

MOOD:  awake

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Some Thoughts On Dating Black Belts

Many years ago, some folks on a mailing list I read posted a challenge: Write a biography of yourself in exactly six words.

I came up with "Much love, only a few mistakes." AMBER suggested it should really be "I am not a beginner's relationship." As it turns out, both of those things are more closely related than they might seem; the missing bit that connects them was provided by an Aikido dojo I belonged to for about a year.

It's not so much that I am not a beginner's relationship, but that relationships generally, I think, go best when one makes a point of only dating people who have black belts at life. This is an idea that's both simpler and more complex than it seems.



more interesting) bits.

A lot of folks--including, to be fair, me, back before I started doing Aikido--have a mistaken idea about what it means to be a black belt in a martial art. The general notion is that once a person becomes a black belt, she has gained a mastery of the art, and is now an unstoppable ass-kicking machine. The reality is almost the opposite. Earning a black belt means that one has mastered the basics of the art--completed, essentially, the beginner's level course--and is now ready to move on to the difficult (and

As my Aikido sensei used to say, "When someone earns a brown belt, they tell everyone. When someone earns a black belt, they usually don't tell anyone." Becoming a black belt means understanding how much there always is still left to learn; one of the things that goes along with being a black belt means knowing that there are still a whole lot of folks who are better at just about everything than you are. Mastery is a process rather than a state of being. And despite all that, people who've earned a black belt are expected to teach others, to lead boldly, even while being aware that having a black belt doesn't actually signify mastery. (He was actually quite wise; he also used to say "Americans have bad knees," which is undisputable in its essential truth.)

We have this image that someone with a black belt is a virtuoso, unshakeable in her grasp of the art, express and admirable in form and moving, faultless in every movement, infallible in the execution of every technique. In reality, black belts can fall on their asses just as well as beginners can; they're just more likely to do it in complex and innovative ways, that's all.

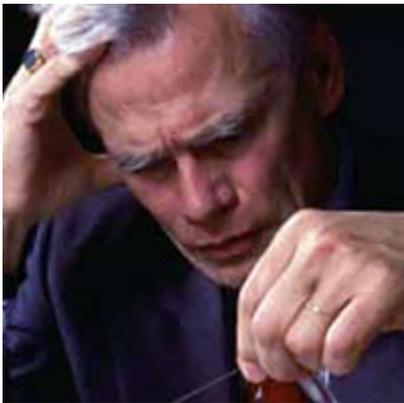
Which is not to say that there is no difference between a novice and a black belt. The black belt does have some mastery, but it's a mastery of the basics, not a mastery of all that there is to learn. A black belt understands the general ideas, has a grasp of how to move through space, has an understanding of her



body and the essential fundamentals of leverage and kinesthetics, and understands what it *feels* like to be moving in the correct way. Even if she's falling on her ass while she's doing it. (There are some wonderful outtakes from various Bruce Lee movies on YouTube, showing him, among other things, whacking himself with a pair of nunchucks and snagging his foot in his opponent's shirt during a missed kick; Jackie Chan has injured himself so many times during missed grabs, falls, and in one case being hit in the head with a helicopter(!) that he's broken nearly every bone in his body multiple times and is deaf in one ear.)

The point is that having a black belt doesn't make someone infallible, nor mean that that person has entirely mastered everything there is to know about the art in question. It simply means that there's a certain base level of competence that's been established, though even the best black belts can still trip over the occasional invisible imaginary turtle shell and fall flat on their faces while walking across a perfectly smooth floor.

Which brings us to life, and why I'm not a beginner's relationship.



I've actually had several partners tell me that I'm not a beginner's relationship, in several different contexts. And I think it's true. As a form of shorthand, I've long said that I make it a policy only to date grownups...but it's occurred to me that I've only rarely thought about what exactly that means, and so it's become a shorthand even to myself.

There's been a bit more turbulence than I'm normally used to in my romantic life over the last couple of years, so I've been mentally chewing on what it means to be a grownup, and to choose partners who are grownups. The word "grownup" comes with a lot of attached baggage--we tend to think of grownups as being not a whole lot of fun, as being responsible rather than spontaneous, as choosing what's most convenient over what's most daring, as being more concerned about the mortgage than about making life worth living--and that definitely isn't who I want in my romantic life. So these days I'm more inclined to say that I prefer to date people who have a black belt at life.

But what does that mean?

It certainly doesn't mean someone who's mastered everything that life can throw at them. That's an unrealistic standard in the extreme, and anyone who thinks he's reached that particular bar probably lacks imagination.

Rather, it means someone who has a handle on the basics. And I don't necessarily mean the basics of filling out an application for title insurance or fixing a stopped-up drain, though those things are certainly good.

The basics I want in a partner are the basics of conducting a life with respect, compassion, and decency toward other human beings, which has a lot less to do with the mechanics of life and a lot more to do with the passion for life.

In a way, that's a bit like porn. It's hard to define precisely what that looks like, though I do tend to know it

when I see it. Were I to make a list of the things that a black belt at life understands, it might include things like:

Feelings are not (necessarily) fact.

Just because I feel bad, that doesn't necessarily mean that someone else has done something wrong. Just because I feel good, that doesn't necessarily mean that what I'm doing is right.

There is more to life than avoiding awkwardness or discomfort. Sometimes, awkwardness and discomfort are an inevitable part of learning and growth. Sometimes, they point to places where I can improve.

There are better ways to deal with the things that I feel than to direct other people around or through my feelings.

Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans.

The world is filled with beauty and chaos and joy and sorrow and pain and uncertainty and fear and ecstasy and heartache and passion. All these things are part of life's song; to fear any of them is to fear life itself.

Life rewards those who move in the direction of greatest courage.

You can not expect to have what you want if you do not ask for what you want. Open, honest, fearless communication is not only the best way to build a healthy relationship; it is the only way.

Fear of intimacy is one of the greatest enemies of happiness.

Conflict is inevitable. We are all on different journeys, and sometimes there is turbulence between us. Dealing with conflict can be done without creating drama.

None of us is perfect. All of us makes mistakes. As grownups, we accept responsibility for our mistakes, without externalizing blame, and pardon reciprocally the mistakes of others.

The times when compassion is the most difficult are the times when it is most necessary.

Being slighted, offended, or hurt by someone else does not justify treating that person poorly. It is easy to vilify those who have hurt us, but they are still people too; even if we can not be close with them, even if we must be guarded, there is no rationalization for evil toward them.

Understanding one's own boundaries is an important part of understanding one's self.

Being uncomfortable is not, of and by itself, a reason not to do something, nor to forbid someone else from doing something.

Integrity isn't in what you do when things are easy; it's in what you do when things are hard.

Security comes from within, not from outside.

It is impossible to be generous if all you can feel is fear of loss. Things change; nothing is forever. Fear of loss robs us of joy and compassion.

Love is not scarce; it's abundant. The greater you fear its scarcity, the harder it is to find.

Expectations, especially when unspoken or unexamined, can become a poison. Revel in what things are rather than what you want them to be.

A life of optimism leads to greater joy than a life of pessimism. Look for the best and you'll often find it; look for the worst and you'll often find it, too.

There is more to life than going from cradle to grave by the path of least resistance. Conformity is not a virtue, and open expression is not a vice.

To censor one's self for the sake of propriety, expectation, or social norm kills the soul and drains the color out of life.

The world is the way it is, not the way we want it to be. Wanting something to be true does not necessarily make it true.

There are probably more, I'm sure.

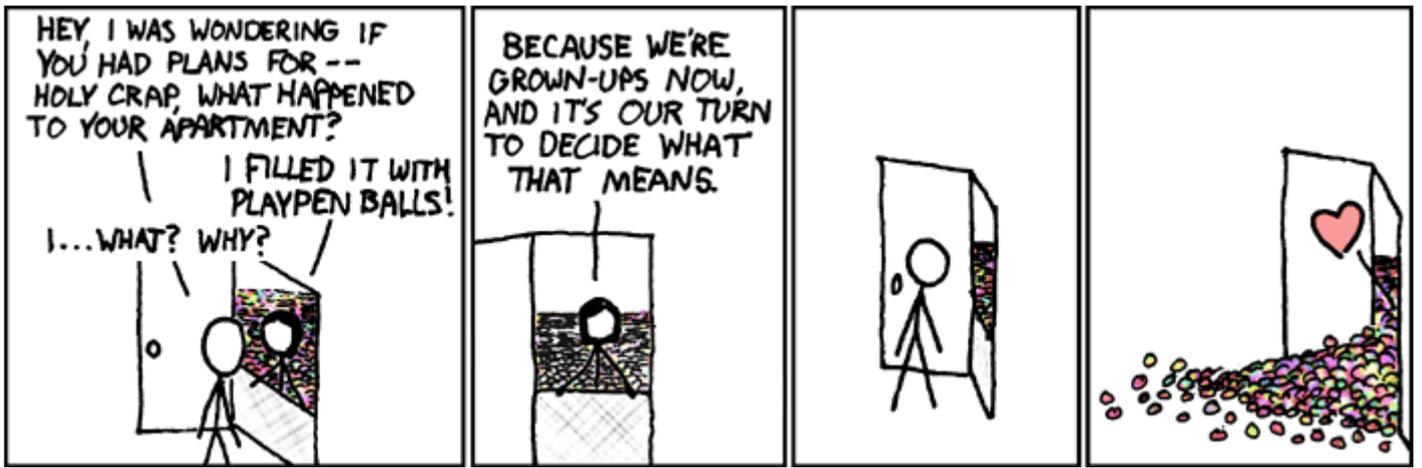
Now, I don't want to give the impression that being a grownup necessarily means mastery of every single thing on this list. Not every black belt can do a spinning back kick.

Nor do I mean to imply that perfection in all of these things is the minimum acceptable standard of performance. Many of the things on this list require constant practice; if there is a person in the world who has reached perfection in any of them, I have not yet met him. Or her.

Some of them are even things that I struggle with. Lately, for example, I've been feeling a bit of a tug-of-war between vulnerability and safety; in the past couple of years, I have made a conscious effort to allow myself greater vulnerability, and have been hurt because of it. I have not quite developed a solid set of skills for quickly evaluating who it is safe to be vulnerable to, as I have spent most of my life getting to know people slowly, over a long period of time. As a result, I have on a few occasions recently allowed myself to be vulnerable to people who have not treated me compassionately, and that's something I don't yet know how to handle with grace.

There is, I think, always one more thing to learn. Whether we're talking about martial arts or life, there's always a new lesson, waiting in the next fall or the next heartache. I don't expect, or even want, partners who are perfect. In fact, I'd bet that anyone I meet who strikes my interest is probably better than I am at doing at least one of the things on this list, even if there are things on it that she hasn't learned yet.

One part of the Dunning–Kruger effect is that people who are highly skilled often rate themselves poorly. It is okay for a black belt to have self-doubt; this is, like entropy, an inescapable part of existence. Understanding that, too, is part of being a black belt at life. I know that there are skills I still need to learn, but I am also confident that I have the ability to learn them. If there's a foundation upon which all these other things are built, that is probably it.



(<http://xkcd.com/150/>)

TAGS: [philosophy](#), [polyamory](#), [relationships](#), [xkcd](#)



16 comments

 February 22 2012, 17:48:35 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

THIS. One hundred, thousand, billion times THIS.

 February 22 2012, 18:49:47 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

"Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans."

Life is what happens to you; it may be influenced by plans but isn't subservient to them.

[Far more clear than I have put it](#)
 February 22 2012, 19:01:23 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

User  referenced to your post from [Far more clear than I have put it](#) saying: [...] <http://tacit.livejournal.com/372716.html> [...]

 February 22 2012, 20:21:57 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Brilliant ... and timely.

 February 22 2012, 20:35:13 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Well, fair to say I'll be pointing all my friends to yet another one of your posts...so much good food for thought.

[The New Blackbelt](#)


I wanted to take a moment to reflect more on the New Blackbelt. There is a specific set of issues associated with being newly thrust into this position of power and decision making that is separate of the steady progression of mastery that will follow. This is definitely a step function.

Earning her brown belt among her peers of the lower levels indicates achievement among her peers it can be remarked on publicly and used to reinforce self esteem. Gaining a black belt now inducts her into a world where the roles and maneuvers are not falsely limited, she can attend more things, and learn that nearly everyone is better at her at SOMETHING. The floor beneath her feet may seem to fall away.

As a new blackbelt she becomes aware of how much she has available to her to learn and may not be as equally aware of the quality of her own self or the depth of understanding she already has in her basic skills that can be combined to begin to master Grace. She is expected to be self directed and motivated in her own education and to seek out new opportunities. She is expected to take the time to refine a skill once she becomes aware that she lacks it. She is encouraged to come to understand that practice, patience, time, dedication, and networking with other blackbelts to learn from their experience is the best way to get these skills. She accepts a role in the community to be there for other blackbelts to provide the same feedback and insight on the parts of herself that have achieved mastery. And perhaps, most intimidating of all, she is expected to behave boldly. Newly mastered skills are leveraged to get into new situations to have new experiences that will provide further skill development. To behave boldly so that she may reach for something new and fall on her ass again while trying.

Not only will she fall on her ass while trying, learning, doing, exploring, becoming - she will occasionally be so adept in her own skillset that she can face those with more knowledge and time and training and even outmatch them in certain interactions and occasions. As a blackbelt now - she no longer hides her strength or depth of understanding to blend in among her peers or to perform precise practiced maneuvers just to match the others - she engages the world (and even the masters above her current skill level) with confidence that she knows what she does know and may, indeed, best the master or provide someone else the opportunity to learn from her own self.

Also, regarding that list, I think an individual who takes heart on any 5 of these listed points is naturally going to be progressing on much of the rest of the list as well. The mastery of even one list point may employ skill advancement in (several!) others. You CAN be focused on improving or enlivening just one part of yourself and it may (not will, may) also improve the skill and confidence of multiple other facets as well. It is okay to be a blackbelt, have mastered the basic skillset, and to be focused on just the one next thing for a time.



This is brilliant. I tend to feel the way the XKCD script does about being a grown-up... I get to decide what that is, and do so consciously. And that means I know I'm imperfect in lots of ways, but that I'm willing to learn and want to grow.

When getting involved with new people I simply don't if they're not at least reasonably equal in that regard. We all have faults, blind-spots and sometimes juvenile expectations, but if you're not aware of them I'm not likely to even be your friend. We can be acquainted and I may even talk to you politely or try to help you grow, but I'm sure as hell not going to spend the time or energy I would on a full friendship. And lovers

have to be people I'd enjoy as friends, willing to make the effort to grow with our relationship, and fun.

Great food for thought, and the description of a black belt makes me understand more about martial arts than I ever have before, so thank you.

 
[February 23 2012, 06:22:56 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Beautifully said. As a fellow aikidoka, I've always loved what black belts really mean. My sensei explained it to me as a black belt meaning that you're ready to start your real training, that you're ready to properly dedicate yourself to the art.

~Duk

 
[February 23 2012, 07:29:09 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Brilliant. Do you mind if I spread these lessons and would you like to be referenced on them?

  [tacit](#)
[February 23 2012, 08:22:23 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I don't mind at all; by all means feel free! :)

No title
 
[February 23 2012, 19:14:00 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

User   referenced to your post from [No title](#) saying: [...] i was asked to weigh in on an entry [...]

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[February 24 2012, 20:08:29 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

User   referenced to your post from [found, friendsurfing](#) saying: [...] need to reread: on dating black belts [...]

 
[February 25 2012, 01:29:42 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Yeah, I needed this. Thank you.

 
[February 25 2012, 16:43:52 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I came to this through a link from a friend.

You speak my thoughts and feelings way more eloquently than I. Thank you. Mind if I share?

  [tacit](#)
[February 26 2012, 12:26:16 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

By all means, feel free!

Anonymous

February 26 2013, 15:05:31 UTC

CHECK COLLAPSE

Going through my own emotional relationship turmoil right now. This article is very reassuring. Thank you.