

VerbSap

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A Night At The *Dojang*



By Gail Gauthier

A *dojang* is a *taekwondo* training hall. I use the word interchangeably for my *taekwondo* school in which our training hall is located. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to, but I really like saying it. *Dojang*. It sounds as if something special ought to happen there for those people who make the effort to seek the place out.

About seven weeks after I made black belt at my local *dojang*, I attended an official black belt class.

I find the black belt students at my *dojang* intimidating, if not actually scary. Particularly the teenagers. No, maybe particularly the twenty-something guys. No, particularly the middle school girls, though I try to avoid any female student of any rank who has a background in gymnastics. They can kick the stuffing out of targets. Literally. Little bits of fuzz fly around them like a cloud.

That is my dream, to kick something to bits. To be better than I am.

No one pressured me to go to the black belt class. No one even mentioned it. But I knew the class was there, at my *dojang*, every Wednesday evening. I'm a little bit obsessive, anyway, and I was feeling really into martial arts mode just then, having recently made black belt and all.

I was a black belt. The *dojang* had a black belt class. I mean, come on.

When I started studying *taekwondo*, I thought that martial artists were very disciplined. I'd always heard that discipline is a good thing. Disciplined people work harder and achieve more. In short, they are better human beings. Who doesn't want to be a better human being?

Two and a half years passed. I became a black belt, but I didn't notice any significant improvement in myself. I didn't notice any insignificant improvement, either.

I decided I hadn't become a better human being because I just hadn't gone far enough in my training. Perhaps that would come now that I was a black belt. The other black belts were intimidating and scary, I reasoned, because, having trained longer than I had, they knew something that I didn't. Something that made them better than I was.

Since I attended the same advanced student classes they did, the only place they could be learning this secret black belt knowledge was at that Wednesday evening black belt class they went to without me. Something had to be going on in that class. If I started attending it, I could find out what it was. I could

know what they knew.

I remember driving to class that night. I clung to the steering wheel in the dark with my back rigid, the way I do when I'm going well over the speed limit so I can pass a truck on the highway, afraid of losing control, afraid of what will happen.

We have a lot of black belts at our *dojang*, and the black belt class was crowded with students from both the junior and adult divisions. I had trouble finding a spot to warm up before class. I was also worried about where I should stand when it came time to line up in formation. It should have been a no-brainer. I was a brand new black belt. I was the bottom of the heap. But bringing the juniors into the mix was confusing. Was I still at the bottom of the heap, which would be easy because it meant standing at the back right hand corner of the room? Or was I beneath all the other adult black belts but above the junior black belts because they were all young enough to be my children? Even if they knew more than I did?

Fortunately, the other black belts all knew where to stand. So when the class finally started, I was able to just fall in behind two tiny juniors. I got through the warm-up, even though a big junior kept bumping into me while we were running around the *dojang*. We worked on *poomses* that night, which are sequences of blocks, kicks, and punches. We have to learn a different one for every rank, meaning that by the time I reached black belt I was supposed to know nine.

I like *poomses* because, though we're supposed to perform them as if we're fighting off opponents attacking us from different directions, they're kind of like dance routines. Not that I know anything about dancing. But I'd like to.

I was feeling pretty good when *Sabumnim*, the highest ranking, most intimidating and scary black belt at our *dojang*, broke us up into two groups and told me to go stand with a teenage junior girl and all the other adults, who, that night, happened to be men. I thought, Get a load of me! I'm training with all these intimidating, scary guys!

Then everything went to hell.

Four people from each group were told to pick up body shields. Think of those shields you see cops holding in front of themselves at riots but with blue padding. The four shielded people formed a gauntlet for the others in their group to run through, pausing only long enough to pound the shield with a roundhouse kick.

The roundhouse kick is not my best kick. To be honest, I don't have a best kick. I'm not fast, either, which you really ought to be if you're going to run a gauntlet with a bunch of black belts. My endurance needs to be improved some, too, which was going to be a problem because I just knew we were going to have to do this drill over and over again before the evening was over.

Running the gauntlet was every bit as bad as I thought it would be. The black belt holding the last body shield would encourage me by name as I approached. I cannot exaggerate how discouraging it is when someone can tell you are struggling and need support.

But I knew I only had to hang in there for a few minutes and then we'd switch, I'd get to hold a shield and rest for a while. That's how drills work. Everybody takes turns so they get a chance to try everything. Oh, how I looked forward to getting hold of that body shield.

Then I had it. And suddenly four adult men—highly trained adult men—were kicking me. (Well, two of them had leg injuries, so they were punching me.) I didn't have the shield positioned correctly so as it absorbed the shock of the kicks and punches it kept flying back and hitting me in the face. The force of the blows kept knocking me back. Even when I was able to pull myself together enough to get myself into a fighting position, meaning one leg was ahead of the other forming a triangle, the jolts were too much for me. And, remember, a triangle is supposed to be *the* strongest geometric shape.

There was something about being, essentially, attacked that I found unbelievably disturbing. Shocking. Even then I think I knew I wasn't actually being hurt. But my mind couldn't cope with the abnormality of the situation.

Years before, I had to go into the hospital for abdominal surgery. Though this was a planned surgery, I was admitted to the hospital just an hour or two before the deed was to be done. I had to walk into that building under my own steam, take my clothes off, lie down on a stretcher, and allow myself to be rolled into an operating room where someone was going to slice me open with a scalpel. I'd had surgery before. I knew I would survive it and even be better for it. But it's just not normal to expose your gut so someone can cut it open with a knife, even if you are paying her to do it. It goes against every natural instinct.

The same was true in the *dojang* that night. These were nice—though scary—guys who were kicking and punching me. Some of them were dads with kids in the junior group on the other side of the room. We all knew one another by sight, if not by name. They weren't actually trying to hurt me. In fact, I was pretty certain that at least some of them were going out of their way to go easy on me.

But I just couldn't take it. I couldn't cut it. I had no business being there, and everyone around me had to see that.

When it came time to switch again, I took my turn staggering through the gauntlet once more, this time with the knowledge that I was making a fool of myself. We switched once more and I had to...I *had* to...pick up that shield knowing that I'd be kicked and pummeled once I did. Not hurt. I never got hurt, though I did think I was going to have black and blue marks on my chest the next day. But I was weaker than everyone else there. I was the worst.

I'm used to being the worst in athletics. But I'd been a black belt for seven weeks. I thought things were supposed to get better.

On my third trip through the gauntlet, I suddenly decided that not only was I making a fool of myself right then and there, but in all likelihood I'd been making a fool of myself for the two and a half years I'd been training at the *dojang*. The college student who taught the morning class I attended was holding one of the shields, and as I passed him I realized that he must be so embarrassed to have to train with me. I felt badly for him.

I gave up trying to do a good job with the drill. It took all my concentration just to keep from breaking down sobbing in front of all these guys and, worse yet, the kids on the other side of the room. I considered running out to the entry, pretending I needed a drink, so I could wash my face in the water fountain, hoping that would either calm me down or mask tears. But I was afraid that leaving the room would make me feel that I had permission to cry and that once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop.

So I just stayed there, taking it and taking it and thinking that I would have to give up *taekwondo*, that I wouldn't be able to go to the *dojang* any more and then what would I do with myself? My *taekwondo* classes gave structure to my week. I practiced step sparring and *poomses* at home. I read martial arts books. For two and a half years I'd had a nice little martial art student identity thing going on.

The drill ended and we started cooling down. I was able to do some serious rationalizing while we were lying on the floor stretching. Three quarters of the class had gone well enough, I reasoned. If no one spoke to me after we were dismissed, I might be able to get out to the parking lot without bursting into tears.

When we were released from class, I didn't offer to help clean the *dojang*. I ran to sanctuary—the women's locker room. I changed my clothes and worried because I'd worn boots that night, and it would take time to get them on out in the entry. The longer I was out there, the more likely it would be that someone might say some brutal, hostile thing like, "What did you think of the

class?" or "We going to be seeing you regularly?" and I'd break down in front of him.

As it was, after I left the locker room I passed a guy who said, "You did well."

"Freaking liar!" I screamed.

No, really, I just said, "Thanks."

I didn't start crying until I was halfway home. I was still sobbing when I got there.

The next week, I attended an evening advanced class where there was a mix of students. The curriculum changes from week to week, so imagine my... surprise? disappointment?...when *Sambumnim* pulled out the same gauntlet drill he'd used with the black belt class the week before. Things went better for me this time, maybe because of the smaller number of black belts in the room. The atmosphere wasn't charged with their concentrated power. Or maybe the lower-ranked students just couldn't kick as hard.

Since I didn't have to put so much effort into keeping myself from becoming hysterical, I was able to notice that a young, highly skilled teenage black belt was struggling to stay on her feet when it was her turn to hold the shield and be pounded with kicks. She was also gasping for breath while waiting in line to run the gauntlet herself. And an impressive, brawny red belt had to pull out of the exercise altogether for a few moments.

I watched that poor guy standing at the edge of the *dojang's* mat, leaning over so he could rest his upper body on his knees, and I felt something really close to joy. I'd spent the last week burdened with the knowledge I'd picked up in that black belt class: I was incompetent. I was unskilled. I was slow, I was old, I was foolish. And now, watching my classmates struggle, that hard rock of misery in my chest cracked and crumbled.

I guess I should have gone up to him and said something like, "You did well." I was a higher-ranked student and should have helped him out. But at the time all I could think was, Hey, I didn't have to stop and rest. Heh, heh, heh.

I was almost weak with relief. I could continue going to the *dojang*. I could continue to practice step sparring and *poomses*. I could continue reading martial arts books. I could continue on as I had before.

Later, I would be a little embarrassed about my gloating. I took it as a sign, though, that it would be a good idea to avoid the black belt class in the future. In all honesty, my potential for becoming better than I am may not be all that great.

Gail Gauthier's sixth book for children, *Happy Kid!*, will be published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in May. That book has a subplot related to *taekwondo*.

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