

“The Word You Say: Inside Your Head.”



The story of one father & martial artist helping his young students find focus, discipline and confidence!

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It's three o'clock on Thursday in the Balanced Life Skills martial arts studio, and a group of four year olds, accompanied by their parents, are patiently waiting for Mr. Joe. As is usually the case, whenever he enters the room, the children's faces display a mixture of joy and anticipation. Each wants an opportunity to have Mr. Joe's attention; which they all receive as he individually ties on their karate belts to begin class. After the belts are tied, Mr. Joe walks on to the karate floor and places down square rubber mats for the children to sit on. These mats will ensure that the children always know where their place is on the floor. He calls the children by name and points to which mat each should go. The children sit on their assigned mat and squirm around while waiting for class to begin, some even begin to spontaneously repeat the alphabet aloud for reasons that they themselves probably couldn't even explain. After briefly chatting with the parents, seeing how each is doing, Mr. Joe begins class by saying “today we're working on balance”.

When did my father, Joe Van Deuren, become this other entity simply named Mr. Joe? When did this transformation begin and how have I never thought of this before? I've been around for the entire journey that my father has undergone to become Mr. Joe and yet I feel as if for the first time I am only now truly noticing what he has accomplished. Have I, for all these years, taken my father for granted? It doesn't feel as though I have; no, it feels more like I have just never understood what motivates him, what it is that drives him to accomplish the things that he has achieved. His achievements have always left me with an odd feeling of both inspiration, for what he has accomplished, and puzzlement, for why he has accomplished it. This, I suppose, is how most children feel about their parents. The only information we have about them is that which we have noticed in relation to ourselves. Growing up we

don't get to see the bigger picture or the history of the human telling us what to do, all we see is that they're telling us *what to do*.

Mr. Joe is telling the four year olds to sit in level eight, which involves sitting with both feet bent inwards and under the body, crossing each other at the ankle. Then he tells them to sit in level nine, which means that they should straighten up their posture and sit more rigid then in level eight. After this, he asks them to sit in level 10, the most controlled level of sitting in which they keep their bodies as still as possible.

My father first got involved with the martial arts after watching my siblings and I take lessons. After a while of watching us, he said, "I just couldn't sit on the sidelines anymore, so I decided to take a class myself. Probably within a month of that first class, I realized the martial arts were not only a good way of getting kids involved in something physical, but being able to teach them something spiritual as well. I made my mind up right then that that's what I was going to do." He began watching others teach the martial arts and eventually he started teaching himself. He would go to work at his previous job in the morning and work until three in the afternoon and then go teach at the karate studio until nine. He did this for about five years until he opened his own studio.

That studio, Balanced Life Skills, is not like most other karate schools. My father created it because he didn't feel that other martial arts schools had the same philosophy that he had. As he explains it, "many of them were only about the physical." It's his opinion that the majority of the parents are not bringing their kids in to martial art schools to learn kicking and punching, or to be fighters. "They want them to learn discipline and good characteristics for life." So, he started a school where the core was martial arts, but it is built around two things: building good character in every student and building good citizens by doing community service. The first thing he did was to hire a child development specialist, who helped him with developing a complete character building program

based on words of the month. For example, he takes these words, like 'self-discipline', and discusses them eight times during a month.

Another unique aspect of the school is that they don't start training kids to be black belts until they are about ten years old. "We don't expect any black belts to come out of our school until they're about fourteen years old. By then we think we can help them appreciate what it means to be a black belt. Which is simply that you're going to do your best, you're not going to give up, and you're going to persevere until it's done. My approach to martial arts is that in my mind you can substitute the word 'life' for 'martial arts', and so what we're trying to do is to train these kids to be successful in life."

Mr. Joe is talking to the class when one of the students speaks out and says "Today I hurt my ear on someone's shoe."

Not missing a beat Mr. Joe gently asks, "Oh yeah, can you still do class today?" The student informs him that he thinks he can, to which Mr. Joe replies, "Yeah, I think you can too."

Regarding the children, my father tells me that "the big deal is to be consistent with what you're teaching and what you expect from the kids. You demand that they do their best and you do it with a smile, because they have to know that you care about them. They have to know that you're dead serious and that you're not going to accept anything but their best...but always with a smile."

My father's childhood was less than idyllic, which has helped to influence his motivation to help children now. He wants them to have a better role model and teacher than he had growing up. My father was born in Annapolis and grew up in Odenton Maryland. His mother was 21 years old when he was born and his father was 54 years old, and they had very little money. Within a year or so after my father was born, his father was in the hospital with ulcers and almost died. After that his father was very sick and unable to provide very well for the family. His health continued to disintegrate until he was 68 years old and died of heart disease. My father was fourteen when his father died. "I didn't realize this until I was thirty years old... but I was very angry at my father for being so old when he had me because

he was not around, and was not able to do what other fathers did for their kids.” One of the only things my father remembers when dealing with his dad was when he was young, he thinks maybe when he was five years old, his father did muster up enough strength to take him out and show him how to catch a ball. His father threw the ball several times at him. It hit him several times in the head, and his father called him stupid. “That’s one thing that I will never forget,” my father says. “So we had no money and we lived in very poor conditions, to be perfectly honest. Of course, I didn’t realize how bad off we were until later. But I was determined that I was going to have a life that was better than that.”

So my father started working at age eleven, which is how he could provide the money to buy his clothes. In the beginning his work was running errands for people that would give him 10 cent and 25 cent tips. After that he started working at a store while he was still in school. He worked anywhere from 25 to 80 hours a week for a dollar an hour. “Then of course, when I had my own children, I was very determined not to have them live like that. I knew what it was like to go through some pretty tough times and so I was determined also to have an effect on other kids, and to do what I could to help kids who didn’t have the same sorts of things that I, later, was able to have.”

After stretching and warm up exercises, Mr. Joe has the students work on their balance by standing up on one leg and doing other various activities of this sort. He goes down the line of students and has each individually demonstrate their balance. After each of the students has done so he gets the parents to participate by having them clap for the students. It makes the environment very uplifting. The clapping is infectious. Soon, everyone is clapping and I find myself clapping, even though I should be taking more notes. Also, high-fives are necessary. After each demonstration, the student gets a high-five and it is easy to tell just how much they value a high-five from Mr. Joe.

My father’s basic philosophy in life and in the martial arts is about the impact of the little things people do. “Sometimes the people that promote certain ideas do so to such an extreme that people become standoffish about the idea. Really, it’s only about awareness.” My fathers believes that if you make a tiny change and you are aware of the effect that it could have, or will have if many people do it,

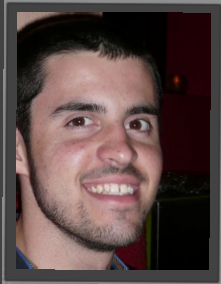
then over a period of time it becomes a part of you; in the sense that there is acceptance and less struggle. If you decide to say “good morning” to someone every day eventually it will become second nature and you won’t even have to think about doing it any longer; it will just happen. “The little things we do have a huge effect. And so it’s not about what any single person does in a huge way, it’s about what each individual does in little ways.” My father has incorporated this philosophy into the studio through a program called “acts of kindness”. At each level in the school the kids are required to do a certain number of acts of kindness. Which can be anything as simple as opening the door for someone, or showing courtesy through the use of words such as “please” and “thank you” without someone telling them to do so. Eventually, the goal is to get the kids to start performing acts of kindness without even thinking about it. He also did a program where he had the kids write down every time someone else did an act of kindness towards them. “It was extremely powerful, because many times we don’t take the time to notice when someone has done something nice for us. But we should take a moment, just to stop, be still, and think: that was an act of kindness. How am I going to pass that along?”

The class is almost over now and Mr. Joe has all the students sitting in a circle. He has with him the “treasure box”. Each student gets to pick a treasure, which look like some sort of precious stone. He tells them to close their eyes and silently focus on the stone. He says, “soft breaths. Breathe in, breathe out.” He tells me later that “introducing something as radical as meditation is difficult because you have many people in society that are more fundamentalist and very dogmatic about their beliefs. But meditation is really just an opportunity for you to be still and to allow yourself to have some quiet time. It just allows you to be mindful or aware of things that are happening, and so it does have an effect. The practice is one that I think is sometimes misunderstood, because some people think it might be a religious thing, but in fact every major religion asks us to take the time to think and just be with whatever our beliefs may be. From the point of view of peace with yourself, I think meditation is one of the most important things you could do.”

My father has found peace with himself. He has changed so much between the first time he started taking the martial arts and now. I can remember a time before he started the martial arts when he would drive me to school in the morning and we would not talk at all. He was very intimidating and I never knew the right thing to say. Now he has calmed down and is more approachable. I can talk to him about whatever I need to without worrying about how he'll react. My father has guided me along the way with him through his path of inner change. He has helped me become a better person by way of example; which is, I believe, the only true way to do so. Most importantly, he has given me what he never had growing up and I could not have asked for a better teacher.

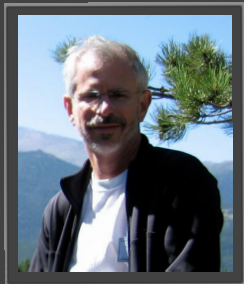
Now the class is finished and to end it the students must bow to Mr. Joe as he bows to them. But before they do, Mr. Joe asks the students "what's the word you say inside your head when you bow?" They all answer simultaneously: "respect". They bow and the class is over. Mr. Joe then gives each student a high-five saying "give me five, now give your mom a kiss".

After everyone has left, my father turns to me and says, "so that's a typical four year old class."



Sean Van Deuren, author, is a student at Emerson College in Boston. At the time of this writing he is starting his second year there, majoring in creative writing. He wrote this story for a paper at school and received a 99.5 for the paper. He is an actor, writer, director, poet, and a member of a traveling improv team in Boston.

So far he has been a good son too!



Joe Van Deuren (Mr. Joe) is the head instructor of Balanced Life Skills, a school that teaches martial arts. His own instruction in the martial arts began when he was about 40 years old. While his own children were young he had a vision of being able to help others, parents and children, in the whole growing up process. When he was introduced to the martial arts he was quick to realize that this was the hook he needed to help kids grow in their character and learn to defend themselves from things they need protection from in this modern world.

A martial arts education is so much more than just kicking and punching. Self Defense as taught at Balanced Life Skills includes anger management, eating healthy, environmental self defense, and involvement in the community helping others.

Some of the programs he has started or has implemented in Annapolis, MD include: Placemats for You, Where Does the Rain Go?, Help a Teacher, Community Awareness Days, Martial Arts Defeats Diabetes, Excellence in Leadership, Jackson & Ella Art Show.

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Teaching Life, Art & Peace