

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

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

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

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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An Illuminating 4th

Harrisburg, the capital city of Pennsylvania, is situated along the Susquehanna River and is unique among cities of similar or larger size in having a completely undeveloped waterfront. For more than four miles, the space between the river and Front Street is a park, with lots of trees, benches, observation stations, picnic tables, exercise equipment, and a walking/biking path. The Susquehanna is an exceptionally scenic river, a mile wide at that point, and just beautiful. For special occasions like art festivals and the like the downtown section of Front Street is blocked-off to handle crowds of pedestrians and to accommodate food trucks and other vendors. Such is the case for the annual fireworks display on Independence Day. But this year the event turned out to be very different than normal and there were, for me, multiple lessons learned.

The evening of July 4th, my wife and I went to meet with our daughter at her downtown apartment, and then walked to the river and spread a blanket to watch the fireworks display, off the street and near the bank of the river. I would not have gone at all, but my daughter tends to discount my concerns about large public gatherings in the current national environment and since we could not dissuade her, we went. But my wife and I discussed the potential for danger—earlier that day there had been the mass-shooting at the parade in Illinois. Licensed to do so, I went armed (concealed pistol, extra magazine, knife, flashlight). Front Street runs north to south and had been closed all day for the festival. There were thousands of people.

My daughter had invited a friend from high school to join us, someone that had been a former law enforcement officer in Washington, DC and Harrisburg. While we were standing around, my daughter asked her friend whether he was carrying a firearm. He said he wasn't, because he thought there would be too many people in the crowd to allow safe use of the weapon if it were needed.

Lesson One: Assuming you are legally entitled and appropriately trained to carry a firearm, if you have it you can always decide not to use it. The opposite is not true.



At about 9:30 p.m., just before the fireworks were to begin, a wave of screaming started a little way to the south of where we were and a literal stampede quickly developed, with people shouting, "They're shooting!" The sound of the stampede was unlike anything I've ever heard, a deep bass roar like a train approaching or something, with so many people fleeing up the street. I've participated in races on Front Street, with a couple hundred runners, and it never sounded remotely similar.

Afterwards, my daughter said her first thought had been, "This can't be happening!" My first thought was, "Well, **** ...here we go."

Lesson Two: Regardless of where you live, it can happen here.

Lesson Three: If you consider in advance potential dangers, you may be better prepared to respond in a measured and rational manner.

Lesson Four: Even if you are able to respond rationally, the overwhelming majority of people around you will instead panic, and constitute a significant threat themselves in their mindless flight.

My daughter's friend instinctively reached for his pistol...but it wasn't there. Regardless, he took charge of my daughter and I stayed with my wife. Partly because of our earlier discussion, but mostly because she's just plain good in emergencies, my wife was completely calm.

Lesson Five: Special operations warriors have a saying, "Two is one and one is none." I never seriously considered carrying a backup firearm but now realize that might be relying on hope rather than strategy. It's insurance against a mechanical failure in your primary weapon, or running it dry. Or, as this circumstance demonstrated, you might have to arm a companion.

Leaving the blanket, we moved quickly toward the river bank to stay well out of the stampede. We took cover behind a very large tree and paused to try to assess what was actually happening. On the way to the tree, we passed a wide-eyed man squatting beside a picnic table, something that didn't offer either cover or concealment.

Lesson Six, as recently described by martial arts friend Reg Sakamoto: Since the world is getting a little more unhinged let's have a lesson. Cover and concealment. Concealment is anything that hides you from sight, but will not protect you from even small-caliber rounds. For example, bushes. Cover is anything that will protect you from rounds. For example, get down behind an engine block; this will protect you. Not the body of the car, but the engine block.

As soon as things settled down a bit, it was apparent nothing was really happening other than the stampede itself and people being trampled. The aftermath on the now-deserted street was an apocalyptic scene, with overturned baby strollers, camp chairs and tables, cooler chests, food, and all kinds of other personal belongings, clothing, and electronics abandoned and strewn about. We retrieved our blanket and then regrouped at our daughter's apartment.

We eventually learned that a fight had broken out a block away between two groups of unaccompanied minors and that one of the juveniles lit firecrackers, shouted "Gun!" and threw them at the other kids. And that got the ball rolling. In the rush, many children were separated from their parents. We heard little children crying, "I don't want to die, Mommy! I don't want to die!" What a screwed-up country this is getting to be.

In the following days, local news reports seemed to be very much downplaying the incident, saying that police stepped in quickly and restored order. Baloney. We saw no officers at any point, prior to or after. It was reported that there were only minor injuries and no-one required transportation to the hospital. But while we remained at our daughter's apartment there were constant sirens and

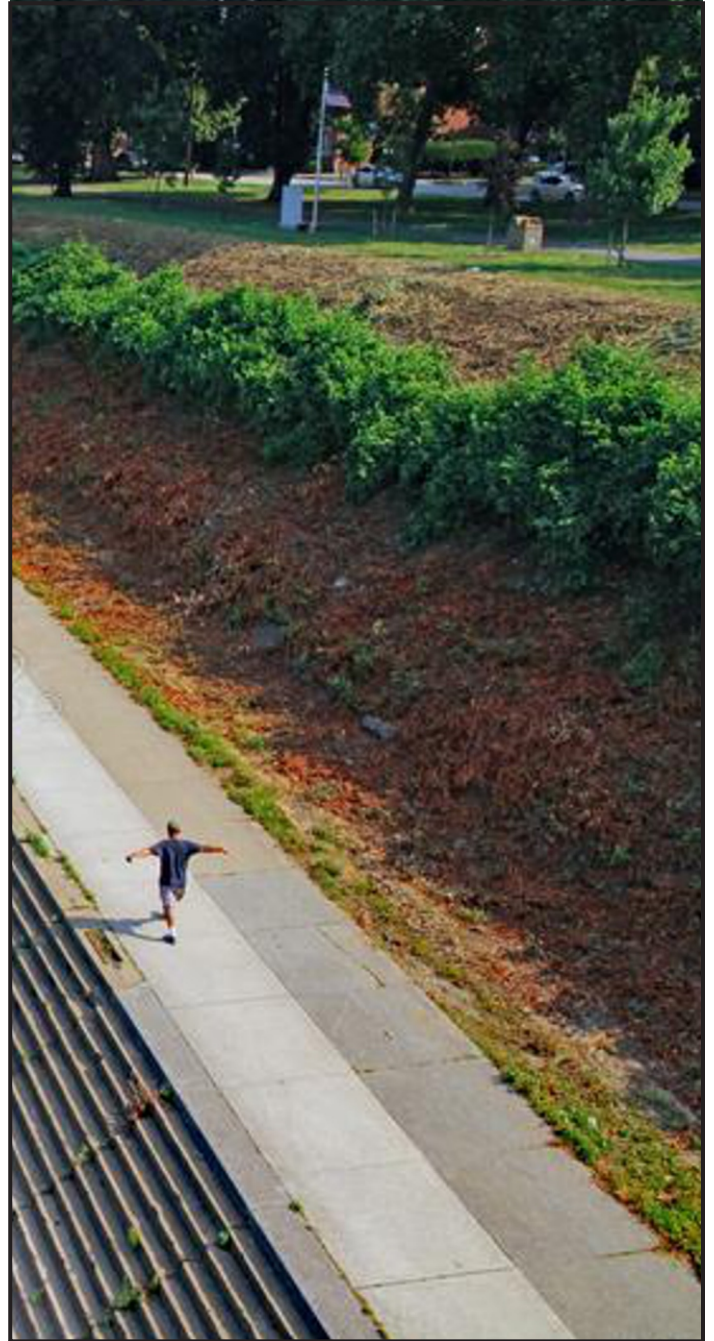


ambulances coming and going for almost two hours after the event.

Lesson Seven: You are responsible for your own safety. If it's possible in your area, being legally armed may be something you want to consider and make a habit. Understand very clearly, however, that a firearm is not some kind of magic talisman. Even with proper training and practice, a firearm in the hands of the legally armed citizen offers only the chance to avoid being a victim. That being said, U.S. government studies indicate personal defense with a firearm happens between 1.9 and 2.5 MILLION times per year in this country, and in well over 90% of the instances the weapon does not need to be fired.

Lesson Eight: While traditional martial arts training, depending on the specific art, may or may not be directly applicable to physical self-defense, the mindset developed by traditional training is very definitely an advantage in emergencies.

There's a big difference between paranoia and preparedness. We were lucky that what we experienced was a false-alarm, in terms of it being an active shooter event, but it was nonetheless a dangerous situation due to the panicked response of the large crowd around us. That aspect, the potential consequences of the uncontrolled reactions of others, was something I never considered. 🌀



Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

