

Resilience

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

My 9-year-old son was taking the test for his black belt in karate, the end of a 4-year journey. Several pairs of parents leaned against the gym wall, believing their slouch would hide the nervous tale their pinched shoulders and chewed bottom lips told. We had already endured over two hours of student sparring and katas, sets of intricate, dance-like moves. We are strangers in a tense silence, distant somehow from these graceful, respectful athletes.

This was the final round, much discussed and dreaded by the boys. They each had to fight their teacher's teacher, a 6'5" fire captain and Vietnam veteran. The student's job was to fell the grand master. As the big guy in the red gee squared off against my little guy in white, the "no-contest" reality was instantly apparent. My son could never stand against a man who could step easily away from his best punch. The master's two objectives also became evident. The first was to test all the student's skills, occasionally tapping undefended head or unguarded kidney, "oof"-ing convincingly when the boy scored a point. The second was to wear down the student, to circle and jab till the boy reached his level of endurance; then to push him past that level till he was down.

I could hardly breathe, as I watched my little boy kneeling and retching on the floor. At this point the contest no longer had--for me--anything to do with karate. It had everything to do with the stuff my son is made of. My son was about to show me what he will do when life--always bigger than he--knocks him off his feet. What will he do when he thinks he can't go on anymore?

How long is the eternity a parent endures watching a child learn an important lesson all alone? An endless 45 seconds passed before David leapt to his feet and charged toward the grand master, mad and determined. The master's job at this point, we

quickly saw, was to be vanquished by the student. The mighty captain soon fell, and with a mighty thud.

The excitement of this day had nothing to do with the pride I felt at my son's achievement of a long-held goal. I had seen, with vein-throbbing clarity, what he will do when he's down. He will get up and try again. I know this single experience is no prediction that he will never break or run away or stop trying. But I got a glimpse of how David will face challenges, and it filled me with hope.

My interest in his ability to get up and spit the bitterness of defeat from his mouth comes from my belief that that's the most important skill he can have. We never know what life will require of us. We just must be brave or clever or even cowardly -- whatever it takes to get us through. We must look for the opportunity every situation holds, even as we lie, splayed and gasping on the floor of our souls.