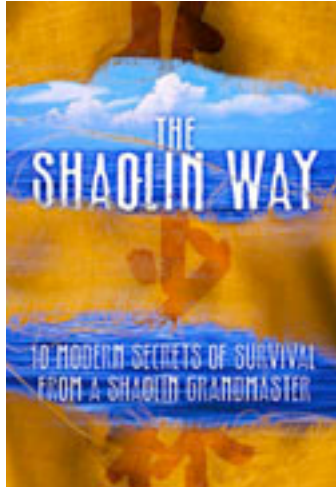


Packing a Punch



I first met Steve DeMasco on a rainy morning in February 2002 at his "kwoon" – or studio – in Syosset, Long Island. I had been assigned to do a television news story on what was called a “cultural exchange” by his staff member; what they meant by this was that 25 “fighting” monks from the Shaolin Temple in China were coming to Long Island to perform elite kung fu for Steve's American kung fu students. In the Chinese culture, such demonstrations by the ascetic set are considered to be a great honor.

Even though he had been practicing Shaolin kung fu for over 30 years and been invited to the temple several times (and is now an honorary monk) Steve seemed awed by their presence on his home turf.

And so my crew and I sat in on a very rare event, where bald, be-robed men and boys – all with the ethereal quality of those unconcerned by material things – did elaborate and elegant martial arts forms for the Spanish Harlem-born DeMasco under fluorescent lights, smack in the middle of Long Island. Afterwards, Steve's students mingled with the Chinese monks (who practice their art eight hours a day and read nothing but Buddhist tomes, I learned through a translator) as he sat talking with the elders in halting Mandarin, quietly sipping holy tea imported specially from China for the occasion.

Soon after, intrigued by the eastern mind-body connection that Shaolin kung fu teaches, as well as Steve's unique combination of streetwise tough and Zen guy, I cautiously accepted his offer to write, as he put it, “my book.” Who was this odd fellow who pulled me into his office, querying what my Chinese astrological sign was compared to his? Who had numerous honorific documents written in Chinese, which I could not read, framed on his walls? Whose perfectly maintained silver-black hair and languid brown eyes belied a beat-up soul?

Through difficult hours of taped interviews – during which he cried openly -- detailing the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his father, his life of poverty and violence begun in the projects of Spanish Harlem, and the transformation the eventual study of Shaolin afforded him, I began to know. As a journalist doing requisite fact checking, I believed his story, and how much he wanted to help people using what he had learned in his life. But more importantly, I liked him.

I suppose some people might see Steve as a David Carradine knock-off. But Carradine was essentially an invention of television. Then there's Bruce Lee, knowledgeable but also an entertainment creation. Steve really is a hero, an expert Shaolin practitioner and role model for kids, someone who makes a difference every day. Just ask Matthew Short, or any one of the hundreds – maybe thousands, now – of children and adults Steve has worked with. Or you could ask President Bill Clinton, former education secretary Richard Riley, judges, corrections officers, and members of the US House of Representatives about Steve's efficacy. Violent teenage offenders, victims of sexual and emotional abuse, the disabled; Shaolin kung fu has aided all of them, with Steve DeMasco as its unwavering disciple, and teacher.

Steve's story is an original. You can liken it to FINDING FISH, THE COLOR OF WATER, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, or THE ART OF WAR, but it stands on its own. And, it is made all the more inspirational thanks to his heartfelt voice thoughtfully detailing the lessons he has learned and their applications to the reader's life. An educated but emotionally challenged man, Steve still struggles with the demons of abuse and violence, even as he dedicates his life to helping others face their own dragons. He has used the essence of Shaolin philosophy to transform the lives of struggling adults and children, and his efforts show that everyone can make a difference, no matter what odds they face.

In these troubled times, Steve's philosophical lessons and practices – borrowed, of course, from Buddhism and Shaolin -- of giving back in order to make one's own life better, are important and necessary reading for all audiences. Young adults struggling with questions about violence (particularly relevant today given the many recent national tragedies involving minors and firearms), power and weakness will take note. Steve's stories, approaches to life alteration and self-acceptance hold messages for all of us - from troubled teenagers and concerned parents, to fans of the martial arts and seekers of spiritual and psychological guidance. The lessons that this 50-year journey can teach are innumerable: starting in Harlem and continuing to change lives today, "The Shaolin Way" will be a sure stand out on any rack, anywhere.

Blurb from Publisher's Weekly about "The Shaolin Way"

March 7, 2003

Kung-Fu Secrets Promised at Harper Entertainment

The publisher's senior editor Josh Behar bought world rights in a book called "The Shaolin Way: Ancient Secrets of Survival, Healing and Joy Through Kung-Fu" by Steve DeMasco, a counselor and martial arts master, writing with Alli Joseph.

He made the buy through agent Sydelle Kramer at the Frances Goldin agency, and plans to publish next summer.

Shaolin, named after the Buddhist temple where it was first practiced 1,500 years ago, was a method of self-defense created for the monks to protect themselves against wild animals and bandits, and was the forerunner of all the later martial arts styles. De Masco describes its intricacies as both a fighting style and a way of life that can help users cope with their problems.