



Aikido of Champlaine Valley

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July 14th, 2020

Dear Technical Committee and the Board of Directors,

I formally tender my resignation from the United States Aikido Federation. I am not making this decision alone; my *yudansha* and the Aikido of Champlaine Valley Board of Directors unanimously agreed to leave. We resign because the USAF Board and Senior members failed to protect the voices of the Independent Women's Coalition, and punished the women who presented the petition. We leave because our values directly conflict with the actions and policies of the USAF.

I feel a great deal of grief over my decision. I did not make this choice lightly; like Sensei, I became physically sick over the conflict. I would wake up in the night, tormented by the opposition between loyalty and ethics. The USAF has been my bedrock, my home, until retirement or death. After over 37 years of training in our organization, I felt like an integral part of a sprawling, diverse family, and I held a deep, abiding commitment. I am heartbroken because many of you have been my teachers, friends and peers.

However, I cannot continue supporting a reactionary system. The punitive actions against the Independent Women's Coalition have angered me. I have tried to navigate years of concerns from my students and friends regarding sexism and sexual harassment within the USAF. These conversations continually placed me in awkward positions. Since the petition, these difficult talks have become more intense. In February, a young student walked into my office with tears in her eyes. A strong, articulate woman, she could barely speak due to anger and frustration. Her previous dojo and organization strongly supported women's issues. She felt bewildered by the sexist retaliation of the USAF. What could I say to her? What would you have said? How would you justify the punitive response against the women who spoke out? How could you rationalize the authoritarian tone of the new grievance policy, in which nothing "vexatious" shall be brought before the committee?

I teach aikido to many trauma survivors. Abuse survivors are especially shocked by the one-year statute of limitations regarding grievances. Such rules are inherently regressive because it often takes years for survivors of physical and sexual abuse to speak out. In addition, it implies that time diminishes a legitimate grievance or crime. Does bad behavior have an expiration date, like a box of cereal? The unwelcoming tone of the policy also discourages feedback, especially if a member is already fearful and hesitant to seek help.

I have remained silent about negative behavior within the Federation in order to protect my own status and position. Many other voices in our Federation have also been silenced because

they do not want to create waves or be accused of disloyalty. They, like me, justify inaction by saying that we ask too much from our institutions; it is too early to make major changes. While some teachers quietly advocate for change within their own dojo, our pacifism sustains and legitimizes pernicious, systemic sexism within the USAF.

Many people emphasize that we need to protect Sensei; this is his organization, and the conflict is too complex and stressful given his health and age. Let him live out his years and retire in peace! This is certainly a powerful justification. I don't want to increase anyone's suffering, especially Sensei. I don't think anyone should try to change his views. If I remained quiet, I knew I could support Sensei, and envision progressive change in the future. But Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds me of the "fierce urgency of now": social change cannot wait for the perfect time. Change is messy, stressful and inconvenient, and we do everyone, including Sensei, a disservice by claiming that this is not the right time. We use the dictates of tradition to infantilize our leader.

While I struggled with my feelings, the majority of my *yudansha*, both men and women, had already made up their minds. In March, as the pandemic spread, my senior students decided not to pay dues to the USAF. By failing to advocate for change, I realized that I would lose students. I have never attempted to "radicalize" or impose my political views on my students. I am embarrassed that that I need to make a justification for my dojo's response; it is prompted by a statement from a USAF Shihan: "Women in *my* dojo don't seem to have any issues with our Federation." I have believed in the primacy of training: "Just ignore it and train," has been my mantra for 39 years. However, my students reached their own conclusions. And finally, the pandemic has bought existential questions into focus: what is my purpose? What is *our* purpose? In the words of the late poet Mary Oliver:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

It has become clear that I need to support my students, and my decision to leave should not be the source of inner torment. I am a teacher and leader, and I must make a stand in support of women's rights, support my *dojo*, and advocate for social and spiritual change in this broken, polarized world. *This* is my one wild, precious life.

I am saddened that the Board and Technical Committee failed to take direct action to protect the USAF and Yamada Sensei. A positive intervention would have protected Sensei and his legacy. Here lies a great irony: compared to Japanese tradition and modern Hombu Dojo culture, Sensei *has* supported women. We all know that. But the Federation is bigger than Sensei; senior men in leadership positions failed to unequivocally assert support for the MeToo movement, and tell Sensei that *progressive, values-based change is now necessary in order to preserve his wonderful legacy as a teacher and leader*. With unified advocacy from leadership and support for Sensei, change was possible.

For several months, I struggled with the idea of speaking forcefully and honestly with senior teachers. I knew that *change would only come if senior men endorsed and supported a more liberal approach promoting anti-bias training, diversity, and women's issues*. This winter, I spent many hours writing a letter titled "Why I am staying in the Federation." I never sent the letter because I didn't believe that the leadership advocates *any* change that might upset Sensei. I also felt like I have no voice at all, and I was afraid to speak after being castigated by Sensei because I shared the petition on Facebook (Sensei asked me to remove my post and issue a public retraction. I deleted the post, but I silently refused to publicly renounce of my views). Even more disturbing was the sense that USAF leadership mirrored Sensei's hostility, demonizing the women who presented the petition. Instead of publicly addressing issues regarding gender equity, senior teachers and Board members attacked the character and integrity of women in the Independent Women's Coalition. Here are a few comments made by Senior members: She has angered Sensei for a long time; look how much Sensei did for her, and look at her selfish response; according to a Black aikidoka, she is not really progressive on racial issues; she always complained anyway; she is lying!; They didn't approach this issue right; she must be doing this for her daughter; the so-called petition with no signatures; she must have anger management/mental issues; she is guilty of "scurrilous behavior," and so on. Women were condemned and punished. In the name of preserving the status quo, USAF leadership denigrated and gaslighted women and their supporters.

Sexism, like racism, is insidious and systemic. Consequently, sexism is unavoidable and often subtle in its negative influence. *The USAF never acknowledged this complex reality in writing*. In a self-congratulatory letter, you backed your advocacy for women with data (if this letter doesn't embarrass you, substitute "Negro" for "women," and we are bleakly reminded that this country may have made baby steps towards racial equity and equality, but it has failed to pass the Equal Rights Amendment). *To this day, there has been no formal statement acknowledging sexism within our organization*.

If our art is about transformation and change, there is no sense that we are a learning, self-reflective organization that adapts to the culture and ethics of a changing society. In separate, private conversations, I raised the issue of sexism with two senior instructors. They cited their personal support for women; they described how many women had recently joined their dojo, how they don't treat women differently, or view them sexually on the mat. On the surface this advocacy sounds great, but I was disturbed for two reasons: first, if sexism is systemic, we must take a proactive approach to discussing the issue, acknowledging that there is much work to be done. Secondly, the men I spoke to seemed more concerned about my perceptions of their positions rather than being receptive to my feelings and suggestions. I had little sense that our leaders believe that we need to improve our organization's support of women's rights and equity.

On the *tatami*, we learn how to blend with the attack, and for a moment, examine the attacker from their perspective. We study the way of harmony. Similarly, we can apply our physical skills to mindful listening. Listening requires empathy. It is hard for men (myself included) to understand what it feels like to be a woman in the USAF. I can personally attest to my tendency to becoming defensive when my own students have called me out on sexist behavior and privilege as a white man. I know it isn't easy to be receptive to new ideas and perceptions, but

it is essential that men in leadership positions learn how to listen to women *and* provide a sense of safety so all members can talk freely and honestly.

Sadly, the actions of our leaders damaged this sense of a safe space for listening. Sensei sent angry messages and telephone calls to members who signed the petition, and the revised Grievance policy made it clear that the Board discourages dissent. Many people decided that their relationship with Sensei was more important than their commitment to publicly supporting the Coalition and advocating for change. This conflict continues to cause a great deal of pain and sadness for numerous members. A number of students and teachers wanted to sign the petition (or they retracted their signatures) and advocate for women's issues, but they knew that this threatened their status and advancement. *There were no signatures on the petition because of the angry backlash!*

I was asked to choose between fundamental ethical principles and my Federation when I had imagined everything in alignment. This conflict is soul crushing. *Gender equity within the Federation is not a women's issue: it is a human rights issue.* Sexism is systemic. By publicly denying its ubiquitous presence and deleterious effects, the Board ironically reinforced the fact that sexism is embedded in the matrix of our organization.

The politics of fear, mockery, hatred and exclusion define our government and culture. By excluding and punishing the women in the Independent Coalition, we are explicitly tied to the nightmare of Trump's sexist, fearful world. Comparisons are legion: from the statement that the Board will not apologize for their response to the petition and Trump's denial of responsibility for the rapid spread of the pandemic, to a culture in which silence and acquiescence is conflated with loyalty, and dissent, with treason. I was reminded of our creepy similarity to Trump's universe when my colleagues in the USAF said to me with regards to women and men trying to make positive change in our organization: "why don't they all just leave?" They had no idea how hurtful this felt to me, because there was no other organization that I wanted to join, and to be a modern aikido *ronin*, without affiliation or home, is a bitter exile given my life-long commitment to the vital importance of growing our art within a larger community.

I hope that we can sustain a connection - I'm always available for a respectful and honest conversation. This conflict is complex and challenging, and I have tremendous compassion for all of you. Thank you for all of your support, instruction and friendship. It remains an amazing journey, and I feel gratitude and sadness knowing that we remain connected within this wondrous spiderweb of existence.

Gassho (palm to palm),

Benjamin Pincus

Aikido of Champlain Valley is a federal 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. We do not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender or sexual orientation in our admissions or employment.

