

## THE FIGHT

We were on the sidewalk to the house containing the second floor apartment in which my family lived. It was a dumpy old house with a front porch that was literally falling off. My family had lived in several houses on the same street and this was the worst. I was secretly ashamed of it.

The neighborhood was made up of a style of house for which Worcester was famous: the three decker. Three floors one apartment to each floor, one family per apartment. Usually there were several kids to each family. The neighborhood group of kids fit well together as long as we were active playing baseball, football or basketball. When we were not actively engaged in some activity conflicts erupted. The fights that burst forth were struggles for status in the local toughness hierarchy. The combat was mostly comprised of pushing, shoving and a few punches. No one was kicked while on the ground and there were no weapons. It is too simplistic to say they were ‘good natured’ but they were not vicious or bloody.

I can't remember exactly what he did but as I was about to leave the group and go into the house, one of the kids did something to insult, infuriate and embarrass me. For the first time in my life I chose to fight back. This particular kid and I were at the bottom of the neighborhood pecking-order. I couldn't beat anyone up and the only kid he could beat up was me. If he was feeling particularly annoyed on any day he did not dare fight one of the tougher kids. His only safe target was me. As his most exploitable target he often directed his need for improved status toward me.

Words were said, push, in fact, came to shove and the fight was on. Only this time I initially made a real contest of it. To everyone's surprise including my own, I was fighting effectively. I began to pummel him. I hit him squarely in the jaw twice. He bent and ducked to get out of the way of the unexpected onslaught. Then I hit him in the back and delivered two very good rib shots. It was clear I was winning. The kid who owned the highest rung on

the hierarchy exclaimed to him in astonishment, “Gee Johnny your getting hammered.”

The image is very clear in my mind. He is bent and I am standing over him rather amazed at my own power. I knew I was winning and all I had to do was deliver an upper cut to his face and the fight was finished with a clear victory for me. I could have hurt him more than I had ever hurt anyone.

But I did not deliver the blow that would have liberated me from the bottom of the ladder. As I hesitated, he straightened up and returned a very hard punch to my face. Seeing this as an acceptable reason for defeat, I began to cry, dropped my fists and fled grateful for the nearness of the back door to my home. The neighborhood social organization retained what seemed then like a divinely ordained order.

I fled inside. Mother comforted me, as I knew she would. Father was angry and criticized me, as I knew he would. “The boy needs to learn to defend himself,” he announced, admonishing us both. That order too kept its divinely ordained shape.

There are a variety of lessons in this incident as I look back on it so many years later.

First, I hesitated out of fear not of my opponent but fear of my own anger. More accurately, I hesitated out of fear of the depth and effectiveness of my anger. I did not know how to be effective and when I accidentally stumbled upon my power I fled from it. I have always abhorred violence and hate thoughts of hurting anything. But, there is a real sense in which I should have delivered the uppercut and bloodied his nose. The refusal to deliver the blow did not arise from a deeply considered pacifism. Taking the blow from him and fleeing home was really an expression of little self-respect.

Second, both of my parents were right. Mother was right because I needed to know there was a place I could flee to and still be accepted. She knew the world could be very cruel so comfort, softness and compassion are important. And on the other hand, father was right. It is unfortunate that he had no more effective teaching method than reproachful faultfinding. But, he also knew

the world could be cruel so self-defense, toughness and self-respect are also important. I do not advocate violence as a means of conflict resolution or social status seeking. However, I do advocate being comfortable with one's effectiveness even when it is fueled by anger.

The fights of small boys often mirror the far more dangerous conflicts of our world. Our families, neighborhoods and planet desperately need alternatives to violence that arise from choice, self-respect and strength.