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## *It Does Get Harder As You Go Along* by Frank Gordon, Paul Schweer

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Saturday, February 05, 2005 5:51 PM

The snow is good today. The sky is clear. Birds are at my feeder. I saw some cow elk on the ridge this morning.

I apologize in advance, this might make you uncomfortable for a minute, but I'm in training for a fight for my life. I'm about a week into it, I have nine days left to train, and I have to review my preparations for losing. Then I'm going to the hospital where they'll cut out 15-20 inches of my bowel and go hunting for the rest of my new enemy, cancer.

It's not my nature to talk about the hard stuff, it's my nature that I'd carry it on my own, solitary, like I learned from my father. The only way I knew growing up.

The Aikido classes I've been teaching, since I learned why I was so tired all the time, have all been about facing your problems, not flinching, letting the daylight in on them so they diminish, reaching into the heart of it and dealing with it directly and right now, win or lose. I'm talking to myself when I teach those classes. I'm talking to myself while I'm writing to you.

A big part of my practice right now is learning how to talk about this, how to hear more about this, and let daylight in on the problem. It hates daylight, it thrives in the dark and ignorance. I'm already figuring out some, down in my alligator mind that I'm not the first guy to have this problem and my odds are better than a lot of other things I've done and I'm running into other people who have beat other similar battles and they are not bigger/stronger/faster/smarter than I am.

I'm training to be able to remember that every time I have my panic attacks, so I don't do anything dumb and hopefully I can carry more strength and less fear onto the table when they put me to sleep, and afterwards when the second round starts.

I hope it works. It's the only plan I've got.

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Sunday, February 06, 2005 10:24 AM

*You're not making me uncomfortable. I already suspected you were, like me, a merely mortal man.*

*I am not a big fan of mystery or magic. Powers conjured by a spell to defeat the ordinary -- false hope and misguided fascination. Whether elf or goblin, benevolent phantom or dark angel, the only offering they bring is fear.*

*So I am often left looking for examples of how I might complete this journey in the least offensive manner possible. For me. And that is the balance, isn't it? Not being in any great hurry to arrive wherever I'm headed, trusting that my journey will end before I can do any great harm, believing it will last long enough to accomplish some portion of good -- that is faith, isn't it?*

*You're giving me a gift, letting me inside your head -- one of those examples I'm always looking for -- shining a little light on a dark part of life. Like many gifts, you may never know just what it means to those you bless with it. And I suspect, as you find the capacity to talk freely and without apology, you may find your gift returning to you.*

*Thank you, Frank.*

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Wednesday, February 23, 2005 9:32 AM

*If my math is right, you've had your surgery by now. If I knew what you needed to hear I'd say it, but I don't.*

*So I'll settle for mentioning that there are people who care about you.*

*Best to you and yours...*

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Monday, March 07, 2005 2:32 PM

I'm about ten days out of the hospital now. I've sat and watched two aikido classes which reinforce how I must train for the cancer. Tonight I will teach a class, although I won't be moving fast. The new students could stand to see me, and I need to practice on the mat the relationship I'm trying to cultivate with the cancer. They took a lot of bits and pieces out of me.

Later this week, I go back to the hospital to have a 'port' installed in my chest to facilitate the large quantities of fluids I'll be infused with. Next week I'm tentatively scheduled to begin a four month regimen of chemo and radiation.

95% of the time I'm handling it, when I crack it never lasts more than 2-5 minutes so I try to stay present and just wait till it goes away. That seems to work, I feel separate from the stress/grief/fear reaction that my body is having even though it doesn't look that good from the outside. This is a difficult path, but I know it is very little compared to

*(Continued on page 2)*

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what others have to deal with.

Sunday, March 20, 2005 9:01 PM

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Tuesday, March 08, 2005 3:57 PM

> ... I've sat and watched two aikido classes....

Anything noteworthy catch your attention?

> Tonight I will teach a class....

How did it go? What did you see?

> ... when I crack it never lasts more than 2-5  
> minutes so I try to stay present and just wait till it  
> goes away.

How do you manage that?

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Wednesday, March 16, 2005 9:15 AM

Sorry to be slow in responding, my situation keeps evolving and I seem to have fewer good hours in a day. These are good thinking questions and my thinking is getting a little slower now. I'm going into the hospital for a few days and I'd like to keep up this correspondence when I get out and can.

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Wednesday, March 16, 2005 10:41 AM

> These are good thinking questions....

Enjoy.

> I'd like to keep up this correspondence....

You just did.

A hospital stay... is not for the weak-minded...

I just finished my first week of chemo. I get a week to recover, then we do it again. My program will be one week on chemo daily, one week off, repeat for sixteen weeks and stir to see how I'm doing and how the cancer is doing. The plan is that my training partner will wear down from this faster than I will.

>> ... I've sat and watched two aikido classes....

>

> Anything noteworthy catch your attention?

Accepting, turning, diffusing, not going head-on, maintaining one's center as much as possible while confusing/redirecting/dissipating/taking uke to ground. That looks very much like the way I'm being counseled by the cancer nurses, who actually mediate between patients (me) and doctors ('godlike in the hierarchy' cerebral characters with no communication skills who look at me and only see an interesting problem). The nurses interpret the obscure pronouncements of doctors, explain language, look things up, couch information in human terms, warn me about side-effects and how to deal with them. They talk about not fighting the cancer, just focusing on taking the best possible care of myself in the face of the trials ahead, like a long-distance runner in an obstacle course ( my analogy).

>> Tonight I will teach a class....

>

> How did it go? What did you see?

Well, I was too weak to teach, but getting on the mat felt very important to me for my own needs. I had a senior student teach and I moved around the mat and paired silently with students for slow practice. I would sit when I needed to. I felt grieving and I would sit. When it went away I would move. This was not where I wanted to cry, so my strategy of letting grief blow through me wasn't working very well. Most of the students are not aware of my condition...

I was proud of my senior students for the way they cared for the classes.

>> ... when I crack it never lasts more than 2-5  
>> minutes so I try to stay present and just wait till  
>> it goes away.

>

> How do you manage that?

I don't know. I have no idea what I'm doing.

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(Continued on page 3)

Monday, March 21, 2005 4:32 PM

- > The plan is that my training partner will
- > wear down from this faster than I will.

*Doesn't sound like much of a plan. You okay with it?*

- > ... getting on the mat felt very important....
- > I moved around the mat and paired silently with
- > students.... I felt grieving and I would sit.
- > ... my strategy of letting grief blow through me
- > wasn't working very well.

*What is it about aikido practice that makes this kind of thing possible?*

*I came to the dojo hoping to acquire life tools, but I now wonder if the dojo is more a lab for examining tools forged elsewhere. A safe place for discovering what is already there. Or what is not there.*

*Why was being on the mat so important to you?*

- > I have no idea what I'm doing.

*Why should you be different?*

so much like me that distinguishing characteristics are hard to isolate. They key on variables like growth speed for example, but then that hits me in my hair, mucus membranes, stomach lining, etc.

- >> ... getting on the mat felt very important....
- >> I moved around the mat and paired silently with
- >> students.... I felt grieving and I would sit.
- >> ... my strategy of letting grief blow through me
- >> wasn't working very well.
- >
- > What is it about aikido practice that makes
- > this kind of thing possible?

I don't know, but this is what has kept me in the art in spite of the troubles I've had with it.

- > Why was being on the mat so important to you?

I think I only understand parts of that. I've frequently described the mat as a laboratory where we perform experiments not on other people, but on ourselves. We can set up questions or statements physically on the mat and repeat them over and over, tweaking variables and studying the outcomes.

At least one of the things I was doing was figuring out how to be around people when I was feeling sick, weak, and afraid. My impulse was to go to ground and hole up, but I thought that was a bad strategy for this problem.

Thursday, March 31, 2005 9:06 AM

I'm going to have an unexpected recovery week which I'm going to enjoy. I was to start my second chemo round yesterday but they always run blood tests right before starting the treatment and found my white blood cell count too low, so I get a week off to rest. My experience with the treatment so far is that after I get an 'infusion', I go home straight to bed and wake up with the experience of a bad flu bug, with a little nausea and diarrhea thrown in.

- >> The plan is that my training partner will
- >> wear down from this faster than I will.
- >
- > Doesn't sound like much of a plan.
- > You okay with it?

It's the best plan I've got. Fighting isn't really a good analogy for this process. It's a little more like maybe, cleaning an infestation of rats out of a warehouse. You open all the doors up and cut out, kill, drive out, all of them that you can, remove the food sources as much as possible, and put out baits for the remainder that are in hiding.

The drugs are designed to target cancer cells but the cancer cells look

- >> I have no idea what I'm doing.
- >
- > Why should you be different?

I still don't know what I'm doing.

Monday, April 04, 2005 10:03 AM

- > Its a little more like maybe, cleaning
- > an infestation of rats out of a warehouse.

*Sounds like a dirty business.*

*I hate rats.*

*Has does one prepare for the hosting of vermin? For the extermination process?*

*(Continued on page 4)*

*How is the line clearly drawn between what is inside and the nature of one's insides?*

- > *We can set up questions or statements physically*
- > *on the mat and repeat them over and over....*

*Are those you're practicing with adjusting to accommodate you? If so, in what ways are they adjusting; in what ways are their adjustments helpful, or not?*

- > *[I] was figuring out how to be around people*
- > *when I was feeling sick, weak, and afraid.*

*How is this different from your past practice?*

Tuesday, April 19, 2005 5:11 PM

The north corner of my house, which catches only the late sun, still has a pile of snow there that slid off my roof and collected over the winter. Everywhere else is in full-bore spring. The birds are back, the trees are leafing out. My daffodils and bulbs are just reaching up, not flowering yet. Glenwood Springs, down in the valley, is about 3 weeks ahead of me and in full flower.

I got my Boulder Summer Camp acceptance last week. In May, Sugano Sensei is teaching a weekend seminar in Aspen. So I have two seminars I know I can get to in the next few months. My medical schedule now requires a daily appearance at the hospital so I won't be getting far away from Glenwood for the next 3-5 months.

- > *Are those you're practicing with adjusting to*
- > *accommodate you? In what ways are they adjust-*
- > *ing; in what ways are their adjustments helpful, or*
- > *not?*

All the Aikido folks locally continue to be gracious about accommodating me and my limited practice. I move at 60-80% of normal training speed and I can take ukemi to the balance break, but I can't fall or roll yet. One adaptive thing that I'm doing is asking my partners to match my speed, energy level, and don't 'tank' for me but take the same ukemi that I'm giving them. This is helpful for me and, I'd like to think, a useful way for other students to vary their training too. And I get off the mat immediately when I start wearing out.

Tanking doesn't help my practice or theirs. Randomly varying speed of attack is not good for me. I can even work with very new students if we understand the need for reproducible waza for kihon. The only time I've been hurt since I started my limited practice was when a beginner's medium-slow punch to the stomach randomly veered up and struck the

device I have implanted above my left pectoral muscle.

- > > *[I] was figuring out how to be around people*
- > > *when I was feeling sick, weak, and afraid.*
- >
- > *How is this different from your past practice?*

The last few years, I've generally tried to be uke first and figure out what my partner wanted/needed first. Then I'd ramp up or down or get more circular or direct or whatever my partner was doing. And/or, whatever the Sensei is teaching. If my teacher was doing something different from my partner, that's always interesting. If I'm capable, I'd like to meet my training partner wherever they are (if I can) and move in the direction the teacher is going (if I can).

Now, I'm always the physically weaker student, regardless of ability. Yes, Aikido doesn't require great physical strength, and I know many students, and teachers, have worse problems than I do. But part of our practice is accommodating what's real. I was at a seminar a few weeks ago before my current chemo schedule and a very nice student there, who trains in a harder, more direct style of Aikido than my normal practice, he came to me when I was resting and insisted that I throw him in breakfalls a few times. Even though he was basically guiding me through the movement as uke and then throwing himself over my arm, his ukemi required some small weight bearing on my part while he was rotating in the air and I could barely do it. When he was done, I thanked him and scooted off the mat as soon as his back was turned. I was honored, and I also couldn't train the rest of that day.

Paul, how do you practice? How about on good days when you're pumped up? How about bad days? Are you different in different training environments? With different people?

What could I learn from your teacher's practice and how he deals with his health issues and aikido practice, if I could be there. I think about him sometimes and how much more he has to deal with than I do. One of these days I'd love to come to your school for a visit.

Friday, May 06, 2005 9:30 AM

*It rained here most of the day. A slow soaking affair, lacking wind and lightning. Just a steady rain from an overcast sky. Evening brought an end to it, and as the sun set there was a little space between the dark clouds. And a thin band of white light on the edges as the day faded.*

- > *... how do you practice?*

*By the seat of my pants.*

*(Continued on page 5)*

*I have more reasons than you would care to hear for how I decide what I do on the mat. And off, for that matter. But what is going on, at the time, is just me doing what seems the best thing then and there. And that is determined in an instant by my gut. Granted, a lot of the thinking I do after the fact and in general, composing this email for example, I see as gut molding. Training my unconscious self, as it were. But what is probably closer to reality is I am trying to understand my submerged self, and how it responds in certain situations, and how I might act appropriately and independent of its response -- I am trying, still, to accept that there is a part of me that just is what it is, and I best come to grips with it and allow for it best I can, cause it ain't changing this side of heaven.*

- > How about on good days when you're pumped
- > up? How about bad days? Are you different in
- > different training environments? With different
- > people?

*Insert standard disclaimer here -- what follows is what I try to do. What I actually get done is, of course, often undermined by my usual shortcomings: childishness, short-sightedness, arrogance, presumption, feet of clay, etc.*

*What I am trying to do, on good days and bad, is take ukemi. That is my current focus. I understand ukemi to be the sincere and continuous effort to erode, within and appropriate to the context, my partner's capacity to influence. My attempt to pursue this focus must be balanced against my obligation to understand and execute what is being taught. And on those occasions when I am fortunate enough to assist my teacher, I am also obligated to understand and provide whatever I can to assist his training, his teaching and his exploration. That is what I am trying to do. On good days and bad. In every environment. With everybody.*

- > What could I learn from your teachers' practice
- > and how he deals with his health issues and
- > aikido practice...?

*His current focus, as I understand it, is that uke provides both the problem and the resolution. He is trying to work out what that means. On good days and bad. In every environment. With everybody.*

*He is trying to work that out with or without me. Sometimes in spite of me. Often in spite of his body's betrayals. He decides, not his body. Nor anybody else.*

- > I think about him sometimes and how much more
- > he has to deal with than I do. One of these days
- > I'd love to come to your school for a visit.

*I think about him, too. I don't think I have much of a handle on what he has to deal with, but I don't expect to. He seems to be, like you, just doing what he can.*

*I hope I'm still around when, someday, you visit.*

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Friday, May 27, 2005 8:37 AM

I've had a few difficult weeks, but I'm now on a drug regimen that seems to manage the side effects of my real drug regimen better. I'm even taking a hypertensive drug to manage the side-effects of a drug managing more central side-effects.

I'm actually getting used to the regimen and accepting the loss of control over my time, energy and life, better. And this week, I got good news. I am now halfway through my chemo regimen and they are not currently looking at extending it past the end of July. They took a cat scan a few days ago and it came back normal, meaning that the radiologist could not resolve any remaining tumor in my abdomen. This is good news. The cancer isn't gone, but the chemo is working!

I'm able to be back at my desk and work 2-3 hours a day and that does my heart good too. I'm not strong enough to teach Aikido yet, and of course, with a port in my chest it could be problematic, but I am on the side of the mat regularly now and I am doing slow, measured practice with my students that I can depend on to match my slow pace.

So this is a good report from my end!

I am very sorry to hear about Kevin Sparkman. His situation is much more serious than mine. I wish there was something I could do to help. But oh, I'm seeing some daylight and it sounds like he is looking into the darkness. I feel bad for him and his family.

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Thursday, June 09, 2005 8:15 AM

*I'm in the office early. Nice when it's just me. Quiet for a while, then listening as people arrive and get settled in, starting their day.*

- > I'm actually getting used to the regimen and
- > accepting the loss of control over my time,
- > energy and life, better.

*Is this something you explore in your practice? I've come to understand it is something worth working on. It seems like the kind of thing that should be in my practice -- it is in my life, I know, but I'm pretty good at pretending I'm in charge -- seems like the more I look for this in my practice, the better my practice gets. Or maybe, the better I get at accepting that I suck.*

(Continued on page 6)

- > I am now halfway through my chemo regimen and
- > they are not currently looking at extending
- > it past the end of July.

*That sounds like a little hope for a good end to all this. In just a few more weeks. A nice sound.*

- > I'm not strong enough to teach
- > Aikido yet... I am doing slow,
- > measured practice with my students
- > that I can depend on....

*The most effective, most lasting, most memorable teaching I experience is simply someone's willingness to show themselves.*

*Sounds like you're teaching, want to or not.*

- > So this is a good report from my end!

*Very good hearing it.*

*What common elements do you see in the way you practice now and the way you recall practicing? What has changed? What is missing? What would you rather see less of?*

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Tuesday, July 05, 2005 6:35 PM

The last two rounds of chemo hit me harder than I expected, I've had to spend more time in bed and I've been sleeping a lot more.

But tomorrow, I start my last round of chemo. I'll get unplugged on Friday and this is my last scheduled round of treatment. The nurses were right, it does get harder as you go along. They'll let me rest for a few days and then I'll probably be scheduled for another CAT scan, colonoscopy, blood work and who knows what else. Then I'll be turned loose, subject to re-testing over the next 6-12 months.

It'll then take about two months for the chemo to wash out of my body... I don't know if they'll take the port out of my chest by then... None of that is as important to me as the fact that my numbers are turning up good in the tests and they no longer resolve any tumors in my scans. I've lost all of my fat and a lot of muscle mass. But I'm going to come out on the right side of it. So this is all good news.

- > Is this something you explore in your practice?
- > .. seems like the more I look for this in my
- > practice, the better my practice gets. Or maybe,
- > the better I get at accepting that I suck.

Well, I definitely have to accept that my Aikido sucks and then practice anyway. My reaction time is slower and my eye-hand coordination is not what it was, so I have to start from where I am. The Aikido I see in my mind, I just can't do. So when I start training again, I'll just have to start from where I am.

- > Sounds like you're teaching, want to or not.

I don't know, maybe so. They get to see how I cope, and sometimes, not cope. There's something to be learned from that, but it certainly isn't brilliant technique.

- > What common elements do you see in the
- > way you practice now and the way you recall
- > practicing? What has changed? What is
- > missing? What would you rather see less of?

Now these are large questions. I'll have to think about it some more. But if I don't send this off now, it might be another two weeks before I get back to it.

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Wednesday, July 13, 2005 5:04 PM

*It is late afternoon and raining hard. Lightning, crackling thunder and rain in sheets of heavy drops, waterfall miniatures pouring from downspouts. A storm of sorts, but normal for a summer afternoon. It will disappear quick as it came, the day sunny as before it rained. But a bit cooler.*

*I'm traveling through an odd time in my aikido practice -- a particular stretch of road that reappears from time to time. Which no doubt means my path up the mountain isn't up at all, but rather a dead-end circle running round the base -- wondering why I keep at it, and just where exactly I fit in. And it makes me feel a bit silly to struggle with such a petty question, knowing I ain't got any real problems. Knowing I should be thankful instead of frustrated, welcome instead of lonely. But silly or not, it's what I got. So it goes.*

*It is good to imagine you're walking out the other side, leaving this thing behind.*

*What now?*

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*(Continued on page 7)*



Wednesday, July 20, 2005 2:19 PM

Sorry I'm slow getting back to you. I've been taken off the chemo, and the first thing that happened was that I got sicker for a few days. That's apparently a common reaction. But as of today, I'm actually starting to feel better. I walked for forty minutes yesterday, almost a mile. Best I've done in five months.

- > ... rain, in sheets of heavy drops, waterfall
- > miniatures pouring from downspouts.
- > A storm of sorts...

This sounds like a bad day, or week, or month. A plateau? Threshold? Climbers, have to set anchors at intervals to protect themselves and their gains. You? I do. My right arm comes from a failure to secure myself on a climb. Now I always check and test, like a solo sailor.

- > What next?

I don't know, I have a few problems to deal with over the next months, outside of my recovery. I may mull on that question through the fall. I'm not the same man I was, but I don't know yet what's different. The doctors tell me six months to a year to get my strength back. We'll see, but I'm only now able to see myself out there. Last month I couldn't.

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Monday, September 19, 2005 11:42 AM

It's now just over two months since I ended chemo, about 6 weeks since the drug port came out of my chest. 48 hours after it came out, I hired a personal trainer and started working out at a gym three times a week. I also started hiking, with stones in my pack and my dog, up in my favorite mountains above my house, three times a week.

On September 1, I started teaching Aikido again at my school. There were a lot of tears there that day.

I'm now running my business again, half-time, and I'm able to travel outside of the valley where I live, for the first time since January. I've put 15 pounds back on my bones already. Another 20 pounds to go. My body now understands that we're coming out of this deal of the cards.

I am very grateful. Every day when I get up, I am grateful. When I eat a good meal, when I get that tired worn-out feeling from the gym, when it rains on me, when some guy wants to argue with me on the phone about some business problem, I am grateful. I'm grateful for my wife, who stayed right at my side and managed for me when my brain wasn't working right (which was a lot of the time). And I'm grateful for my friends who helped keep me connected to the world so I could find

my way back. It was not a sure thing.

I'm not quite the same guy I was before. I smell the roses a little more. I feel a little more compassion/empathy for people. I'm in less of a hurry. I'm looking around a little more.

If it wasn't for a lot of people around me, talking to me, covering my work, my classes, bringing food, mowing the yard, sending me prayers and energy, listening to me, I'm not sure the outcome would have been as good. I've supported other people in that way, but I never thought I would ever need it myself.

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Monday, April 10, 2006 9:24 AM

I'm still clean, my strength and health are back to 70-80% which is fantastic. I still chafe at my shortfalls more than I appreciate what I got. Now I have another chance to learn Aikido, and a couple of other things.

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Monday, April 10, 2006 8:45 AM

*Nice report. Good to hear you're that far back, that near your old self.*

*So... I'm curious. Now that you're pretty much on your feet again, what changes do you see in your aikido? What differences in your teaching and/or training?*

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Tuesday, April 18, 2006 5:24 AM

- > So... I'm curious. Now that you're
- > pretty much on your feet again,
- > what changes do you see in your
- > aikido? What differences in your
- > teaching and/or training?

Hmmm, this is a tough one. A really competent student of Aikido could probably give you an answer that would be profound and useful.

I wish that I had great insights. I don't. I am less confident than I was before. Less confident in my practice, less confident in my ukemi. Less patient with myself. I notice that right now I'm more linear than I was before, less tenkan. My students probably don't notice the differ-

*(Continued on page 8)*

ence, its subtle. I suspect the difference is felt, even if not recognized.

During the year I was basically off the mat, my senior students kept the school going. I notice a shorter vocabulary of technique than before. The students are more in their hands and heads and less in their bodies. They became a little more focused on throwing as a sign of success and less centered. There are fewer of them now.

I'm focusing my teaching attention on basics, and using the techniques to get us back to solid balance, core movement, attention, all the things which the chemo robbed me of, the students lost as well. I feel bad for the group, we were stronger before, but we all have to start from where we are. I think my creativity and my humor have suffered, I'm making a conscious effort to attend to different aspect of movement and break the students and myself, out of ruts and habits. We lost a lot of continuing students, I lost a lot of natural movement. I watch myself and them and look for the stuck places and try to teach how to get through the stuck places so that I can get past them myself.

I'm trying to teach what I know, not teach what I don't know. What seems to work best for the group is when I teach towards whatever I'm trying to get for myself.

I think Aikido should be joyful. So, I want to get more joyfulness in my life and then I can put it on the mat. That's a bit of a bottleneck yet. I'm not as good-humored on the mat as I used to be, same as off the mat. I need and want to get that back.

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Frank Gordon is a long-time student of Aikido and other martial arts. He teaches Aikido at the school he founded, a small independent dojo in Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

Paul Schweer began his aikido practice in 1998. He is a student at Shindai Aikikai in Orlando, Florida. You can see more of his work at [www.seenwaking.com](http://www.seenwaking.com).