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Foreword

My name is Ryan Hall. Some of you know me as a competitor, some as a guy who blinks a lot on DVDs, some as a friend, and some not at all.

I write to you because awful things have taken place, both recently and long ago. Like all awful things, they must not be allowed to go unchecked; they must be combated not only in word, but in action. Some may suggest that I have no right to comment or cast judgment on these things, asking who appointed me the arbiter of good taste. In response to this, I say that what follows is merely my opinion, but if my community cannot be counted on to meaningfully police itself on matters so painfully clear as these, then it is not a community I would like to be a part of any longer.

We must, as reasonable people, unite and do what we can to make sure that our words are not empty ones. Scorn and snarky comments on Internet forums are not enough—they fade away and those who were not here to see them may one day forget that these events ever occurred.

I ask you to read this in its entirety and before deciding if it has any merit. Please do not take my words at face value, as I am no oracle, nor do I have all or even many of the answers. Please consider them carefully, though, and ask yourself where you really stand, what you really believe. If you see what I see, though, if you feel as I feel, I beg you to raise your voice with me against a rising tide of poor behavior in our community.

Please pardon me for repeating myself or meandering a bit during the course of this thing—it's not the world's most carefully crafted statement or an article that's meant to neatly make a point and then call it a day. What follows is from the heart and is meant to cover everything I could remember from my past and as much as possible of my thoughts on the issues I see currently afflicting the martial arts community. I apologize in advance for taking up your time, but thank you if you are able to put up with with what ended up being a deeply cathartic exercise for me.

I could have turned this into some blurb or snippet that would appeal to the short attention span that plagues many of us, but I will not disrespect the suffering of those who have been victimized by doing anything less than my level best to make crystal clear the fact that we in the Jiu-Jitsu and martial arts communities are at a critically important junction. The values and by extension, future, of our community hang in the balance and the direction of our next step is not to be chosen lightly.

Every one of us has a dog in this fight.

An Open Letter to the Martial Arts Community

“The things that will destroy America are prosperity at any price, peace at any price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living, and the get rich quick theory of life.”

-- Theodore Roosevelt

Hello everyone.

Over the past week, certain revelations have come to light about awful, subhuman behavior on the part of a number of members of our community, some of whom I know personally.

The worst of this is certainly the work of some truly reprehensible individuals who seem to think that they have the right to destroy the dignity and innocence of others in the pathetic service of their own desires. Some of them will hopefully bear the full brunt of the justice system's penalty for the atrocities they have committed. Others may not be liable to judgment at the hands of the courts, but should in no way be excused for their own disgusting acts both past and recent.

Somewhat less grievous, but still staggering in its absurd level of insensitivity, cultish wagon circling, and revolting lack of perspective has been the response of certain individuals who feel the need to blindly defend the actions of those with whom they are associated. I cannot say for certain if this is born out of some sort of woefully misguided sense of loyalty or if it is simply the basest act of self-preservation, aimed at protecting a reputation built on the connection to someone discovered to be wholly disreputable. Regardless, I would think that the vast majority of people should agree that their behavior is beyond repulsive not only its dismissiveness of the suffering of the victims involved in this debacle, but also in their staunch refusal to exercise the analytical portion of their brains and reason for themselves in anything other than a completely self-serving manner.

Making matters worse, some who would consider themselves “good” people are remaining silent, either unable or unwilling to put integrity over solidarity and financial interest. They have looked on passively as their associates have scrambled to cover their tracks, to duck and dodge inquiry into matters so grave that they demand a response. Disappointing. Many will hide behind the “I wasn't there, it's not my place to say anything” defense. This is a completely unacceptable stance given the information in evidence. Their reluctance to act

speaks volumes about either their weak character or their already being under some level of mental control.

It has been correctly noted over the course of history that all that is necessary for evil to thrive is the indifference or inaction of otherwise decent people. Are we really willing to accept this truth and still remain seated?

As someone who has occupied a number of roles and stations in the martial arts community since I first became involved with it, I believe that I may be able to shed some light on why things are progressing as they are, as well as provide a cautionary tale for others who I hope will be able to avoid the pitfalls that I often plunged face-first into due to my naively trusting in the good (or at the very least neutral) intentions of the people over top of me.

My Story

To create context, I offer my story. I hope that you will count it one worth considering:

I have always had a preoccupation with (some might say overdeveloped sense of) justice. Morality was never subjective to me and I was drawn to stories in history of right winning over might, good over evil. As it tends to do for most of us, life did its part to teach me that the world is often not a fair place. Bad things sometimes happen to good people and the good guys don't always save the day. Never one to let harsh realities dampen my idealism, though, I resolved myself to doing everything in my power to make the world around me a little more just, a little safer for people who weren't gifted with the things that I had been fortunate enough to benefit from: a good family, a stable home, loving parents, strong lessons about right and wrong. I wanted to be able to protect those who could not protect themselves, to be a force for good, if only on some small level. Certainly, I thought, a life lived in pursuit of this would not be a wasted one.

From childhood all the way up to age 16, I wanted to join the FBI to investigate criminals and try to make the world a little bit of a safer place. When I found out that my colorblindness disqualified me from any sort of field work, I was devastated. I lost interest in academics and was back on the search for something into which I could pour my heart. I bounced from activity to activity, place to place, never really finding anything that was right for me. When I was accepted to a university in New York City as an electrical engineering major, I resigned myself to grinding out a degree in a field I was capable in, but loved not. I wasn't the most fun guy in the world to be around.

At 19, I found real martial arts in New York City and was immediately hooked: hard training, real sparring, genuine people who looked out for me, and the beginnings of what would develop into one of the closest friendships I will ever have. I trained as frequently as I could, paid attention as well as I could, and thought of nothing but how much I loved what I was learning. My math notebooks went from calculus to diagrams of triangle chokes and armlocks. Martial arts gave me a feeling of peace and fulfillment that I had never experienced from any other activity in my life and I wanted nothing more than to spend my days training. I knew nothing of competitions, professional fights, or martial arts as a business, but I didn't care—if I had to live in a cardboard box for the rest of my life, I would be fine as long as I could stay on my journey towards what I thought might be enlightenment.

When I returned home to Virginia for the summer, I didn't know what to do. Depression set in. While driving down the main street in my town a week later, though, I saw a sign in the window of a Tae Kwon Do school that had existed for

as long as I could remember: “BJJ/MMA.” I was ecstatic. I went in immediately and inquired about classes. As it turned out, the instructor was a professional MMA fighter and BJJ purple belt who taught muay Thai and Jiu-Jitsu a couple times per week. When I tried the class, he kicked my butt (completely unsurprisingly) and I was back on track, training every day. I couldn’t have been happier. I worked odd jobs to pay for tuition and pretended to go to community college after disappointing my parents by letting them know I would not be returning to my university.

Over the next few months, my new coach became not only my employer, but also a mentor and trusted friend. He soon opened his own academy and after training there everyday for almost six months and spending every dollar I had on competitions, he eventually introduced me to his instructor. I remember being injured, seriously, and driving across my city to sit on the side of the mat every day, taking notes and soaking up every bit of the atmosphere and information because I couldn’t bear the thought of missing out on a piece of wisdom that might help turn me into something better than I was.

My devotion to Jiu-Jitsu caught someone’s attention, and when the resident poster boy left for greener pastures, I was given the offer to train full-time. To say I was excited is an understatement, as I nearly crashed my car on the way to tell my family. Before accepting, I asked my coach what he thought. I trusted my friend implicitly and on his advice, accepted the offer and made the switch. Unfortunately for both of us, not all that glitters is gold.

Since that time, I have been around the block a bit. I have trained at some of the most famous Jiu-Jitsu and MMA academies in the world. I’ve made lifelong friendships with wonderful people, some of whom saw and see fit to mentor me while expecting nothing in return. I am beyond thankful for them. I’ve competed across the globe, won and lost at all levels, and even opened an academy with one of my closest friends. There have been ups and downs, but it has been one heck of a learning experience. I am now on the path that I had hoped for since I first learned what MMA was: not a master, simply another student, another one on the road to growth as a martial artist and professional athlete, yes, but most importantly as a man. I am surrounded by people I respect not only as fighters and instructors, but as men and women, as human beings. I feel incredibly fortunate.

Of course, it hasn’t been all sunshine and roses. I have seen the ugly side of the martial arts more closely than most, the side that is ruled by self-styled despots and ends-justify-the-means rationalizers willing to use up and discard those they see as inconsequential. I have been the poster boy for an organization and an individual with whom I grew ashamed to have an association.

At times, I have been a fool. I have made rationalizations for sociopaths, given

them a pass on their behavior and even their history because I wanted so badly to believe. I have spent sleepless nights attempting to convince myself that I must be crazy to think the things I was thinking when the reality was that my brain was trying to get me to wake up from the Matrix, so to speak. I have even created rifts with my real family because I was unwilling or unable to see through my rose-colored lenses what was clear as day to them about my adoptive one.

What I definitely did not understand at the time was that I had unknowingly joined the beginnings of a cult, and at its center was a figure perceived by many (perhaps most notably by the figure himself) to be some sort of messianic individual deserving of unflinching devotion, total commitment, regardless of his actions. Of course there were warning signs, but I rationalized them away as best I could initially. Perhaps I just didn't understand the workings of someone who did everything in his power to convince me that he was above the judgment of the little people beneath him? Looking back, I realize that my inability to see what was right in front of my nose was simply denial, an emotional defense mechanism; it was attempting to save me from the pain of coming to terms with the fact that some of the people I'd put intense amounts of faith and trust in were not only completely unworthy of my devotion, but were actively manipulating me and others to our detriment for their own, often minor benefit.

I have no excuses, but I was once young, naïve, and idealistic enough to believe that there was no way that someone in a position of authority over me, given how earnest and supportive I was of them, would ever maneuver me like a pawn on a chess board for their own benefit or even amusement. I certainly would never do this to someone who trusted me (or anyone else for that matter), so why would anyone else?

I understand now that poor character is poor character and there is never any reason to support it, no matter what carrot that person dangles in front of you or threat that person holds over your head. If an individual is willing to blur or even outright ignore the rules of right and wrong, of human decency, on any level, they are highly likely to do the same in other aspects of their life whether I have witnessed them do so yet or not. If they have mistreated others, it's only a matter of time before my number is called.

To this day, I am still attempting to make up for the mistakes of my past. Though my gut told me to get out and get out now, I stayed in the hope that I was wrong. I waited and waited until I could no longer look myself in the mirror and feel comfortable because of the things I had seen, the things I had heard. I waited too long.

Hero Worship and The Martial Arts

It is sometimes said that a person should not meet his or her heroes, because there's a good chance they will leave disappointed with the human being in front of them when they were hoping for something more.

But what if our heroes, rather than simply disappointing us, used the influence they hold over us to manipulate our emotional attachment to them for their own benefit? How would we feel about them then? Would we even realize what they were doing or would we be too blinded by our affection to see their machinations for what they are? Dark colored belts and gold medals have a way of obscuring the clarity of our vision.

Unlike players in the NFL or major leagues who tend to be somewhat inaccessible, in the martial arts world, our heroes not only interact with us from time to time, they also frequently peddle a product. In many cases, this product is touted as a magic elixir that will, for only a small fee (sometimes recurring...sometimes without our knowledge), help make us more like them. What's worse is when some of these "heroes" band together, endorse one another, and double down on their ability to fleece the unsuspecting and impressionable. To call this behavior that of a con artist does a disservice to hard working con artists everywhere—there was a time when one had to get by on his own personal hustle. He had to con you face-to-face and didn't have the benefit of testimonials to bolster his claims of credibility.

I still remember the first time that a "fan" was excited to meet me. I was fairly shocked, as well as a bit confused. He asked me what my "secret" was. Didn't this gentleman realize that I was just a regular person like him? Wasn't it obvious that I only won as much as I did because I trained as much as my body would endure and because I cared more than most? I certainly wasn't the chosen one or anything like that. I began to wonder what would happen if I started to win less frequently. Would I still be regarded in the same light, approached with the same nervousness? I concluded that I would be somehow less important in this otherwise well-meaning man's mind. If only I had something on me that I could have sold to this person and others like him to capitalize on my "moment in the spotlight"...but seriously, no.

All joking aside, your idols do not possess the "secret" to life or success any more than anyone else you know does. There are no shortcuts in life, no tricks that allow us to become sustainably wealthy or successful in a fraction of the time. Of course the idea of these things is tempting, but beware those try to convince you of their existence—they are almost certainly selling something. Beware their cronies, as well. A group of ten people independently endorsing one another can seem very compelling until you realize that they are incentivized to do it and probably met behind your back to orchestrate the whole thing.

You May Think You Know Your Coach, But You Probably Don't

Smiling nicely and paying a kind word at an opportune moment does not a saint make. Truth be told, some of the most outwardly charming, personable people I have ever met hid a manipulative predator underneath their socially acceptable mask. Predators have a way of being very chameleon-esque, altering everything about themselves to fit in with society and escape notice until they strike. If you could spot them from a mile away, they wouldn't be very successful, now would they? Though it would be great if they would make identifying them a simple task, manipulative and amoral people do what they can to avoid acting out in ways that are likely to be held against them publicly—if they didn't, they'd be as stupid as anything else, which would probably contribute to making them somewhat less of a problem.

Throughout my entire martial arts career I have been both praised as a relatively decent human being, and on some, thankfully less frequent occasions, been accused of being a jerk. For a long time I was confused by this, as there are not a great many people who know me on the close, personal level which would allow for a real assessment. I often wondered why someone would call me a great guy simply because I shook their hand, was polite, and didn't attempt to rob or bite them during the five minute window in which we interacted. I also wondered why others would assume negative things of me when, to my knowledge, I had never wronged them in any way.

What I came to realize is that we, as students of the martial arts, as people, really, become deeply emotionally attached to the idea of a superhuman individual or group of individuals who, in our minds, must possess privileged knowledge that allows them not only to be an incredible fighter (Or politician? Or pastor? Perhaps a high-profile university football coach?), but also a shining example of humanity.

To put things in perspective, I believe that there may be 10 people at my academy who actually know me well on a personal level. I would say that I am uncharacteristically outspoken and approachable for a school owner, and fraternize with my students more than most. That still makes 10 (including my girlfriend of 6 years) out of over 250 individuals. How many of them would violently defend me were I accused, with droves of evidence (perhaps even my own admission of intent as well as the accusations of outright guilt by multiple other people involved in the incident), of something heinous? Would they defend my character (no matter how blindly), or, robbed of compelling arguments there, would they stoop to attempts at discrediting my accusers by callously suggesting, without a shred of evidence, that my victims somehow "asked for it." Would they ignore my history if it included numerous slimy moves and shady attempts at manipulation (or times I coached others into doing the same)? With my whole heart, I hope that the answers are "no" and "absolutely not." I would be ashamed

to be associated with people who possess such an absurdly weak grasp of right and wrong, of decency. Then again, I don't hold myself out as some sort of oracle, nor do copies of books on how best to build a cult and manipulate the trusting adorn the top of my desk.

When someone visits or enrolls at my academy, I am incentivized to be a nice guy. It's in my interest both professionally and personally. If you pay me for classes and I provide a service to you, it does not follow logically that I am a lovely human being. It simply means that I fulfilled our contract and did so in a manner that is more likely than not to generate return business. Perhaps you'll stick around for a few years or more, we will share time and experience together, develop a real friendship beyond the training room, and you will decide that I am a person worthy of your respect. Or perhaps you'll see things that make you decide that I am not. Your decision should not be influenced by gifts I give you or speeches I make, though. It should be based on those times you caught me when I thought no one was looking. How did I act then? How do I handle my employees, some of whom may have no recourse were I to mistreat them? Do my interactions with them seem like an actual relationship or more like some too-perfect Truman Show re-run? Do they do a good job and operate professionally, or does it extend to being at my beck and call like slaves?

The reality of life is that we are rarely faced anymore with situations in which it is easy to see through to the truth of a person. The world of social media and online interaction is an incredible evolution of technology, but in many ways, it cheapens us as people. In the eyes of others, we become what we write in a fixed number of characters, what we post on a Facebook wall, what we are called by other people who themselves likely do not know us on anything approaching a close, personal level. Can an individual truly be summed up in such a simplistic fashion? What about professional marketers, professional athletes, public figures of any kind? Can I even begin to know the character of someone who crafts so carefully the face they show to the world? I would think that the obvious answer is a resounding, "no."

Times of difficulty and those moments when I believe I am untouchable reveal my true character. Times when I hold power over you or others and there's nothing you can do about it. Do I hold myself accountable to a greater power of any kind? To family or friends (if I have any)? When I err, do I face the music, or do I scramble and attempt to obscure the truth?

Does it follow logically that one is "a great guy" or a "good man who helps people" for delivering a product he was paid (financially or otherwise) to deliver while simultaneously standing center stage and accepting praise for his actions? How does the use of ill-gotten influence to create a pulpit from which to shower gifts in an effort to gain favor with the trusting make one the modern-day equivalent of Robin Hood? I would submit in both cases that it does not. Amoral people in positions of influence are always adept at giving hand outs—it keeps

the good guys in check because they've been bought and paid for.

If you want to know what kind of person I am, see what I do when I am starving, but so are you. Here you will see the real me, not when I have a steak on my plate but am willing to toss you the bone while posing for a photo.

Never judge a man by what he can do for you (even worse, what he tells you he can do for you)—it is a certain path to a poor assessment.

Innocence and Trust Capitalized on for Manipulation

Power, money, success, and the like are seductive by their nature. Many of us desire some or all of them to varying degrees, but what, if any, are the limits to the things we would do to attain them? The worthwhile person decides first what he is willing to do and then asks himself what he wants, not the other way around. He does not retroactively define his code of behavior to fit his situation and impulses. If he does, he will soon find that he is no longer the same person he was when he began his journey.

The phrase, “martial arts,” evokes an interesting mix of images in the mind’s eye of the uninitiated: warriors training, students listening intently to the secrets dispensed by a wizened sensei who holds the secret to inner and outer strength. Certain words come to mind as well; words like respect, honor, humility, strength. What the uninitiated do not see through the too-often artificial veneer of piety and positivity is that underneath can lurk a world of manipulation, opportunism, and ego gratification. They do not know that these words and the feelings that they engender in us are, frequently, simple fodder for empty platitudes that are used to gain influence over us and generate blind trust. Is this so different from the rest of the world? Perhaps not at its face, but the reality is far more insidious.

The martial arts community is a strange one. Obviously, it is composed of the same fallible, flawed human beings that constitute every other field of human endeavor, but there remains something unique about it: not many people will look at the owner of a laundromat they don’t know, take him on as a mentor, and assume at face-value that he is a great guy with only the best intentions. This happens all the time in martial arts academies, particularly when a prospective student is young, impressionable, and heavily invested in his or her training. How many times have we heard what a lovely human being so-and-so is because he’s skillful and smiles a lot or helped you with a guard pass detail that one time?

Not many people would blindly accept their attorney’s system of values as a barometer for judging themselves as a human being or qualifying their actions. For whatever reason, serious students of the martial arts too often forego their own responsibility for critical thought in order to be accepted by someone they perceive to be a guru who will guide them to strength and stability without even realizing that they are doing so. Most times, this vulnerability is not intentionally capitalized on. However, there do exist individuals who make their living by preying on the hopes, dreams, insecurities, and sometimes laziness and outright stupidity of the people who look up to them. They are professionals at creating a persona that is larger than life, so-great-it’s-incredible, specifically designed to engender the feeling of “I can’t believe I’m so blessed to know this guy who will lead me to the promised land.” Most of them work off of the same playbook, but when you don’t know that the playbook exists, they can seem highly impressive.

Perhaps you have read about some of these people. Perhaps you know one. Perhaps you are one. If you are, there's a good chance that you are a pawn in someone else's game the same way that some others are pawns to you. Congratulations on your participation in a pyramid scheme. You must be very proud of yourself.

Too often in modern day do we hear stories of betrayal, of people in power using and abusing their influence to enrich themselves or satisfy their desires while trampling on those they see as beneath them or unworthy of their consideration as human beings. Police, politicians, religious officials...none still hold the standing that they may once have in our hearts and minds because each of these groups has, at one point or another, abused their power, betrayed our trust, and even followed up with systematic attempts to cover their tracks and suppress information in the hope that things will just go away and people will forget what they've done. They believe that, if they can stonewall the public for long enough, they can escape the fallout created by their behavior. If they are successful, it only further strengthens their perverse belief that they are above reproach, beyond the reach of the little people. This cannot be allowed.

Losing sight of why we do something is the first step in losing our way, forgetting who we are. How many of us began martial arts training with the hope of becoming stronger physically and mentally, to be able to protect ourselves, to stand up for the weak? Perhaps to one day be knowledgeable and experienced enough to pass on whatever wisdom we may have acquired to the people around us? How many of us took up another profession for similar reasons? I hope that the answer is "many."

When we, people first and martial artists second, permit such injustice to stand, we sacrifice a portion of our humanity that we may never recover. We tacitly accept the idea that some individuals will do whatever they can get away with and there is little we can do to prevent it. The idea that there is no right and wrong, no justice, breeds a nasty brand of cynicism—the same cynicism and belief that nothing is sacred that many of us see poisoning our society, influencing negatively our children as well as ourselves. It is an emotional, visceral response, born of disappointment with how the world often is, how it is too frequently not the fair and just place that we wish it were.

If we allow deep rooted cynicism to grow in us, we are one step closer to engaging in and then justifying our own unacceptable behavior on the grounds that, "it's the way of the world, if you don't like it you're a hater." How long can one believe that they may do whatever they want, fallout and the opinions of others be damned, before they themselves start to act out in unhealthy or hurtful ways? Is it not painfully obvious that this perverse attitude is the seedling that grows into all sorts of awful behavior? Would any of us want to teach our children such pathetically self-serving, not to mention inevitably self-destructive garbage?

Each day we train, we hold our partners' safety, even their life, in the palm of our hand. This is a sacred trust and it creates an implied contract that, though often unspoken, is the foundation of why the martial arts is different than almost every other area of endeavor in which a civilian will ever participate. It bonds us together more tightly than those who have never trained can easily understand. This bond and the feeling of trust that comes with it can all too simply be twisted and used to manipulate its owner.

As conscientious martial artists, we must be fully aware of the power we hold over those underneath us. Lower ranks look up to and often too lightly lionize those of higher rank. The reality is that the more advanced have been practicing for longer, started earlier, and nothing more. In the eyes of the new student, though, particularly the young one, these people may as well be superheroes with powers they cannot fathom possessing. More than knowledge, these more advanced students hold the power to control others, harming or not harming, assisting or ignoring them as they see fit. Even if it isn't discussed, that is a deeply primal thing in the mind of a person. It is not to be abused.

Martial Arts as a Means of Generating a Cult Following

Someone much smarter than I once said, “Watch your thoughts, for they become your words. Watch your words, for they become your actions. Watch your actions, for they become your character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.”

When I was a bit younger, I did not fully appreciate the truth of this statement. I believed that I was, relatively speaking, incorruptible and would not be subject to the influences of those around me, whose sermons I heard, whose words and ideas with which I was bombarded. What I now understand is that each day, we are dragged upward or downward not only by ourselves, but by those around us. The closer to an individual I am, the greater the level of contact, the heavier their influence on me, regardless of what I might like to think. One day I may be too close to this person to even see them as a human being anymore. I may let their titles, their medals, the empty testimonials others give them fool me into believing that competitive success is somehow representative of the character of an individual. They may personally admit, in a court of law, to something truly heinous, but I might be too far gone to even process that information.

All too frequently, martial arts groups, like many heavily hierarchical organizations, evolve intentionally or otherwise into a cult-type scenario with highly powerful (if only in the context of the group), deeply revered figures sitting atop them. This can happen to anyone with influence, good natured or otherwise. When people constantly are scurrying around, doing your bidding in an attempt to gain favor with you, life can seem pretty good. That is, until you realize that this is not the sort of behavior a real leader should be encouraging. A good leader has a responsibility to teach people to respect themselves, as well as others.

The path to hell, it has been said, is paved by good intentions. What if the intent has a different flavor, though? Where then would the path lead? The idea of power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely is appropriate here, as the individual(s) at the center of high-profile martial arts group often operate almost completely unchecked and have access to an army of lower ranks eager enough for approval to do their bidding. These underlings often buy in and operate mostly without independent thought. For a leader with less than honorable intentions and a sharp enough intellect to grasp the nature of control, followers exhibiting independent thought or maintenance of a belief structure that is not in keeping with that of the leader’s are generally seen as an enemy of the group. Those who engage in either, however respectfully, quickly find themselves at odds with their peers and their leader. They are either punished internally (being shunned or looked down on by their “friends” is a common one) or cast out, often to become fodder for a self-serving, contrived cautionary tale concocted by the leader to squash dissent going forward.

Once an individual has been accepted as part of the group, they often jealously defend their position not only to the outside world whenever the group is questioned, but also internally. Due to the high degree of emotional investment and intense social pressure, attacks on the group are often countered in a knee-jerk fashion with little or no thought as to whether or not the attack in question is a valid one. This can be plainly seen as we have watched numerous less than intelligent, obviously brainwashed individuals grossly overstep their bounds in attacking the immediate family of one of their cult mates when that family expressed justifiable concern over the influences to which their son and brother is being exposed. This behavior is indefensible.

This phenomenon exists in all sorts of varying degrees, sometimes catalyzed by hurt feelings, sometimes permitted through the silence of otherwise reasonable people. How many of us have watched someone we know be branded a “creonte” or a traitor for changing academies? Did we even take the time to discern their reason for leaving or did we just accept at face value that there must be something wrong with them because they no longer want to play in the same sandbox we do? Call me crazy, but I don’t try to convince my students that they have joined a gang and agreed to forever submit to my will when they sign up at my academy. Who knows, though? Maybe I’m dropping the ball—I do twitch a lot.

From an external vantage we can see some, but there lies more within, and I have been there. Internally, these people often attack one another, usually indirectly, as they jockey for position and compete for the chief form of currency in their lives: increasing the level of perceived closeness to their master. I remember paranoid, late-night text messages accusing me of disloyalty to a person I had done nothing but support and vouch for both publicly and privately to many who had reservations. I remember having phone conversations listened in to. I remember being informed on by “friends” who presented themselves as confidants once I started to ask uncomfortable questions. I remember, once the writing was on the wall that I was waking up, being bullied into signing contracts that were predatory (though thankfully unenforceable) beyond belief. I remember being threatened. I remember receiving hate mail from misguided cultists who felt spurned when I took my leave from a toxic situation. Now that I am far enough away from such things, I harbor no anger whatsoever towards these people. To the contrary, I feel mostly sadness, as well as immense gratitude to those who helped me escape a cycle that could have easily had me exhibiting the same behavior one day.

Each time the group sees one of its own leave of their own volition, the resolve of those who remain is strengthened, their beliefs reaffirmed—they have no choice but to double down on their situation or risk facing some very uncomfortable self-examination. Any feelings of doubt in the leader are unacceptable, because it would mean that this person may not be the one to turn them into the thing in their mind that they want to be, the thing that they were sold they would become

if they submit to being led. Obviously, it is significant that their entire peer group is comprised of fellow cult members. Just as hyper-conservatives or hyper-liberals who spend time only with people who share their beliefs often do, they end up radicalizing one another until the group becomes an extreme caricature of what it began as. To the outside world, they will appear irrational and brainwashed, which only forces them to seek further refuge with fellow “believers” as they circle the wagons.

Case in point, the attempts at rationalizing or outright denying the horrific actions of those they are connected with because the alternative requires they turn their gaze inward. Perhaps not everyone who disagrees with you can be so easily dismissed as a “hater.” Victim blaming is only one small part of the mental gymnastics that will have to be done in order to continue to fit in. Sadly, once this line has been crossed in an individual’s mind, it becomes increasingly easy to cross it again each successive time.

The reality of cult-type situations is that they are seductive. As human beings, we all like to feel included, feel like part of the group. Better still is being part of something special that “they” (read: anyone outside the group) don’t understand and may, in the mind of the cultist, be jealous of. Once you have that feeling, you are likely to want it again, so badly and unconsciously that you may already be under its influence. You have been taken in by clever marketing, specifically designed to capitalize on your desire to feel strong, in the right, not part of just any group, but THE group. You are not a bad person; you are simply a person—emotional, sometimes erratic, often tribal.

The chief tool of the manipulator and the base of the pillar of a cult is dependency—financial, social, professional, emotional—without it, control is difficult to attain and more difficult to sustain. It is critical that we train ourselves to sense any attempts at manipulation and unwanted control made by others. If we do not, we open ourselves up to a terrifying scenario: given a long enough period of exposure to negative influence and great enough need for validation from the group, an individual may begin to forget what they were like, who they were, before they relied so heavily on others for their sense of self.

Once dependency has been created, dissent is easily crushed, spirits broken. Ask yourself this: How do you feel when discussing something important with someone with whom you are on level terms? How do you feel when the conversation becomes tense? How now would you feel if that person were holding a weapon? Though they are not directly threatening you, you might have a difficult time not taking notice of the fact that they could, and if they decided to be unreasonable, you would be in a tight spot. What if this person also held financial control over you? What if they could also exert social pressure vis-a-vis their group of followers who are now the people you spend most of your time around? Taken in certain directions, this can be an unpleasant line of hypotheticals.

I have witnessed individuals involved in cult-type situations be abused financially, psychologically, physically, and emotionally. What's sadder still is that many of them were so psychologically battered and emotionally broken down that they could not even admit to themselves what was taking place, much less act to counter it. If ever they spoke up or attempted to create some level of independence for themselves, intense social pressure was utilized against them. They learned that it was simply better to sink into depression and say nothing than make a stand—at least they would keep their “friends” that way. It was truly despicable.

Grandiose titles, “us versus them” mentalities, “exclusive” groups, shaming non-believers, these are the tools of the manipulator. Learn to spot them and be strong enough to help the unaware before they are caught in the web. Be prepared for them to violently resist you at first, but know that they will thank you later. Above all, remember this: you are not who some self-styled guru says you are. You are not what a cult says you are. You are who you have been, the person your family and friends made you. Don't allow yourself to be duped into thinking that the approval of some people who themselves probably aren't using their brains is necessary for your life in any way.

For school owners, particularly those of us with some level of standing or accomplishment, the truth is simple: cults of personality form in the martial arts. Period. Another truth is this: amoral men do not always start out that way. It is often a slow, steady crawl to anything, just like earning a black belt. While some cultivate situations where they can prey on others (sometimes they justify it to themselves because the individual in question even thinks they want to be your sidekick, peon, whatever) even those of us who have no interest in such things need to be on guard. If we do not actively fight to humanize ourselves, to fail, to err, to admit to being mistaken CONSTANTLY in front of our students, we will fail and may see a cult develop around us.

Do we guide and help only the people who may be useful to us at some point, or will we do our best to serve those who need it most, the ones who wouldn't have the slightest idea that they were being taken advantage of even if someone sent them a certified letter about it? They are the little guy, the young woman, the shy, the weak, the poor. They are the ones who most deserve our consideration, even our protection, sometimes from themselves. Do not buy into the false adoration of those around you and get to thinking that you are categorically above anyone or anything simply because you have a title or can punch a little harder than the average guy.

We owe it to those who do not know enough to realize what they truly need to do right by them and guide them to sustainable independence.

Anything less is simply unacceptable.

Final Thoughts

Integrity, the connective tissue of one's soul, should not be a salable commodity. Once it has been tendered, it is likely gone forever. It can be pursued after the fact, but like attempting to repair a shattered vase, it is a highly difficult task and rarely is the remake an adequate substitute for what was once whole. Nothing is worth your integrity. Not success, not money, not fame. Nothing. Any person who asks you to compromise it, no matter the justification, is both morally and ethically bankrupt.

I often wonder what I would be doing right now were I still a part of my old group. I would have compromised my values so many times that I would be a different man, someone I doubt I would recognize. Would I too be blindly defending actions of people I am associated with simply because we wear the same patch, doing whatever is necessary in my mind to absolve my guru, and by extension, his disciples, of responsibility for their actions? Would I finally look myself in the mirror, as I once did, and be so disgusted with my reflection that I wouldn't know what to do? Or would I simply keep my head down and keep pushing towards something so completely insignificant when compared to the price I was paying spiritually? I honestly don't know.

Otherwise reasonable people who are in desperate situations often do desperate things. Things like turning to someone peddling a magical fix to their problems. Things like believing that the martial arts are an acceptable tool to use to enrich one's self at the expense of the uninformed. Things like aggressively and creatively imagining scenarios in their mind that suspend the facts and allow them to continue living in their insular, "haters gonna hate" imaginary world where neither they nor their master are accountable to anything or anyone for the things they do, the things that are done in their name.

In the past I would have felt only fury at such hideous and reprehensible behavior, but now I feel an equal amount of pity for the desperate individuals who are too weak to admit to themselves what they surely are sensing in their hearts. If there was ever any need for evidence that the martial arts world is at least as frail and human (often the negative parts of that word) as everywhere else, there is surely none left now.

Regardless of what some people may attempt to lead us to believe, the ends do not justify the means. Please, never forget it. No matter how many times it is repeated, failing (allegedly, depending on which story is to be believed) in an attempt to do something awful beyond words in no way makes the perpetrator a better man than he would have been had he succeeded in completing his task. An attempted murderer is no better than a successful one—he's just a worse shot. Intent is the foundation of character, ladies and gentlemen.

Even knowing what I know now, I, too, was almost foolish enough to stay quiet. Due to the proximity I have to some of the principals of a current horror story (subhuman or just grossly misguided, depending on the individual) and the public perception of the nature of my past with them, I had hoped others would speak out and my voice would not be needed. Only a few did, but those who were brave enough to offer their thoughts did so eloquently and forcefully, standing up for what they believe in, what they know to be right. Others bravely and correctly took their leave from affiliation with individuals whom they could no longer in good conscience support. I would be ashamed to let them stand alone.

Sometimes it seems like justice has left the world, like it is only for some, and even then only when the stars align properly. I believe this is because the average person thinks it is someone else's job to keep bad behavior in line. I dispute that. We all have a responsibility to do the right thing, to see that good people are supported and negativity squashed as often as it can be. A man once said to me, "Ryan, as long as people feel like they got what they wanted, that's enough for me." That line of thinking was as broken then as it is now.

If I stick my head in the sand when I hear something ugly, I am complicit in the ugliness. It is my business to know with whom I am dealing. This is not only our community—it is our world. The version of it we pass on to our children will greatly depend on the actions we take before they arrive. Would we have them live in one where people who dodge justice continue on to foster poisonous attitudes in their disciples—the same disciples who accuse victims of "asking for it" or being a "dirty whore" because they are too scared to brave the world without the security blanket of their equally misguided buddies' approval? I should think not.

Don't buy into the materialistic, morally vacant way of life that is peddled to us each day by media and advertisers. Be something more. Be the change you want to see in the world. There is nothing wrong with having a balanced worldview and values that are not dominated by ego gratification and self-aggrandizement. Twitter followers and Facebook likes do not validate your existence. Your actions in the world, not your tournament victories or opponents defeated in a game of wrestling determine your value as a person. Don't allow yourself to be seduced into believing that there is something wrong with an individual who holds more dearly their dignity than their medals, than their bank account.

Teachers: A true leader creates other leaders. He desires not to dominate those around him, but to uplift them. Not to uplift them for his own benefit, his own aggrandizement, but because it is the right thing to do. A real leader doesn't want disciples. A real leader hopes for friends who respect him for being a decent human being above all. After all, what other reason is there to follow someone?

Students: Trust your gut. We all have an internal compass that pushes us in the right direction, that guides to where we are supposed to be. Listen to it. Do not permit yourself to pull a gold medal high beam routine to justify staying in a place or with a person when your intuition tells you something isn't right. I did once for too long and still bear the scars.

Cultists: You may become angry with me, attempt to assassinate my character, question my right to speak, accuse me of lying, or even threaten me. One day, though, I hope you will grow emotionally enough to find the perspective you need to see how shameful and weak, though still painfully understandable, your behavior is. If you do, please find the strength to tell your story to others so that they may be spared the mistakes you've made.

If these words have touched you in some way and you want to act but don't know how to proceed, here are some suggestions:

1. Learn:

Familiarize yourself with the news stories that are circulating and the associated commentary. Visit a website like <http://www.rainn.org> to learn more about the real effects of sexual assault on individuals, on families, on society. Read up on cult behavior. Forewarned is forearmed.

2. Pay attention:

If you have a sneaking suspicion that some of what I have said applies to you or your training situation—or anywhere else in your life, for that matter—face the discomfort instead of rationalizing it away. Pay attention to how you feel and to how people are acting. Consider how consistent these feelings and actions are with what you know to be right and wrong.

3. Ask:

If you aren't sure anymore that you know what's right and what's wrong, get a reality check about your situation, from people outside your academy. Whom do you have access to who is known to have integrity? Be honest: would your grandmother be proud of the place you call your martial arts home? Even solicit the opinions of people you have considered "haters" in the past. Be open to their comments. (The fact that it will be incredibly difficult to do so means you're on the right track.)

4. Stand up:

Make sure your actions support your words. If you see inappropriate

behavior or wrongdoing, name it and tell those in question that you insist on better, from everyone around you, including yourself. Say it as often as necessary and follow up with corresponding behavior. If changes are not made, have the conviction to act, to associate only with those who you can respect for their integrity.

5. Find support:

It will not be easy or fun to address these issues. Don't do it alone. Find others, either in or outside of the group, who can assure you of your sanity. Do not let doubts and fears derail you. Your soul may hang in the balance.

6. Provide support:

If you have a strong moral compass, a supportive social system of which your team is ONE part, and a healthily balanced life, pay it forward to someone who may not be there yet. Provide perspective, discretion, and encouragement.

7. Keep perspective:

No matter how important the activities we participate in may seem, they will never be a substitute for the truly valuable things in life: character, friends, and family—the people who will love and care for you unconditionally, regardless of how much money you're making them, how many tournaments you're winning, or how carefully you obey their edicts. Anyone willing to encourage a rift between you and those who truly love you obviously does not have your best interests at heart.

In closing, I will stay true to classic form (familiar to those of you who have had to suffer through me teaching a class) and repeat myself: the martial arts experience, as well as life in general, is not some sort of zero sum, winner take all game. It is not me versus you wherein I get mine while the getting is good and justify my actions by convincing myself that you would have done the same to me were you given the chance. It is about attempting to live rightly, growing as a person, treating others as you would hope to be treated. It's me versus me in my struggle to be a better, stronger person—the kind of person who can help others along their path the same way that good people have helped me on mine. Never, ever, let anyone convince you otherwise.

Proud to be a part of the 97%,

Ryan Hall