Opinion
Guest Voices



The author's son stands in front of the dojo that has become a haven of love and belonging — a sacred space — for their family. (Courtesy of Britt Luby)



by Britt Luby

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I signed my son up for karate for two main reasons: I wanted him to get involved in some sort of activity and I wanted to enjoy air conditioning while he did it. I never expected to one day call this extracurricular "sacred," but that's exactly what happened.

For nearly two years now, I have taken him twice a week to the Shotokan Karate Studio a short drive from our home. He bounces out of the car in his freshly washed white uniform (it's called a "gi," I now know), and I slip into an uncomfortable chair in the parent waiting area with a book. I could leave him there — he is safe, and occasionally I do pop over to the grocery store — but usually I take the much-needed break to unwind from a shift at work, to read, and to watch him kick and spar.

A few weeks ago, in the early dark of evening, we walked to the car after class only to find that it did not start. "The battery is dead," I said to my son. "Let me think for a second." Before calling AAA, I started to walk back into the studio to see if anyone had jumper cables. I had barely turned in the direction of the building before three adults walked out to me, starched white gis glowing against the dusk, black belts tied across their waists, sporty sandals on their feet. Within seconds, two of them were entertaining my son back in the dojo while another pulled his old car up next to mine.

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Two days later it was Ash Wednesday, and my colleagues and I prepared to distribute ashes at the hospital where we work as chaplains. Chaplain Steve and I stood together for an hour in the hospital chapel, smearing ashes on foreheads and talking to each other about our own Lenten practices. Gathered around a long table

at lunch, a group of us talked about church traditions that make the Lenten season feel sacred.

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I even realized I was speaking. "My son's dojo is the most sacred place in my life right now," I said. And I meant it. For two years, our family has been building a little community there. The kind of community that would risk oil stains on their gis to jump-start your car, but also the kind of community that notices when you are gone and continually encourages your children.

In the parent waiting room, I hear families speaking English, Spanish, Arabic and Tagalog, but we are all looking at our belt-clad children as they try to learn a new kata, or exercise. We are filming each other's kid when a parent cannot make it to a belt promotion ceremony. We are looking after the herd of younger siblings running wild in the waiting area as they try out their own karate moves or share coloring books. My 4-year-old daughter has become totally enamored of one of the other mothers. My daughter runs to her, lays her tiny head on this woman’s shoulder. "She loves me!" the mother says, smiling widely. This same mom helped my son wiggle into rubbery headgear at his first tournament in the fall. I hadn't realized he needed headgear to compete; her young son shared his sweaty gear with mine.



(Pixabay/Steve Buissinne)

My son asked to have his seventh birthday party at the dojo, but I had never known the studio to host birthday parties. "Do you think we could swing it?" I asked the owners. I did not want to burden them, to make a mess or make their lives harder. "Maybe we could have a sensei teach a class for a bit, then just have cupcakes in the lobby after? I promise to keep it easy."

It need not be easy, they said. *Not for his birthday! It will be extravagant! We will all come! We will order pizza, too! Where can we hang a pinata?*

They pressed further. "Those new kids, the siblings in his class — could we invite them, too? They don’t seem to have friends here yet."

This dojo is owned and led by a husband and wife, both black belts with full-time day jobs. They have taught my son rituals and the importance of showing respect. But they have also taught him to respect himself, how to look after others and how to

transfer what he learns in the studio out into the world. When my son struggles with behavior at school, I can ask Shihan to talk to him. When we forget our sparring gear, they find equipment for us to use. When a family cannot afford a tournament fee, they find a way to allow the kid to compete. Parents volunteer to make our tournaments run smoothly. I collected admission fees at the front table at the last tournament, and my husband spent six hours helping judges with scoring.

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I have been trying for decades to find a church that feels like this dojo. A place that wants everybody at the table; a place that will put you to work but also makes sure to take care of you. Sadly, my church does not feel like this. Does yours?

A few weeks before the dojo birthday party, our priest announced the restoration of a previous practice: Lay members of the church are no longer allowed to make announcements at the end of Mass. From now on, only the priest will share details about pancake breakfasts and CCD registration. In my day job, I baptize babies in the moments before their death at a children's hospital. In my night gig, I join a chorus of parents and senseis cultivating a dojo community. But in the space I have always revered the most, my church, I feel my role slipping. I can't seem to find a voice or a steady footing in the pews. I am tired of fighting so hard to simply feel seen, wanted, valued.

So for the rest of Lent, I rested. I turned from fighting to sparring. Well, watching my son spar. Easter Sunday came and went, and I continue tying on his karate belt (he's orange with a black stripe now!), settling in the hard chair, and watching him learn with his friends. This evening he is the highest belt in his class, so he gets the honor of leading the group in reciting the dojo kun. After he finishes, his classmates bow to him. Before slipping on his sandals after class, he hugs me — curly, sweaty hair and flushed cheeks — and we walk together out of our sacred space.

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