

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Kung Fu

By Jonas Thoene Gerber

One of the first martial arts movies I ever saw was *The Forbidden Kingdom*: a charming zero-to-hero movie filled with jaw-dropping action scenes and hilarious comedy. Suffice to say it was a feast for the eyes when I saw it at eleven years old, and it set me aflame with passion. I loved the epic fight scenes and badass warriors in the film. However, after begging my dad to let me join a Kung Fu studio, I was disappointed by the classes.

Instead of flying kicks and flashy sword moves, we spent most of our time doing push-ups and learning stances. Perhaps I should have seen this coming. There is a scene in the movie where Jason asks Lu Yang to teach him Kung Fu. Lu Yang hits him with a stick and says, “that’s called strike, tomorrow I teach you block.” Despite my dissatisfaction, my burning desire to become a Kung Fu master would not be quenched, and I kept training.

Throughout my instruction, I maintained my fascination with ‘completing’ my journey by receiving my black belt. For a white belt, this dream seemed impossibly far away. I longed to be able to smash through wooden tables or pluck a fly from the air with chopsticks at a whim. The belt progression was displayed along one wall as a constant reminder, a colourful rainbow of badassery. The studio was decorated with all kinds of exotic weapons begging to be used: swords, halberds, bo staffs, rope spears, and nun chucks. Much to my dismay, however, the studio was very strict about who was allowed to train with weapons, and all the cool pointy ones were reserved for black belts. My obsession was further encouraged by the showboating

of older students; one of the younger black belts loved to show off his wallflip to newer students. Each nugget of awesomeness kept me coming back for more.

I spent six years training. Kung Fu was a rock to me through all the changes and confusion of middle and high school. Tears, laughter, and everything in between were shared at the studio. Despite the challenges of the training, the instructors always kept the student's enjoyment as a priority. The monotonous repetition of techniques was broken up by games of dodgeball or water balloon fights. Whenever I felt stressed or overwhelmed with other parts of my life, I could find solace in my training.

As might be expected, my Kung Fu training was far different from what I had seen in *The Forbidden Kingdom*. The brutal, fast-paced realities of self-defense differ vastly from the flashy, extensive fight scenes seen in action movies. Focus was placed on practical, efficient techniques over ostentatious ones. My disappointment was multiplied by the endless repetition of mundane techniques. The curriculum was quite comprehensive for practical self-defense; we covered striking, takedowns, ground fighting, weapon use, weapon defense, and supplemental movements such as dive rolls, flips, and high jumps. There was an insane amount of content to learn; the curriculum only reset annually, so each month came with its own subject. In retrospect, I'd be hard-pressed to say I achieved any degree of "mastery."

I was deemed ready to take my Black Belt Test after five years when I was sixteen years old. There were two different black belt tests at the studio, each occurring once a year: one for kids and one for adults. I desperately wanted to take the adult test. While a youth black belt carried the same status as an adult black belt, the test was less difficult and required less preparation; to me, this lowering of the bar seemed patronizing and undermined the validity of my hard work. Perhaps this was cleverly designed to push students to work harder; this was certainly the case for me. Thankfully, I was deemed ready to take the adult test with two other students, Dave and Addison. They were a fair bit older, mid-thirties, and I admired them a lot; they were incredibly skilled and worked extremely hard in preparation. I felt inadequate training with them. As a gangly teenager, I had awkward, flailing techniques that were a stark contrast to their smooth, polished ones.

The pressure leading up to the test was a palpable weight on my shoulders. I felt like I'd never be good enough. Every day for almost a year, I would do some form of training to prepare. Occasionally, I would take over instructing lower-level courses at the encouragement of the studio head; he told me one of the best ways to study is to teach others.

The instructors were frustratingly vague with the details of the test, further increasing my anxiety. My instructors told me we had to know the entirety of the curriculum and demonstrate requested techniques. They also mentioned that there would be a written portion and an essay, but to my dismay they said nothing about the topics. The few details that I managed to glean were that the test would begin with a short but intense timed hike up Mt. Finlayson in the morning as a warmup, and then the test itself would take place at the nearby studio.

It's a delicate balance to climb for success without building your own fall.

The morning of the test was by far the hardest part of the day. My head was cloudy and my heart beat heavily in my chest. Everything I had worked for had built up to this. I met with Dave, Addison, and my instructor at the base of Mt. Finlayson at around 8:30 AM. After a brief warmup, we were off. The climb was incredibly easy; I blinked and it was over. A short twenty-six minutes and we had scaled the mountain, four minutes faster than our supposed goal. We made it up and down so fast that we were early for the next part of the test.

While Dave and I shook with nervous energy, Addison was a paragon of composure. It seemed like he was preparing to kick his feet up for a lazy afternoon instead of undertaking a monumental test of perseverance and skill. Addison's calm demeanour helped ease Dave's and my tension. However, our tranquil moment was banished once we stepped into the studio.

We were greeted by a wall of intimidating stares. The thirteen Black Belts overseeing the test were lined up along the wall behind the studio head, Bob. Despite knowing many of them for years, there was no joviality present. I felt as if I were on trial. A dozen judging eyes bore into me. After a brief introduction, our first challenge began. They lit a candle and told us to maintain a horse stance—legs wide, knees bent to 90°—until the candle burnt out. The first few minutes were bearable, but eventually, my already sore legs turned to jelly. However, the mental strain far outclassed the physical one; the endless blank stares brought me to the brink of panic.

Kung Fu was a rock to me.

Unfortunately, Dave and I didn't make it through the challenge unscathed. While the candle only burnt for nine minutes, our legs wouldn't hold and both of us fell multiple times. Only Addison, true to his indomitable character, lasted the full duration. No comments were made from the testers, and we moved on to the next phase.

We were told we would be sparring with each black belt in succession for two-minute rounds. After that, we would then go through the order again and wrestle each black belt for the same duration. The testers formed circles around each of us and would viciously push us back into the centre if we got too close to the edge. Strangely, I found this section to be the most enjoyable. It felt liberating to be able to fight back against my judicators. My relief was short-lived, however. Within minutes, my chest was burning from the intensity. My numb legs struggled to support me, and I felt as if I was moving through molasses. The brutality was further punctuated by faint retching from another corner of the room. I couldn't spare a moment to glance, but afterwards I learned they had buckets ready in case any of us vomited; to my surprise, it was Addison who had to use the bucket. After an hour of being rag-dolled and used as a punching bag, I felt as if I had been put through a washing machine. Thankfully, the next portion was the written exam.

The respite was heavenly, but the written exam came with its own challenges. My exhaustion was so strong that I had to use both hands to hold my pencil. Additionally, my head was so foggy that the convoluted questions in the short answer section made little sense. For example, one question asked for an example of movement within non-movement. The essay question further confused me. It described a scenario where while

standing on a frozen lake one sees both a man and a woman fall through the ice. With no opportunity to go for help, and equal distance from both, who should you save? To this day, I struggle to provide a suitable answer. I answered that I would save the woman because I felt that if the man was larger, he would be more likely to survive in the frozen waters long enough for help to arrive. After my rudimentary answers, I was not feeling confident in my chances.

The final portion of the exam would be a technique demonstration. To my surprise, this was the quickest and simplest part of the exam. After a year of study, Addison, Dave, and I performed the techniques with little difficulty. All consideration for our tiredness vanished upon the conclusion of the exam.

With bated breath, we hung on Bob's every word. He expressed how proud he was to see how far each of us had come, and that each of us deserved recognition. But he had only one black belt to give today and asked each one of us who we thought had earned it. As soon as the words left his mouth my heart sank. I knew it wouldn't be me. Despite all my hard work, Addison and Dave were far more proficient than me and had performed better throughout the exam. Unfortunately, they both seemed to agree. I wasn't anybody's choice for receiving the black belt. I answered that Addison should get it, and Dave and Addison each answered that the other should.

Much to my surprise, however, this was simply another test! With a great smile, Bob confessed that each of us would receive a black belt. Gone was the air of gravity; smiles, laughter, and congratulations filled the room. While the final test may have seemed cruel, it provided me with valuable clarity. Despite working my hardest, I wasn't the best or most deserving of a black belt. I didn't have to be though; I had proven my dedication and perseverance and followed through with my training.

But I wasn't satisfied. The praise and congratulations from friends and family felt hollow to me. Despite fulfilling all that was required,

I hadn't met my own expectations of what a black belt meant to me. I thought that passing my test would mean that I was a master, but all I had done was learn the basics. I felt as if I were cursed by a genie; my dream had come true but not the way I wanted. The more I learned about martial arts, the less I felt I knew.

For a time, the martial arts movies that I had once loved repulsed me. I could see what true greatness looked like and knew that I was nowhere close to achieving it. Despite years of hard work, I was only a few rungs up an endless ladder. It seemed easier to just let go and walk along a beaten path than struggle to appease my vanity. It was hardly a healthy mindset for a young man, but perhaps a realistic one.

My focus shifted. I stopped training to devote time to college, work, and mindless entertainment. For a while, the release from my endless training felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. I had so much more time to spend however I desired, but soon a different burden moved to take its place. The disappointment I felt only grew in my passivity. An endless nagging question prodded the back of my mind: Would I feel satisfied if I had kept training?

I was standing on the edge of a knife; the slightest slip could cut me. Life was an endless tightrope of pain with no destination in sight and an abyss looming around me. But it seemed that time was the solution I was looking for. The clarity that hindsight provided let me turn the knife's edge away.

I accepted the reality of my own limitations and took pride in the work that I put in. The value of the training I put in only grows the older I get. Discipline, tenacity, and guidance are privileges that molded the person I am today. I can't do half the things I envisioned I would be able to do, but I'm also capable of so much more. People always say to follow your dreams but never seem to consider what happens if you achieve them. It's a delicate balance to climb for success without building your own fall.