Soil Science and Martial Arts

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Anybody who knows me well knows that I have three great passions in my life, my family, soil science, and Shotokan Karate.

I have long believed that all things in life are interconnected. I met my lovely wife, Cindy, on the job (she was a consultant on a project on which I was the inspector) right after I started back to school to study soil science. We married and formed our consulting company the next year. Her son Chris and daughter Kelly were our best man and maid of honor at the wedding, and we’ve been a tight family ever since. One day Cindy talked me into joining her and Chris at their karate class. To make a long story short, I stayed in karate, and they eventually drifted away from it. Later that year I set the goal to be an ARCPACS-certified professional soil scientist and a shodan (first degree black belt) by my 40th birthday (1998). I achieved both within a week of each other and with 6 months to spare.

Shotokan karate is a Japanese style of un-armed defense. The word karate is actually two words, kara meaning empty and te meaning hand. It traces its roots back to Okinawa in the feudal period when peasants were not allowed to own weapons. It is believed to have been developed by the peasant class to enable an unarmed karateka (practitioner of karate) to protect himself or herself from an armed samurai. There are a number of ethical considerations in teaching or learning a potentially deadly art. As such, there is a strong code of ethics and conduct that is epitomized in the Dojo Kun.

Seek perfection of character.
Be faithful.
Endeavor.
Respect others.
Refrain from violent behavior.

This is recited by the entire class in unison at the end of each and every training to drive home its importance.

I joke that I study karate so that I can win all of the arguments in the field with regulators, but like most martial artists, I would be the last person to resort to violence. However, the study of karate has greatly influenced my professional life. I have found that karate and soil science have a lot in common. Both require dedication, intelligence, discipline, determination, constant training and a strong code of ethics. A good dose of humility is also a plus.

Karate is not something that can be learned from a book. Many aspects of soil science require hands-on training as well. There are many shared lessons that I can think of (Does anybody else see another series or articles forming in my twisted brain?), but the one that I want to focus on is the Sempei-Kohai relationship. This is not solely a martial arts trait, as it permeates the Japanese culture, but it is strictly practiced in karate.

The word Sempei (pronounced sem-pi) can be translated as superior and Kohai (pronounced ko-hi) as subordinate, but the essence of the relationship is lost in such a loose translation. In karate and in Japanese society, there is an obligation for the Sempei (superior) to teach the Kohai (subordinate), but also to look out for the Kohai and mentor him or her in every way possible. Failure in any way reflects badly on both. There is a saying that it is the Sempei’s responsibility to pull the Kohai up from below, while it is the Kohai’s job to push the Sempei up ahead of him. This means that at any given time on the dojo floor (the training room) the Kohai will be trying his hardest while the Sempei corrects him and challenges him. It is a point of etiquette that it is fine for a Kohai to hit a Sempei,