



A Ronin Reflects on The Samurai Game™

by Lance Giroux

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What training event that I have attended most powerfully allows individuals and groups to integrate body, mind, emotion and spirit in ways directly applicable to practical living? Without hesitation, my answer, after 27 years of applied study and experiential teaching in the area of the human potential is "The Samurai Game."

In 1978, my mentor, the founder of the seminar company I was then working for, selected me to develop a 10-day leadership training program. His reasons for selecting me to develop capstone training for his most ardent students included my attitude about Beginners Mind, my West Point background, and my leadership experience as an Army officer.

By year's end, the first seminar was conducted. Over the next five years he led eight of these trainings and was looking forward to more.

Then he was gone — killed in an accident. Within hours of his death all his instructional responsibilities, including trainer development, fell to me.

The challenge of stepping into his shoes was daunting. While the seminars centered on a certain set of universal principles, the company had grown reliant on the founder's charismatic personality. Many saw him as the organization's center.

My long-term focus became to move the trainings and the company away from dependency on the founder's charisma and back to principles — a difficult and delicate undertaking. Most people resisted, especially senior leaders. To accept the

change, they would have needed to acknowledge the death of the company's founder completely and finally and to move beyond his memory. So, for me, the next six years became corporate *randori*. Resistance came from all directions — sometimes head on, sometimes from behind.

We needed something that would dramatically shift people's perspectives. And, as often happens in *randori*, a solution presented itself. This time, the solution came in the person of Jack Cirie, one of the few people originally certified to lead the Samurai Game.

The Samurai Game was developed by George Leonard Sensei (Aikido of Tamalpais), who has authored many books including *Mastery*, *The Ultimate Athlete*, *Education & Ecstasy*, and *The Way of Aikido: Life Lessons From An American Sensei*. Leonard Sensei has always been extremely selective in certifying others to run the Game, ensuring that they are people of the highest integrity. For that reason, Jack Cirie wanted to understand my motivation for learning and using the Game. I explained that we needed to create an organizational environment in which a sincere discourse could begin on three questions:

1. What are the principles (good or bad) on which I have staked my life?
2. What constructive principles will I set as core values and hold before me as a beacon for the future?

3. How do these principles relate to what I want for this organization and to what I want in my life?

I described the 10-day leadership training to Jack and explained its strong identity with the founder. If we could make a significant difference within that training, we could alter the company's overall direction.

I felt that our company, and the entire personal growth industry, was at a crossroads. The industry had drifted into the illusion of delivering instant success and enlightenment. Jack and I both knew of seminar leaders who were driven largely by their own egos, of facilitators who were using questionable tactics, and of students who — rather than becoming self-reliant — had become dependent on seminars. We wanted trainers who were respectful of their students, externally focused, and sincerely desirous of serving everyone regardless of title, position, or income. And we wanted students who would profitably use what they had learned in trainings, without dependency.

So Jack and I became co-conspirators. Jack made arrangements to fly to Northern California to lead the Game.

My first experience of the Game came on the third day of a 10-day leadership training that I was leading at Point Reyes National Seashore. Participants were given the choice to playing the Game or sitting out as observers. Whatever the choice, we explained, there would be no judgment — as the Game benefits all who encounter it. The freedom to choose allowed for complete trust and, as a result, everyone opted in.

Jack set up a picture of what would happen. The 70 participants would randomly form two teams and take on the roles of medieval Samurai. It would be one team against the other, with participants engaging in a variety of unpredictable contests. Metaphorically, everyone's life would be at stake. Contests would not involve significant physical contact, yet all contests would require commitment, focus, and alertness.

Participants would operate from prolonged states of physical, emotional, and mental centeredness. The atmosphere would be chaotic, and people would need to stay balanced or "face death."

Everyone would need to adopt an attitude of *service* of the sort that was at the core of being a Samurai - service to teammates (clan), service to leader (*daimyo*), service to a personal ideal or code of ethics (*bushido*). Also, each player was

to serve all opponents by respectfully bringing the best of self to every contest — regardless of outcome. In so doing, each contestant would have the potential to generate similar attitudes in opponents.

The Samurai Game began.

The outcome was phenomenal. Throughout the day, every person rose to new levels of honor, decisiveness, honesty, and presence of mind. Amazingly, there was not one hint of ego. Within each moment existed life and death. People strove to adhere to their own *bushido* while "alive" and to carry it into "death." All engaged for the purpose of gaining an understanding of when their *bushido* would strengthen and when it would weaken and crack. Everyone lived within the code (with the exception of two, who were required to live outside any code and become tricksters or "ninja"). What started as imaginary quickly became authentic and alive.

Jack was the referee. But unlike any ref I had ever seen, he was the representative of life's unfairness, capriciousness, and randomness. He had outlined the rules clearly, yet we were in for many surprises.

As senior trainer, I had to observe rather than play, but I

was soon observing with new eyes. I was in the Game as completely as the participants. Every moment, every action (or lack of action) deepened my appreciation of the Kanji character for "*kiki*," meaning "crisis," which contains within it both a character meaning "danger" and one meaning "opportunity." I watched people engage as if their lives were really at stake, playing "wholeheartedly

to win." Yet I did not see anyone playing "to beat the other guy." The respect and integrity present in the room were so thick that they were overpowering.

Everyone lived each moment. Time slowed as a swirl of individual and team greatness emerged with each challenge, reflecting the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of life. All contests, including those appearing to rely on chance, had an esthetic quality. Some were extraordinarily beautiful. Anticipation was useless — and usually "fatal."

Hours after it started, the Game ended. But, for each of us, the lessons had just begun.

To describe my first Game as spectacular would be an understatement. People who had been certain that they could not lead became brilliant leaders. People who had been at odds with each other in real life suddenly found deep, mutual



crisis = danger + opportunity

appreciation.

I was catapulted to a new understanding of individual greatness. Levels of honor and integrity that I had not witnessed since my days at West Point were all around me. I simultaneously felt humility and exaltation. Observing people being authentic and taking decisive action assured me that the path I was on was worth the entire six-year *randori*.

At this point, I had one word for the Samurai Game: Magnificent! I looked forward to a long association with Jack Cirie, and we began to make plans for the future.

Three weeks later, the lessons of my first Samurai Game took on a new dimension. Jack died. His sudden death was, and is, a poignant lesson of what he had so artfully facilitated: a total appreciation for life — its richness as well as its harshness — experienced in the here and now.

I felt strongly that the work we had started could not stop with Jack's death. We needed to find someone to lead future Games.

Shortly after Jack's passing, I met with Richard Heckler Sensei (Two Rock Aikido). I knew Heckler Sensei from an encounter years before, and I had discovered that he and Jack had been longtime friends who had co-conducted a military project named Trojan Warrior. In this year-long project, they had introduced centering, meditation, and self-examination to a team of the Army Special Forces. The project had produced documented results, increasing mental alertness and physical effectiveness (Heckler Sensei chronicles the project in his book *In Search of the Warrior Spirit*.) And The Samurai Game had been a component of Project Trojan Warrior.

Heckler Sensei and I met and discussed what Jack and I had done. We formed a pact to continue what had been started.

Over the next six years, Heckler Sensei led the Games, becoming a shadow force in transforming the 10-day training and the company. He provided the encouragement and friendship I needed to "take bold action" — to leave the company, step out on my own, and create Allied Ronin™ - Leadership Training & Consulting.

Heckler Sensei also introduced me to a source of great support and mentoring: George Leonard Sensei.

Leonard Sensei told of how he developed the Game — a story of the power of one moment, one idea, and one intuition. Walking to his dojo one afternoon after a reunion of friends with whom he had served in WW II, he was inspired to ask himself some questions: What if people could become more strongly attached to peace than to conflict? What if, under stress, people could be ready and able to fight, yet willing and able to choose alternatives? What if people could look death in the eye without having to pay a horrible price?

By the time Leonard Sensei reached the dojo, he had mentally outlined a simulation of combat wherein, for a few

hours, his students would become "samurai," "sentries," "ninja," and "daimyo." When he arrived at the dojo, he asked his students to suspend judgment and to play with him. They agreed — and the first Samurai Game unfolded. Afterward, it was evident to him that profound learning had occurred.

To my mind, The Samurai Game is Leonard Sensei's most brilliant creation. It is, arguably, the most powerful simulation available for developing personal effectiveness, leadership, and teamwork.

Some time after I had been certified and had led my first Game, I told Leonard Sensei that I was going to take the Game around the world, making its lessons available to as many people as possible. His immediate response was, "Why not?"

What is magical about the Game is that it becomes a mirror into which people look honestly, finding personal strengths (often hidden) and old habits (often denied). It is also a window through which people clearly glimpse others' strengths.

Playing the Game requires no martial-arts experience. Yet, the Game can provide those who do have a martial-arts background with fresh insights into principles of harmony, balance, strength, influence, commitment, and blending. It integrates centered physical movement, mental alertness, and focused energy with the emotional quality of each moment. When the final contest ends, the unfolding process begins — which, for most people, extends into the rest of life.

I have led the Game repeatedly with youths and adults, in public settings, in corporate trainings, and in leadership retreats for graduate-degree university students. Although most groups contain both men and women, I have led the Game in "women only" and "men only" venues. I have been humbled to watch the Game played masterfully by people with severe physical disabilities.

In comparing the Game to life, Leonard Sensei once wrote,

[It] is subtle and complex. Participants are never quite certain of all the rules or of exactly what's going on, or what may happen next. Such conditions, unlike those found in many group training situations, provide: an intense test of integrity when no one is watching; support when the going gets tough and rules don't easily apply; and commitment when the future is unclear and there is no certainty of success.

For me, the Game has been a source of challenge and renewal. It has consistently brought me to my edge and back to center. It has strengthened my belief in the greatness that lives inside us and connects us all. It has encouraged me to act with a decisive heart while reminding me to retain a simple and respectful spirit.