

Healthy Relationships are Vital in Reaching Your Goals

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Challenge Martial Arts

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Success of any kind requires healthy relationships with yourself, the people in your life,
the world around you and, most importantly, God.

“Relationships help us to define who we are and what we may become. Most of us can trace our successes to pivotal relationships,” Donal O. Clifton. In short, to succeed in any venture you are going to need healthy relationships. There is a reason that most recovery programs weigh so heavily on the idea of support systems. A strong and reliable relationship gives a person better odds to succeed in their recovery. Though I am not speaking from firsthand experience, I have had many close people in my life walk the road of addressing their addiction, and I find similarities in their journey to the ones in my life... the relationships in my life have shaped, and continue to shape me, through my journey of becoming a Black Belt. It is because of these highly valued relationships that I have been able to strive towards this goal. Success of any kind requires healthy relationships with yourself, the people in your life, the world around you, and most importantly, God.

Few people in life ever accomplish anything alone. It has been said, “No man is an island.” I am thankful that I am not an island. I was fortunate to marry my childhood friend, Nicole, who is now my wife of eighteen years, mother of our four kids, and my biggest supporter. I would not launch into any venture without her support. Over the years, that support has come in a variety of ways—often by diving headlong into challenging situations with me. There are times when she is not so sure of the goal, venture, or direction I am taking on, but she has faith in me, and in God’s hand in guiding our family. She knows I will never intentionally lead our family into dangerous, uncharted waters. Life may find us there, though, and when it does, we will weather the storm together. We moved to Alaska in 2020 to step into long term missionary work with a youth organization a few doors down from Challenge Martial Arts (CMA). Nothing says I trust you like selling everything you have, starting support-raising in the middle of a pandemic, and moving six-thousand miles away from home. Once in Alaska, we decided to continue our kids’ homeschooling—like so many others, we were already homeschooling our kids after being forced to by the Covid 19 school closings. We decided to commit fully to the homeschool

lifestyle, and we now found ourselves looking for a PE option for our children in Alaska. CMA would fit that bill, and in the moment I had no idea that my journey towards Black Belt was going to kick off—or I should say, continue.

I actually started Taekwondo when I was a kid around eleven-years-old. I was fortunate to practice for about a year before my family could no longer afford for me to continue. It has been a dream of mine, from the first time I stepped on the mat all those years ago, to become a Black Belt. The reasoning has changed over the years, but it has always lingered in the back of my mind. I had mentioned to Nicole throughout our relationship the desire to train in martial arts again, but for many years starting back up was nothing more than talk. It was not until we started homeschooling our four children that the possibility became reality. Our kids had already begun their journey to become Black Belts before my wife encouraged me to join them. Since then, she has given up many family dinners, date nights, family outings, and trips, for time spent at the studio honing our craft. I am curious what she thinks she has gained, though—maybe I'll have her write me an essay about that! In any facet of our journey, the time commitment is not only asked of just me and the kids; she has sacrificed right along side us. The journey to become a Black Belt is similar those in the military, public service and our first responders—the whole family serves. The ask is demanding, and it requires everyone to buy in on the mission. She has been in my corner spurring me on to accomplish this goal.

Throughout the years I have been encouraged by the close relationships in my life, like the ones I have with my wife and my children. When others share in the burden of a goal, the stress that is brought about by striving towards a goal is lessened, and big goals like becoming a Black Belt become easier to obtain. I am fortunate to share my life with four amazing children. Kyana is the oldest, then Madison, Jess, and Liam, our only boy.

All our kids have attended CMA. Kyana stopped at Purple Belt to focus on softball. She received a scholarship and is currently playing in Colorado for a Junior college. Last season she was honored as an NJCAA Scholar athlete for her dedication in the classroom as well as the field! Kyana inspires me with her hard work and dedication to her craft. She has shown me that we should chase after our dreams and seize the opportunities God lays before us. Miss Tirado, (or Madison, outside of CMA) is the first in our family to become a Black Belt, and we address her as Miss Tirado at CMA events to show respect to the position she holds. She moves with such intentionality and grace—a type of grace that is married with precision and power. Her kicks are beautiful— clean and crisp. Madison also knows how to grind it out like her big sister— she once decided to catch up to another student and blew through the Brown High belt curriculum in six weeks. Brown High is an advanced belt with a high demand, and her ability to wrestle that goal to the ground is nothing short of amazing. She has proven to have grit, battling back from injury and multiple surgeries. As my girls have flourished into tough and driven young women, they have inspired me discover my goals and attack them.

Jess, Liam and I are all in the final stage of becoming a Black Belt. Jess, too, has had her own series of setbacks to battle. She has asthma due to complications at birth that put her in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) the first two weeks of her life. We were not sure she was going to live through it. She has never let her physical hurdles keep her down, though. She pushes through pain, dizziness and balance issues. The joke in our family is that Jess was given a strong personality to make up for the two weeks she lost in the NICU. She has her way of cheering me on and supporting me. She randomly quizzes me on our Recommended homework, reminds me of inspirational quotes I share with my kids, and lifts my spirits by simply saying, “You got this!” In a letter Jess wrote to me as an encouragement for my Recommended test, she penned, “No one cares, work harder.” It is a quote I say to my kids often, a little tongue and cheek, to encourage them that their problems are real, but sometimes the recipe for

success is, “Keep hammering.” These quotes come from Cam Hanes. Cam is a prolific hunter and outdoorsman who has harvested animals that most only dream of. He hunts harder, longer and farther than most are willing to go—with a bow because of the challenge it offers. His mantra of, “No one cares, work harder and keep hammering,” is constantly ringing between my ears. I pray I can be the man she sees me as. As for Liam, I admire his ability to focus on this journey. He just turned twelve and has developed something our world could stand to learn from him—the ability to tell himself no. Not everything we think of is worth our time, energy and resources, but, more difficult, even some worthwhile things may need to be put on hold for more pressing matters, or given up entirely. He has sacrificed hockey practice to remain focused on his martial arts training. This meant that he rode the bench a touch more than he wanted, missed practices, and even had to miss the occasional tournament all together. My kids have all encouraged me with their words, their actions and by the examples they have set for me and others. My kids have lifted my spirits with their words on many occasions.

It is the relationships we hone that either encourage us to be more than we are, calling us to be greater, or they tear us down, and sow doubt and rob us of joy. Let’s face it; we are stuck with our family. I could not ask for a better group of people to be “stuck” with. I feel blessed to be “stuck” with people who speak truth into my life, cheer me on and say the hard things I need to hear at times.

Other impactful relationships come from those just outside of the family circle. I am talking about friends and the community of people we choose to spend the rest of our time with. For the sake of brevity, though, I am going to focus on those I know at CMA. At CMA, we are all working towards a common goal. Students range from the eyes wide open, drinking from the fire hose, White Belts, to the Advanced Belt students. For the White Belts, the concept of bowing to others

(this includes parents at times), addressing others as sir or ma'am, and learning to stand in "set" (the first and most basic stance) without fidgeting, all seem foreign and new. Then there are those who are merely "moments" away from reaching the rank of Black Belt Recommended. Recommended students have demonstrated a competency in the overall curriculum and Master Fritsche believes they are ready to enter the next phase of training— the most intense part of their journey to become a Black Belt. Throughout the spectrum of the color belt curriculum, students become comfortable with being judged by both Master Fritsche and their peers. Judgement should come from a place of love and respect, and getting better at receiving these critiques is vital for success. These relationships teach you both humility and respect—for others as well as yourself. As you advance, you take the lessons with you. I remember what it was like learning a high block. The awkward feeling of a back stance as a White Belt. Or the first time I learned a reverse (a spin of sorts) and struggled to keep my feet under me. I looked like a baby deer trying to take its first steps. Through it all, my instructors and other students have corrected and encouraged me— over, and over, and over.

There is even more that brings us together than merely being martial artists— after all, we are all human, and we deal with the struggles of life. Just recently, before my Recommended test, my brother-in-law and nephews were in a car accident. They are all okay now, but David, who is seven, fractured his orbital socket and cheek bone. My head was not in it that day, but I needed to go to class and work to get a form (that I have been doing for years) checked off and ready for testing. My every thought was being consumed by rage, fear and anxiety. Master Fritsche, in a loving way, encouraged me to focus on the here and now—nothing else matters in that moment. Obviously, she is not being cold and heartless. We have a saying at CMA, "make every move its own universe." She was calling me to rise above the situation, master my emotions and get the job done. This is because learning to master self is not just one of the most difficult aspects of being a martial artist, but one of the most critical.

My toughest opponent is the one staring back at me in the mirror. He is hard to please. In his mind, he should still be a White Belt. There are techniques he learned as a White Belt that he is still honing and has not reached the level of mastery yet. He believes perfection is the benchmark to move into a Yellow Belt. These mental traps will keep you stuck. It is vital to success to celebrate the small victories. As I mentioned earlier about making each moment its own universe—this means there is a multitude of complexities that go into this moment— stop, be present, celebrate, bask in its beauty. “Okay then, that is enough, back to work!” I heard an anonymous Navy S.E.A.L. Instructor say, “There is no secret to making It through training. It is learning to count the small victories. You got up, victory one. You made your bed, victory two.

You are dressed, victory three. This ability to celebrate the ‘trivial things’ is the key to surviving BUDS (SEAL basic training).” I must remind the guy in the mirror that he can do it—the battle is really in the mind. I have spurred this guy on, begrudgingly at times. I must rise above the pain in my knee from a torn meniscus. And the constant nagging of a vertebra out of place in my neck. I had to learn to be self motivated, to draw on my relationship with the world around me to inspire me and keep me going. We must interact with the world around us, and we can achieve great things when we learn to leverage the plethora of inspiration around us, like those words to that Navy SEAL instructor, or the words of Cam Hanes or those of Master Fritsche.

I am a husband, father, employee, friend and many other titles. The demand on my time is high. I work in a field that does not afford me the luxury of knowing when my day ends. I am done when I am done. This has put a great deal of stress on me—at first, that is. I went through the Advanced Belt curriculum at lightning speed to enter Recommended with Jess and Liam. Perhaps the nagging in my neck is from the whiplash? I feel like I can count on one hand the number of times I was at class on time during these intense few months. In some cases, I missed class all together. There were many nights I would be walking in the door to train as the

last class of the night was leaving. One day while I was at work, I had a realization about the stress I was feeling. I looked at my watch and knew class had just begun. This was disheartening because I was still an hour from clocking out, at best. It all came together like the joy one feels at placing the final puzzle piece. The realization was this—nothing about my situation was “normal”. I was manufacturing the stress I was feeling in my life because of the ideal I was clinging to. I was reminded of a lesson that I try to teach my kids. There is the ideal situation, and there is reality. I was trying to fit my reality into the ideal. Having specific, realistic expectations of oneself is vital in accomplishing any goal. Couple that with humility and you have a winning blueprint. The battle inside the mind can be a treacherous area to navigate and it is important to know how you tick. If you know what your short comings and strengths are you can develop a realistic plan to attack your goal. Having a healthy relationship with yourself is vital to your success. We need to have our head up, eyes open and heart ready to receive it.

Lastly, the single most important relationship is our relationship with God. In this area I do not like to leave it open to interpretation; let me explain to whom I referring. The Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and the End. He is the uncaused first cause. I am talking about the creator of the heavens and the earth. Yahweh. The triune being of Father, Son and Spirit who loved you so much he took your place on the cross. He bore the weight of what you earned, God’s judgement. In return we receive his righteousness. He did for us what we could never earn or work our way to. Having a close, intimate relationship with God is the single point all the previous points hinge from. A few years back there was a clever graphic in the Christian community. It went like this, “kNOw God, kNOw peace.” The graphic is a play on the word. They used color to illustrate what I did in text. The concept is that we must fellowship with God, and in doing so this relationship brings about peace in our life. The second meaning is that without God (in your life), we cannot experience (true) peace. This is not to say that here on Earth you will not have peaceful moments. It is saying True Peace comes from God. I have been fortunate to

experience this peace along my journey. When the troubles of life come, which undoubtedly includes striving to achieve difficult goals, having a strong relationship with God is the foundation all other relationships are built on.

Today, as I am typing this, a friend of mine in Arizona passed away. He had been struggling with heart complications these past few months. He now sits with God in eternal glory. While his presence here will be missed and his family and friends mourn his passing, I am reminded of a scripture that I find comforting in these types of situations. 1 Corinthians 15:55 reads, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” There is no lasting sorrow in death to those who have faith in God. There is only rejoicing and victory. They are now free from the sin of this world that brings about heart ache, both physical and emotional. They are free from a failing, decaying body, from grief, anger, hatred and many more areas of life that at times are hard to endure. Every good and perfect thing comes from God, and we cannot do anything outside of his will, and God uses even the tough times for our benefit. Through our relationship with God, we can have confidence in the direction he is leading, because he has greater things planned for us. A place he has led me to is the footsteps of Challenge Martial Arts. This little studio in Nikiski Alaska, filled with amazing people that I am blessed to call friends, is part of my journey. I recently heard on a podcast, “God equips you to be the man (or women) he needs you to be—for the purpose he calls you to.” I may not see the end destination, but I trust God will bring me to that place, at the right time.

There is no doubt my training as a martial artist has brought me closer to God. I have experienced peace in the midst of my journey. I believe God has placed a desire in my heart to become a Black Belt. With all that I am, I want to achieve this goal—not to be able to stand in front of others chin up, chest puffed out with bravado and declare I am a Black Belt. No—it is about service—and I want to do my best to emulate the greatest servant, Christ. God has given

me a heart to want to serve others. Christ chose serve others through the cross and I have chosen the mat. I will never have the impact that Christ did, but I believe I can make a difference in someone's life. I can be an instrument in God's plans for someone else's life. There is a kid or maybe another adult who God bring will through those doors at CMA because he has gifted me uniquely to help them on their journey.

This realization of the desire God has given me has amplified my communing with him in prayer. I have mentioned already the lack of time I have free in my schedule. I have made it a routine to begin my workday with prayer. I pray for God to make my mind sharp, to remove any hurdles I may encounter, and to give me the grace to get through the ones I must go through.

I find it a little odd that a sport where I am a student of violence has brought me closer to God. Through my journey, God has deepened my understanding of what service looks like to him. In scripture we are given many examples of God defending the "little guy". It is my responsibility to be prepared to step up and shield those who cannot do it for themselves—should God place me in those situations. Similarly, it is my duty to be able to protect those who God has entrusted to me—my family, friends, and those he places in my path like the relationships I have cultivated over the years of training at CMA. I am to look at to the greatest defender of all for encouragement and direction.

I am inspired by the example Christ set before us on caring for others. I have prayed for those who are on this journey with me at CMA as they experience hardship. I do not know who is responsible for saying, "The only thing certain is life is death and taxes," but I think they left out a few things. Most importantly, hardship. As I train alongside others, I am fortunate to engage with the whole person. Meaning, people come to the mat with heartache from a family member passing, a tough day at work, all the way down to getting frustrated when they dropped the last of their coffee. We all experience an elaborate spectrum of hardship in life and I am

fortunate to be able to take the things I learn on the mat— the personal things happening in others lives, not the training—and take that to God on their behalf. I hope that their relationship with me leads to success in their lives, just as they help lead me toward success in mine.

Martial arts is about developing the whole person. This means mind, body and soul. Without these relationships in my life, I am not sure I could have done it. I know I could not! A life void of meaningful relationships is shallow and lonely. There is a Chinese proverb I have held onto for better part of a decade. “Joy shared is twice joy, but sorrow shared is half sorrow.” That’s it! When we reach our goals we celebrate and others celebrate with us. Those spurring us on rejoice. When we are down and need to be propped up or encouraged, those relationships we have been building are there to help us carry the weight. Our relationships mold us, shape us, and define who we are. As we reach our goal and cross the finish line, we realize the journey is just getting started. The next goal awaits. Healthy relationships with yourself, the people in your life, the world around you, and God are what got you here. To be successful in achieving your goals is like washing your hair... wash, rinse, repeat.