

Fellowship of Reason, Inc.

October 2004 Newsletter

"Advocating Heroic Engagement With Life"

Volume 6, Number 10

International Section (Received by all local chapters)

Mission Statement

The Fellowship of Reason® is an open, benevolent, and vital rational moral community in which we celebrate our lives, our freedoms, and our philosophy of reason. We study ethics.

Life Lessons from a Samurai

by Chris Snider

The Japanese are well-known for their intelligence, their hard-work ethic, and their ability to focus on complex endeavors over extended periods of time. How do they do it? There's no simple explanation, but the Japanese success story is due in large part to the harnessing and adaptation of "samurai culture"—a devotion to discipline, personal growth, and well-roundedness. And no one personified the Way of the Samurai more than the legendary Musashi Miyamoto.

In 1643, Musashi (then a 60-year-old master samurai) retired to a cave sanctuary on Japan's Mount Iwato to record all that he had learned from his life as a warrior. The result is *The Book of Five Rings*. Here Musashi sets down not just technical advice on combat (although there's plenty of that included), but also generic advice on how to live, how to pursue life-goals. A veteran of over 60 duels, Musashi perfected a distinctive method of fighting with two swords (one held in each hand), which he poetically named "The Individual School of the Two Skies". Although Musashi was never a ruler or a general, his skill, reputation and philosophical insights have transformed him over the centuries into a cultural touchstone for the Japanese. He has been the subject of countless books, movies and TV shows, most notably Eiji Yoshikawa's masterpiece novel *Musashi* (well worth reading in its English translation). Yoshikawa's book was adapted into the *Samurai* trilogy of films starring Toshiro Mifune (the "John Wayne" of Japanese cinema).

What can Westerners learn from this book? Quite a lot, it turns out. Although it's true that Oriental and

Occidental philosophies can sometimes be literally as far apart as the east and west they're named for, there is a surprising amount of overlap to be discovered by those willing to invest the time and energy.

The Book of Five Rings is short (barely cracking 50 pages in English translation); it is written in plainspoken, even clumsy prose, and Musashi lectures in a way that avoids historical anecdotes or the repetition of "old sayings". What we get is pure Musashi. He divides his knowledge into "rings" (or "spheres"), one for each of the four elementals - Earth, Water, Fire and Wind, plus the mysterious Ring of Emptiness or Ring of Void. The information contained within the five sections is often redundant, oddly organized and overlapping. I'll do my best to boil them down in a way that's interesting and (hopefully) faithful to the source material. So let's dig in.

The Earth Ring—Musashi is big on science, pragmatism, practicality ("Pragmatic thinking is essential"). Know the tools you work with, whether they're physical or intellectual. Know when to use the right tools. Learn by doing, not just by reading. Learn how to scale your knowledge up or down, depending on the task at hand. Learn what makes you an individual ("...as human beings, it is essential for each of us to cultivate and polish our individual path.").

The Water Ring—By referencing the fluidity of water, Musashi encourages us to be flexible in our thinking ("Fixation is the way of death; fluidity is the way of life."). Also, learn to think empathically and objectively ("...it is essential to keep your mind free from subjective biases."). Be ready to adjust your methods to the moment at hand (what he calls "having a position without a position"). Your mind should be relaxed, "open and direct" at all times, regardless of whether you're practicing or doing. Here's some great advice: "Determine that today you will overcome your self of the day before, [and] tomorrow you will win over those of lesser skill and later you will win over those of greater skill."

The Fire Ring—Think of combat as fire, of experience out in the real world as indispensable to

forging your character. Be proactive; press your advantages; don't wait for opportunities to come your way – make your own opportunities (“...if you consciously try to thwart opponents, you are already late” and “...make the first move; this is essential.”). Learn how your opponents (human, societal, or internal) operate, and thereby discern ways to overcome and succeed.

The Wind Ring—Musashi decried the commercialization and ceremonialization of the martial arts that was already taking place during his lifetime. He saw “the Way” as a true lifestyle, not just flash-and-style. He detested the same kinds of “wind bags” that we would – hypocrites, people obsessed with appearances over character, or people who are all talk and no action. Musashi warns against “finicky narrowness”, hidebound pursuit of supposed secrets, and obsession with particular methods as being better than others (remember the flexibility of Water!). In the end, style means little compared to substance (“When it comes to winning victory in everything, it is impossible to prevail without reason.”).

The Ring of Emptiness—This is perhaps the most Zen-like and difficult to understand of Musashi's teachings. Sometimes translated as “emptiness” or “void”, what Musashi means here is more akin to “clarity”. Emptiness is “...the state where there is no obscurity and the clouds of confusion have cleared away.” Once you have mastered the other Rings, acting in the proper manner becomes automatic, victory becomes a foregone conclusion. This is eerily reminiscent of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of “flow” (outlined in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*)—the study of which would be another whole essay by itself!

So what have we learned? Practice, practice, practice. Be flexible in your thinking. There's no substitute for experience. Don't be distracted by style over substance. Pursue these basic, universally human principles—and happiness is all but guaranteed!

Quotations in this essay are drawn from Thomas Cleary's translation published in 2000 by Shambala Publications, ISBN 1-57062-748-7.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in the columns appearing in this newsletter are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the organization. The Fellowship of Reason, Inc speaks only through its Articles of Incorporation, the Bylaws, and the actions taken by the Board of Trustees as a board and recorded in the minutes of the corporation.

Letters to the Editor

(Please comment for publication upon matters of interest to you, including the essay in this newsletter.)

Reflections on Last Month in the Fellowship of Reason®

(Please submit matters of interest for this section.)

Bozart Festival: Our third annual Bozart Festival was a success! We had 23 attendees (with nearly everyone participating). Thanks to Scott Carper for arranging the clubhouse facility.

FOR Symphony: We enjoyed our first concert by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra on this month. We had a huge turn out of FOR Symphony goers (23 people purchased series tickets). Most attended the pre-concert lecture. Most attended the post-concert offering of Champaign and chocolate desserts by a local restaurant.

The concert was great, but the high point was the pianist who was positively charged with energy!

Two Long Lost Members Return: Two long absent members returned for visits in September. We are delighted to welcome back Carlos F. and Don S. to FOR activities. We had not seen them since Beth and John took them to their mountain cabin in North Carolina (in the company of Martin, Sally, and Scott) last year. A causal relation is vehemently denied by both. ☺

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Local Section: Atlanta Chapter Calendar and Contact Information

October Birthdays

October 6	Michael Zimmerman
October 21	Jerry Pease
October 21	David Ziebell
October 27	Steve Stokes
October 31	Martin Cowen

November Birthdays

November 3	John Grover
November 12	Randy Sekeres
November 25	Bernice Bass Sossenko

FORum Schedule

- **Sunday, November 5, 2004**
- Sunday, December 5, 2004
- Sunday, January 2, 2005
- Sunday, February 6, 2005
- Sunday, March 6, 2005
- Sunday, April 3, 2005
- Sunday, May 1, 2005
- Sunday, June 5, 2005
- Sunday, July 3, 2005
- Sunday, August 7, 2005
- Sunday, September 4, 2005
- Sunday, October 2, 2005

Adult Education

1st Sunday at High Noon

Begins at noon before FORum David Ziebell facilitator.

FORUM, November 5, 2004: 1st Sunday

Begins at 1 p.m. SHARP!

Remember: Time limits will be vigorously enforced!

Hospitality—**Martin Cowen**
Historian/Timekeeper
Welcome—
Celebration of Freedom—
Celebration of Visitors—
Celebration of Each Other—
Celebratory Announcements—
Celebration of Science—**John P. Giles**
Celebration of Storytelling
Celebration of Literature—
Celebration of Heroes—
Celebration of Personal Mission—
Celebration of Talent—**Jerry Pease**
Oratory—**Dan Barber**
FORum—
Announcements—
Closing Quotation—

FOR Toastmasters

Every Tuesday at 8 p.m.. Martin Cowen coordinator:
770-471-9800.

Invisible College

Invisible College is on hiatus.

Philosophy Tapes: 1st/3rd Tuesdays

Philosophy tapes are played to a small private audience in the living room of a volunteer on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month Free.

Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet on the 2nd Tuesday of every month at John and Beth's house to discuss a marvelous book. Beth Holley is the coordinator of the book club 404-754-7519.

Non-Fiction Book Club: 2nd Saturday

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet 11 a.m. on the 2nd Saturday of every month at Chris and Allison's house to discuss a marvelous non-fiction. Allison Byrd is the coordinator of the non-fiction book club 678-585-0406 or Allibyrd@charter.net

Potluck: 3rd Saturday

Members and friends of FOR, Inc. meet on the 3rd Saturday of every month for a potluck supper. Bring something good to eat or drink to share. Our next potluck is on Saturday, October 16, 2004

Film Night: 4th Saturday

Members and friends of FOR, Inc enjoy a monthly movie night at John's studio using his extraordinary equipment. FOR's next movie night is Saturday, October 23, 2004. Arrive at 6:30 p.m. Doors will be locked for safety! Movie starts at 7:15 p.m. Free.

Pub Night: 4th or 5th Wednesday

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet on the 4th Wednesday of every month at Manuel's Tavern at 8 p.m. for adult beverages and adult conversation. FOR's next pub night is Wednesday, October 27, 2004, at 8 p.m.

FOR Symphony: Six Thursday nights in the 2004-5 ASO Concert Season

Our second concert is at 7 p.m. in Symphony Hall on Thursday, October 21, 2004. Martin Cowen is the coordinator of FOR Symphony 770-471-9800.

Membership Information:

- Regular membership: \$35 per year if paid prior to October 31, 2004
 - Contributing membership: \$70 per year if paid prior to October 31, 2004
 - Lifetime membership: \$700 if paid prior to October 31, 2004
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Contact information:

Visit us on the web at www.fellowshipofreason.com

To talk to somebody about FOR call Vera at 404-577-7968 or Martin at 770-471-9800 or Dan at 770-831-3010.

A subscription for 12 monthly issues of this newsletter is \$15 per year.

Fellowship of Reason, Inc. is a Georgia nonprofit corporation and a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) corporation.
