

The morning after the November 2016 elections, almost no one I knew went to class. For me, that Wednesday morning was a time of frozen shock, a moment when doing *anything* felt pretty much unfathomable.

But, some people went to school. And some people, that morning, grasped for what to do and actually came up with ideas. Professor Bob Lee was one of those people, and his idea was a taiji class. A taiji class he'd call, in the flyer he typed up, Live to Fight Another Day.

[music]

*I think I first decided to do this class to teach this class, right, you know, literally the moment of the election.*

Bob teaches in the Ethnic Studies and American Studies departments at Brown, and the morning after the polls were counted, he was supposed to lecture. So he showed up.

*nine in the morning. and you know, the class was in considerable distress. You know there were tears in the class. certainly the level of anxiety was extraordinary.*

It's important to note here, Bob teaches *about* resistance movements. This class, specifically, was called Asian Americans and the Struggle for Social Justice

*So everybody was thinking about what was going to happen, what they could do. What forms resistance could be mobilized.*

Only hours after election results came out, it was really unclear how any organized resistance might look. Or what kinds of direct danger people might be in. But Bob had some experience that he thought might come in handy. He's a black belt, in a couple kinds of martial arts.

*Probably when I was in about the 7th or 8th grade I started doing judo, chinese boxing. I was a small little kid and easily picked on. So it was really a matter of learning this as a kind of bully control.*

And, after a while, it wasn't just about playground bullies. In college, as a young activist, Bob kept practicing kung fu. And those two things--the activism and the martial arts--they were actually really connected for him.

*I was just telling my class yesterday that on my college dorm room there were two huge posters. One was Huey Newton, sitting in this big bamboo rattan chair with a spear and rifle. That was one wall and the other was the poster of Bruce Lee doing this flying kick.*

That's Dr. Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party. This was the 70's: maybe the peak of public activism in the US, and the Panthers were making waves with community self-defense tactics; Asian-American activists groups were having conversations about violent and nonviolent resistance, too.

*And in some ways kung fu became kind of a political commitment for me, it was part of being young, Asian American, and radical. Having Bruce Lee on one hand and Huey Newton on the other you know, made sense.*

So, flash forward to 2016, in that post-election moment where everything felt unsure and horrifying and possible and impossible at the same time. When a lot of people felt like they might need to mobilize through direct action, when the threat of physical violence seemed like it had been sanctioned, somehow. Helping students feel safe in their bodies, Bob thought, might be important.

*It seemed absolutely right, absolutely the logical step to offer this class in self defense. Preparing students to deal with the physical resistance. It was like, yes, this is what's needed.*

[music]

Bob's taiji class has been meeting since November now. And, yes, if you're wondering--it is *that* taiji.

*If you go to a park in Asia but in a lot of parks in the US you know on a Sunday afternoon or in the morning you see often elderly people doing this exercise.*

Bob describes the way taiji is normally practiced as slow, flowing, graceful. But, he explains, it doesn't have to be.

*It is actually a martial art, and I particularly chose that particular form of martial art for a reason. Because 1: it's easy to learn with a good repertoire of techniques.*

Perfect for beginners, which is mostly who he's teaching. And two,

*You don't essentially raise anybody's eyebrows. People will walk by and think they're doing something that looks a little bit yoga ish. it's a kind of a camouflage if you will.*

When I hear Bob talk about the class in terms of camouflage, it reminds me of what I thought when I first saw the flyer for it, attached to an email from the American Studies department, with that name, *Live to Fight Another Day*. Oh, I thought. Bob Lee is building a resistance army. Like physical training for the revolution, or something.

But it's more complicated than that, or at least, more subtle.

*When you think about your students using what they've learned in class, how do you imagine it happening?*

*Well, one could imagine it in several ways. You know, on the street people drive by and harass you.*

*Or you're in a social setting at a party and there's unwanted touching. You don't want to slam somebody to the ground and do significant damage but you do want to feel comfortable taking control of the situation.*

*Yeah, Live to Fight Another Day was the idea that I'm not actually teaching people to be fighters. That's a different kind of training. This is how to get out of a bad situation, the idea in taiji martial arts is you do maximum damage in the smallest amount of time and then you get away.*

Bob tells me about this one exercise to me: push hands. Students match up, grasp their hands together.

*And push hands is all about sensing your opponent's balance, sensing their aggression, and then pushing them off balance.*

It's about using their own aggression against them. Even more important than knocking them off balance, though, is learning when to stop pushing.

*One of the most difficult things to learn in martial arts is how to yield effectively. And yielding doesn't mean giving up, yielding means to you know how to encounter a person's offense or aggression and either deflect with or control it or reverse it.*

And that concept of yielding, figuring out how to use the strength of your opponent to your own advantage--it's more than a physical exercise.

*it teaches you a certain way of thinking. and a certain way of encountering the adversary. How do you encounter an adversary?*

*And that's, I think, what I hope these students are thinking about as they become more confident. About how to, you know, deal with difficult situations and so forth. that it will help their politics.*

*You know, all self defense, it seems to me, is political.*

*The fact that you want to be able to defend yourself against a sexual predator is a political statement. It goes back to the old idea that the personal is political. And I believe that is really the case.*

This summer, Bob Lee's Taiji for Self Defense class will happen on Thursdays at four p.m. at Brown's fitness center. He welcomes new participants.

