# Life Is a Spiritual Struggle By Joseph Laycock - Brighton, Massachusetts

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“Just reach around the neck like this, and apply pressure.”

Over the din of boxing gloves pounding against leather bags, I struggle to hear this Brazilian explain yet another way to choke someone unconscious. This is a martial arts gym. Most of the regulars are amateur fighters with dreams of going professional. When they’re not here, some of them work as firefighters or bouncers. I’m definitely the only schoolteacher in the room.

People use the term “at-risk” to describe my students. The old term, “inner-city kids,” is no longer politically correct. They are predominately low-income, black and feared. We require them to come to school with backpacks made of clear plastic to keep them from concealing weapons.

My students take interest in my training. Sometimes I’ll enter the classroom with bruises or a slight limp from the gym. In world history, I’ll discuss the cultural significance of the fighting styles I study. I explain that in Thai kickboxing, the eight striking weapons — fists, shins, elbows and knees — represent the eight-fold path of the Buddha. I describe how Brazilian jujitsu has more improvisation than Japanese martial arts, which reflects different cultural attitudes towards tradition.

Every class asks me the same questions, “Have you ever beat anyone up?” And, “Why are you a teacher instead of a professional fighter?” When I tell them the truth — that I have never been in a fight and have no aspirations to go professional — I get a range of reactions from disappointment to accusations of cowardice.

“So why do you do it,” they always ask.

I believe that life is a spiritual struggle. My battle is not against another fighter but against the unjust and apathetic system that is attacking my students.

I get up at 6:30 a.m. and work at least a 10-hour day. I take students who have serious gaps in their learning — some of them can barely read — and I do my best to help them graduate from high school. Our school is so old that its walls are actually beginning to shift apart at the foundations. Because of over-crowding, I have to load my teaching materials onto a cart that I push from room to room. There is no point in pretending that this is an easy job.

In martial arts, laziness, apathy and despair will cost you the fight. As a teacher, these traits are deadly for at-risk students. Politicians and textbook companies now define what learning is, and school has increasingly become a gauntlet of standardized tests. The result has been a soaring drop-out rate. In this climate, students need a teacher who is still willing to fight.

When I work the heavy bag until I feel faint, or have a 300-pound stranger pin my face to the mat with his knee, I am cultivating the strength of will necessary to make a difference. Like everyone else in the gym, I am training for battle. My battle is every day.

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Joseph Laycock is now working on his doctorate in religion and society at Boston University. He started studying martial arts in college and furthered his training in Thailand.

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