

The Establishment and Development of the Whitman Aikido Club

The college town of Walla Walla, in southeastern Washington, is a small place. Its surrounding wheat fields outnumber its gas stations and, as I despairingly found out in March 2008, it does not have any aikido dojos. No aikido? Well, at least not at the time that I made searches across the Internet during the first few weeks after mailing in my decision to attend Whitman College. Nor had the situation changed several months later, when I arrived for my first semester as a transfer student. Try as I might to wish that a dojo would pop into existence, the absence of aikido in Walla Walla remained a hard truth; a truth, however, that I was not prepared to live with.

I had begun practicing aikido nine years earlier and despite yearlong visits to both Guam and Australia throughout that time I had managed to keep up my training. Granted, the absence of an existing dojo at which to train was a new type of obstacle, but certainly one worth overcoming. So, while other new students at Whitman settled into their residence halls, made new friends, and struggled with the demands of their college classes, I spoke with the student government, the director of student clubs, and the overseer of the campus athletic facilities. How should I go about starting a new club? How quickly might it be approved? What facilities could be reserved for training sessions? The latter issue was to be by far the most troubling, and is one that upsets me to this day, but more on that later.

As it turned out, starting a new club was a relatively easy process. Within a week of my arrival at Whitman, I had written a constitution for the club, found someone to act as the requisite faculty advisor, and submitted this information along with other simple paperwork to the student government for approval. By the following week, the Whitman Aikido Club had become official and it was time to start filling up its membership roster. Whitman has several email lists that are useful for advertising things to the student body, and to each of these I sent out a message with information about the new activity on campus that was available to everyone. Imagine my excitement when I promptly

received a dozen responses from students interested in learning more about aikido or trying it out.

Having not yet been able to arrange for a facility in which to train, presumably due to the ongoing renovation of the main athletic building at Whitman that year, the first official meeting of the aikido club was purely orientational and was held in a large classroom in one of the academic buildings. Many of the students from whom I had received emails attended this meeting and I thought that most of them went away with their questions about aikido, and the club I had started, satisfactorily answered.

Around the third week of that first semester at Whitman, the first real aikido practice of the club was held. Only three students showed up, none of whom had any prior martial arts experience, but the practice was nonetheless a success in my opinion. At that time I was really able to say that I had established aikido at Whitman College.

We trained outside that first day and for nearly two months thereafter as well. Although practices were occasionally sporadic, we eventually settled into a rhythm of three meetings per week. Also, while my initial hopes of consistently high membership were never realized, there were generally three to five students in attendance.

By mid-November it was too cold in the afternoons and evenings to continue to train outside and, having found no better option, I was forced to move the aikido practices into the main lounge of one of the student residence halls. The principal discomfort associated with this situation was the presence of the thinly carpeted cement floors that served as the only available surface on which to train. At that time there were no wrestling or gymnastics teams at Whitman, so no mats were available for us to fall on. The best I could do was keep the practice slow and cautious and wryly explain to my students that their rolling would be all the better in the end for having been learned on such uncomfortable ground.

After the holiday break in December and January I returned to my teaching duties as president of the Whitman Aikido Club. The start of the winter semester saw a decline in club membership, and I rarely found myself with more than three training partners on any given day. In addition, our training location options failed to improve, and this caused one of the most dedicated club members to have to permanently give up rolling

due to a chronically bruised tailbone. Despite these inconveniences, the first year of aikido at Whitman concluded after fifty-two complete practices. At the very least, these had served to keep me in touch with the art and introduce it at varying levels to twenty different students.

Summer 2009 proved reinvigorating for me as I dedicated much of it to training at Aikido Northwest. I had high hopes for an even more successful next year at Whitman, as the athletic facilities were reputedly fully renovated and a new group of first-year students would provide for a way to inspire more interest in the aikido club. It was to the latter end that I dedicated immediate effort upon my return to Whitman at the end of August. I sat at a table at the Student Activities Fair, dressed in my *gi* and *hakama*, where I displayed various aikido books and training weapons in order to attract attention. This strategy proved successful as, after three hours, twenty-two students had written their names on the aikido club interest list. Sadly, the procurement of an indoor training facility was a complete failure. Without explanation, the director of club sports refused to arrange for a room for us to practice in, despite the fact that the new and improved athletic complex now boasted four large studios. Once again, then, I resigned myself to training outside as long as the weather was nice and in the main lounge of the largest residence hall when it got too cold or wet.

Of the students who had expressed interest in aikido at the Student Activities Fair, some never did come to try it out. Many did, however, and for the first month of the fall semester I was pleased to repeatedly have classes of size five or more. Additionally, one of my former training partners from Aikido Northwest had chosen to attend Whitman College and began training with the club. His experience was a huge complement to my demonstrations, since for the most part the other members of the club possessed minimal knowledge of aikido.

By the time the weather became cold and our practices returned to the residence hall, regular membership had again declined. The Taekwondo Club, which had been established longer at Whitman and had a history of consistently large class sizes, suffered a similar lack of success in maintaining a high level of interest among the student body. At this point I had realized that the membership of most of the campus

clubs swelled at the start of each new academic year, but by the middle of the semester, most students gave up on the new activities they had been so eager to attempt.

Despite my high hopes for more student involvement and eventually locating a better place to train indoors, the remainder of the 2009-2010 academic year proved nearly identical to the prior year for the aikido club at Whitman. The one exception to this was that throughout this spring semester, in addition to the three regular weeknight classes, I held weapons training sessions every Saturday and Sunday in the morning. Although generally only one student attended these practices, they provided me with an opportunity to reacquaint myself with a vital aspect of aikido that I had previously given little attention to during my time at Whitman.

As a transfer student, my stay at Whitman College only lasted two years, so in May 2010 my tenure as the president of the aikido club was rapidly drawing to a close. At this time, I reflected that in four semesters of trying to promote aikido at Whitman I had failed to establish a consistent membership of more than three students and had never been able to arrange for a studio with mats in which the club could train. Nevertheless, for the four students who had spent at least one year training with me, I had provided a solid introduction to the basics of aikido, while for myself I had accomplished the goal of maintaining my own practice despite the absence of an established aikido dojo in Walla Walla.

I left the aikido club under the direction of my friend and training partner from Aikido Northwest, who I hope will endeavor to prolong the presence of aikido at Whitman for at least the three years he will remain there as a student. For me, the University of Kansas' graduate program beckons, so the next step in my aikido journey remains a mystery for now. Certainly, as when I chose to attend Whitman College as a transfer student two years ago, I have researched the existence of aikido dojos in and around Lawrence, Kansas. In a way, the research this time around has turned up promising results, as there appears to be a Ki Society dojo located less than a mile from the university campus and an on-campus club overseen by this same dojo. However, the webpages for these groups were last updated in 2006, so there is no guarantee that they still exist. If they do not – well, I have a pretty good idea what I will do about it.