

Unlikely Teachers



FINDING THE
HIDDEN GIFTS IN
DAILY CONFLICT

JUDY RINGER
Foreword by Thomas Crum

Introduction:

Hidden Gifts

Always practice the Art of Peace in a vibrant and joyful manner.

– Morihei Ueshiba, *O Sensei*, Founder of Aikido

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? In what ways are you resisting connection? What is conflict and how can you safely change yourself in order to change your situation?

A New Way to Manage Conflict

Luckily, I've discovered a tool that helps 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 physical 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 between aggressor and defender. 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 so many years, I was accustomed to struggling with life events, putting pressure on myself at every turn. 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 and to share the view the aikido lens offers, both to demonstrate for others and to clarify for myself how life, work, and relationships might benefit from this model. At the same time I began practicing the martial art, reasoning that integrating aikido “on the mat” would help me teach and apply its concepts “off the mat.” Every moment on the mat reinforces my belief.

The Way of Harmony

Developed in the twentieth century, aikido is the invention of a highly skilled and spiritual Japanese warrior, Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969). Those of us who practice aikido call him *O Sensei* (“Great Teacher”). A master of sword and open-hand combat, *O Sensei* held that the true martial art was one of harmony. Making subtle changes in the combative arts he had mastered, he conceived a martial art that could disarm an attack without doing harm in the process. He called it aikido—the art of peace. Translated as “the way of blending or harmonizing with universal energy,” the aim of aikido is not merely self-defense, but a new way to reconcile differences.

The power and art of aikido are in the joining—in moving toward an attack and becoming one with the attacker. It takes presence of mind and a strong center of gravity not to be swept up in the energy of an attack but instead to enter into its chaos, understand its core, and direct it toward resolution. Since she flows *with* the river instead of pushing *against* it, the aikidoist’s movements are quick and powerful. Before an attack can do harm,

the attacker is engaged and guided to a place where the energy can play out safely.

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.

Aikido and Conflict—The Metaphor

The stories that follow depict personal experiences, how I responded at the time, and what I learned. They also act as meditations on the aikido-conflict metaphor as it has evolved and crystallized for me. Each story falls into one of six facets of the metaphor as I imagine it playing out in the successful resolution of a conflict. Interrelated and inseparable from each other, the facets correlate with the way I have watched myself encounter, manage, and (most of the time) resolve conflict. The six facets:

• **Resistance.** My initial reaction to adversity is to resist it. In a physical assault I want to keep the attacker away from me. Similarly, I would rather not have to deal with a workplace conflict, a difficult person, or a frightening illness.

• **Connection.** At some point, however, I must connect with the conflict if there is any hope of resolving it. In aikido, I connect by moving toward the attacker and joining my energy with his. In life, I connect when I accept that the problem exists. Connection is the first step toward resolution.

• **Practice.** As I acknowledge the conflict, I begin to take action. At first my action is unskilled. I make mistakes, and I practice and refine my approach. Aikido practitioners refer to this refinement process as “getting on the mat.” The mat is the place where we meet to learn and hone our technique and practice confidence and presence.

• **Discovery.** Through steady practice, I gradually find myself in new territory, where the realization of how little I know catapults me into a land of discovery. Whether on the aikido mat or on the mat of life, I become a learner. As I move from resistance to curiosity and wonder, my practice becomes fun.

• **Power.** Discovery brings a new kind of power because it is aligned with energy. I learn that power does not equal force or coercion. Rather, this new power increases in direct relationship to flexibility and empathy.

• **Teachers.** Finally, I notice that conflict has become my teacher. My difficult relationships have taught me flexibility and assertiveness. Through adversity, I have discovered new perspectives and insights. In aikido we say, “The attack is a gift of energy.” I bow with gratitude.

Centered Response

Underlying and connecting the six facets of the aikido-conflict metaphor is my ability to direct my life energy in a conscious and purposeful way. Call it what you will—self-control, emotion management—my awareness of and ability to manage *me* is where each story begins. On the aikido mat, when the attack comes, we learn to “center and extend *ki*.” To be “centered” in this sense means to be balanced, calm, and connected to an inner source of power. In life as in aikido, when you’re centered, you are more effective, capable, and in control. As the book unfolds, you will learn how to choose the centered state when conflict arises.

Ki (pronounced "key") is Japanese for energy or universal life force. It is the *ch'i* in *tai ch'i* or *qi* in *qi gong*. When you center and extend *ki*, you increase your ability to influence your environment and your relationships.

Bowing In

At each aikido practice, we bow to each other as we get onto the mat to begin our learning—as I now bow to you. Thank you for picking up these stories on how to be more purposeful in inventing your life, day by day and moment by moment.

Like you, I am a learner and an explorer, and much of what I write is influenced by curiosity, not certainty. When I first started using the aikido metaphor, I thought I was using it to teach about conflict. Now I know that my interest in conflict is actually a fascination with how I interact with people and events in my life, and with how I give and receive energy and co-create meaning with other human beings.

The people and events in these stories have proven to be gifts in my life, though they did not always appear that way at first. My hope is to share the insights and new skills that came as a result of these interactions. I will be happy if a story becomes a reminder to take a moment and regain perspective, perhaps at the beginning or the end of the day, or in the middle of a difficult challenge. I hope that these stories may act as a breath of fresh air and cause you to remember your own experiences and the gifts that came with them.

Each story ends with a Practice—questions and exercises to help you work with the concepts and increase your power, your presence, and your enjoyment of life. Many stories also include comments from students, friends and colleagues who have their own conflict stories to tell.

I often say to workshop participants that I have nothing new to teach. I think we know how we want to be, but it is often difficult to act on that knowing. You'll see that this is true for me. I'm still practicing.

Many other wonderful books have been written on these topics, and at the end of this book, I've included a list of resources you may find helpful in your journey.

Harmony doesn't mean just getting along with people at any cost just to avoid a confrontation. Harmony as used in aikido does not involve compromising at all. Rather aikido's harmony brings different, even opposing elements together, and intensifies them in a way that drives everything toward a higher level.

— Mitsunari Kanai, *Technical Aikido*