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*Fear starts in small places. It is a seed that takes root and though it can remain dormant for years to come, under the right conditions it can blossom again and again. In confronting our fears, we learn to harness the secret power that lies nestled in its kernel. Fear is like rocket fuel, it can explode and destroy us or when harnessed properly, can take us to the moon. Without fear we would be as jellyfish, completely at the mercy of life's currents.*

*- JBW*

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DUM SPIRO, SPERO

WHILE I BREATHE, I HOPE

## 1. THE SEEDS OF FEAR

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As a youngster I lived with my share of fear.

We moved house quite a bit in my formative years; and so it seemed that I was always the new kid on the block. Appearing part way into the school year, when pecking orders and cliques were already established just made things very difficult.

My nemesis was a kid called Spike. A hardened country orphan who did not go to school, Spike still bore the scars of the house-fire that had claimed his mother a few years before we had moved to his small country town. His father was an alcoholic and his older brother was a respectable fighter, even in his teens. They were a troubled family.

Spike must not have had very much to entertain him and so I think he spent most of his time dreaming up ways to terrorize me. It seemed he was always there waiting for me as I stepped off the school-bus each afternoon. I am sure that living in constant hunger or cold is far worse, but for me back then, living in constant fear was making my life unbearable. Physically, I was beaten up by Spike on quite a few occasions, but mentally, I was beaten up by him on almost a daily basis. But one summer's day, my father changed everything.

Prior to moving to the country, my father was a streetwise city cop, who learned how to fight as a young man working with the immigrants in the Snowy Mountain Project. I had seen

him fight on occasion and he was a hard man. I remember being astounded one night when he beat the crap out of four men after being fronted whilst walking along a Melbourne inner-city beachfront. The thing that astounded me the most, was not that he beat the four guys, as of course all our fathers are supermen, but rather the fact that he kicked one of them right in the face. This was back in the early 60's; martial arts movies didn't exist; and to me, this was absolutely mind-boggling. It was one of the most amazing things my young eyes had ever witnessed. I think my father knew a thing or two about not only fighting, but also about fear and the harnessing of it. He knew how to turn the engine on and keep it under control. This was to be my first fighting lesson from him, and would turn the tide on Spike. Before imparting this little wisdom to me though, I was destined to be beaten up one more time.

It happened as it usually did; I stepped off the school-bus and old Spike was waiting there for me. He didn't speak much our Spike, he always came straight for me, started with a shove or two, then suddenly he'd switch gears and start in with the serious stuff. But on this occasion, I had reached some kind of turning point. The fear did it's thing and my body decided that flight was in order. I ran past him, along to the corner shop, which we owned, bolted in through the front door and right into the arms of my father. It seems that dad was watching these fights that I had been telling him about, after all. To both my shame and dismay, he spun me around and launched me back out into the street and into the hate-filled fists of a snarling Spike. I got the snot beaten out of me that day; it was time for dad's first lesson.

After I got cleaned up from the beating, my father took me out the back. He held up his hand, wedding ring gleaming on finger, and told me to hit it as hard as I could. And so I did, again and again, until my knuckles were bleeding from hitting that ring. After a time, he had me stop and told me my punch was okay but it wasn't the most important thing; the most important thing he said, was having a plan and letting nothing stop you from carrying it out. Apparently I only had one thing to do, as soon as I thought the fight was going to start for sure, I had to ignore everything but Spike's nose. I then had to watch my hand hit Spike's nose, and let nothing distract me from doing so. That's all there was to it? I had my doubts.

A day or two later, as I got off the bus, there he was again; ready to dish me another pounding. I dropped my schoolbag and as the world narrowed, all I saw was his blotchy nose. I can't remember whether I waited or not, whether I copped a shot or not, but I do remember Spike hitting the ground with blood spurting all over the place. I also remember jumping astride him and deciding to not stop pounding him until someone pulled me off. Now here's the really strange part, something I will never forget, I saw and heard, fully grown adults, cheering me on like a mob of Romans at the gladiator arena. I couldn't believe my ten year old ears.

As human beings, we are still pretty closely tied to our tooth and claw past. Whether Spike was universally disliked and due a punishment or whether the townsfolk just thought I was in need of a win, I will never know; but when mothers of sons can watch a street scrap and yell encouragement from the sidelines – 'Hit him John, hit him!' – we have proof that

we are not long out of the caves.

And so I had my first lesson in self defence from dad – do not be distracted from carrying out your intention. Decide and act. A decade later, that advice would save my life on more than one occasion.

Mike Stone, one of America's Karate greats, once conducted a seminar where he got two of the attendees up to spar. After letting them go at it for a few minutes he had them stop and gave each fighter a bit of confidential coaching. One, he just gave some small talk and encouragement, basically telling him he'd done well and to keep the good work up – the other, he promised a monetary sum if he could break the other guys nose. Then he let them go again. Bam! Invariably, within seconds of round two starting, one guy had a bloodied nose and one walked away with some spending money for the weekend. Mike would then ask everyone, what the difference was between round one and round two? In round one, they fighters both put up a pretty even show, in the second round, there was always a clear-cut winner. The difference – Intent!

Having a clearly defined and unwavering intention can be a powerful ally in a fight. One mindset is about play; the other is about winning. Both are important, both have their place in the larger scheme of things – but when lives are on the line, playtime is over, and the man with the plan has the edge. Though I didn't know it at the time, my father was telling me the exact same thing.

I guess that early victory over Spike really shaped me to a degree. Throughout secondary college I had my share of schoolyard fights and incidents. I was always smaller the

average but this never seemed to matter; invariably I would end up sitting astride my opponent wailing away as hard as I could. Perhaps this was a throwback to my earlier victory over Spike, I am not certain, but it worked for me and so I developed an interest in takedowns and throws.

#### **Intent:**

*One of the differences between people who achieve their goals and people who don't, is the fact that high achievers do not waver in their intent. Intent is simply 'desire' with focus'. Staying 'locked on' to the things we want to achieve is fundamental to achieving outcomes. Intent should be unwavering. Teenagers, for example, usually have trouble with 'intent' because they tend to be easily distracted. Intention gives rise to purpose, one of the keys to happiness in life.*

Luckily for me, there was a wrestling club not one hundred meters from where we lived at that time, and it was not long before I was in there and hitting singles and doubles with glee. For a year and a half I practised wrestling, until I broke my leg and had to take time off. The plaster cast made it impossible to practise, so I switched to Karate, where I could at least hold a stance and throw punches from the hip. Eventually the plaster came off, and I launched into my martial arts training with newfound enthusiasm. The style I

practised at that time was Goju Kai Karate. Much later on, as the owner and editor of the Australian martial arts magazine, Blitz, I was to train with Gogen Yamaguchi (the Cat), founder of the art in Tokyo, Japan – a singular honour.

I must have had a rebellious streak in me as I started to wear a non-approved corduroy jacket to school with the Goju Kai fist emblem stitched on the breast. Although I wore my Goju emblem proudly, when it came to schoolyard disputes, I still found myself reverting back to the takedown, mount and pound till someone dragged me off routine. It doesn't take more than one or two incidents like that at school to send the sharks off in search of easier victims. The only problem is that once you develop a habit, good or bad, there it is, you have it – and it has you!

At our most basic level we have a very simple learning mechanism. I call it the Nice Berry – Poison Berry Switch. It comes from hundreds of thousands of years of genetic hardwiring. If, as hunter-gatherers we ate a good berry, then next time we saw it we ate it again. If, on the other hand, when we ate a berry for the first time we had a bad reaction, then we would almost certainly, never eat it again. This is our most basic learning model. If it works, repeat! If it doesn't, try something else. My schoolyard ground and pound was working, there was no way I was going to over-ride my hardwiring and change it. It had stuck fast.

It was toward the end of my secondary schooling when I actually began to develop a reputation. I was not someone to be trifled with. My schoolyard rep was crystallized one morning at recess. I was only sixteen years old at the time and busy playing handball at recess when one of the school

seniors came strolling along asking us younger crew for money. I didn't give him the time of day when he put the question to me, and so I copped a slap on the back for my head for my impudence.

Whatever engine I had been ever so slowly building, kicked into life, and the next thing I knew I was sitting astride him smashing his face into the black asphalt. I was really just getting going, when a strong hand gripped my on the shoulder to pull me off; I sprang up, spun around and put him on the deck as well. I was in the process of getting on top of this second annoyance when I realized it was the school principal; and the principal of a boy's catholic college to boot. This was going to get worse before it got better.

Very surprisingly to me, as we sat in his office, awaiting an ambulance for the mangled senior, the principal gave me a rather gentle lecture on the virtues of self control. He let me off with a two-week suspension. I never told my parents about it – I just spent the time down the beach. I'm guessing again that the bully who started the incident had probably been due for a serve himself. Well that, plus the fact that I was two years his junior, probably saved me from a worse fate. After that incident, I was left alone by all those who like to prey on the weaker and smaller. I'd learned the *Sharks Don't Eat Other Sharks* lesson. Sharks hunt Tuna, they like easy prey, they don't want a fight if they can help it. I really hate bullies. I hated them as a kid, I hate them today, in fact, I suspect I developed a pathological hatred of them. If I spent time on a couch, I'm fairly certain Spike's name would come up again and again.

Sadly, the martial arts arena attracts it's fair share of bullies.

I love it when I come across them. Choking them out is like therapy for me. For me, an important part of the martial arts teaching ethos, is to empower people to stand up to life's bullies. When we suffer injustice – I think we can go a couple of ways; we can dish out further injustices to others, thus at least getting a turn ourselves, or we can rail against injustice whenever we see it. The way of the martial artist is the latter. There is always a reason why superheroes become the way they do. Their fuel comes from somewhere – and that fuel more often than not, is fear. Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. It is a kind of fuel that makes an engine go. Where that engine takes us has got nothing to do with the fuel it uses. Where the engine takes us is a matter of choice and a matter of training.