

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

Stupid, Stupid, Stupid...

Best to Learn from the Mistakes of Others

We devote considerable effort and time to development of physical skills applicable to self-defense, but all the technique in the world is useless if situational awareness and judgment are lacking at the moment of truth. This point was brought home to me many years ago, under circumstances in which tactical mistakes I made could well have resulted in tragedy for my family.

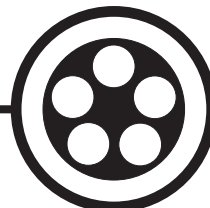
My wife, Rosanne, is an artist and designer. She had recently acquired an account she was very excited about: Two partners were starting a company to market a particular, Philadelphia-style soft pretzel, and Rosanne was hired to design the company logo, product packaging, and all the printed materials and various forms of advertising the new business would require. The account would be her biggest ever.

One late afternoon, I answered the doorbell to find a fellow standing on our front porch who introduced himself as the pretzel company junior partner. Rosanne wasn't home at the time, so I invited the fellow in (this was the first mistake), figuring I would need to write down a message or check for some type of information. Hearing that we had a visitor, my then very young daughter, Erika, trotted partway down the stairs from the second floor to see what was going on.

I'd never met either partner, but my first thought was to be as accommodating as possible. Besides, Rosanne hadn't mentioned any concerns with either partner — nor had she any, prior to this incident.

Surprisingly, though, rather than asking a business related question, the fellow asked for cash, saying he was nearly out of gas, but realized he was close to our house. When I inquired why he didn't figure to use a credit card, or hit an ATM, the fellow said he'd left his wallet at home. At this point, things started to seem a little strange to me, and when I hesitated the guy began to get mildly belligerent.

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Second mistake: rather than reassess this person's intent at the first hint of implied threat, I remained focused on the idea this person was important to Rosanne and that I should try to accommodate him.

As the person's requests shifted toward demands, I suggested that I didn't have any cash. So Erika, innocent as she was, immediately piped up with, "I do!" (I was headed to the credit union myself the next day, and really didn't have anything much in my wallet.)

Figuring that in light of Erika's remark the easiest way to conclude the situation would be to provide some cash, I told the fellow to wait a minute and went upstairs to raid Erika's bank. As soon as I rounded the corner I realized my third — and worst — mistake: Erika was out of sight. I snagged the money and headed back downstairs, with the sick realization that those few moments would have been more than adequate for this fellow, this belatedly recognized intruder, to grab up my daughter and head out the door.

Between Erika's bank and my wallet, I was able to hand the intruder \$20, to which he replied, "Is this all you have?"

Making certain that Erika was well behind me, I told the intruder to get on his way, which, with some measure of grumbling, he did.

As soon as Rosanne returned home, I told her what had transpired and she immediately called the other partner. He apologized profusely, saying that his friend suffered from some particular psychological condition and had a history of doing just this type of thing. The senior partner promised to return the money, which he subsequently did. Rosanne also informed the senior partner that under no circumstances would she again meet or deal in any way with the fellow who had "visited" us. As it turned out, the business venture went bust pretty quickly, although Rosanne was at least paid for the logo design and other work she'd accomplished to that point.

So, what were the lessons learned?

The first, and most important, though very disturbing to me, is the demonstration that despite my training I am

fully capable of making utterly stupid, tactical mistakes. Self-defense demands a certain level of professional paranoia, the recognition that while everyone might not be out to get you, the few who are aren't going to announce themselves in advance. Take nothing for granted, at any time.

Protect the most valuable; forget the rest. I should have been far more worried about Erika's safety than the potential for offending Rosanne's client.

Allow no one personally unknown to you to cross the threshold of your home. Remember that if you even crack the door to someone unknown, the door can be easily kicked completely open and entry forced. Strangers are owed courtesy, as well as assistance when warranted, but not at the expense of making oneself vulnerable to attack.

Samurai kept a naginata hung over the front door, and were never unarmed even when sleeping. If you face a home invasion type incident, inaccessible weapons are worse than useless. (The father of a college friend of mine had firearms loaded and hidden throughout their home. At the time, I thought he was psycho. Now, though, I think he's a shining example of the theory, "Better to have it and not need it, than to need it, and not have it...") Obviously, live weapons in the home must be stored safely and securely, but a variety of means now exist to permit rapid access to weapons while denying any access to unauthorized persons.

Make a plan. Think about possible situations and how threats might be handled. We can't anticipate every contingency, but we can consider at least a few environments in which assaults are most likely and devise general responses.

I never again separated myself from a family member in any situation the least bit disturbing. Erika grew up thinking I was overprotective, but that's just the way it was going to be. I was determined that whatever further mistakes I made would be a matter of erring on the side of caution.

And I thank God that I learned this lesson at the cost of nothing more than personal chagrin. ☸

Robert Wolfe, the chief instructor at Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975, has taught since 1985, and holds senior ranks in Itto Tenshin-ryu kenjutsu, Yamate-ryu aikijutsu, and Isshinryu karate. He has published articles addressing martial arts in magazines and journals.

