports us all. Our real safety lies in connection, but because we are more practiced at building walls, we create a prison for ourselves, keeping out the very things we hoped the walls would enclose.

What walls have you constructed that no longer serve a useful purpose? Do reactive habits keep you from finding a new path?

A New Way to Manage Conflict

Luckily, I've discovered a means to help me remember that I have alternatives even in the most difficult situations. A couple of decades ago, I fell in love with a martial art called Aikido and began to see the world through its lens. From the beginning, Aikido's fluid, spiraling, and powerful movements seemed to suggest possibility—a new way to manage conflict. I found Aikido's principles of centered response, utilization of energy, and non-resistant leading to be equally applicable in non-physical conflict—what we might call life's "attacks"—such as arguments, everyday hassles, and the more serious problems we all face at some point in our lives.

When you watch Aikidoists practicing, you don't see a typical adversarial battle. You see what looks like a physical exchange between two people giving and receiving energy, more like a powerful dance than combat.

As an attack comes toward her, a receiver does not strike back or otherwise block the force of the attack. Instead, she moves toward the incoming energy (shifting slightly off the line of attack) and physically unites with the attacker's power. Once she makes this connection, she controls the direction and momentum of the attack by pinning or throwing her opponent. This is the most basic principle of Aikido: do not resist an attack. Instead, the aikidoist learns to blend, control and redirect.

Utilization of Energy

Life could be a lot easier than I make it, was my first thought upon seeing the art of Aikido. Having lived the life of a perfectionist for many years, I was accustomed to struggling with life events. But as an Aikidoist I asked, *How might I use what comes at me instead of fighting or wishing it away?* It made so much sense, and I loved the inclusive view it offered. I guessed correctly that it would take some undoing of old, ingrained habits of resistance before I could acquire this new way of being, and I began to look with new eyes at what I had previously thought of as negative events in my life. *What does it mean to use energy?*

I began to teach the Aikido metaphor as a way of transforming conflict, in order to share the view the Aikido lens offers and to demonstrate and clarify how life, work, and relationships benefit from this model. At the same time I began practicing the martial art, knowing that integrating Aikido "on the mat" would help me teach and apply its concepts "off the mat."

The Way of Harmony: Life Applications

In life, the Aikido metaphor is realized when you transform challenges into opportunities and adapt to new circumstances with ease, moving *with* life's flow, instead of struggling against it. You are practicing Aikido whenever you listen with curiosity to an opposing view or search for mutual understanding, respect, and purpose. Aikido happens any time you stop, take a breath, and choose a more felicitous state of being. No matter how you approach it, whether physically or conceptually, Aikido offers a unique blend of power and grace, inviting you to find the hidden gifts in every difficult moment.

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, stories and practices on the connection between aikido, conflict, and living a purposeful life. As the founder of Power & Presence Training, Judy specializes in unique workshops on conflict, communication, and creating a more positive work environment. Judy is a black belt in aikido and chief instructor of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH, USA. Subscribe to Judy's free award-winning e-newsletter, *Ki Moments*, at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

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