

In Defense of Self-Defense

Thoughts on violence & martial arts

Paul Walker (Peter Werbe)

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THWACK! My fighting stick landed exactly where I aimed it—diagonally across the face of a fascist who was trying to rip down a banner a friend and I were holding, to which the stick was attached.

The blow struck him with such velocity that it snapped his head back while a rosette of blood gushed forth from his broken nose and split lips intermingled with a piece of a tooth and broken lenses from his glasses.

It wasn't a lucky blow. It was executed with intent and exact precision—waist and hips rotating, arms and shoulder following, right hand gripping the pole upwards, left hand down. I charitably did not bring the opposite end of the six-foot pole up into his crotch.

The blow was delivered during an environmental protest to protect myself and others around the banner from right wingers who had a long history of violent attacks against activists. In a larger melee that followed, two more rightists attacked me, and other demonstrators came to my defense. We suffered only a minor injury and no arrests.

Lest this sound like a recounting solely for purposes of violence porn (admit it; almost all of us like to hear tales of fascists getting their asses kicked like when white nationalist Richard Spencer got punched on Inauguration Day), we can look at the specifics of what is above and how it relates to questions of self-defense.

This article is only about repelling attacks and not about offensive actions against the right. Most organisms defend themselves reflexively. Pacifism is chosen behavior and can be effective in some situations and campaigns. A physical response to an attack has some genetically coded tripwires, but utilizing it effectively needs to be learned.

The key element here is training. I had practiced martial arts for years in which stick fighting was one component. It was done in classes that were specifically established for training us in defense against right wing attacks.

We began in a class taught by a high-ranking black belt, a Korean from Seoul who had been on his country's national police force, and who bragged to us about beating up protesting students, having no idea that we were American equivalents of his targets.

On the wall of his training room he displayed crossed U.S. and South Korean flags to which he insisted we execute a bow of respect each time we entered his studio. We dealt with this by folding our hand in the crease of our bow which was giving a middle-finger salute. The class was taught very formally and rigorously, with achieving belts of rank a major goal.

We eventually decided to form our own class with a black belt friend as instructor and while most of the formalities were dropped, the rigor continued. Although we enjoyed the camaraderie and the building of martial skills very few of us previously possessed, our practice was not done with the intent of gaining individual self-defense skills, but rather building a collective community defense of our demonstrations and meetings.

Having an organized defense guard is nothing new to revolutionary or labor movements, particularly ones which anticipate armed assaults from either the government or right wing.

In Spain, the revolutionary anarchist labor union, the CNT, had its own militia and fielded armored vehicles during its fight against fascism in the 1930s. However, before the Revolution and Civil War broke out in 1936, CNT

locals were often under assault from employers' associations who hired thugs to attack strikers and terrorize members.

The Spanish workers fought back with designated union members becoming pistoleros, armed men whose exclusive duty was to protect the other workers by force of arms. Their workmates pooled their wages to provide for the families of the ones who stood guard or exacted penalties against those who acted on behalf of the bosses.

The most well known pistoleros were anarchists Buenaventura Durruti, who later led a militia unit, and Francisco Ascaso, who died on the barricades in Barcelona on the first day of the fight against the fascist uprising in July 1936. Although hundreds of other men served in this capacity to protect their comrades, the exploits of these two are particularly interesting.

Visible armaments, whether guns or fighting sticks, have the drawback of bringing the attention of the police who are increasingly less tolerant of armed antifa as the demonization of anti-fascist forces is currently taking place. A contingent of black clad men and women carrying poles will probably not be considered well by the cops. Prior to demonstrations, police in many cities such as Seattle, have confiscated anarchist and antifa's sticks, signs, and other self-defense items while not subjecting rightists to the same enforcement.

Training is key to military dominance. Right wingers are heavily into martial arts, weight lifting, and weaponry; many are ex-military, so the bravery of the antifa comrades in confronting them is particularly admirable, and often surprisingly successful. Acting as a disciplined cadre in a physical confrontation gives those involved power beyond their numbers. Like a choral dance, training together builds solidarity and confidence.

There are many anarchists already proficient in martial arts and, in some cities, cooperative, non-hierarchical classes are available, but traditional schools will teach you the skills you need; just don't tell them why you're there!

Training, even without a well-schooled teacher is possible although having a capable instructor is preferable. If there isn't a class available, there are training videos online giving instruction in open hand combat and various weapons.

Long poles, known as bo sticks or staffs (think Robin Hood and Little John), might not be the best option for each situation. However, you can easily obtain one at your local lumber yard by getting a 1 to 1-1/4 inch pine dowel used for a closet rod. You want one as long as you are tall.

Careful. You can do great damage to someone with this weapon, even kill them. Also, having a long shaft without knowledge of how to use it can mean your stick winds up in the hands of your opponent.

Remember, what you can do to someone else, can be done to you. Don't enter the realm of violence without the realization that you could become a casualty.

There are dangers inherent in martial training. Even people who desire non-hierarchical structures can find themselves and their group altered by the process of militarization. The tendency is for those who excel at physical prowess and exhibit the most bravery in combat to rise to leadership on the basis of this. They can become the decision makers since they are seen as the risk takers both by the group and themselves. As anarchists, we realize that armed force is the central definition of the state, and it can play the same pernicious role in our movement, something that must be resisted.

Writing this was disturbing. Most of us are people who don't feel good about hurting others, even those who mean to harm us. There is a long history of revolutionary violence in the struggle to eliminate the institutions of oppression and exploitation, and some of us may become part of it.

Although there can be pride in our victories, it is sad that we may be required to take such actions, no matter how necessary, which have no place in the world we envision.

For training videos including stick fighting, search Jake Mace. For a good laugh and a send-up of martial arts, search "How to Punch a Nazi."

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