

Before we start, I want to tell you about an upcoming episode that we're working on. We're looking at different ways that Death has personified in fiction, like in The Sandman, Discworld, or Adventure Time. If you really like those versions of Death or any other depiction of Death as a character in a fantasy world, let us know. Tell us when you first saw it, and why that version of Death really spoke to you. Send an email to contact at imaginary worlds podcast dot org, and we might contact you about being in the show. Thanks!

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky and this is the second of a two-part series about mentorships.

This mini-series was partly inspired by my experience as a teacher at NYU. Teaching has been a great addition to my life, and it's been so gratifying to see what students create after the class is over with. By the way, the next semester in the winter will be in person at NYU.

But the inspiration for this particular episode about Star Wars actually came from another episode we did back in the Spring called De-Aging Well. In that episode, there was a round table discussion talking about how different franchises are dealing with aging characters. And eventually, we started talking about the Disney+ show Obi Wan Kenobi.

CHRIS: Is he not empirically though the worst mentor in the world? But he's like a Dumbledore, right? Like it's sheer manipulation. He's completely playing this kid, both of these kids.

In the last episode we looked at superhero mentorships. But the relationship between superheroes can be tenuous. Star Wars is the opposite. A Padawan and their Master are bonded for life – sometimes even in their afterlife. That's great if they have a positive relationship. If not:

JR: I don't know how you come back from your mentor or your mentee becoming Vader. You know, I guess you move to the desert and try again with his kid.

OBI WAN: What have you become?

DARTH VADER: I am what you made me.

Amy Richau is a freelance journalist who has written several books about Star Wars. And her most recent book, which is called Star Wars: I am Your Father, looks at the entire saga through the lens of mentorships.

AMY: What I really liked about it was that it really kind of allows you to, um, think about Star Wars and in terms of pairs. Cause a lot of times you think of them as like individual characters or like a group of like the resistance or the Imperials. It's kind of interesting to look at it through a different lens where you're just looking at the, the relationships between two different people.

There are a lot of interesting Master-apprentice relationships through Star Wars media from novels to video games to comics to the animated TV shows. But for this episode, I'm going to focus on the characters most people know from the three movie trilogies. Although if you haven't seen any of those films -- spoilers ahead.

And while I was researching this topic, I came across a blog post called "When the Force is Not With You: Mentorship in Star Wars." The article made some interesting points, but what really got me curious was the name of the author. He calls himself, Angry Staff Officer. He is currently an active member of the U.S. military,

ASO: I am an officer on the dark side of the force. If you will.

He created the blog to complain about certain aspects of the military, and talk about history and foreign policy. His superiors were okay with the blog, but they asked to use a pseudonym. So, I will keep referring to him as "Angry Staff Officer."

And Angry Staff Officer publishes a lot of blog posts about Star Wars with titles like, "Galactic Lessons Never Learned" or "Star Wars is Bullshit: Lies Science Fiction Taught Me About Strategic Planning."

ASO: It really hit me when I was looking at how do I express military things and ideas to a non-military audience in a way that would make sense. And yes, I can use history. Also, I can use Star Wars.

In my last episode, I talked about how fantasy genres are good ways to explore mentorships because the stakes are so high, and there's an element of danger.

And we looked at whether stories about mentorships are really about committing to a life of service.

That feels true for Angry Staff Officer. He says mentoring is a big part of the military because they give young people a lot of responsibilities relatively quickly. And as a Star Wars fan, he started thinking about why the Jedi Order fell apart at in the prequels. He realized part of the problem was that the Jedi mentorship program was very strict, even by military standards.

ASO: There is no escape. That's the way that's how it's done. You have a Master and you have a Padawan. That's always how it's going to be, also you don't have parents because they've taken you from them and they're also your boss. So, like, everything is introduced is reduced down to this one individual.

And those pairs of individuals work in service to the Jedi Council.

ASO: The whole idea of the Jedi council is that it's this remarkable organization that can provide order inside a flawed universe who doesn't want that. Right? No, that's, that's great. But as anyone who knows anything about actual force, not The Force, but force, it has to be controlled. Similarly, with, with the Jedi, they realize we can't just, you know, we can't just allow anybody to be doing whatever they want. There is an element of control there, but they bring that control down to a very micromanaging level. If they're doing that with every Master and Padawan out there, how are they doing anything? If they're having meetings every time there's a, well, this is how I'm feeling with my, with my Padawans training, or, you know, we're really nervous about you because of X, Y, Z one, they need a, they need some subcommittees, like they need to, they need to bureaucratize a little bit better, but two, this idea, as, as long as they can control their members that deeply, then they're able to control the galaxy. That leaves zero room for any type of initiative, that leaves zero room for, uh, for innovation, for anything like that. It just means everything's got to go through these, this group. And, you know, group think is sort of where ideas go to die, so. (laughs)

Some of the rules are put in place to prevent the Jedi from turning to the Dark Side. And Masters need to be on the lookout for emotions like fear and anger in their Padawans. But frustration can also be a gateway emotion to the Dark Side. And the Jedi Council could be really frustrating.

That's why Amy Richau's favorite Jedi character is Quin Gon, who was played by Liam Neeson in The Phantom Menace. Qui Gon gets to be a rebel, and he never strays from the light side of The Force.

AMY: That's kind of a powerful mentor role where you're like, I'm going to lead you. I'm going to be your leader. I'm going to like help you be a better person by showing you that you don't always have to follow the rules and sometimes, you know, breaking the rules or going your own way or not taking the traditional path. Like sometimes that is the right decision, even though it's not kind of the one that you're laid out to expect as, as a success story.

OBI WAN: Do not defy the council, Master. Not again

QUI GON: I shall do what I must, Obi Wan

OBI WAN: If you would just follow the code, you would be on the Council. They will not go along with you this time.

QUI GON: You still have much to learn, my young apprentice.

Another problem is that the Jedi seemed to be paired with Padawans based on who's ready and who's available. They're not exactly paired by a Myers-Briggs personality test.

Qui Gon may have been a good Master to someone who was just as frustrated with the system as he was. But his mentee, Obi Wan, was the ultimate rule follower. When Obi Wan got his own Padawan, he and Anakin were not a good match.

AMY: What I always think of is like, if Qui Gon had lived and could have been Anakin's his ma his Jedi Master, like, would it have been different? And you would like, I would like to think that it maybe would have, and maybe he would've been the person who could have gotten across, but you know, in the end like that, you know, we'll never, we'll never know. You know, Qui Gon became a little bit of a surrogate father, I think for Anakin for the short time that they were together.

ANAKIN: Qui Gon, sir. I don't want to be a problem.

QUI GON: You won't be Ani. I'm not allowed to train you, so I want you to watch me and me mindful. Always remember your focus determines your reality. Stay close to me and you'll be safe.

AMY: And I think that Obi Wan was trying to fulfill that father figure but became a little bit more like a brother that's a little bit hard when you have kind of a brother relationship, that's harder to be a mentor. You know, it's harder to take advice or, you know, any kind of discipline from a sibling than it is from someone who is like a little bit, you know, more, more senior standing.

ANAKIN: We will find out who is trying to kill you, Padme. I promise you.

OBI WAN: We will not exceed our mandate, my young Padawan learner.

ANAKIN: I meant it in the interest in protecting her, Master, of course.

OBI WAN: We won't go over this again, Anakin. And you will pay attention to my lead.

ANAKIN: Why?

OBI WAN: What?

Angry Staff Officer thinks this breakdown in mentoring from Qui Gon to Obi Wan to Anakin comes down to the issues of trust and respect.

ASO: I know he says at the end, oh, you were like a brother to me, but from the get go, there's no trust or respect there. He doesn't actually respect Anakin. He sees Anakin's powers. I don't think he likes him at all. Um, and he's just constantly sort of berating him. And I think that that overshadows everything, obviously Anakin is going to feel that constantly. And I get it. I've had lieutenants where I'm just like, oh my God, like, can you just, can you not! Like, can you just get your stuff together and stop being so much of yourself? And, you know, the nice thing is with lieutenants, one, they turn into captains and, and, and they develop. And two, if they don't, you get to, you know, say, hey, it's been, it's been real. It's been fun, but it hasn't been real fun. The army doesn't exactly need you anymore. Bye. Bye. You can't really do that with the Jedi. Um, there's really no exit for Obi Wan.

And this lineage of mentorships continues from Obi Wan to Luke.

Now, Obi Wan didn't have to mentor Luke. He wanted to. But Angry Staff Officer is not impressed with the fact that in the short time Obi Wan guided Luke, he didn't tell him the truth about Anakin.

LUKE: How did my father die?

OBI WAN: A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine before he turned to evil, hunted down and destroyed the Jedi knights. He betrayed and murdered your father.

ASO: So, the idea of building mutual trust is one of those keystone, uh, keystone tenants of the army. You don't establish trust by concealing information. And what we find with Luke especially is he his saga, his arc is just sort of one litany of concealed information from his mentors who he trusted after the other. Some people might say that Obi Wan and Yoda are trying to protect Luke.

That's what I was going to say. I think they're, you know, they're often the, the lying is to either protect the mentee from physical danger or information that they see is dangerous.

ASO: I think I can get behind it up to a point of not always sharing the full information, but something so massive as lying to the mentee about their father, who their father is, and never really getting to that at the point where the mentor is alive. Um, I think really breaks down the, the whole basis of trust.

After the original trilogy was over, Luke started a Jedi school. And in the 2017 film, *The Last Jedi*, we learn in a flashback sequence, that Luke was very concerned about his Padawan, who was also his nephew, Ben Solo. And when Ben was sleeping at the Jedi academy, Luke went into his mind.

LUKE: I saw darkness, I'd sensed it building in him. I'd seen it in moments during his training, but then I looked inside, and it was beyond what I ever imagined.

Ben woke up, saw Luke holding a lightsaber, and that was the moment Ben turned to the Dark Side, and became the villain Kylo Ren.

A lot of fans were angry, saying the Luke would never consider killing his nephew without giving him a chance to redeem himself. But that scene did not make Angry Staff Officer angry. He thinks Luke's instincts were thrown off because at that point, Luke had been putting the Jedi Council on a pedestal. He even had a whole shelf of Jedi sacred texts.

ASO: If we accept that, Luke has been basically soaking up as much Jedi stuff as possible. Since then, this just makes sense. Like this is just following the ways of the Force. So, commitment means that you are, you know, you're in it for the long haul. So, your mentee is going to make mistakes. The person who you are looking out for is going to make mistakes. I tell every new officer that, especially if they're working for me, I'm like, look, you're going to make mistakes. They're not going to be really stupid. And we're going to talk about them. We're going to examine them. This is your time to make those mistakes at the beginning of your career. As long as you learn from them, there's no room for that here. Say, Luke has the mutual trust built up with Ben, at the time, then he's able to address this head on and say, this is, this is what I'm feeling. Let's dig into this versus, you know, standing over him with a lightsaber in the middle of the night, which is not exactly, um, rationally calculated to make anybody feel okay.

Amy Richau says there are still positive Master-Padawan relationships, especially in the comics and novels. And she says there are a lot of good mentorship stories beyond the Jedi.

AMY: There's a huge amount of found family in Star Wars. And I think that that's kind of ripe for mentorships, rather whether it's like, you know, I'm the pilot of your ship. And like, you're a part of my crew or whether it's a true, you know, like you are my Padawan, I'm a Master

In fact, when Amy brought up The Last Jedi, she talked about the way General Leia mentored Poe Dameron.

POE: We took down a dreadnaught.

LEIA: At what cost?

POE: You start an attack; you follow it through.

LEIA: Poe, get your head out of your cockpit. There are things you cannot solve by jumping in your X-wing and blowing something up. I need you to learn that."

POE: There were heroes on that mission.

LEIA: Dead heroes. No leaders.

AMY: For Poe, that was the big lesson he learned, you know, the hard way in the last Jedi is that he was trying to be a leader, but Leia was kind of like, you know, like the way you're doing it is not, you know, Poe is more of like a hotshot pilot. He really transforms from being like, I'm going to get into an X-Wing and blow up some stuff. And so he could have like stayed there, but he, you know, I think that Leia and, and, and Holdo both show him what it is to have a larger idea of like, what really, what does it really take to conquer this huge evil.

And yeah, and also too, when you think about matching mentors and mentees, I imagine that that Leia could've been looking at Poe and thinking I was married to a guy like you, and that didn't turn out well at least or him. And maybe I could be a good person to guide you through this.

AMY: Yeah. And I think it's a great moment. Um, when, you know, Poe is unconscious and they're kind of loading him into like this, you know, the ship that they go in, like Holdo and Leia like basically make a joke about how they both like him.

HOLDO: That one's a troublemaker. I like him.

LEIA: Me too.

AMY: Sometimes. You're the hardest on the people that, you know, you see potential in and that you care about.

Angry Staff Officer agrees. In fact, what he liked about Yoda was that Yoda never treated Luke with kid gloves.

ASO: What Yoda and Obi Wan are attempting to do is push Luke through his, you know, get him out of his comfort zone and push him into learning more about himself. That is critical there. If you are comfortable, you can't really learn you. true learning comes from discomfort. And boy Yoda makes, makes Luke uncomfortable in many ways. (Laughs)

LUKE: I won't fail you. I'm not afraid.

YODA: Eeh. You will be. You will be.

As a Star Wars fan, I find all this very interesting, but I'm not in the Jedi or the military so I was wondering, how would this play out in the civilian world? Well, there is a TV show that imagines how those philosophies of the Jedi and the Sith could exist in the real world, or at least a slightly more realistic world.

After the break, the competing schools of karate in Cobra Kai tap into the light and dark side of The Force.

BREAK

Cobra Kai is now entering its fifth season on Netflix. And before we discuss the parallels between Cobra Kai and Star Wars, I need to explain what Cobra Kai is, and to do that, I'll need to give away a few minor spoilers.

The show is set several decades after the original The Karate Kid movie from 1984. You might remember, in the original film, Ralph Macchio played Daniel Larusso, a kid who just moved from New Jersey to California, and he gets bullied by another kid named Johnny Lawrence. Johnny is part of a vicious karate school called Cobra Kai.

KREESE: This is a karate dojo not a knitting class. You don't drop a challenge and leave, old man. Now you get your boy on the mat or you and I will have a major problem.

MIYAGI: Too much advantage, your dojo.

KREESE: Name a place.

MIYAGI: Tournament

KREESE: (Laughs)

Daniel trains with a Japanese man named Mr. Miyagi and eventually Daniel defeats Johnny in the All Valley Karate Tournament.

(SFX and music of The Karate Kid climatic scene)

Ralph Macchio and William Zabka are back as Daniel and Johnny. And even though they're middle-aged men, they still can't stand each other.

DANIEL: What the hell are you doing? You come to my house?! Are you insane?

JOHNNY: I'm trying to make things right! Make the past be the past! You still can't keep well enough alone, man!

In the first season, Johnny starts Cobra Kai again, with their motto: Strike First. No Mercy. In response, Daniel starts his own karate school called Miyagi-do, named after his late mentor, Mr. Miyagi.

When we first meet Johnny, he is a broken-down man looking for a purpose. He starts training a teenage kid named Miguel.

JOHNNY: All right, ready to begin your training?

MIGUEL: Yeah, Sensei

(JOHNNY THROWS MIGUEL DOWN)

MIGUEL: What that?! Ugh!

JOHNNY: Lesson one, strike first. Never wait for the enemy to attack.

MIGUEL: You could've given me like a warning.

JOHNNY: Quiet! We do not train to be merciful here! Mercy is for the weak.

Miguel and Jonny actually bond pretty quickly because Miguel is looking for a father figure, and Johnny feels like a failure because his own teenage son won't talk to him. But as the training continues, Johnny realizes that the philosophy of Cobra Kai is corrupting Miguel, who was a good kid.

JOHNNY: Look I know we want to win, but it's got to be the right way. You don't have to fight dirty.

MIGUEL: Dirty? There's nothing dirty about winning, Sensei. You taught me that. Don't worry, I got this. No mercy.

The most interesting thing to me about Cobra Kai is that throughout the show, we see that being a bully and being bullied is very fluid. Once a kid learns how to use

force to protect themselves, it is so tempting to abuse that force, even if they're trained by Daniel in the light side of the force -- of karate.

Ryan Arey produces videos for the site Screen Crush. He did a great video comparing Star Wars to Cobra Kai.

RYAN: The whole thing about Cobra Kai, it's making you feel strong through violence. It's the ability to kick ass is what makes you a strong person. The Sith also operate on fear. You know, you have to be afraid of the person at the top in order to serve them in a way that like, by serving the Emperor, you're serving yourself the way that Cobra Kai dojo will pit people against each other, and they'll have competitions against each other is very similar to that.

The character who developed that philosophy is John Kreese. He was the main villain in the original movies, and he's back for this show.

KREESE: Always remember your enemies think they're doing what's right. They think they're the hero and you're the villain. But now you know the truth. There is no good. There is no bad. Only weak or strong.

Johnny's arc on the show is to move away his old mentor, and that toxic philosophy which corrupted him as a child. Johnny's growth as a character comes through mentoring kids, but that process is very messy for him.

RYAN: Cobra Kai points out that not just anybody should step up and be a mentor and you should be doing it for the right reasons. Johnny starts off being a mentor because he wants to recapture part of his past. So, he passes that need for the, to recapture the past onto his student, Miguel, and when Miguel, you know, kind of slights him or pushes him away, he takes it personally. Now compare that to Mr. Miyagi and Daniel, Mr. Miyagi had his regrets in life. He was lonely, but he did not have to take on Daniel. He saw something. He saw some goodness in him again, you know, if you want to apply that to Star Wars. Yoda is a mentor who took great delight when he was younger in teaching students, you know, you see him with these kids and everything. Like he loves his job, and he is not interested at all in the acclaim of being Master Yoda. The ultimate line about mentor relationships for me comes from The Last Jedi when he says, "We are what they grow beyond. And the greatest teacher failure is."

The characters in Cobra Kai don't always line up exactly with their Star Wars counterparts. Palpatine, Anakin and Obi Wan are more like archetypes that

different characters can embody depending on what direction the story goes. But Mr. Miyagi basically is Yoda.

MIYAGI: You remember lesson about balance, yeah?

DANIEL: Yeah.

MIYAGI: Lesson not just karate only. Lesson for whole life.

The actor Pat Morita died in 2005. So, we see him a lot in flashbacks from the original films, which are presented as Daniel's memories. And the school of Miyagi-do is similar to the Jedi.

DANIEL: Training ain't over yet. You may know the moves but none of that matters unless you have balance

ROBBY: I balance on my skateboard every day.

DANIEL: I don't mean balance in your body. I mean balance in your life.

RYAN: You know, Miyagi-do is literally about balance. Like they, they have all these exercises about balance and standing on the thing. And The Force, the way The Force is supposed to operate is balance. And I'd say that is the key tenant that like they both sort of like the philosophies are based on. And of course, defense first, you know, a light saber is, can be used for offense, but it's primarily a defensive weapon. The reason why a light saber is more effective than a blaster is because it can deflect blaster bolts. And the same way that Miyagi-do karate is.

The problem for Daniel is that he's not Mr. Miyagi. He can't get himself to respect or trust Johnny. Those flashes of anger and arrogance throw Daniel off balance.

Now, among Star Wars fans, there's been a lot of discussion around whether Star Wars canon should include a middle path called The Gray Jedi. The Gray Jedi would be able to balance light and dark in a way that doesn't corrupt them. That's basically what Johnny Lawrence is trying to become, as a person and a mentor.

RYAN: I don't think Johnny ever has found that balance. I think that he comes near it at points, but it's always his own ego or his own sense of nostalgia, which is a big theme in season three that kind of keep him from achieving that sort of like Zen balance.

In Star Wars and Cobra Kai, the Dark Side has a tactical advantage because all they want to do is win. The downside for the Sith and Cobra Kai is that darkness will eat away at them and turn them against each other.

If someone is in the Jedi or training with Miyagi-do, they're trying to win, but not just for the sake of winning. They want to create a more just and equitable place to live. They also don't want to cheat or cause unnecessary harm.

And that means they lose sometimes at critical moments. They may lose with dignity, but it's awful to watch their enemies spread their toxic beliefs and draw more young people over to the dark side.

In the end, we know the Jedi or Miyagi-do are going to win because they're the good guys, and these are Hollywood stories. Somehow there is going to be a happy ending. But Ryan says the light side of The Force also has an advantage within the stories.

RYAN: There's also a thing about Miyagi-do where it's based in service. You know like Daniel learned his moves muscle memory from doing jobs, from helping out from building things, from painting and improving the world around him. In that way, I would say that like Miyagi-do's philosophy is more serving others and Cobra Kai philosophy is more serving itself, which is why Miyagi-do struggles. And the same thing with the Sith, like the Sith don't give a crap if how anybody, what anybody else thinks about it, they're just out to win. Whereas the Jedi trying to like take care of the whole galaxy and not even looking out for the Sith.

In other words, if the dark side is focused on conquering, the light side has to focus on creating. That way, every mentee and every new generation can be a new hope.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Ryan Arey, Amy Richau and Angry Staff Officer.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

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