

Tuesday, November 14, 2006

Two lawyers inspired me to practice t'ai chi.

This week, I added the yin-yang symbol to the top-right of this blog, together with a link to my article on practicing law by incorporating t'ai chi, the peaceful path, and lessons from the Trial Lawyers College. Yin Yang. The yin yang symbol is an important expression of t'ai chi, and the phrase is part of the five main principles of practicing t'ai chi, which principles are simple, yet profound, particularly when applied throughout the day in all physical, verbal, thinking, and psychological matters. Those principles are maintaining the harmony and balance of yin and yang, relaxing and sinking the body into the ground, keeping the body upright, making the waist the commander of any turning of the body, and keeping the wrists softly unbent. I came to t'ai chi finally in 1994, not by any new age desire, but because t'ai chi appeared to be beneficial to providing the extra strength, harmony, and calm that I sought during my daily courtroom battles. In 1991, I first met late trial lawyer Victor Crawford -- who helped inspire me to learn t'ai chi -- at a criminal defense lawyers' meeting. I somehow learned that he was a practitioner, and asked him questions about it from time to time. Three years later, I asked Vic his advice for learning t'ai chi. Vic sent me some brochures about classes given by Ellen and Len Kennedy, (who became my teachers) and some other local instructors. He attached a note foreseeing amazing doors that were about to be opened through learning t'ai chi; what an understatement. I started going to the free Saturday morning t'ai chi practice sessions at Glen Echo Park, and then signed up for lessons there with Ellen and Len Kennedy, who are great teachers and who are former students of Robert Smith, who was t'ai chi superstar master Cheng Man Ching's first western student. My t'ai chi teacher Len Kennedy also is a lawyer, who believes so much in t'ai chi that for years he has taken time to teach t'ai chi weekly in addition to the intense hours he likely puts in currently as Sprint general counsel, and previously as a big law firm partner. I visited Vic Crawford about a year after starting to study t'ai chi, and told him I was unsure how much time to devote to going to t'ai chi classes. He urged me forward, and talked about the amazing energy and other benefits that come from practicing t'ai chi. I have witnessed such energy and strength firsthand when Len Kennedy has invited me forward to demonstrate various t'ai chi moves; with little energy, he'd bump me along a linear path. At the time, Vic was suffering from cancer that would claim his life less than two years after I started studying t'ai chi. He spoke of understanding his body independently from his doctors. Vic was no new ager practicing t'ai chi. He was a brash lawyer, and a lobbyist first for the tobacco industry and then against it as he battled cancer following his own years of smoking. This was the inspiration I needed to follow the t'ai chi path. How does t'ai chi help me as a lawyer? It helps give me the necessary strength to engage in effective and fearless battle. T'ai chi teaches that we must be relaxed and harmonized no matter how dangerous, threatening, or stressful the situation that we find ourselves in. Permitting tension is to become weaker and to block off essential channels of strength, energy, and creativity. The more I put t'ai chi into practice, the more I realize that these principles work and are essential. To be fearless, I take inspiration from t'ai chi master Cheng Man Ching, who spoke of overcoming our fears in terms of imagining that we are practicing t'ai chi while balanced atop a narrow pointed cliff. To not eliminate one's fears while atop the cliff is to guarantee certain death. Eliminating fear also calls for keeping and tempering the fearlessness of a child filled with wonder, and living in the moment, as wonderfully detailed in the following story of the man and the two tigers: A man is chased in the wilderness by two tigers, only to be forced off a cliff, hanging for life from a vine. One tiger waits above and the other waits below for a human meal. Two field mice gnaw away at the vine. The man sees a wild strawberry growing from the side of a cliff, reaches for it, tastes it, and -- with his life hanging in the balance -- thinks of how delicious the strawberry tastes. Practicing t'ai chi in the courtroom reminds me of a scene from a World War II movie where an American soldier, hidden from view, guns down enemy soldier after enemy soldier, calmly chomping on his cigar at every step of the way. As much as we must be sensitive about any violence, had this soldier lost his calm to anger, fear or yelling, he would have been a dead duck. His calmness, together with his shooting skill, gave him strength. The peaceful, harmonious, and t'ai chi path is beneficial both for lawyering and for living. Achieving on this path is a never-ending process. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:00

Hi mr Katz,

Glad to hear you are still practicing tai chi. It is something i have considered to get in touch with , it seems it seems to calm me done before proceeding in a rage, which gets one no where.

Cheers
Michelle

Anonymous on Nov 14 2006, 22:44