New Essay by Patrick Medema: Being Acquainted with Violence

I was in junior high the first time my friend was bullied. This was during the late 1990s, before we could maliciously attack someone from our phones or smart devices, when belittling someone took a personal touch, away from keyboard. I wasn't there but the bully had hit my friend, nothing serious, no broken bones, just a little hurt pride. However, when his father found out, he got in touch with my father and together they agreed that my friend and I needed to learn how to defend ourselves. I wasn't asked, I was told that I would learn to fight. Thus began my acquaintance with the practice of violence.

I've never thought of violence as being "evil." I was taught that violence is a tool, the same way a gun or a knife is a

tool. And while violence isn't the solution to every problem, the proper application of violence can be a good thing. There are limits though, a time and a place to call it quits before violence begets violence or you find yourself on the wrong side of a jail sentence. That being said, I've never understood pacifism, the idea that violence serves no purpose or that civilized society has no need for violence is a joke and a poor one at that. Violence can be a good thing, a necessary thing so long as you understand its proper application. It's a thin, hazy line at times but a line nonetheless.

After the decision was made, my first acquaintance with violence came in the form of a boxing ring. Boxing, or Pugilism to the sophisticant, is an art. There's a finesse to it that is lacking in the more popular mixed martial arts. It's hard to explain to someone that's never done it but it's like a dance, a graceful and violent series of motions, second nature to the practitioner but magic to the people watching.

It's easy throwing a punch but throwing a punch well, that's the trick, and it's not all about throwing punches. The secret to being a good fighter is making the other guy miss, going blow for blow with a guy doesn't mean you know how to fight, all it means is that you can take a beating. Sometimes that's enough but there's a difference between a brawler and a fighter. This is the way I was taught to fight, with style and finesse and, most importantly, with my head. But, for all the talk of magic and finesse, boxing is all about the show, it's a sport. Two equally matched fighters in a ring with a referee and gloves isn't the same thing as a brawl in the street. In the ring, your title may be on the line but odds are that you're going to walk away afterwards. There is no such security in the real world, a fight in the street or a brawl in a bar could end up costing you your life, whether that means a cell or a box.

Knowing how to fight in a ring or an octagon doesn't means you

can handle yourself on the streets, where we visit violence upon each other not for sport but for real, where anything can happen and anyone can catch a beating. The man that places all his hopes in his ability to perform is a fool, especially when violence is involved. Just because you can fight, doesn't mean you should. There are no guarantees in a fight. It doesn't matter if you're the greatest fighter in the world; if you go looking for a fight, you're going to find one, one you might not be able to win.

The thing about violence is that even when it's justified, it doesn't mean that your problem will be solved. In life or death situations, violence can save your life. In a combat zone, violence is a daily occurrence and while you are justified in defending your life, or the life of your comrades, there are consequences. The harming of another human being is anathema to our souls. The long-term effects of war and posttraumatic stress disorder are only now being fully realized as so many of our veterans are struggling to overcome the mental and emotional scars of facing and perpetrating violence. Even a simple street fight can have long term repercussions. A fist is a little like a bullet, once it's been fired, everything else that happens afterwards is on you, the good and the bad.

My father was, and is, an old-school kind of guy. His father, my grandfather, was a cold man, detached and distant from his children, a veteran of the Korean War and a champion fighter. My father grew up in a time when streets and neighborhood were sacred and you defended them at all costs. My father was a good fighter and good fighters earn a reputation. There's a certain mystique when it comes to neighborhood tough guys, those guys that people cross the street to avoid, the way the room gets quiet when they walk in. It's intoxicating, the kind of power you can cultivate with the threat of violence. But neighborhoods don't last and when the neighborhoods went away and he was forced to participate in society, my father brought

his reputation with him. And, as a teamster in Chicago during the 80's and 90's, a penchant for violence was a good thing.

Thus, a man who thrived on violence, or the threat of violence, and who chose to isolate himself from others raised a son to believe that violence was an easy way of getting what he wanted and that people in general were only useful if they served your needs. If they couldn't help, then they were discarded. If they could, then they were cultivated. And, if they threatened you, you hurt them. Growing up, it got to a point where it was easier sizing a person up for a fight rather than getting to know them. I'll be honest, I'm not sure which came first, the ability to commit violence or the ability to isolate, but it's a symbiotic relationship. Turn yourself off to people and you start to lose interest in their well-being. Once that happens, hurting them isn't all that difficult. Not when you're the most important person you know.

When violence is an easy means of dealing with a person, that person's value as a human is diminished. The amount of time you're willing to invest in a person is directly proportional to the value you attribute to that person. Why waste the time talking to them, understanding them, empathizing with them, if it's easier to just shut yourself off? It's a lot harder learning to live with someone instead of just hurting them when they don't do what you say or want. It's a time saver too. It's much faster to hit someone than it is to sit down and talk with them.

Devaluing a person means deciding that they are not worthy and therefore require minimal effort on my part. This is hubris, believing that I'm better by virtue of who I am and what I've accomplished, as if such things hold any real meaning. The funny thing about arrogance, you're never really as good as you think you are and there is always someone better. Diminishing a person's status to that of a "thing" is unnatural, it's a conscious act driven by our selfishness or, if we're being really honest, our insecurities and fears. This

is what relationships are all about, sharing who we are, imperfections and all, and having that vulnerability reciprocated. I dare say that kind of rejection is more painful than a punch to the face.

It wasn't until years after I'd joined the military that I started seeing people as being meaningful, not just "useful." So many of my problems with relationships were a result of my belief that people were just "things," an attitude I had chosen to pursue for so long. It sounds silly to say aloud but people have value, even the ones that you don't like. And while I still struggle to build and maintain relationships, they are worth the investment. And not only that, what kind of life is that, plotting, manipulating, using people to your own ends? Pop culture wants to glamourize it on T.V. and in movies but like everything else pop culture produces, it's a bunch of lies. Think about all the craven, sycophants trying to earn their way to the top. Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you want others to see you?

As long as we exist in relationships with each other, violence is a possibility. If we agree that some violence is acceptable, how do we avoid unnecessary violence? Who is our enemy? The guy that talks shit about you behind your back? So what? The guy that cut you off in traffic? So what? Your shitty neighbor down the block? Call the police if you have a problem. What good is violence in any of these situations? It's satisfying, or it can be, hurting someone. But what does it accomplish? What does it do for you other than cause more problems? In the right situation, violence can save lives. In the wrong situation, it can ruin them. If we value people and want to avoid violence then we must be willing to humble ourselves, to quiet that nagging voice that tells us every slight or perceived insult should be answered with violence. Life cannot be spent sizing people up in preparation for violence. Man was never meant to live that way.

I'm not an expert but it takes someone acquainted with

violence, comfortable with violence, to know when it's appropriate to use it. I feel bad for people that have been sheltered from violence all their life. These people are ill prepared for the reality that violence is an inevitable part of life. I don't think we need to revel in it but we need to be prepared for it. This isn't a rally cry for the Second Amendment or a revitalization of the "Affliction" mixed martial arts culture. If anything, it's an appreciation for those that accept violence as a part of life and are willing to use violence to protect others, our military, and our law enforcement.

But, even amongst our armed forces, what percentage have actually taken part in violence? And of that percentage, how many have the requisite maturity and experience to apply violence in an appropriate manner, enough to save lives but not so much as to appear savage or malicious. Ditto for our law enforcement. We want to believe that those charged with the use of necessary violence are grizzled, battle tested, level-headed men and women but the truth is that most of them are no different from they people they "protect." An oath of service or a badge doesn't mean you are exceptionally qualified to use violence. I'd go so far to say that the majority of controversy surrounding excessive force and wrongful deaths is not only a failure of judgment on the part of the individual involved but a lack of preparation on the part of law enforcement in general when it comes to the proper use of and application of violence in a high-risk situation. And I don't mean to second guess anyone, I won't play armchair officer, but we owe it to our police, and our military, to prepare them as best we can for a job only a few are willing to undertake.

I think it would be great if we lived in a selfless society dedicated to the preservation and betterment of man, where egos are non-existent and where people are valued as equals rather than treated like "things." But that just isn't the

case. Ego is a part of who we are. We can fight against our baser instincts but inevitably we all give into selfishness. In "civilized" society, there are times when the need for violence seems so distant but I urge you not to be so naive. The need is real. It's with an appreciation of this truth that I continue boxing, attempting to perfect the art I started so long ago. The capacity for violence is like a cushion, a safety net designed to protect me and mine from the uncertainties of life. The trick is not losing sight of the fact that there is still a cost even if justified. This is how we keep our humanity while still being acquainted with violence.