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The Immersion Labs: Legacy of the Blade

As millennial in college, I am constantly bombarded with messages demonizing violence and the use, even understanding, of weapons. In the day and age of political correctness and the perceived “need” for sensitivity training, seeking martial arts knowledge is rarely considered artful or civil. Since I could remember, I’ve been consumed with curiosity with any thing could be implemented as a weapon. I remember playing with sticks, throwing rocks, and generally using my imagination to figure what length stick would do to make an ideal bow staff, stick sword, or stick dagger. Growing up I went to a elementary school that was tucked into a relatively rural part of town, it was there in third grade that one of my early childhood friends passed me a knife in the middle of recess and suggested I keep it in a sign of bonding friendship.

The first real knife I ever owned was a small swiss army knife. My father “lost” it and my father let me keep it, so long as I helped him with small tasks. I carried it with me everywhere I went. I think I carried it all through elementary school, before losing it somewhere on a walk home. Having grown in a “permissive” environment I found it extremely unnatural that I was in a minority population that carried tools of any kind (multi-tools, knives, even a pen or pencil). I felt having one was a necessity for preparedness sake, but found that pulling one out for legitimate use was still viewed as taboo. I learned to quickly adjust and made great strides toward what I perceived the art of “introduction”. A lot of this had to do with concealment, but after years of use and employment, I learned to move naturally with whatever I carried on my person and not make a show of its great benefit; essentially I was no-nonsense whenever I handled edged weapons and tools.

The older I got, I carried smaller knives through school, sharpening pencils, cutting thin cordage when necessary, or never accessed it at all. I would forget I was carrying, but was aware of its availability. The taboo so many others saw, I saw as an advantage in more ways than one. Never have I ever had to use it in an offensive and defensive manner. I believe my respect for weaponology came from my familial group dynamic. There are butchers, restaurateurs, and bakers in my family tree and all of them use a variety of blades in the operation of their respective trades. As a youngster in middle school and highschool, I did helped out in kitchens and carniceria (butchery) and learned how to formally handle bladeware after acquiring my own knicks and cuts, small bloody lessons I also learned to patch up and keep fresh. My parents did enroll me in Tae-Kwon-Do, but we moved shortly after to a different town and was no longer within range to go to class. Even though I enjoyed the martial arts school, I wasn’t complaining for my return. I guess I didn’t feel like I missed anything, having to disarm myself in order to

dawn a ghee. Looking back, it was the discipline and integral form for structure I found appealing and indeed missed learning and improving personalized technique.

Now, in college I've barely got time for an extravagant social life, but I'm not hurting as I was never really the life of a party I wasn't invited to. I kept my knives sharp and learned how to hone, but refuse to do so for tools I carry everyday. I would much rather keep stones or rods near by, having the capacity to bring an edge or a point out of anything I have handy. Social media is a boon for enthusiasts like myself. Pictures and more pictures with descriptions and reviews, tests and experiments; the amount of information available is seemingly endless. I consider myself an enthusiast, because I'm nowhere near the connoisseur I would like to be; more like an "armchair snob". Knives are one of the topics I could get lost on for hours and read on their shape or metallurgy and still feel like I know nothing about. Sharpening knives is something I couldn't get tired. As long as the steel took an edge and kept it, I was a happy camper. It was through social media I learned about the Immersion Labs Foundation and their first premiere event in the martial arts scene with a Lab like I've never attended. The Lab name was Legacy of the Blade and aside from the exceedingly attractive name, I had great interest in the content of the Lab. After reading into what the learning objectives were for Immersion Labs and the value they were delivering in seeking out martial arts experts with weapons knowledge from styles across the world and disseminating it in a controlled space for a limited number of prospective students to experience and immerse themselves, I was hooked and felt it calling name.

I quickly applied to attend and interviewed with Professor Mahipal Lunia, and was immediately impressed with the cohesiveness with which he managed to organize and conduct the event. After further consideration and learning a little bit of my back story, Professor Lunia offered me the opportunity work with the Immersion Labs Foundation in a work-study capacity. I jumped at the offer and immediately researched the experts who would be attending and briefed over their areas of practice. I was astounded at the knowledge dump I was in store for. A weekend of blade play, using different technique, employing a range of blades, learning of their historical background and evolution was not what I had bargained for, but somehow managed to finagle my entry into not only participate as a student of Legacy of the Blade, but contribute toward its smooth operation. I was thrilled to be a part of something larger and productively foreign than myself.

The weekend was non-stop action, or so it felt like as between sets with informational discussion, questions and answered we were able to put to use the technique reviewed with the instructor coming by to help us coordinate our movement, understand the motion, and connect with the mechanic of it all. It was everything I wanted from the Lab and more. While the instructors spoke, I would take whatever notes I could to better remember what I learned and

practice later. I also took many pictures and created a social media profile on Instagram for Immersion Labs Foundation. I uploaded pictures, short cycle videos, and left captions paying homage to the masters who had joined us there and attempted to impart just a sliver what they had acquired over years of training and exercise to a group of like-minded practitioners, venturers, and students like myself in a few short hours. I was careful to adhere to community policy, not overshare, and keep a respectful distance from instructors so as to not impose on them while they created the Immersion Labs experience for us to enjoy and explore.

One of my favorite sets was that of Ed Calderon on the first day and Sensei Henri-Robert Vilaire the third and final day. I believe these two sessions outline the main objective of the Immersion Labs: Legacy of the Blade. The insight provided by these two individuals alone was enough to make me question and discard what I thought I knew about weaponology thus far. Ed Calderon's in depth and graphic presentation of the use of blades in street crime which can take place in a variety of locales, close-quarter and open air, made me aware that consciousness is key to most every encounter. With knives large and small one can create and destroy, so maintaining awareness and being conscious of how and when they are employment is key to success and failure. Lessons like this don't even have to draw blood to be taught and I appreciate it all the more because of the format Ed Calderon brought it and was able to speak without second guessing his own role in relation to the blade. Sensei Vilaire's demonstration and breakdown of techniques in the lab setting really provided the feeling of rigour one should approach knife wielding in fighting. While not as stylish as the Italian stilettos, the Tantojutsu really held my attention in its forcefulness and call for control of both the knife AND opponent. This contrasted with Ed Calderon's teachings which for the most part served to inform us to the necessity for awareness, recalling the 5 elements necessary in knife carry; these could be recalled on the five fingers of the hand starting from the thumb as need, environment, tool, body, and weakness. To a certain extent I have always thought of my blade in these terms, but was never able to mentally articulate them and was very moved when I heard them expressed by another knife user. The experience with Sensei Vilaire and Ed Calderon was very motivating and I couldn't get enough.

A recurring theme that presented itself and so I had difficulty choosing a favorite master or lesson was stick fighting. It was all so unique having originated with sticks for practice and easily translatable to knives and swords. Learning from Mark Mikita, Ron Saturno, Carlito Bonjoc and Maija Soderholm all provided for an extremely rich pool of form and technique to apply and later develop if acquired. The breaks in between with Lloyd de Jongh and Burton Richardson to learn just the tip of the iceberg about what is Tripwire and some handiwork with the karambit really tied up our hours neatly without any burn out. Having special guest Emilio Labarcon display Visayan Tapado was truly an honor to witness; the raw power developed and carefully crafted for control is indeed a thing to admire. Even if I shouldn't become a Tapador,

Sensei Emilio taught me not to judge a small man with a stick, especially one who rules their own center of gravity.

A defining moment in the weekend was meeting Kyle and Erik with Budo Brothers, a non-profit organization from our neighboring Canada that has dedicated itself to facilitating access to martial arts training for underprivileged children. This was so unique in make me realize that martial arts transcends boundaries of culture through the very introduction to something foreign. It aligns oneself to improve on their current situation all the while strengthening the body and mind. Kyle and Erik came through with some sweet Gi sets dedicated to the Lab and we all got a chance to don them and take pictures. It was phenomenal. The appreciation these two had to martial arts of all types was evident in their demeanor, sincere and motivated. Having met them was like a sign martial arts are in no way dying, but continuing to evolve and develop from arts and traditions of old and made fresh through generational youth, and having facilitators like Erik and Kyle will ensure martial arts continue its progressive growth. Where to next? The urban ninja? Your guess is as good as mine.

Sharing my weekend with these amazing people and the whole Immersion Labs Foundation team was an experience of a lifetime. I was able to meet expert from across the world, as well as practitioner and enthusiasts from all over the country and some internationals as well. The labs emphasis on principle, principle, principle (SAFETY being of the utmost importance) was constantly in contention and never ignored. But it wasn't all work without some fun! We ate together, conversed, shared stories, and contributed tidbits of knowledge aimed at expanding the bounds of practice. I gathered from our guests and attendees, that they are no nonsense people; the Foundation did a great job of selecting applicants in this respect. I feel it is because that Professor Lunia's dedication and hardwork in coordinating the Lab without negative incident. It's as if those that arrived left having become better people after immersing themselves with others who were there for similar reasons: to learn, share, and convive. Immersion Labs truly lives up to its creed by facilitating exploration, conceptualization, and integration.