

Worst Enemy Best Teacher
Deidre Combs
New World Library,
2005

CHAPTER FIVE

Engage

*A knowledge of the path cannot be substituted
for putting one foot in front of the other.*

— M. C. RICHARDS

This is a story from the kingdom of Camelot about the Knights of the Round Table. King Arthur sat dining on New Year's Eve with Lady Guinevere and his most trusted knights, Gawain the Good and Agravaine of the Heavy Hand. The halls were filled with jokes and song from good knights clad in red, lovely ladies, and the noblest king the nation had known.

No sooner had the first course been served when a huge man rode in on a tremendous green horse. The man too was green of skin and beard. His fine clothing glimmered like emeralds embroidered with inlaid gold. He bore no armor and carried in one hand a sprig of holly, a symbol of peace. In his other hand he held a broad battle-ax of green razor-sharp steel.

The Green Knight asked, "Who is the king of these men? I have come to play a game with him." Arthur stepped forward and offered him supper. "I have no interest in dining but offer instead a

test for someone who has bold blood and a brash head. I will give you my ax and allow you the first blow. Yet in a year and a day, I must be allowed the same."

No one moved. The Green Knight laughed and chided Arthur, "You say you are the living legend? Where is your power and pride now? Are you afraid when no fight is offered?" Arthur, wincing in shame and flushed with anger, stepped forward, demanding the ax. The Green Knight smiled, handed Arthur the ax, and dismounted.

Just as Arthur raised the mighty weapon and considered his stroke, Gawain spoke. "Allow me, my lord. My life is little to lose, and it would be improper to have you engage in this mockery." As the knight bowed at his king's feet, Arthur gave Gawain the green ax.

Gawain told the knight, "I am Gawain and will bear from you what comes after the blow, but from no other knight alive." The Green Knight smiled and nodded at young Gawain. "You must come find me in one year and a day."

Gawain raised the ax, and the Green Knight lifted his curly mane to reveal his verdant neck. Gawain's swift stroke beheaded the Green Knight, and red blood surged from the decapitated body. The Green Knight bent over and picked up his head, mounted his horse, and rode away, calling, "Find me in the Green Chapel."

Gawain bore a heavy heart as he hung the ax upon a tapestry, knowing the test had just begun.

Eleven months passed, and Gawain started off toward North Wales to find the Green Knight. He donned a shield of bright red gules painted with a pentacle of gold, called the endless knot, which reminded him of the five virtues of the knight: friendship, courtesy, a pure heart, generosity, and compassion.

Gawain encountered beasts and suffered from great hunger and cold, but could not find the Green Chapel. On Christmas Day,

desperate, he prayed to find a place to rest. Looking up he saw a castle suddenly appear, shimmering in the distance.

The lord of the castle welcomed Gawain warmly, introducing him to his strikingly beautiful lady of white skin and flushed rose cheeks and to the yellowed old woman who sat beside her. "For sport and to show you are a good guest," the host, Bertilak, said, "let's play a game. For the next three days I will go out hunting with my men, and when I return each evening I will exchange my bounty for anything you manage to acquire in the castle. Then I'll help you find this Green Chapel."

Gawain happily agreed.

The first morning, the lord hunted a herd of does, while his wife snuck into Gawain's bedchambers hoping to seduce him. Gawain, wishing to stay true to his knightly vows of courtesy and chastity, responded, "I am honored, but this is not to be." The beautiful lady stole one kiss. When Bertilak appeared that evening and asked for his winnings in exchange for venison, Gawain kissed him.

On the second day, the lord captured a wild boar, and his wife again tried to woo Gawain. "I am honored, but this is not to be," Gawain replied as this beautiful lady kissed him twice. At dinner Gawain exchanged two kisses with Bertilak for the boar's head.

Finally, on the third day, the lord hunted fox. The beautiful lady kissed Gawain three times after trying yet again to embrace the knight. When Gawain again said, "I am honored, but this is not to be," she asked for something to remember him by. Gawain wanted to exchange nothing, until the beauty mentioned that the green and gold silk girdle that she wore around her waist could protect him from dying. Gawain took and hid the girdle that night, giving only three kisses to the host in exchange for a fox skin.

On New Year's Day, Gawain rode off with the girdle to seek the Green Knight. At the edge of the forest, a guide sent with him promised not to tell if Gawain decided to give up the quest.

Gawain refused, saying, "Good or ill, every man must complete his fate," and bid farewell.

Soon after Gawain found a cave partially hidden in tall grasses and called out, "Here I am, do what you will." The huge Green Knight emerged as Gawain bravely presented his neck. The Green Knight then feigned two blows. On a third feint, the Green Knight nicked Gawain's neck, barely drawing blood. "You toy with me, the contract is complete," growled Gawain.

The Green Knight then explained, "I am Bertilak, and because you did not honestly exchange all of your winnings on the third day, I had to draw blood on a third blow. You are a noble knight whose life should be spared." He continued, smiling: "The old woman at my table was Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's half-sister. She shifted my appearance into the Green Knight and sent me to Camelot. Is not woman your true enemy?"

When Gawain returned to Camelot and shared the tale, he displayed the green girdle and tied it on his left arm, vowing to wear it the rest of his days as a reminder of his failures. In a show of support, all the knights of Camelot bore green girdles on their red-frocked arms.

Like Gawain, we take on the warrior's role whenever we meet an adversary and wish to serve something greater than ourselves. This tale reminds us that through this journey we will be tested and that the challenges can be terrifying. Yet our sincere commitment can ultimately protect us, and by practicing specific skills we are more apt to succeed.

Although these days not all of us have ready access to formal conflict training, you may have already encountered some of the techniques we will cover in the next four chapters. Some of us have had inspiring sports coaches who provided physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual conditioning strategies to better

perform. Others may have found help in confronting vexing problems through studying the spiritual traditions and yoga. Still others may have been taught about being an honorable and courageous leader through military training. Most of us have simply picked up tricks through trial and error that have served us well along the way.

The martial arts also codify a heroic warrior philosophy into daily disciplines and techniques. In this chapter we will use the sparring process, which consists of five basic parts, as a useful metaphor for engaging with an opponent:

1. Your shield: a code of conduct
2. The opening bow: beginning well
3. Sparring and competitions: the power of practice
4. The closing bow: honorable closure and integration
5. Proper conditioning: staying strong

This process not only guides our conduct during a difficult conversation, but it centers us so that we may welcome whatever comes to us throughout the day. Just like the mythic warriors of old, we set out to meet our opponents with a strong shield to protect us so we may return home safely from our daily battles.

Your Shield: A Code of Conduct

Having a set of ethics or ideals that you pledge to stand behind is a distinct characteristic of the principled leader. When one is fighting as part of a team, like the Knights of the Round Table,

The purpose of discipline is to promote freedom. But freedom leads to infinity and infinity is terrifying.

— HENRY MILLER

the group commits to follow a common set of principles both on and off the battlefield. In *The Code of the Warrior*, U.S. Naval Academy professor Shannon French describes a soldier's common code as encompassing "not only how he should interact with his own warrior comrades, but also how he should treat other members of his society, his enemies, and the people he conquers." Our knight Gawain the Good pledged to follow the five virtues of a Round Table knight:

- Friendship
- Courtesy
- A pure heart
- Generosity
- Compassion

Similarly, Joseph Campbell describes the gallant Warrior Way in Japanese mythology as:

- Loyalty with courage
- Veracity
- Self-control
- Benevolence
- A willingness to fully play one's role in the masquerade of life

And from the Lakota tradition we have:

Endurance, cleanliness, strength, purity
 Will keep our lives straight
 Our actions only for a good purpose.
 Our words will be truth.

Only honesty shall come from our interaction
 With all things.

Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals also hold to an ethical code such as the Hippocratic Oath and the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. We may develop shared principles through religious membership or through our alliance with an organization like the Rotary or Optimist Club.

Why do we need a code? When we are in positions of power and leadership we can cause harm. When we are in great danger we need guidelines that will keep us clear about our actions. "The code restrains the warrior," explains French. If we, like French's midshipmen students, wield destructive weapons, having a code helps to guide us along the "fine line between warrior and murderer." A study by University of Iowa law professor Mark Osiel cites a young man who, after seeing many of his friends killed, was found by an officer "with his rifle at the head of a Vietnamese woman." The officer simply said, "Marines don't do that," and the young man stepped back and lowered his rifle.

There are four bases of sympathy: charity, kind speech, doing a good turn, and treating all alike.

— BUDDHA

In addition to restraining us, our code protects us. It is no accident that the five-pointed star symbolizing the five virtues of a knight was painted on Gawain's shield. The shield has long been the symbol of one's code of conduct. In ancient times, Spartan mothers, when sending their sons to war, would say, "Come home with your shield or in it," alluding to the critical importance of standing by your ethics in battle, whether you return intact, wounded, or worse.

A common code brings boundaries and honor to a battle. As martial artist Phil Heron states, "The code of a warrior is

necessary because without it the opponents are playing different games. Modern warfare is made horrifying by the absence of a code. There is no honor, only death.”

In an extensive study on post-traumatic stress disorder among Vietnam War veterans, Jonathon Shay found that those who most suffered from PTSD were involved in wartime experiences that were not only violent but betrayed “what’s right.” Without their shield to protect them, these men were prone to such miseries as persistent nightmares, addiction, abuse in family relationships, and depression.

Our conflicts will continue to test our shield of ethics and even to pit one principle against another. Gawain struggles with Bertilak and his hostess because he is trying to be both loyal and courteous. In a recent multiple-session workshop, I asked the participants during the first meeting to create a set of ground rules for our sessions together. Their guiding principles included:

- Trying to see from the other’s perspective
- Confidentiality
- No political correctness — “just say it”
- No personal attacks
- Honesty
- Enjoyment and having fun

At the beginning of the second session, I reviewed this code of conduct for two new participants. One of these asked, “How can one be honest, avoid political correctness, and not engage in personal attacks?” To her, these ground rules were mutually exclusive. This brought the group to consider the question of how they could be brutally honest and respectful at the same

time. Through confrontation, the way we interpret our principles is tested, and we can more deeply appreciate the meaning of our code. The Brahman, in the opening story of this book, appreciates more deeply his ground rule of “caring for even the most pitiful” by the story’s end. Caring for even the most pitiful also means caring for himself.

As everyday warriors, we must confront an inescapable test. When we align ourselves with a set of ideals, say, responsibility and honesty, the mirror opposite will also be present. With responsibility comes irresponsibility, and with honesty comes deception. Each has an inherent value. Just as red and green are opposing or complementary colors, crimson-clad Gawain, to reintegrate into his community after his adventure, must wear the emerald girdle. In this act he acknowledges that with high ideals (red symbolizing the heart) comes our basic struggle for survival (green symbolizing nature or the body). By choosing our ethics, we explore their apparent opposites, and through this process we more deeply understand our chosen virtues and ourselves.

However, if we do not recognize the natural conflict of opposites that comes with a code of conduct, horrific dichotomies can result. For example, cultures with strong warrior traditions have also unconsciously manifested the extreme opposites of these ideals. The Greek Stoics in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.E. were a highly disciplined warrior class that believed in controlling all anger, holding high respect for the enemy, and having an impeccable sense of responsibility. Juxtaposed against the Stoics were the Greek hedonists, who killed slaves for sport and delighted in gluttony and sexual perversion. In North America, the Plains Indians warriors would pray with great reverence to

For equality gives strength, in all things and at all times.

— MEISTER ECKHART

the spirit of an animal before a hunt, asking that the animal be sacrificed for the tribe. Once he had killed, the hunter offered more prayers and rituals to respectfully send the spirit to the next world. Meanwhile, this same culture would ritually bring home male prisoners from warring tribes so they could torture them to death.

To keep internal balance while holding to a moral code, Robert A. Johnson, in *Owning Your Own Shadow*, suggests making a "small but conscious gesture" to acknowledge a virtue's opposite. We can use art or writing to acknowledge our impatience after we have spent our day being extremely patient. Johnson tells the story of two women who shared a household in Switzerland. Whoever had some especially good fortune carried out the garbage for a week. If we are going to be a saint, to stay healthy it helps to acknowledge our inner sinner. If we are going to be loyal, recognizing our disloyalty will keep us whole. Creating our own metaphoric green girdles will make us better shield-carrying warriors.

To consider:

- What is my code of conduct?
- How can I safely acknowledge my virtues' opposites?

The Opening Bow: Beginning Well

Interpersonal conflict can be scary. We worry about getting hurt or putting someone we love at risk. Consciously acknowledging that we are about to enter a confrontation better prepares us to meet an opponent. In aikido, practitioners,

when they step on the sparring mat, are taught to begin with a quick bow while looking at their opponent. In the bow you acknowledge that the opponent who stands in front of you is a potential teacher and also one with the capacity to destroy you. The bow says in effect, "Thank you for this opportunity. I am watching you carefully. Teach me."

I have never in my life learned anything from any man who agreed with me.

— DUDLEY FIELD MALONE

The *haka*, or an opening chant that the Maori people of New Zealand recite before going into battle, reflects the tenets of the opening bow. In the *haka* performed by the New Zealand All Blacks professional rugby team while they face the opposing team before each game, they honor the opponent and recognize the transformation the engagement can provide:

Leader

KA MATE! KA MATE! (Tis death! Tis death!)

Chorus

KA ORA! KA ORA! (Tis life! Tis life!)

Leader

KA MATE! KA MATE! (Tis death! Tis death!)

Chorus

KA ORA! KA ORA! (Tis life! Tis life!)

TENEI TE TANGATA PU'RU-HURU NA'A NEI TIKI MAI

WHAKA-WHITI TE RA!

(Behold! There stands the hairy man who will cause the sun to shine!)

HUPANE! KA-UPANE! A HUPANE! KA-UPANE! (Upward step! Another...! An upward step! Another...!)

WHITI TE RA! (The sun shines!)

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of domestic abuse are brought together with convicted domestic offenders. None of the victims were victims of the abusers in the room. All parties have been through counseling, and the offenders understand the problem of abusive behavior. The nonprofit *Stop It Now!*, based in Massachusetts, has created dialogue circles between surrogate abusers and victims surrounding child abuse. When there is a great imbalance of power, such as in spousal or child abuse, the use of surrogates allows parties to resolve their conflict without having to directly confront their opponents.

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each man's life a sorrow and a suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

— HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

This process, according to participants, creates enough safety so that each side can learn from the other about the causes of abuse and this difficult relationship without feeling threatened. One female survivor of abuse remarked after using the surrogate process that it was “a journey from hate to hope.” A recovering sex offender who took part in a *Stop It Now!* program remarked, “It took the courage of one person to break my cycle of humiliation by confronting me honestly, holding me accountable, and still approaching me with love.”

Using Dialogue

Dialogue is a Greek word that means “moving through the word.” It is an approach to communicating that fosters progress in organizations and individuals. “Dialogue seeks to harness the ‘collective intelligence’ . . . of people around you; together we are more aware and smarter than we are on our own,” says William Isaacs, founder of the MIT Dialogue Project.

Recently interest in this ancient form of conversation has been growing in corporate and community circles around the

world. When using the dialogue technique, people sit in circles and listen in silence while each person speaks. They may pick a theme beforehand, or it might be a monthly gathering where themes and ideas emerge spontaneously. Some use this format to practice communicating about tough subjects. Others use it to resolve group conflict and to work on complex problems. Others learn a great deal just by being present.

Using dialogue is an opportunity for “cool inquiry,” as physicist and systems theorist David Bohm calls it. The format helps to keep emotions from running high so that information can flow freely and the group can act as a coherent whole. It is a discipline that keeps the “fire” of conflict burning under control.

These are the ground rules of using dialogue:

- Everyone has ample time and quiet to speak.
- Listening and learning are prioritized over convincing others of our position.
- Participants ask questions to explore other people’s perspectives.
- Very diverse viewpoints can come together in a nonconfrontational way.

Hiring a facilitator who is trained in dialogue techniques might be a first step if you wish to convene a meeting. Once a group is accustomed to the rules and techniques, it can easily self-manage the process. I have included a few dialogue resources in the selected bibliography; below I provide some tips to help you create and maintain a meaningful dialogue:

Now there is cure in coolness and calm, but in heat and passion there can be no cure.

— MILINDAPANHA

- *Select a theme* or question to be considered.
- Assign a *timekeeper and recorder* if appropriate.
- *Sit in a circle* to assure equal access to information and equal opportunity to speak.
- See the *other participants as "fascinating strangers"* or holders of the missing pieces of the puzzle you are solving.
- *Check your assumptions.* Practice self-reflection: What do I believe about this situation or the person speaking? Why do I think it is true?
- *Use a "talking piece"* or a single object that is passed around the circle. Only if you are holding the object may you speak.
- *Institute a "no interrupting"* ground rule. The person who is speaking has the floor completely until he or she closes with an agreed-on line like, "I have spoken," "I am finished," or "I open the floor."
- *Make room for silence.* If you want quiet, hold the talking piece or take the floor and don't speak!

The Palestinian/Israeli Parent's Circle consists of members who have suffered through the murder of at least one immediate family member and have pledged not to respond in revenge. The five-hundred-member group is founded on the concept that lack of communication fuels violence on both sides. "Each side has demonized the other," said Aaron Barnea, an Israeli Parent's Circle member, whose son was killed while serving as a soldier in southern Lebanon. "The Israelis think all Palestinians are terrorists who want to slaughter them; the Palestinians think all Jews want them driven from their land and cast into refugee

camps. Peace will only be possible when each side throws away these stereotypes." As Palestinian member Nadwa Sarandah explains, "There are always stories behind the story."

The Parent's Circle developed a phone line that facilitates dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian callers. By dialing a four-digit number, "any Israeli can talk to a Palestinian, and any Palestinian can talk to an Israeli." Between October 2002 and May 2005, the Hello Shalom/Hello Salaam project logged over 530,000 calls with over one and a half million minutes of dialogue between the two sides.

Ghazi Brighith, a Palestinian from the West Bank village of Beit Omar, joined the Parent's Circle after his unarmed brother was shot at a checkpoint. One of the first Palestinians to participate in the phone line project, he notes, "The greatest mistake we made was to allow ourselves to stop talking. These days we are under closure. We can't reach Israel. But this is one way we can get around the walls."

The volunteers have been overcome by the success of this experiment. "Once the dialogue starts, people realize how similar they are... People must make up their own minds about how to create peace," says Aaron. "But we know that dialogue breeds understanding, and this is the first step in any peace process. If we prepare the public, show them both sides want to be proud, independent, and living a normal life, then we've taken a major step towards winning this battle."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama also sees dialogue as a viable alternative to war: "It is my belief that whereas the twentieth century has been a century of war and untold suffering, the twenty-first century should be one of peace and dialogue. As the continued advances in information

A man who is swayed by passions may have good enough intentions, may be truthful in word, but he will never find the Truth.

— GANDHI

technology make our world a truly global village, I believe there will come a time when war and armed conflict will be considered an outdated and obsolete method of settling differences among nations and communities.”

Although I have used dialogue successfully with adults, I wanted to try it in the home laboratory. In the middle of a recent dinner conversation, I asked the family if we could discuss taking a few days to drive to a favorite Mexican town during spring break. I requested that we use a talking piece and lay down some ground rules. After some grumbling, we chose a metal moose sculpture that was sitting in the center of the dinner table as our talking object. And the fun began.

Since we normally all love to interrupt one another, conflict broke out over who had the moose, who was talking out of turn (all of us), and why we were doing such a terrible exercise. Everyone complained that I had wrecked the dinner conversation and that it was taking forever (we practiced for ten minutes!). Field research can be painful.

When we finally calmed the chaos enough to practice one round of passing the moose to each person, we made some surprising discoveries that make me stand by dialogue as a viable approach. First, each child had a list of things that he or she wanted to say. They grabbed the opportunity of having their family's undivided attention not only to describe what they didn't like about the process but also to move the conversation where they wanted. We received a department store list, a request that an older brother attend an upcoming basketball game, and an explanation of why our eldest loves dinner banter. I realized that one of my children's version of hell is to have his creative expression restricted. “This is like a concentration camp,” he added with dramatic flourish. Dialogue is his creative enemy!

This ten-minute experiment transformed our communication patterns for the rest of the evening. Our conversations slowed down, and we stopped interrupting one another. We all listened better, and the process opened a conversation about our collective style that we'd never had before. This exercise also made it clear that dialogue is a tough discipline. It pushes us to listen, to slow down and wait. It restricts our actions, as does any discipline, so that we might refine our skills and improve. Although it may feel difficult at first, like daily exercise, with practice it becomes easier and starts to bear fruit.

Summarizing its place in family communications, our eldest said, “Dialogue makes sense when we are trying to decide something, like if we stay at the beach or drive around, so everyone can have a say. But it doesn't work for normal conversation where I want to ask you a question and have you answer. Then it is really bothersome.” In the end, we chose not to drive to the Mexican town, to use dialogue only when we need to decide important issues as a group, and to continue our usual evening chatter the rest of the time.

The Closing Bow: Honorable Closure and Integration

Many things happen when we fight, and some of them can be pretty lousy. We may come away a confident victor or limp away battered and bruised. We may practice some moves and find ourselves upset or disconcerted. To recover and gain the strength to fight again, we need to first close the fight. Martial artists know that they will return to their opponent soon, if not immediately, and thus, they close each sparring session with a bow. With the closing bow, the opponents return to relative stability and keep

*If you don't fail now
and again, it's a sign
you're playing it safe.*

— WOODY ALLEN