

The Gift of Violence

Apr 17, 2023

How to manage your life, which as part of our evolutionary heritage, includes violence

Neither Matt Thornton nor this book fit comfortably into any category. The supposed subject of this book is Brazilian jujitsu. BJJ. It is within the genre of mixed martial arts – anything goes hand-to-hand combat.

But Thornton references, and the book is recommended by some of the brightest philosophers of our age. In his introduction he credits polymath Michael Shermer of Caltech ([The Secrets of Mental Mathematics](#), cross-country bicycling champion) for encouraging him to write the book. He offers an incredibly rich bibliography. Among the books most cited is Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature*. He introduces each chapter with a quote from the classics, always appropriate, often one that is not familiar. Peter Boghossian wrote the afterword.

Like Sun Tsu's "The Art Of War," Machiavelli's "The Prince" and Clausewitz' "On War," this is the book about the philosophy of managing violence more than the art of being violent. It is rich with examples of emerging successfully from interpersonal confrontations without employing the fighting skills he has spent a lifetime developing.

Like Joe Rogan, Thornton forces the reader to re-examine his preconceptions about people who devote their lives to martial arts. The son of a policeman, without a college education, he has done a very thorough job of educating himself. While nowhere in the book does he put down head-in-the-clouds academics, he does often put down the unrealistic notions of pacifists, those who would defund the police and so on. His central message is that violence is real. When all else fails, violence remains the only way to control others who employ violence against you and your family.

Every person, he says, should have a line in the sand. They have a gun and want your wallet? Take it, please. They have a knife and want your car? Here are the keys. They want to force your wife into a car to take her someplace else? No way. I will die first. The purpose of the BJJ training Thornton offers in his Straight Blast Gyms is to maximize your odds of surviving such an encounter.

Thornton is an anomaly in other ways. At 6'7" he towers over every other martial artist who appears in the photographs in the book. He repeatedly makes the point that size, age and gender should not discourage people from learning to defend themselves.

There are lengthy discussions of the nature of the threats we are likely to face and how to be prepared to meet them and how to avoid them. The two acronyms he recommends that the reader internalize: MIND: maturity, intellect, noticing and distance, deterrence and determination and ART appropriate response training have to do with avoiding conflict.

He advises the reader to be aware of where danger comes from, and where it does not. Samples: more from family and acquaintances than strangers. More from handguns than long weapons – or even bare hands. Many times more from recognized bad neighborhoods than good ones. Also – and here he walks close to the edge – certain ethnic groups. He prudently hews close to government statistics. His valuable footnotes take up 10% of the book.

Thornton is the father of a family of five. He offers this advice, which I immediately shared with my wife for us to pass on to our young children: "Here are five specific lessons that you can also pass on directly to your kids. These are the boundaries that your children should know shouldn't be crossed:
"1. I am the boss of my body! If I don't like something or get the "uh-oh" feeling, I will stand up for myself!

I don't need to be polite if I am scared or uncomfortable.

"2. Everyone's bathing suit areas are private. If someone is touching me there or asks or wants to touch me there, I will tell my parents.

"3. Grownups don't ask kids for help. Not even to find a lost puppy. And they never ask kids to go somewhere with them. If this happens, I will tell my parents.

"4. I don't keep secrets from my parents. Especially if another adult has asked me to or made me feel scared, uneasy, or uncomfortable.

"5. I will always check in first before going anywhere. If I get lost, I'll find a mommy with kids.

Beyond this, be sure they know not only their full name and birth date but also your full name, address, and telephone numbers should they ever get lost."

Thornton's lengthy discourses about the shortcomings of the usual martial arts programs resonated with me. I stood up against my wife when our son pooh-poohed the benefits of capoeira and tae kwon do. They struck me as an expensive, time-consuming exercise in choreography. My motto has always been that if it doesn't make you sweat it isn't worth doing. Per Thornton, BJJ makes you sweat. An encounter is not over until one of the two combatants "taps out" to indicate that he is giving up. You are not competing for tikky marks on some evaluator's scoresheet. You are competing to win.

In expressing contempt for disciplines that fake it, Thornton describes a "deepity." It is something that sounds profound but is intellectually hollow. Many deepities contend that ritually practicing classic martial arts moves leads to mastery. "Nonsense!" contends Thornton, citing Clausewitz. "No campaign plan survives the first contact with the enemy." If you want to learn how to do it, there is no substitute for doing it.

Thornton goes into the ultimate reason that somebody would want to learn martial arts. To survive – to live a long life. He then asks why a person, adopting that as an objective, would allow himself to be out of shape, to use alcohol and drugs, and to neglect his mental development. Throughout the book he repeats the observation that the threats that a person can overcome through prudent choices in who to marry, where to live, what to eat, and how to maintain one's physical condition vastly outweigh the threats of violence.

That has certainly been my experience. I can count on the fingers of one hand the times in my 80 years when I would have wished to know BJJ. I came out of them okay, and as Thornton often repeats, I might have gotten into trouble had I been overconfident about a little bit of knowledge. 60-year-old Thornton ran into a lot of bullies growing up. Though born earlier, I ran into many fewer. None of my six children got into fisticuffs. This is not a terribly violent world.

Put this one on your bookshelf under the title of self-defense, self-improvement or philosophy. Whichever you choose, it should be there one way or another.



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[Apr 20, 2023](#)

Liked by Graham Seibert

I was the victim of a street crime once and the intended victim once. I was a victim because, having lived most of my life overseas as a service brat among professional naval aviation types, I was naive about many things.

It was not till I was back in the States as a civilian that I noticed that it was not wise to be incautious around certain races. My first serious experience was when I was a senior in a civilian high school and was checking out various universities. In one instance, I was walking toward the USC campus south of downtown LA after getting off a bus a few stops past where I should have. A car pulled up and stopped ahead of me and a black man got out of the passenger side and walked directly up to me. I smiled tentatively, assuming he was going to ask directions or something and I would have to say that I was not familiar with the area. But he punched me in the face and then landed a terrific blow to the side of my head, knocking me momentarily unconscious. When I came to, I was lying on the sidewalk, my purse gone.

I got to my feet and, without a cell phone to call for help, and with no money or ID -- all in my purse -- I walked to a convenience store and asked the clerk to call the police. I must have looked a mess, bleeding, clothing dirty and my sleeve torn somehow. The Asian clerk just shouted at me, "You go now! You go now!" I stood bewildered for a moment then went out and, feeling dizzy, sat down in the parking lot. Customers came and went, ignoring me, until finally an older white man asked if I was all right. I told him what had happened and asked him to call my home and have someone come and pick me up. He also called the police, but they didn't show up before my brother did.

The upshot of that was that I crossed USC off my list of colleges to consider and my dad bought me a Lady Smith .38 cal. revolver and I resolved to have it ready for use anytime a black person I did not personally know came anywhere near me. That proved to be a life saver in a subsequent incident that I don't care to write about. Suffice it to say that I learned why there is such a thing as a white flight. A man might choose to risk getting into a street fight with violent criminals, but I choose simply to avoid situations where that might be necessary. And should I ever find myself in such a situation, I will rely on Messrs. Smith and Wesson to protect me; they provide true feminine protection.

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[Chris](#)

[Apr 18, 2023](#)

Liked by Graham Seibert

BJJ, a subset of judo, gained popularity through the UFC, an event created by the Gracie family that favored BJJ rules. This led to the rise of MMA, which incorporated striking techniques. Competitions must enforce rules to prevent injuries and fatalities, so "anything goes" is a marketing myth.

Helio Gracie, a 3rd Dan judoka, learned a simplified version of judo from Maeda, which excluded standing, striking, and restorative techniques. This subset formed the basis of BJJ. Thornton like many teachers reintegrated striking - in his case boxing - as have many instructors.

BJJ practitioners rationalize focusing primarily on groundwork by insisting that all fights end on the ground but those skilled in standing arts can often avoid it. Groundwork sacrifices mobility, making it crucial to regain footing quickly. In my Dojo, we warned students that their opponent's best friend in the alley was behind them with a 2 x 4.

Mr. Thornton's criticism of other arts not being practiced full speed is misguided. Many martial arts, like Thornton's first art Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune do, are practiced slowly due to the danger of certain techniques. BJJ itself omits dangerous techniques for safety, making it less likely to cause accidental injuries.

Helio Gracie, by all accounts a mediocre competitor, lost most matches or won against subpar opponents. The Gracies excluded techniques from BJJ that their grandfather didn't learn, such as leg and finger locks, neck and spine cranks, and nerve locks. This supports competitor safety and highlights the immaturity and hypocrisy by criticizing other arts that practice more slowly, because they include dangerous techniques.

Judo is a blend of two jujitsu styles and one sword style, each that is practiced slowly to minimize injury. An educator, Professor Kano revolutionized jujitsu by removing dangerous techniques, enabling students to train at full speed with follow-through and gained an advantage over traditional schools. He focused on physical and mental development through training, and that became judo.

Success in BJJ or any martial art comes from good physical condition, dedicated training, and skilled teachers. There is no superior martial art, only superior martial artists.