

"Shotaku's Paper Sword"

JAPAN, THIRTEENTH CENTURY

from "The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women" by
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Shotaku was the third abbess of the Tokeiji convent. One evening she was returning to Tokeiji from a nearby monastery when a man armed with a sword accosted her and threatened to rape her. She took out a piece of paper and rolled it up, then thrust it like a sword at the man's eyes. He was completely overcome by her spiritual strength and was unable to strike her. He turned to run and she gave him a Zen shout, hitting him and knocking him down with her "sword." He fled.

NANCY MUJO BAKER'S REFLECTION:

This story about Shotaku reminds me of a news item that came out of Somalia last year about a remarkable woman doctor, Dr. Hawa Abdi, who runs a small hospital that she built on her own land. It's the only hospital for miles around. One day she heard gunshots. A group of warlords had surrounded the hospital with guns drawn. They belonged to one of Somalia's most fearsome militant groups, notorious for chopping off hands and stoning adulterers. "Why are you running this hospital?" they demanded. "You are old and you are a woman." She was held at gunpoint while the hospital was ransacked and severely damaged by the warlords' underlings. She was then put under house arrest for five days while the hospital was shut down. In that time, two dozen malnourished children from the hospital died.

But then something extraordinary happened. Hundreds of women from the sprawling refugee camp on Dr. Abdi's property dared to protest, adding to a flood of condemnation from Somalis abroad that forced the gunmen to back down. Because of so much publicity about their misdeeds they agreed to open the hospital again. But Dr. Abdi refused until the warlords apologized in writing! They did—in both English and Somali. In their document they apologized to Dr. Abdi, to the NGOs helping in the camp, to the camp's staff, and to the Somali people around the area who had lost loved ones.

Here are two marvelous examples of "spiritual strength" many centuries apart. What exactly is spiritual strength? In this Zen story with the Zen shout and a would-be rapist being overcome by Shotaku, it is easy to romanticize or idealize some mysterious Zen thing called "spiritual strength" as if it is possessed only by the "enlightened" ones, whoever they are. But Dr. Abdi's story brings this idea down to earth, here and now, and challenges us in a realistic way to ask if we could do what she did.

Actually, we all have that strength. It's the same strength we use whenever we commit ourselves to something completely. An example would be skiing downhill with one's whole body and mind, one hundred percent. It is, on many ski slopes, the only way to avoid breaking a leg. If I ever had to have brain surgery, I would hope that my surgeon could be one-hundred-percent present in this way. It is hard for us to do something—anything—one hundred percent, especially when it involves others. We are usually

worried about making a mistake: do we look right, will we be approved of, will we offend someone? And in this koan and the story from Somalia, we might also be worried about whether we would be killed. We are completely tied to others for reference points to assure us that we are solid, separate, and permanent. We resist doing anything one hundred percent because it involves giving up those reference points and thus our “self,” something we are very reluctant to do.

Master Linji said, “Just be autonomous!” That means to give up everything, to take a stand, not over or against something, but rather fully expressing oneself without any self-consciousness—in these two cases with a powerful “No!” This story makes me think of the eighth Zen precept about not being stingy. We are stingy when we hold back part of ourselves for what we imagine is safety’s sake. If it’s not my life that is at stake, then it’s my reputation, or apparent likeableness, or even just being right. Shotaku married young, but after her husband died she became a nun and eventually abbess of her convent, which was known as a “sanctuary temple,” one of only two places in Japan where women could obtain a divorce. She was obviously used to taking a stand, even against powerful social norms.

Thank you, Shotaku and Dr. Abdi, for showing us the way of spiritual strength—warrior women with your paper swords!

A Zen teacher once said that even if you weren’t a bodhisattva yet, you could pretend to be one. What is the significance of imagination on the spiritual path? Can you overcome fear by pretending to be brave?