

“Hurt the children! Don’t go easy! Give ‘em a hard time!” Sensei Zelda yelled, kidding but only sort of. I was taken aback by these words, even from her. But I turned around, narrowed my eyes and faced my opponent.

As I stepped out of our building’s lobby and onto the sidewalk, I felt the pleasant sensation of warmth from the sun’s rays on my face. I took a deep breath. This was the day that I had been training for: my black belt test. I turned back to see my parents walking behind me and as they smiled, I felt that they had my back. I walked confidently towards the beaten up building that held so many of my memories. The walls were seeping with my history, the floor pooling with my becoming, the ceiling caked with my hard work. As I climbed the uneven, black, tin stairs to the third floor *dojo*, I read the words painted lovingly on them. Peace, Integrity, Responsibility, Awareness, Perseverance, Leadership, Generosity. But this time I wasn’t just reading them idly or to memorize them for a test later, I was reading them to lock their presence in my body for the test ahead. As I entered the creaky, old *dojo*, I looked around. This was my home away from home. I moved towards the changing room to set my bag down in my cubby, and I looked down at my *gi* and brown with a black striped belt. I thought about how hard I had worked for all these years. All for this moment. And I thought about how much the *dojo* had taught me, how much I had learned. But then I snapped back into the moment. I stepped onto the mat and met my friends waiting for me. We were going to do this together, as we had for all the years that we had been collaborating together. There were exchanges of “good luck,” and “you can do this,” and, “you got this,” and even though these were just greeting card phrases, we meant them sincerely this morning. Some of us had been training, sweating and working together

ever since we were three years old. We all knew that Sara had to watch her back kick and that Emma had a killer front one. We all knew that Alessandro loved uppercuts and I loved lower kicks. When the written test was handed to me on the clipboard, my confidence didn't dip whatsoever. I was ready for this. I don't even remember what was on the test, how long it lasted or if my confidence ever faltered once while I was writing. What I do know is that by the time we had finished writing and started preparing ourselves for the physical part of the exam, my stomach was racing with excitement and apprehensive nerves. The *dojo* was melting under the burden of a 98 degree day and yet our *senseis* refused to turn on the ancient air conditioner because black belt promotions are supposed to be "hard core." We began. We awakened our limbs and muscles through warm up stretches, we pushed through the punches, powered through the kicks, charged through the blocks and fueled through the *katas*. We worked through the sweat, as we had for so long. By the end of the first two hours of basics and drills, I was red in the face, completely drenched in sweat, and had fly-aways of my ponytail pasted to the surface of my face. But it didn't matter to me. We had to keep going - that was the point.

At this point we were allowed a break. My body was so exhausted and tired that I just wanted to give up. Gone was the confidence that had filled my being just a mere two hours ago. Gone was the energy that had been powering me since the morning. My mind was blank; everything was blurred and the sounds surrounding me dulled into white noise. I was about to give up and run out. But something stopped me. No, I wasn't going to chicken out because, no, I didn't train to admit defeat. And there was no way that I was going to lie down on the floor and groan when everyone else was already starting to stand up. So I rose with a renewed persistence and joined my friends to face my fate. I pushed through the final basics section -- the weapons -- with the presence of my parents in the spectators' stands fueling me through my journey.

And then the hard part came, the part my *senseis* and others who had made it through the black belt test had been warning me about for years: the promotion sparring matches. They are the stuff of Dojo Legend. They're hard, people said. They're brutal; they involve pain and perseverance and, somehow, love. If you live through them to tell the tale, you'll command a specific variety of respect in the *dojo* forever. They're something that you'll never forget.

At this ominous moment, all the *senseis* asked all the spectators -- including my moms -- to leave. I feebly waved and meekly mustered a slight smile, trying and failing to reassure my parents and those of my friends that I was going to be fine. I actually didn't know if I had it in me to get through this. I was shaking, and psychologically and physically, I was hanging by a fine thread. My moms mouthed me words of encouragement as they were ushered out the door. But with their supportive presence, their cheers and applause gone, the *dojo* was now eerily silent. Yet so loud at the same time.

The *senseis* matched sparring partners. I stepped forward on the mat to meet my first opponent. It was my moment. I was protected by a fighting helmet, shin and hand guards and a chest protector. There was aggression rising inside me but I couldn't yet let it out since I had to complete the proscribed ritual sequence of nods, handshakes, stances and respectful gestures before the match. My first opponent was a large man whom I had never met before. He looked down at me and I glared back. He thought he was better than I was? Well, I guess I'd have to prove him wrong. Being the youngest person on the mat and only girl promoting to black belt that day worked to my benefit because I had low expectations to shatter.

Something else helped me too: I didn't want to leave the *dojo* that day with any energy left over. I wanted, as Sensei Zelda always said, to "leave it all on the mat." Though I was exhausted and drenched, and though my *kiai* sounded quieter and weaker than it had three hours

ago, I was determined to give it my every last drop in my tank. So I pushed through thirteen more grueling rounds of fighting.

“Hurt the children! Don’t go easy! Give ‘em a hard time,” Sensei Zelda yelled, kidding but only sort of. I pushed and growled and made primal ugly faces. This was one of the things I loved most about karate: it was the only place in my life where I was encouraged to grunt and look ugly, where this was celebrated.

We went past what had been projected as our end time for the sparring section by almost an hour.

All of my knuckles had burst and blood had spurted all over my *gi*. My final round of 15 was upon me and it was a hard one. It was against my *Shihan*, my teacher and mentor ever since I was three. She’d known me for so long. And yet, she narrowed her eyes and moved in. There was barely even a note of recognition in her face. I wanted to scream, “*It’s me! Mika! Remember?*” It was enough to make me cry, and I did.

“Two more minutes, Mika! Keep going,” Sensei Zelda shouted. “You can do anything for two minutes!” I was standing there, bawling, sweat dripping down my body, blood on my fists, hair a mess, when my friend who had finished her matches piped up.

“Yes Mika,” she screamed, “you got this. Come on, don’t give up! Push through!” And that is how I got the motivation to push everything that I had left into elbowing *Shihan* and blocking her punches and kicks until the longest five minutes of my life were up. When the sumo timer blared, I wanted to lie down on the mat until the next morning. I wanted to fall into my bed and sleep forever, I just wanted to sit down and get a drink of water. But I didn’t. I stood there, still as a statue. Staring at *Shihan*, tears sliding down my face, blood dripping from my hands. Every position I could stand in hurt to stand in so I just froze in ready position. I bowed. I walked

numbly over to the edge of the mat; I squeezed off my equipment. I felt so small, so weak, yet so accomplished. *It's over, I told myself over and over and over again.* And when my parents came back in and looked at me in alarm, I just meekly smiled and waved. *It's over.*

I was a *senpai* now. When I stood in front of everyone, accepting applause for the stiff new black belt *Shihan* had tied on me, I was happy. But more than anything I wanted a hot bath and a nap. I stood there for as long as necessary and then limped off the mat. I quickly and painfully got changed into my National Geographic tiger tank top and stepped carefully down those uneven black tin stairs. As I stepped onto the sidewalk again, I felt the pleasant sensation of warmth of the sun's rays on my face once again. I had done it. It was worth it.

There's an often repeated piece of knowledge in my *dojo*. It's that when you work so hard that your muscles tremble and feel like they'll burst, that's just them tearing. And after they tear, they build back stronger. So on that day, as I was sitting in the sunlight, eating my celebratory gelato, I thought *I tore, but tomorrow I'll build back stronger.*

Becoming a senpai changed me. After my black belt promotion test, I never again felt (for extended amounts of time, at least) that something was too hard for me to endure or achieve. I know if I put enough passion and hard work -- and possibly ugly faces -- into something, even something very hard, I can probably achieve it. It also gave me a very real source of self-respect that I carry around with me everywhere, and a feeling that I am now obligated to live up to a high standard of integrity in every area of my life. As they say at my dojo, once you earn a black belt, you are a senpai in the dojo but also outside of it in the world.

Glossary:

Dojo: *A dojo is the place where karate is practiced.*

Gi: *A gi is a traditional karate uniform. It's all white with the dojo's logo on it. It typically has long sleeves and long-pants.*

Kata: *A kata is a combination of punches and kicks and blocks that lasts from two to eight minutes. It is a showcase of talent and respect. There are countless kata. Most new black belts know at least 9.*

Kiai: *Kiai is a short and sharp noise that is used to intimidate and startle opponents, and express confidence or victory.*

Senpai: *A younger or less experienced black belt -- a student. Basically, one level lower than a sensei (described below). And the rank underneath a senpai is "kohai".*

Sensei: *A martial arts teacher. Translated from Japanese to "one who comes before".*

Shihan: *Shihan is the head of the dojo. A shihan typically teaches classes while also organizing events and all the other behind-the-scenes work. My shihan I've known since I was three years old. She was the one who did my karate demo class and she has taught at least one of my classes since then. "Shihan" can become the name you call your shihan by (as I do), while also being the title describing they're rank/status in your dojo. Shihan means "quality instructor" in Japanese.*