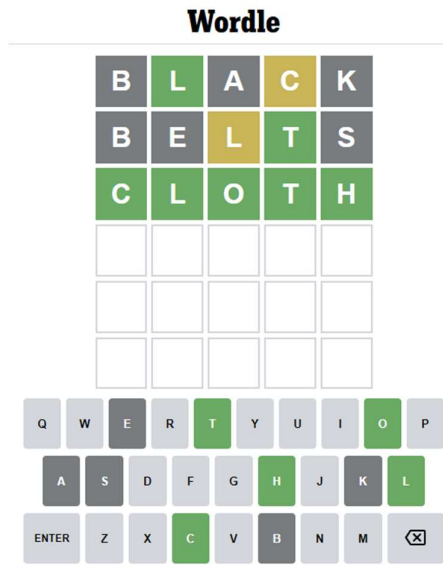


Black Belt for Beginners

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Wordle for March 6, 2022 © Rod E.S.Q.

One of the first activities I shared with my dad was attending a dojo – a place of learning for martial arts. His art of choice is aikido, which can be translated as “the way of harmony”, though you may be more familiar with other arts, such as karate do “the way of the empty hand” and judo “the gentle way” or many others, like kung fu, jiu-jitsu, or taekwondo.

I remember that my dad had a black belt and I was quite impressed and proud about it. I would sometimes boast to my schoolmates that my dad was a black belt, trying to make myself feel special. This would not last, as the response would often be something like: “I guess he could kick all our butts then, huh?”

It was at that point that I’d have to awkwardly explain that aikido didn’t really have kicks, and punches weren’t really central to its techniques either. Aikido is almost exclusively a defensive art, focusing on redirecting aggression so that it becomes harmless to yourself *and* to the aggressor. I quickly learned that bragging about my dad’s “rank” wasn’t all that fulfilling.

When we moved to Canada, we continued the practice and found another dojo for aikido. I was surprised to see my dad wear a white belt, just like me, as we started out. “Aren’t you already a black belt?” I asked him.

He explained that this new dojo was in a different style tradition, and he therefore considered himself as much a beginner as me, and any of the other new folks. I remember feeling somewhat let down, feeling like he

had been unfairly “demoted”, though I also admired what seemed to be a wise sense of humility that he was projecting.

While I expressed my dissatisfaction at his “demotion”, he further explained that the belt’s colour wasn’t all that important... it has significance for sure, and those who wear black belts deserve a measure of respect – or at least caution – but the *real* purpose of attending the dojo was to learn and practice... the colour changes in the belt are nice side effects of that process.

I never quite got as far as black belt at my dojo... I took on other interests and initiatives as I started high school, and a change in management at the dojo also prompted me to pursue something else. But I took to heart the approach my dad handed down to me.

And I also learned that a black belt isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. In movies and pop culture, a black belt is often depicted as a master with lethal expertise, but my dad let on that the black belt he held was a rather junior rank (not to mention that he wasn’t interested in lethal expertise). It turns out that, once you’ve gone through all the colours, there are additional “secret” levels *after* you get the black belt. Getting that black belt just puts you in what is called the *shodan*, which can be translated as the “beginner step” or “first degree”. There can be several of these degrees or *dans*, and instructors might only begin teaching after getting to the third dan or higher.

Indeed, the black belt can be seen as a mere witness to basic competence in the art, its techniques, and the process of learning it. The whole progression leading to the black belt is simply the journey toward *learning how to learn* the art.

Each of you will have gone through some process of learning in whatever it is you do, be it an apprenticeship with a mentor or senior family member, a certification, maybe a diploma or degree, perhaps navigating promotion opportunities at work, or learning what it means

to be in church and do church with others as part of individual and communal spiritual development. And going through each of those steps is really just a transition into a new level of expertise that requires further learning and refinement.

Last month, I mentioned that I attended a weeklong event of intensive professional development for ministers. This event used to be called The Institute for the Learned Ministry, but the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association has adopted a philosophy that more closely mirrors the reality of black belts in martial arts, recognizing that learning is ongoing, so the event has changed its name to the Institute for the Learning Ministry.

In fact, the ministerial formation process has a few parallels to this approach. In our tradition, ordination is often seen as a kind of gold standard of ministerial expertise – the “black belt” of ministry (or perhaps the white collar, as is sometimes the case). But it turns out there are additional “secret” levels of expertise that we must fulfill, even after we have the cred to start wearing clerical collars.

Some of you are aware that newer ordained ministers are often in what is called *preliminary fellowship*... this is the *shodan* of professional ministry – the *beginning* step that witnesses to a certain proficiency in learning how to learn the intricacies of ministry, and it requires additional work, along with evaluation by our credentialing body – some of you have been involved in that part of my credentialing process.

After three evaluations, we might be bestowed what *used* to be called *final fellowship*. But again, our credentialing colleagues realized that this title gives the wrong impression that learning is somehow complete – that title that I was given is now called *full fellowship* (not *final*) ... a kind of third dan, that acknowledges a further degree of competence, including the ability to teach and supervise student ministers. But the work of professional development isn't done. There is still a lot to learn

(though I now have a better idea of how I might go about doing that learning).

One of the key aspects of doing that learning includes an openness to making mistakes, and taking them as opportunities for learning. You may have seen the latest online trend of filling out the daily word game *Wordle*, or other similar games, which involve guessing a word with a limited number of attempts (six tries in the case of the game *Wordle*). You may have observed that even making a “wrong” guess has value – as knowing which options were “incorrect” gives a lot of information that can help in guessing the secret word. Even the “mistakes” can lead you to your objective... if you know how to look at them... if you *learn* how to look at them and use them to your advantage.

Of course, there are different kind of mistakes, and some are more severe than others. There are situations in which a mistake can be especially damaging, and not everyone can afford the luxury of making certain mistakes. Nonetheless, recognizing the inevitability that we will trip up, and finding ways to increase the likelihood of gracefully recovering when tripping up, is a valuable tool and approach that can make life’s challenges less hazardous – maybe even fulfilling.

In fact, one of the first things you learn in aikido is the expectation that you will fall. A fundamental technique for beginners does not even involve engaging with an opponent, but practicing falling and breaking that fall. *Breakfalls* are a set of somersaults that allow you to fall gracefully, minimizing risks of harm and inviting recovery. And you don’t need a black belt to do them well.

My friends, you’ve heard me preach some version of this sermon before. And I’ve done this quite deliberately, because practice requires revisiting important basics several times.

We have talked about how being willing to make mistakes when learning a new language is part of the key to mastering that language.

Together, we have lived the realities of re-learning how to do church in a setting we had barely imagined, along with the tech challenges, which can sometimes be awkward, sometimes humorous, sometimes outright frustrating, and also ongoing. And still we have become the better for it, as we have approached a black belt in doing multi-platform church... which leaves a lot of room for further degrees of development as we continue to practice it.

And practice, my friends, is part of that process. Whether you repeat a martial arts technique several times in a class, over many years; or rehearse a musical piece on an instrument; or go over our principles or any other of our covenants and figure out how to apply them to your lives and your relationships with others; spiritual growth and development calls for ongoing practice, including the moments when we fall short, which invite us to accept new lessons and take that learning into the next level.

My friends, many communities of faith in the Christian tradition, which is part of our heritage, are currently following a practice of reflection and deeper spiritual contemplation, which may involve forms of fasting, in this Lenten season that began last Wednesday and which eventually leads into Easter. We can delve more deeply into that particular practice next week, but today I leave you with the reminder that any spiritual practice involves ongoing work and ongoing learning; it involves failing, many times; and it involves an ongoing call into greater awareness.

My friends, may we be open to failing, learning, and deeper awareness, as we take one more step.

So may it be,
In ongoing practice
Amen

Suggested Hymns:

#159 This Is My Song

Words: Lloyd Stone, 1912- © 1934, 1962 Lorenz Publishing Co.

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education
FINLANDIA 11.10.11.10.11.10

#157 Step by Step the Longest March

Words: Anon.

Music: Irish folk song, adapt. and arr. by Waldemar Hille, 1908-1996,
© 1969 by Waldemar Hille
SOLIDARITY 7.6.7.6.D

#128 For All That Is Our Life

~)-| Words: Bruce Findlow, 1922-

Music: Patrick L. Rickey, 1964- , © 1992 UUA
SHERMAN ISLAND 6.6.6.6.6.6.