

# My Twisted Road to Gold

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We all take roads to our dreams. Many can choose our paths but some of us cannot. My road to gold started in a bathroom when I was seven. Although I did not choose this path, it was part of what has taken me along a very twisted road to the person I am now and the goals I have achieved.

This was an ordinary bathroom by most standards. It was on the second floor of my family's house and was naturally furnished with a toilet and a sink. It also had a cast iron tub by the only window facing toward the lake we lived by. But my favorite was the mirror. My mother had one whole wall paneled with mirrors that were speckled with gold flecks. After my bath, I would stand and see the flecks on my skin. I used to see shapes and imagine I had gold tattoos.

However, these mirrors came to reflect one of the most traumatic events in my life. The shapes in the gold flecks disappeared. All I could see was my own terror and his violation. I could no longer see the shapes in the gold flecks and I no longer had gold tattoos, only deep scars.

It would be fifteen years before I ever saw the glitter in gold again.

Events came into the open and I was subsequently removed from my family and put into government care where I remained until a new family adopted me at age 14. And because of my background, I had no friends and was the subject of constant ridicule. My self-esteem could find no bearing because other than school and art, I was not good enough at anything to warrant acceptance from others. I also wasn't big enough to protect myself from those that found me offensive to their popularity.

Being smaller and weaker, I always had a particular fascination with weapons. Enough that it led me to start a Japanese martial art known as *Kendo*. This art of traditional fencing with bamboo swords however wasn't enough. I wanted to learn to use a real katana. So I started learning the cutting forms of *Iaido* from a second-generation Japanese teacher. I also started *Karate* and *Taijutsu* in hopes that I could hone my little body into a razor sharp weapon, capable of protecting myself physically and mentally with newly empowered self-esteem.

But however I tried, I was still missing something that prevented me from excelling. Some part of my focus fell short and left me struggling to keep up with the other students.

But that all changed the night I woke up to another offender. My habit of sleeping with things was no different this night except that I was sleeping with a katana.

I lay in the hospital counting my blessings that even though I was very traumatized, I had won the battle and preserved the remainder of my dignity. I knew then that learning the true way of the katana meant going to Japan. And so I sacrificed my friends and college and forged a new life in Japan in pursuit of my newfound destiny.

But this destiny would not come easy. I had two strikes against me gaining acceptance. I was foreign AND female. The katana was the cherished weapon of the Japanese feudal warrior, not the American woman crazy about swords.

On the verge of giving up hope, I stumbled into a sword shop in the heart of Tokyo's busy Shinjuku ward. The owner was sitting with some friends in a corner watching a video. As I approached I saw that the video was an *Iai Batto-jutsu* video of people cutting rice mats rolled and soaked in water and wedged on a stake. THAT was what I wanted to study!

The owner turned to me and asked in less than perfect English what I thought of his students in the video. HIS students? I blurted out that I had been searching for a *Batto* school and explained my difficulties. He just sighed and said that his school would not accept women but that I was welcome to watch his practice that same night.

I sat in the traditional posture with my legs tucked under me trying to feign that they weren't falling asleep. Motionless I watched 12 students take offense against the cutting mats called *wara*. My feet had finally lost all feeling when the teacher came to me and handed me his own katana from his sash. I had never handled a real Japanese katana, only my practice sword. I stumbled to my feet in awe at this chance.

There I stood in front of all the students feeling the blood tingle back into my toes. They all sat as I had watching me as I quivered in front of a fresh *wara*. The sensei warned me to be careful and cut only when he said to. So it began. He called out the first cut. A simple cut of 8 basic types. I carefully drew the long blade from its sheath and posed. My hands had never sweat before, but now they drenched the silk wrap on the ornamented handle.

The sword started its arc but mid way I stopped and lowered the sword. I shouldn't be nervous I thought. I had done this cut a zillion times. Just never through anything but air. I just needed to be confident. I raised the sword and let my body take over. The sword made its full arc. And there on the floor lay a sliced section of *wara*. Sensei called another cut. Then another. I followed his commands and proceeded to let my body remain on autopilot. Six cuts later, the *wara* lay in clean cuts on the floor around me and a small stump remained on the stake. The silent students broke into applause as I re-sheathed the 200-year-old sword.

When the class finished I walked towards the door counting my blessings for having the opportunity to use a real sword. Sensei stopped me and said, "You come next week. You no forget practice uniform."

Almost ten years, several national titles and one world title later, I found myself bedridden and unable to walk without a cane after a late practice one night. My lower back having won the battle it started when I originally injured it in the military. My *Batto* days had come to an end but I was not going to let my love for the Japanese arts die.

Three months later when my back had strengthened, I walked into a *Kyudo* dojo (traditional archery school) in the famous Tsuru ga Oka Shrine in the ancient capitol city of Kamakura and begged permission to study. I was accepted and began a four-month class to learn how to shoot a 2 and one half-meter long bamboo bow with bamboo arrows. Here was an art I could do even with my bad back. Better yet, I fell in love with shooting and decided I wanted to try *Yabusame* (traditional mounted archery).

However, as easy as it was to seek tutelage for *Kyudo*, the 800-year-old Ogasawara School would not even give me an audience to seek schooling from them. Several months went by where I continued to request permission to ASK permission to study. I was denied. In the evening I would go to my favorite noodle shop and update the master on my trials. He knew Ogasawara-sensei personally and just reminded me to be patient. Sensei would realize my desire was strong and true but not in my time, in his.

One of the members was a friend I practiced *Kyudo* with and he got me special tickets to attend one of the biggest ceremonies for Ogasawara. What a wonderful display of power and grace! The riders wore glorious costumes from the days of the Kamakura Period mounted on steeds with antique saddles and stirrups. They rode shooting bows over two meters with arrows graced with eagle feathers. Down a long straight track, each archer raced his horse and one after the other clipped three wooden targets only meters apart in rapid succession. Oh, how I wanted to be a part of it!

After the ceremony, my friend insisted I wait outside of the Ogasawara dojo while he gathered his things. One hour and a half pasted and although many other archers came in and out, he didn't show. One archer (who turned out to be Ogasawara-sensei's son) sensed my growing impatience and invited me inside to wait. I sat in the traditional posture near the doorway and tried not to squirm around in effort to keep blood flowing into my feet.

The riders had just finished eating dinner at a long, low table where Ogasawara-sensei was seated at the head drinking Japanese sake and relaxing after the success of his riders. *Yabusame* is highly dangerous and the Ogasawara School has not gone without its share of mishaps.

Suddenly in a loud voice Sensei shouted "Erika, *Koi!*" Come here! I stumbled as I stood. He pointed to a spot directly in front of him. The room fell silent and everyone cleared a path for me. I knelt in the traditional posture before him and bowed. He snickered and said my bow was inferior for someone who had studied martial arts for so long. I tried again but he started into various questions about myself and why I was interested in being part of his school. I did my best to explain in extremely honorific Japanese that the Ogasawara School being the oldest traditional school was the heart of Japanese tradition and I sought to tap into the true essence of Japanese martial arts. Plus his very great grandfather was the teacher to Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first shogun of Japan whom I have a great historical interest.

He gave no response but told me to stand. He started teaching me how to walk in the "traditional" way by gliding, not stepping, which requires never bending your knees or picking up your feet. He chuckled as I stumbled to get my thighs to work with my feet in a way that resembled what he did so easily.

"*Dame!*" No good! He showed me how to bow from sitting, standing and kneeling. "*Dame!*" and "*Dame!*" again. Two hours had past and fatigue was held at bay only by my desire to show him I had what it took.

"*Dame!*" He said I would never make it in his school. Then he turned to another archer and told him he liked my hands. Then "*Dame!*" again and again.

When he was finished, Sensei headed to the door. My heart sank. Then he turned to one of his teachers and told him to make sure I was at the next practice and that I had the proper attire. While Mr. Matsumoto relayed this to me, I tried to contain my elation.

I had done it!!! I had got my foot in the door.

However, getting my foot in the door did not mean, I could come right in. It was a grueling year of intense training on a wooden horse that spun around, shooting hundreds of arrows. Riding horses required grooming and caring for them. Also one cannot forget, cleaning stables and preparing saddles and equipment. Sewing and making costumes also became a priority when they found out I made my own riding costume.

Besides mounted archery, Ogasawara was famous for its etiquette training. The same etiquette used by the shoguns at court. We needed to be polished and that required lots of buffing of my ruff edges.

Only after a year had past did I receive my official membership into the Ogasawara *Kyuba-jutsu Reiho*. I had been blessed with a wonderful transition from the sword. So I thought.

Ability to shoot was something I had from the start thanks to many years of upper body training to swing a heavy steel sword. However, the detailed forms in the shooting sequences were hindered by yet another handicap I have in my right shoulder from an old dislocation. I was warned that I looked sloppy by those who didn't know and was praised for my efforts by those that did. But the former got the better of me and I felt the end of another love coming near.

However, my friend who helped me into *Yabusame* said I should try western archery.

That was NOT going to happen!

I had seen his bow. It was short and gaudy with wheels and too many strings. But that didn't stop him from tricking me into going to an archery range. Having nothing else to do, I let him convince me to shoot his purple Hoyt compound. I couldn't pull the 60 pounds so we both pulled it and I anchored and aimed at a 30-meter target. He told me to fire and I did. What a difference from the bamboo bow! And what a shock when I saw the arrow in the gold ring! I shot three more arrows. I just stood holding his bow staring at four arrows in the gold. I looked at his bow and I started to feel something.

I kept begging him, but he wouldn't teach me. He was getting out of archery so he agreed to loan me his bow. Little help when I couldn't even pull it by myself. However, it was there to remind of how much I wanted to try archery. This was the first time I was interested in a non-Japanese art. It was also the first time I had slept with an object other than my Japanese sword so I knew that this was serious.

I had the chance to go back with my senior to the same archery range but not to shoot. He was getting some things while I stood in the office talking to the caretaker of the range. I looked out and noticed something purple. A bow! I rushed outside and there stood a middle-aged Japanese man with a long purple bow with no wheels and only one string. I was just staring at it when the man asked if I wanted to try shooting it.

Giddy in my elation I didn't even remember him putting the arm guard and finger sling on. He took me up close to a target bale and demonstrated pulling with the leather tab and releasing the arrow. He handed me his bow and I copied his form. I released the arrow and it stuck at a funny angle from the target bail.

The man was shocked. I started to apologize thinking the arrow was damaged from my poor shot until he stopped me and said he couldn't believe I had just pulled a 46-pound recurve. Thinking I was weak because I couldn't pull back the compound, I wanted to shoot again. He let me shoot some more arrows and then asked if I wanted to learn archery. He had an extra bow and arrows and would teach me if I liked. We exchanged numbers and I went home to think about calling him.

I wanted to call him but was scared that it was not true and even if it were, I would not get a cool bow like his. So a week later I called him and he wanted me to meet him at his dental office that night at 7 PM. I knew something was up so I went and got out my homeliest looking outfit so no wrong ideas could be taken and I went to his office. I was nervous that he had tricked me into a date or something.

I opened the door to his office and he stood in his scrubs and smiled. He welcomed me in and asked if I was ready to see my bow. So he really was serious about coaching me. He opened a door to his office and there was his purple *Avalon*. Next to it with the same setup was a gold *Avalon*. I was stunned! It was so beautiful!

There began six months of daily practice and weekly workouts. Within three months I won my first tournament as well as a ticket to Regionals. After six months, my coach and I went separate ways. He went back to baseball, which was his first true love and I quit archery.

Not long after I put my own *Avalon* away, I got a letter from my long lost brother I have never met. We had first talked on the phone a month before and he had asked what my hobbies were. I told him I was practicing Olympic archery. He misunderstood. I read his first letter with a photo enclosed. He was wishing me good luck at the Olympics and said he was so proud that he had such a great sister. I just held the letter and cried.

I pulled out my archery case and headed to the range. If he thinks I am an Olympic archer than I better become one. And so began my archery mission. But yet, a year and a half later I injured my index finger and could not pull my tab anymore. The doctor told me if I continued I could lose the nerves forever. I just held my *Avalon* and cried

Distressed, I wrote to a close archery friend in the US and asked what I should do. He concluded that I should wait until my finger healed. As a last ditch effort, I asked him about compound. I had acquired the purple compound from my *Yabusame* friend in a trade for a sword. He said that shooting compound would be great for keeping my back tension strong. With great relief that I had not lost archery, I started compound.

Fortunate to have spent the past year working in a pro shop in Tokyo, I received first class training for compound tuning from Hoyt and Dave Cousins. Realizing my purple compound was not right for me, I built my own from parts acquired from all over Japan and Hoyt, made my own strings and hit the range. A month later, I broke 1300 points in FITA and won one of six places at the All Japan Target Championships. There, I broke the 60-meter national record and took first in ranking. In the gold medal match I won silver.

Now a year later, I am still shooting compound and recently recurve again. I won the target nationals last year and broke the FITA national record. I have finally found an art that I can do with all my heart AND body and although it is not Japanese, it was born in Japan.

When I look at all my gold medals and trophies and remember the trials I had to go through I remember what really got me here. Somewhere, I made a conscious decision that no matter what life deals you, the cards are yours to play.

If you take away the positive and negativity in your feelings and look at your anger, frustration, pain, or confusion as simple energy, you have an arsenal at your disposal to help make your dreams come true. Although it is easy to say, part of gaining that energy is learning to forgive. Only then do you gain access to make all your negative energy a plus in your life. It also allows you to see things as they should be seen, not tainted. This is my twisted road to gold. Gold, which I finally see glitter in again!