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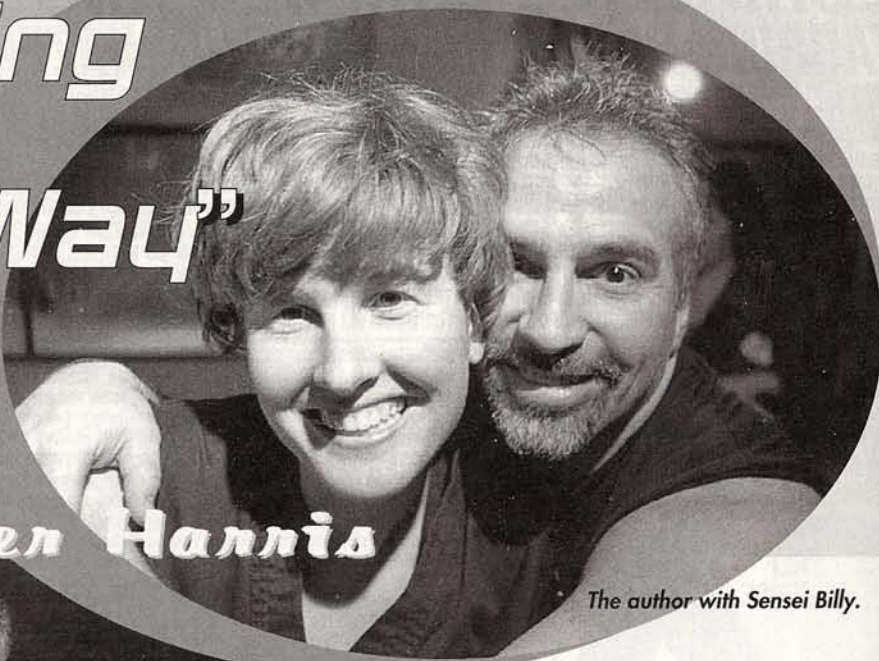
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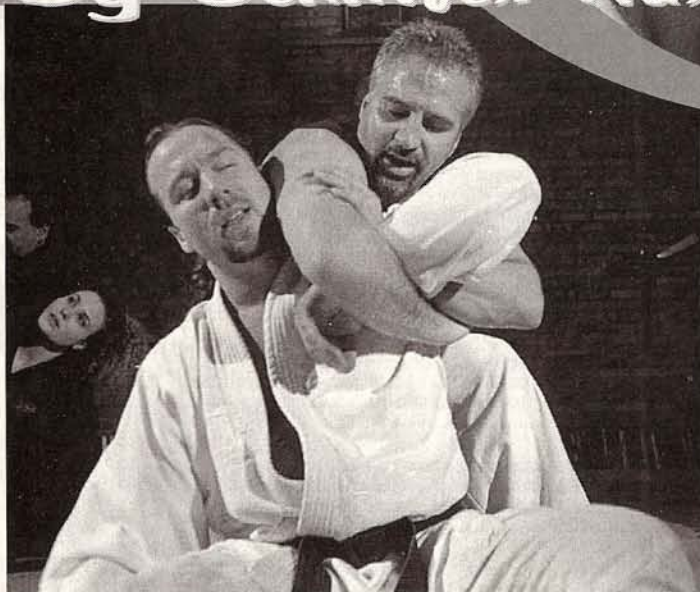
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"How to Kill in a Loving and Caring Way"

By Jennifer Hannis



The author with Sensei Billy.



Sensei Billy
demonstrates
an arm lock
on Tae Chi
instructor
Kelly Carter

Every day I ride the El train to work, down to the Loop and back: Kimball southbound, Kimball northbound. It's the Brown Line, last stop: Kimball. It comes reeling under the strain of metal, stumbling over the tracks to reach me waiting in the cold, blustering Chicago wind.

Last April, returning from work, I noticed a sign on Wells Street: Powell's Way of Kenpo. Usually I walk east along North Avenue and cut up Wells to get home. Kenpo. I didn't know what that was, but the sign read "Martial Arts." Bruce Lee, Teenage

Ninja Turtles. Those were my first thoughts; next was how cool I'd look in those pajama-like outfits. Maybe I could break wood with my hand or scare creepy guys with a glance. Being fierce had its appeal. But I just kept walking as usual.

What I'd been looking for in some way or another was God, or at least enlightenment. I kept hoping I'd run into a sage in a Circle K; or maybe while running along the lake, the sky would open up and snatch me from the ground. Sure it's crazy, but then so is the monotony: wake up at six, work till five, come home and eat, then go to sleep. It's living in a cage. I'd feel the bones against my skin, my heart beat, but what was that? I kept thinking there's got to be something more. I read everything I could get my hands on: the *Upanishads*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Bible*, so on and so forth. What I kept noticing was this one line: the path is narrow. It popped up in every text I read. So what did that mean? Was I supposed to walk on skinny sidewalks?

A few months later as I was coming home from work, the sky felt over-

whelming for some reason. I remember it looked like a tidal pool at the ocean. It seemed as if I could look through the sky; that the clouds were tiny waves undulating on the ocean's surface, and that I was somehow floating through it all. Anyway, as I meandered back to my apartment, I ran into that sign again: Powell's Way of Kenpo. Maybe it was the day or my mood, I'm not sure what, but something made me walk down the alley toward the school. I opened the black metal door and it revealed this really strange room: swords hung on the walls, along with signs with Chinese that I didn't understand, and four punching bags dangling from the ceiling like hot dogs. I walked in a bit uncertain, wondering if I ought to just turn around and leave. I yelled a hello. This big muscle guy walked over to greet me wearing a T-shirt with the arms cut off. He had a bandanna over his head, and all I thought was: biker guy. I go, Umm, I was just wondering when classes are held. He extended his hand and told me that his name was Nick, the Sempai at the dojo. I shook his hand. He led me back to the weight room and gave me a brochure, and said classes were three times a week. The way he looked at me said he didn't think he'd ever see me again. I think that's what made me decide to join.

So a week went by: Kimball southbound, Kimball northbound. Finally I went for my first class. I met the Sensei, William Powell. A solid, stocky guy in his 30's who had this huge smile. I remember thinking that he was someone I could learn from. What I really didn't understand was the sort of physical endurance it required. Besides a fist fight in the sixth grade, which I like to remember breaking a girl's nose (though the opposite was more to the truth), physical combat wasn't something with which I was familiar. I'm a poet. I write about dopey love stuff; fluffy clouds, stuff from the heart, but certainly not things that'll kill you.

After my first class, I went to visit my folks. They live only about a block from the dojo, and I was

hungry. They asked where I had been. I said, "Kenpo, I'm taking up martial arts." I raised my arms up like I was Conan the Conqueror, only female of course. My dad started laughing. He's like, of all the crazy things you've done, this, I never would have guessed. Ever in a thousand years, he said. Of course that only made me more determined.

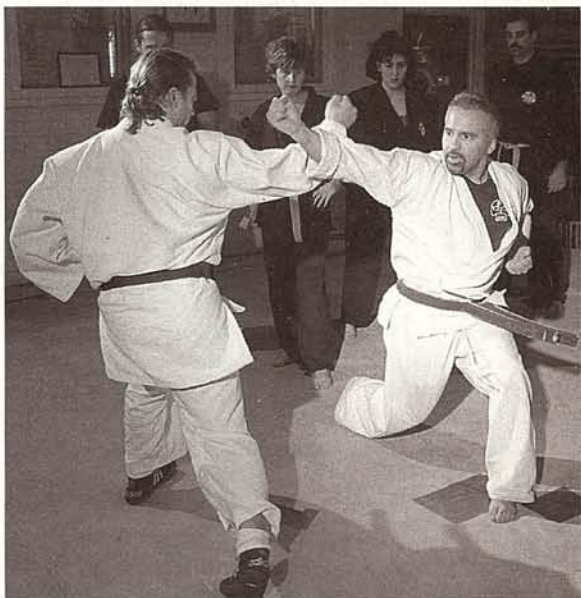
Some people think martial arts is like a cult. In a few regards, it's not too far off. I mean it's not like you're tied up and brainwashed with a bunch of hocus pocus, but, in the sense that it takes over your life, yes, martial arts is a cult. After a few weeks everything that came out of my mouth was Kenpo this, Kenpo that. Waiting on the El platform, I'd form fists and practice my blocks: inward, upward, downward, outward, and windmill. I had to learn them all, and fast, if I didn't want to keep getting bruised. Martial arts isn't for everyone, by any means. It takes a sort of stubbornness. When you find yourself in a headlock with a two hundred pound guy breathing down your back, you have to learn how to resist panicking.

Back at the dojo, Sensei announced that he was going to expand our school. He said a warrior is more than just a fighter. By that time, I'd been with the school a month, and while hardly a fighter, I did feel more in tune with the idea of it, so I was curious what he meant. He said that several of the students were now Daifus--Mandarin for doctor or healer. This included: Kelly Carter, a Tai Chi Chuan teacher, an acupuncturist, a practitioner of Total Body Modification, and a black belt in Kenpo as well; Doc Howie and Doc Darren, brothers, a psychologist and chiropractor, respectively; Dougie Doug, as we call him, a message therapist; and Ron, a Sifu or teacher, the school's new herbalist. Sensei said that in

order to improve, we had to realize the connection between our minds and bodies. That what we were really learning was how to be human. That reminded me of something a friend had said to me: We're not just human beings having spiritual experiences, but rather spirits having human experiences.

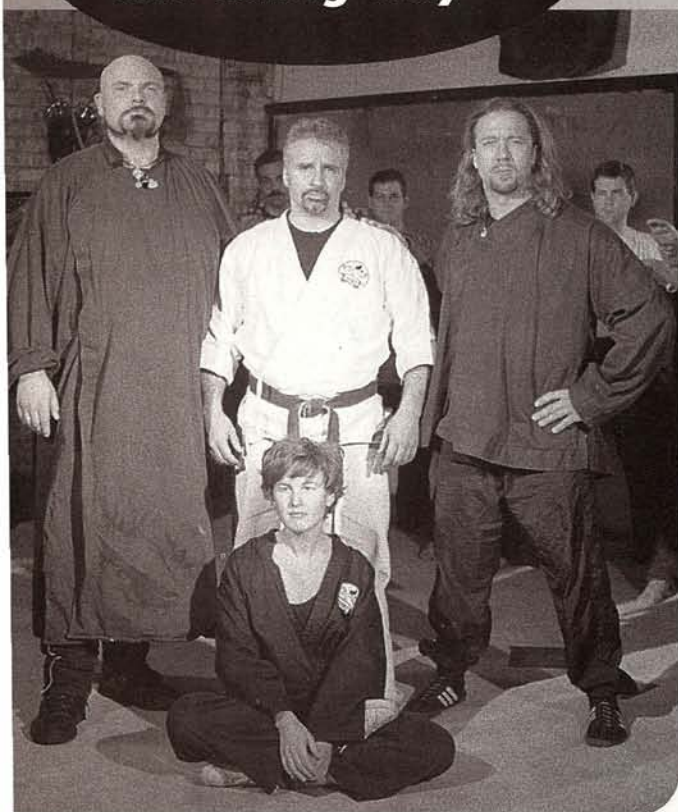
Kelly had been teaching upper belts, so I figured this would be the prime time to start Tai Chi in addition to my regular Kenpo classes. I mean if I was searching for something, surely another form of movement couldn't hurt. I'd been watching people practice Tai Chi in the park ever since I'd moved to Chicago. In the mornings, old men practice along the lakefront, their bodies' humming with the wind--or at least that's how it seemed to me. So I asked Kelly. I said, I know you usually don't teach white belts, but I want to learn. Hardly looking at me, he said, "Yeah, that's cool. I was thinking about starting a beginners' class." So it was done. Soon I would be a Tai Chi-Kenpo warrior chick.

That's when I met Kimball Paul. Not the southbound, northbound, but a real-live train. I'm talking 6'4" and 300 pounds of bone, and



Kelly Carter and Billy Powell practice blocks.

Excerpt from the book
**"How to Kill in a Loving
 and Caring Way"**



The author with instructors, from left, Kimball Paul, William Powell and Kelly Carter.

enough flesh to squash a freight train. Kimball came to the dojo to teach Tai Chi Sword for a night. He was completely bald, wore a flowing cape, and Nike high-tops. Kelly was grinning like crazy,

apparently Kimball was Kelly's teacher. I'd never seen Kelly so revved up; he looked like a kid at show-and-tell. The first thing out of Kimball's mouth was a joke; almost everything Kimball said was something funny. I knew that I'd just met someone I didn't understand. In one moment his seriousness was sharp as his sword, the next, he was bouncing around the room making fun of his enormous gut. What we learned that night was that our limbs are tools, like the sword, and that everything has a counter balance. When Kimball asked me my name, I said Jennifer and found myself staring at his eyes. I've always held the belief that you can learn people's secrets if

you stare at their eyes long enough. He told me not to stare at my opponent; that it was a sure way to get myself killed.

Occidental Tai Chi. That's what Kimball calls his school. Someone asked him what occidental means and Kimball chuckled and said, "Anything but Chinese." When Sensei goes out of town on business, he invites local masters from other martial arts schools around Chicago to teach our class. So Kimball returned to our dojo not long after that first encounter. Kimball refuses to have people bow to him. To honor Kimball we take our right hand and cover our mouth; then bring it down to our throat like we're grabbing our Adam's apple (if I had one); and then extend it

outward, toward him. The movement means that we're given a secret, it protects our lives, and that we share it with our family.

I decided right off that this Tai Chi stuff was something I wanted to do. Having grown up dancing, I was instantly drawn to its grace, but it was more than that. Watching Kelly teach our class, he would sweep down like a crane and touch the earth, then stretch back up to reach the sky (which unites the earth and air powers accordingly). What I saw was the ability to believe rock-solid in one's self.

Throughout August, after Kenpo, Kelly took us out behind the Chicago Historical Society in Lincoln Park where we practiced our Tai Chi. The park is on a slight hill so that we could see over the baseball field, down to the lake. Tai Chi usually started around eight back then, when the sun was still up. As we worked through our meditations, the sun would slowly slip down behind the museum, the sky spreading to a deep magenta. Sometimes he would imitate Kimball, hunching

up his shoulders and talking in a deep voice. "No, you do it like this," he would say while correcting our sloppy movements. He told us what a stickler Kimball is for details.

I took to practicing my movements down at the lake, out on this one small pier at North Beach. I'd wake up at six, go for a run, and end up at the pier. Walking to the farthest edge, I'd drop the walkman and get myself into the Fat Stance—which is one foot at a 45 degree angle and the other stretched out in front, straight ahead. It's called "Fat" because there's a wide margin between your legs and feet, so that your weight is solidly distributed, with your knees bent. Always bend your knees, Kelly would say. Then I practiced Four Corners, which is a combination of the Four Perfect Forms: Ward Off; Roll Back, Press, and Push. It's called Four Corners because as the meditation continues, with each interval, you change directions so that you practice the movement facing north, south, east, and west. The good thing about Tai Chi is that it's always logical.

The dojo is located behind this bar called The Last Act in Old Town, Chicago. Usually on Tuesday nights, the school holds what's called Kenpo II, essentially it's a time for us just to hang out. Sensei believes it's an important part of martial unity, not unlike the small unit bonding methods of Navy Seals. So when the time came to honor the birthdays of Sensei Billy and Sempai Nick, we all hooked up at The Last Act to celebrate the occasion. By the end of the night our party racked up a six hundred dollar bill so you can imagine the sort of time it was.

I had, not too long ago, quit Tai Chi—though I did stick with Kenpo—because being a broke poet and trying to pay my bills was a strain. So I was talking to Kelly at the bar and somehow it came up that Kimball was wanting to write a book on Tai Chi, so I said hey, I'd love to do something like that, tell me about it.

He took a swig of Rolling Rock and said well, I'll talk to Kimball. He said he could trade Tai Chi lessons for the writing, and that sounded good to me.

Next day I got an EMail from Judy, a friend from Kenpo, and she wrote that unbeknownst to Kelly, Kimball was promoting him to master at our next class and that we should all bring him gifts. I decided to give him my manuscript of desert poems; figuring there was nothing I possessed that represented me more than it. Then I got nervous: I wondered if it was a dumb thing to give to a master Tai Chi warrior? I mean most folks think poetry is for wimps, but in a way I guess poets really aren't all that different from warriors. Both are just trying to be as honest as possible, looking for ways to see through themselves: one through the use of their tongue, the other with fists.

The night of his promotion, Kelly was really sick and wasn't going to come to class. Apparently his back was killing him to the point where he could hardly walk. But Kimball lured him in. When Kelly walked into our Kenpo class, we turned to him and saluted in unison. Kelly grimaced through his teeth but saluted us back with the usual yell of "Jumbo" (the call of the warrior).

Doc Darren took Kelly back to the healing room and worked on him while Kimball showed us Short Power. Short Power, he explained, wasn't a matter of strength, but rather using your Chi and breath to transfer your own power into the chest of your opponent. What you do is to stand in the Fat Stance, and raise your arms so that they extend straight out. The energy circulates up through the ground, up the back leg, and then out through your hands. You bring one pinkie so that it touches the other hand's thumb, sort of like you're making wings, he said. Then, place your hands on your partner's sternum, and while you're breathing in, move slightly away from your opponent, imagining that there's a rubber band between your two hands. Then when you can't hold your breath any longer, you exhale, letting your hands snap back together again. However, he yelled, this is not a push. Do not push your partner! Rather, you're supposed to allow the energy you've brought up into your hands to escape into your opponent's chest, causing a swirling-like energy to release within him. Here, he said, motioning for Jim Philips, this tough purple belt. Kimball placed his hands on Jim, inhaled slowly, as his body rocked between his back and front legs.

Then he released with the sound of a kihap and Jim went flying. Literally, his feet were off the ground and he fell about twelve feet back. He said, Jim, did I push you? Did you feel a push? Jim said, No, I felt this really strange movement in my lungs like someone pummeled me. The only thing the class saw was Kimball--barely touching Jim's chest--and Jim going down.

When class came to a close, Kimball boomed for Kelly to come join us. Kelly is broad and muscular, not huge like Kimball, but formidable. When he walked out, his hair moved like a cape he'd wrapped around his neck: swayed in time with his movements. Kimball reached down for a scroll at the base of his feet. He started talking about Kelly. How he'd come to Kimball as a punk kid, wanting to fight everyone and break a lot of noses, and how over the years--many of which Kelly lived with him--Kimball had watched Kelly transform into something beyond his former self. Kimball unrolled the scroll he'd made and on it there was the crest of his Tai Chi family and a dragon. It proclaimed that Kelly was now a master. On the floor, a wok full of alcohol and salt was lit on fire. Kimball took a small blade and nicked the skin from his right hand, letting the blood drop onto

Instructors and students pose at Powell's Way of Martial Arts in Chicago.



**Excerpt from the book
"How to Kill in a Loving
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the scroll. In turn, he nodded to Kelly and asked him to do the same. Kelly fiddled with the blade; I could see the pain in his back echo through his body. The blood fell from Kelly's hand and landed next to Kimball's. Then Kimball squeezed his wound over the fire and motioned for Kelly to do the same. Then, one by one, we pre-

sented Kelly with our gifts.

After the ceremony finished, Kimball said Kelly's pain would go away. That it was the madness of self-awareness. That really what Kelly had been going through--and what so many of us will fail to do--is to endure the awakening of our unconsciousness. To be awake. A few years back, I'd read a book entitled *Where Are You Going?* by Swami Muktananda who essentially spoke of the same process but used different words; like kundalini for energy (a.k.a. Chi) and chakra points inside the body where energy is stored. Kelly walked over to me and told me to talk with Kimball, that he'd spoken with him about the book, and that Kimball seemed interested. I knew from our talk in the bar a while back that it was going to happen. I walked up to Kimball and asked him what he thought about a book on himself and his school of Occidental Tai Chi. He giggled a little and said, "I like it. Are we gonna write it?" Things were decided in a matter of seconds.

The next day I woke up at six, as usual, and went for a run along the lakefront. It seemed like it was going to rain that day, thick clouds grumbled over the eastern horizon. One of the most amazing and annoying things about Chicago is its weather. By the time I'd changed and walked over to the El to go to work, the dark clouds had already passed over. All that was left of the near-storm was a thin trail of nimbostratus that moved like a jaguar through the sky: silent and fast. The train came lumbering up and when I saw the sign saying "Kimball." I couldn't help but laugh at how ironic life really is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jennifer Harris works at The Art Institute of Chicago and is going to school for her Masters in Fine Arts in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She studies Kenpo at Powell's Way of Martial Arts in Chicago and Tai Chi from Master Kelly Carter and Master Kimball Paul. Her poems have been published in *The New York Quarterly*, *Art Times* and *FishStories: Collective II*. Her article is excerpted from a book she is currently working on with Kimball Paul about Tai Chi and how martial arts affect the lives of its practitioners.

