

I AM MY NEIGHBOR'S KEEPER

**(A HUMBLE HOMILY, IN THE FORM OF
AN ESSAY, PRESENTED AS A BOOK)**

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR: OPERA

4 Ranch Lane
Saint Louis, Missouri 63131 USA

Copyright © 2019 by Francis Baumli

First Printing: June 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Philosophiae Doctor: Opera is published under
the auspices of Viaticum Press International.**

Sales: www.viaticumpressinternational.com

ISBI: PDO 001 06 9102 1948

I AM MY NEIGHBOR'S KEEPER

A polite accusation has come my way more than once of late. Namely, that when I make my autobiographical excursions, I too often focus on the women in my life and thus evince what seems to be a prejudice of favoring women over men. This view warrants a response that is equally polite and is both clear and firm.

Actually I have probably written more about the men I have known than about the women. But much of this writing is in longer works I wrote long ago—many of them fictional but with asides which refer to men I have actually known. Plus there is the fact that these longer works generally have not been published. So a reader who looks at my available works simply will not, at present, have opportunity for realizing that my attentions toward women and men have been fairly apportioned.

However, I do concede that over the last three years I myself have occasionally felt that I am being remiss when it comes to writing about men I have known. I have, it is true, very much focused on women of late. There have been two difficulties preventing me from

writing more about men. One is that most of the relationships I have had with men, which I would deem worth writing about, have been highly intellectual in nature. This is a realm that is, in many ways, rather rarefied and cognitively demanding. In such relating there is an intimacy, excitement, and cerebral drama so intense, while also esoteric, that I am unsure as to how to present it. Perhaps one day, if I succeed in becoming a more skillful writer, I then will be able to describe these relationships in a way that is exciting to the reader. But at present, if I were to try and write about them, I fear my approach would be dry, staid, pedantic. In other words, all cerebral and not emotionally interesting.

The other difficulty which prevents me from writing more about men is the simple fact that, generally speaking, over my life I have maintained more long-lasting and active friendships with men than I have with women. While some of these male friends have died, at this late stage in my life (I write this at the age of 67), in virtually all these cases I have kept in touch with their surviving spouses or their children. Hence, it would not seem quite right (within the bounds of gentlemanly conduct) to write about these men.

Still, as I proceed with the task of setting forth my autobiography, I shall attempt to make amends by writing more about

some of the men I have known. As I proceed, I will be doing more than setting forth biographical accounts. I shall, at the same time, be exploring the artistry of autobiography. I continue to be amazed at how my every autobiographical observation also involves such an intensive excursion into biography. Writing about myself, in fact, often involves writing more about others than about myself. Thus autobiography always feels like a phenomenological exercise: conscious intentionality focused toward an inner object gets directed outwardly, it confronts an interface—a boundary that connects rather than separates, and moves beyond this juncture to an interfusion of the two selves. Autobiography thus becomes biography, which in turn nourishes the autobiography, which not only begets but also nourishes and invigorates biography. Sometimes this process becomes so complex as to be vertiginous. In truth, there are times I am not quite sure who I am writing about.

Still, I do want to make amends for my recent neglect of men. But this is difficult. Just now, casting about in my memory, I think of a certain fellow named Bob whom I knew—and know—quite well. We are the same age, in many ways have led similar lives, and we shared many an adventure during our late teens and early 20s. One of these

is quite amazing, and even unique. It also is illustrative of the kind of reputation I had at that time.

My reputation at the time, as has been pointed out elsewhere, is that during my college years the general saying was, “If Baumli isn’t studying, he is fucking or fighting.” Well; this is not true. I also had to sleep. I always worked at least one regular job, along with playing in various bands—this musician’s role being a full-time job in and of itself. I found time for being with my friends, so how could there have been so much fucking and fighting? Well, in truth, there indeed was a great deal of both. The fights used up much of my time, involved considerable drama with many people involved, and indeed I deserved that part of my reputation. But as for the fucking? I did my respectable share, but not as much as some of the other fellows my age and usually no more. It only seemed that I did so much of this because I had a flair for the drama of fucking, and a penchant for seeing the humor in it ... and for talking about its humorous aspects to other people. This happened in an adventure I shared with Bob.

In Maryville, Missouri during the late 1960s, there was a lot of sex going on. Maryville was a small town of about 7000 residents and the college had, if I recall, about 3000 students. In fall of 1968, when I moved to Columbia, Missouri, a bigger university town, the campus

had about 25,000 students and the town had a population approaching 50,000. One of the first things I became aware of was that, whereas in the small town of Maryville, there had been a great deal of sex—even though that area was rural and more socially conservative—in Columbia it was difficult to have casual or easy sex. About six years later I would remark about this to a fellow I knew (the man my first wife would eventually leave me for), and I thought he might have an opinion because he was in Columbia, on sabbatical, from his teaching position at Maryville. Single, and sexual, he was aware of the same disparity and he had an easy explanation. He said there was more sex in Maryville because there was nothing else to do. At the time, I dismissed his remark, thinking it too simplistic. But about two years later, when again I was in the “dating scene,” by simply paying attention to how a date in the busy town of Columbia, Missouri often transpired, I realized that what he had said was absolutely true. My date and I might first go to the Dairy Queen and enjoy something sweet in tandem with conversation. Then we might take in a movie. By this time we had used up three or four hours of the evening. After the movie, chances were that we would drop by the popular coffeehouse called The Chez, have a cup of tea and listen to some good folk singers. Then on leaving The Chez when it closed at

1 A.M. there would be people we knew to talk to. So at about 1:30 or 2 P.M. we would be walking to the car, and even though we were young and vigorous and sexually charged, it nevertheless was the case that the night was almost over. We had commitments for the next day, we were starting to get tired or sleepy, and although there might be some kissing or a bit of something less mild (although usually not very protracted) we soon went our separate ways.

But in Maryville? There wasn't much to do. We could go to the Dairy Queen, but that was brief because there was no place inside to sit down because everything was served at the window and the customers could not go inside the building. As for movies, there were two theatres in town, though one was often closed. And back then these small theatres only showed one movie at a time. There also was the drive-in. But in those days its one movie usually ran from two weeks to several months, which also was the case with the two theatres. So there wasn't much of a selection for movies. And at that time, home video was rare—only available to those who had home projectors which were expensive and fragile. I think it possible that no more than two or three people in Maryville (not counting the projectors some of the schools had) even owned one. There was only one restaurant in town open of an evening that younger people would

go to and that was Jim's Pizza. So we might have a pizza. Then there was always the promise of parties. Since Maryville was a small town, we could go to four or five of these promised parties in less than two hours and discover the usual—that the parties were promises, not actualities, and if there were people there then they would all be bored, maybe drunk, and it wasn't really a party. So ... at 10:30 we would find ourselves in the yard outside of one of these parties, we would walk aimlessly (with a purpose that was not at all aimless) to the backyard, and there we were. Two hot-blooded young people, sexually charged, at 10:30 with nothing else to do. So we did what came naturally.

This situation happened with Bob and me one night. Actually with Bob, myself, and our dates. My date was Joel (accent on the first syllable), and Bob's date was Julie (accent on the first syllable too). Joel was a tiny, slender young thing with glorious auburn hair. It was styled in a page boy haircut, and she was strikingly beautiful. She relished making other girls jealous of her looks (or so other girls told me), and she had a well-deserved reputation for being a "speed freak." We had hooked up that night simply because neither of us already had a date, we were at the same party, and "there was nothing else to do."

Bob was there at the party with Julie. She was tall, pretty if not beautiful, with a body that was robust and muscular though not at all fat. Bob was short, slender, not very muscular, so next to Julie he looked like a second-class date. However I suspect he was quite attractive to most women because of the way his general masculinity came across, his pleasant face, his gregarious personality, and most of all his unflagging energy.

The four of us were in the front yard at a party that hadn't turned into a party and wouldn't. So Bob suggested we drive out to the small country house where we practiced music. We drove out there, the place was locked and neither of us had a key, but it was a nice night. As two couples, we wandered away from each other, but we didn't go far. And what was unusual, we went up. Yes; two couples were soon climbing way up into two large trees, and soon the sounds told me that Bob and Julie were doing what I was already doing with Joel. It was two couples copulating in a tree. But it wasn't group sex. We were in separate trees.

Bob's date was vociferous, and he was given to drinking, smoking much pot, and as a result he was always laughing. We heard his laughter, and her yelping moans, and I suspect the sounds gave us some degree of stimulation. Not that we needed much. My clothes,

and Joel's too, had dropped to the ground as we positioned ourselves (with some difficulty) in the crook of two limbs. She soon would demonstrate that she was one of those women who could come over and over, and this night I did too—if coming three times counts as “multiple orgasms.” But to my three orgasms, I suspect Joel came about a hundred times in three hours. It was one orgasm after another, with maybe a 30-second pause between each one. This amazing ability caused me to wonder if, right then, she was buzzing on speed.

Although the other three people were drunk, I was not drunk at all. I never drank when the opportunity for sex was there. I wanted to be at my most alert, and at my physical best, whenever sex was a possibility in the offing. I had learned this lesson partly from working as a bouncer. In that kind of situation, you need all your faculties to be at ready and at their prime. Compromise them with alcohol, with even one drink of alcohol, and it can mean losing a fight. The same is true with sex. Compromise yourself with even one drink of alcohol, and it can mean letting a sure ride slip away from under you before you even get mounted up. It also can make for the sex being ridiculous, as with another fellow I knew in Maryville. We called him JP. By coincidence, he and I seemed to always be finding out that we

had fucked the same girl. Always (being fun about it) I would say to him, “So was she good?” In a wondering voice JP would always answer, “I don’t know. I was too drunk to remember!” Too drunk to remember? Then he was probably too drunk to really enjoy it while he was doing it. Plus there probably wasn’t much enjoyment for the woman, which meant there wasn’t much likelihood that JP got to repeat the experience. He should have kept alcohol out of the scenario. Alcohol has no place in any situation when you are being serious about what you are doing. And what pursuit is more serious, more important, than the art of taking pleasure to its apex?

Joel and I probably made love for at least three hours, and most of that time involved serious fucking—ranging from slow and sensual to fast and vigorous. At some point we both were spent, and from the sounds that had diminished, then finally stopped, it seemed that Bob and Julie were finished too. So there I was, with a beautiful and very satisfied woman, about 20 feet up in a tree. Bob and his woman were perched about 30 feet away at about the same height. Sated with sex that had been protracted and energetic and satisfying, Joel and I promptly went to sleep against each other way up in that tree. I would later learn that the same happened with Bob and Julie.

I must have slept very soundly. The next thing I knew I was hearing a man's voice calling loudly, "Bob! Bob!" I jerked wide awake, looked down, and saw Bob's father walking around the house and then toward us. This gave me a jolt because I knew Bob's dad quite well. I next realized that Joel was gone. I would later learn that Julie had also disappeared during the dark hours. Apparently the two men in this adventure experienced a much more profound refractory period than the two women did.

"Bob! Bob!" By this time his dad had spotted Bob's clothes and now was looking up in the trees. He saw me. I immediately closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. But I was aware of three things primarily: I was stark naked, my clothes were at the base of that tree, and I felt freezing cold. It was mid-summer, but sleeping naked in a tree all night had been a cold experience.

Bob was soon roused, came climbing stiffly down out of the tree, jerked his clothes on, and went off with his dad. I would later learn that the family was to attend a church wedding for a relative about noon, and this was why Bob's father had come looking for him.

I clambered down as soon as they were gone, was relieved to find that no one had taken my clothes, and also was relieved to discover that my keys were still in the car. I would later learn that the

two girls had walked part of the way back to town, and then had caught a lift from a passing friend who saw them and recognized them.

I quickly headed my car toward town, but I was so chilled that even though it was already becoming a hot Missouri day, I turned on the car's heater as I drove the few miles in to town.

Later, this story would have another chapter—or a pair of tandem chapters. This was the first time I had had sex with Joel, and it would be the last, but later I would have sex with Julie several times. Also this was the first time Bob had been sexual with Julie, and it would be their last, but later he would have sex with Joel several times. (I almost envied him. Joel was a real beauty. And the sex had been wondrous. But I suppose I got the better deal by getting away from her. I would learn that she was hellishly destructive toward men, what with the sexual energy the speed gave her, and even worse, the craziness the speed brought on in dozens of other ways.)

A few weeks later Bob and I were more or less through with these two young women. (Or maybe they were definitely and thoroughly through with us?) Regardless, they together, with no intention of returning to Maryville, departed for .. I think it was Seattle.

So I was free to drop my gentlemanly constraints, and talk about this carnal adventure as much as I wanted.

Bob's father that morning had discovered him sans female companion, so Bob never let on to his dad as to why he was up in that tree. His father inferred that Bob had been drunk (which indeed was part of the truth). For Bob that adventure involved, primarily, getting himself out of trouble with his father, so when he recounted the story it mainly focused on his father's reaction. But when I told it, I focused on the humor, the uniqueness, the sheer duration of that adventure. And since I had no subsequent romantic connection to Joel after that one night of very protracted sex, and after she moved away, I felt no compunction about telling the story to anyone who would listen—and it certainly was a story people enjoyed listening to. So my reputation, all over town, became, "Baumli spent three hours one night fucking a woman way up high in a tree!" This sort of story gets told and retold amidst much laughter and perhaps with embellishment. The tale was corroborated by what Bob had to say, even though his focus was entirely different, so very soon my one fuck with Joel took on the dimension of 30 fucks. Maybe 50. No less than 3 hours of fucking while 20 feet up in the air and 2 people only 30 feet away are doing the same thing! This is high drama! It has

humor, it sounds enticing, and there is even a lacing of splendor around the story—given all that rank carnality, the sense of adventure, plus the added dimension of that refractory sleep during which the women disappeared. And all of it graced with a happy ending. Bob was quickly forgiven—what father wants to keep upbraiding his son for getting so drunk he climbs, naked, up into a tree and falls asleep?

So you see: “When Baumli wasn’t studying he was fighting or fucking,” took on the last term primarily because there often was drama attached to the fucking and I very much enjoyed inflating this sense of drama by focusing on the humor of it. The result was that my reputation as a satyr far outstripped the reality of what I actually did.

Note that I do not give Bob’s last name here. I still know him. I know members of his current family, and his family of origin—now made up of siblings and their offspring. Bob paid a big price, more than once, for his constant use of marijuana and more exotic drugs. That took a toll on other parts of his life. Hence, it would not be gentlemanly to go in to a lengthy description of the many other adventures Bob and I shared. Doing so would make him easily identifiable to many people, might occasion embarrassment for him,

and also would likely cause some people to feel true moral consternation for Bob's soul.

So how am I to make amends for what I was referring to, i.e., how am I to write about men I have known, when prudence and tact forbid my doing any more than merely alluding to people as colorful as Bob? Well, perhaps I can write about certain men I have known who were somewhat anonymous to me, and therefore can remain anonymous even as I write about them. As a matter of fact, just the other day I was thinking about a fight I was in when I was a graduate student in college. (Yes; the topic quickly segues from fucking to fighting.) This fight was unique in that it was the one fight I was in which I came closest to losing but didn't. (Believe me, I am not suggesting I never lost a fight. I did. Some of them I can now shrug my shoulders at. With other defeats, when I think about them, I still sting with shame because I am sure I shouldn't have lost those fights.)

Yes; this is the one fight I came closest to losing but didn't. It involved four characters, counting me. Two professors were involved, me, and my adversary. The other three people can remain anonymous since I never knew the name of any one of them. The only person now identifiable, in that story, is myself. (And we know that

this self, named Baumli, has no compunction about degrading himself. Especially when there is glory attached.)

The drama took place in fall of 1970, which was my first semester in graduate school at the University of Missouri-Columbia. I had already finished my junior and senior years there, so knew the campus well, and I also knew all the faculty of the philosophy department quite well. I was beginning my studies toward a Master's degree, and during this first semester, was taking a graduate seminar called British Empiricism in which we studied Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. The seminar was taught by a junior professor who had not received his Ph.D. because he had not passed his language exam. He would soon get his Ph.D., but would be "let go" at the end of the school year ending in early summer of 1973. He certainly deserved to be let go. He wasn't very bright, he was a poor teacher, and he was just plain nasty toward students who were not his obsequious disciples. I can honestly say that he, and his student cronies, together constituted the worst part of my graduate school education—and this very unhappy part of my education (with this professor it was no more than pseudo-education) went on for about two years. However, he was not without a few qualities—even if they were not sufficient to be called redeeming qualities. He could often

come up with a remark which was trenchant, true, and could serve as a guide to many parts of one's life, e.g., "You don't have to remember to not cuss in front of your grandmother." Also he had a practical bent which was often useful; he could put a halt to vapid verbosity in speculative metaphysics with a well-placed, "Give me an example." It is telling that these are the only two assets I can think of that he possessed. Truly, he was probably the most hateful, malicious, and feeble-minded teacher in academia I ever knew.

That seminar Jack Kelly gave was, as I stated, during my very first semester in graduate school—fall of 1970. It took place in the same room where almost all graduate seminars in philosophy took place—Room 429 (I remember it after all these years!)—down the hall from the main office of the philosophy department (Room 438), up on the fourth or top floor of GCB (which stood for General Classroom Building). This seminar (unlike most philosophy seminars which typically happened at night usually once a week from 8 to 10) was in late afternoon, twice a week with 2 one-hour sessions. As I stated, the only empiricists we covered were Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Jack Kelly understood Locke well enough as long as he avoided the details. He understood Berkeley quite well but had forgotten most of the subtleties. And as for our third subject, he had an approximate,

vague, and often inaccurate grasp of Hume. In fact, he not infrequently thought Hume's views to be the exact opposite of what they actually were.

Because of how my other classes were arranged, I would arrive at this seminar about 15 minutes early, and it just so happened that in this room there was a Latin seminar just before my class. The Latin class was obviously a very advanced one. I would stand outside that little room, across from its main door, and each time would witness the same scenario. The presiding professor would sit at the head of the table, following the text in his book, while one of his assiduous students would read—translating aloud. Rarely—usually only once or twice in the 15 minutes I would stand there—the professor would halt the reader and make a correction.

I was impressed by the caliber of those students. My own command of Latin was very good, but I always had difficulty translating Latin into English aloud. I simply read Latin, and when I read it, I was not translating Latin into English. I simply understood what I read. In fact I often thought in Latin.

After the class was over, the professor invariably came out first, and he invariably cast a quick glance toward me. It was a most

unpleasant glance. It was thoroughly unfriendly, and although it was not exactly hostile, it definitely was baleful. If he was not trying in some way to rebuke me, he certainly intended to repel me. He was short, with a big plump belly and arms thin as sticks. Plus his face was always red—too red—which made me think he probably had a drinking problem.

Somewhere along the way it occurred to me that he probably was not a very good Latin teacher. Those students certainly could translate quickly, and apparently with very few errors, but it was hard for me to believe that their translations contained an iota of literary polish, much less eloquence. I suspect they had learned well how to translate the way he wanted the Latin translated, then they practiced accordingly, and came away from their labors having learned nothing about the literary beauty of Latin.

I would soon become more acquainted with the Latin department. It was on the same floor as the Philosophy department, although down toward the other end of the hall. I noticed the few professorial-type fellows who came and went through that department's door, and my attentions focused on this red-faced fellow who always looked at me suspiciously and one other fellow who was younger and whose personality seemed more

approachable. In fact, it was because of his friendliness that I came to (more or less) know this second Latin professor. Unlike the first one, this fellow was tall, well-built, and almost affable in his way of talking with other people. But I had never talked with him until a very odd encounter which I myself initiated.

On the edge of town, there was a discount grocery store, housed in a dark and gloomy warehouse. The prices were cheap so I often shopped there. One day I spotted this young professor at this grocery store while I was in there, and as it happened, that very day I had been working with a passage in Latin which was somewhat puzzling. So I had a question. The question involved the simple word qua, which any beginning student of Latin knows the meaning of, but this was an unusual application of the word so I was unsure of myself. Acting rather boldly, I approached this young professor. I introduced myself and asked if he indeed was one of the Latin professors. He assented that he was. I asked him if I could pose a question, he affirmed that I could, and I stated it. He found the question interesting, told me that my way of interpreting it was correct in his opinion, and that was the extent of our interchange. Except for a very nice ending. In parting, I told him I hoped he didn't mind thus being approached by a stranger with a scholarly question,

and he very suddenly flushed with a sense of pleased excitement. He answered with words something like, “Oh no! I don’t mind! It is this sort of thing that makes me aware of how a university works. How it extends beyond its walls. Being asked a question like this,” he motioned around, “in an out-of-the-way grocery store gives me more faith in the educational presence of our school!”

So I began greeting him when I would pass him in the halls, and every couple of weeks I might go in to the Latin department’s offices to ask him a question. My questions were always elementary ones. That was my way with Latin—back then, and it still is. The very difficult matters I have no trouble with, but the simple things sometimes trip me up. On two occasions this young professor asked me for help with some difficult medieval Latin that came out of Portugal—where the Latin can be very unusual. I was able to put his uncertainties to rest both times. So I daresay it was a mutually beneficial collegial relationship.

Going in to that department office was always a weird experience. There seemed to be no receptionist or secretary. I inferred that the department was too small to warrant one. There were not even separate offices for the professors. The baleful fellow sat at the first desk, and if he was there when I came in, he would

glance up and give me the same glare I had become accustomed to. The other three people could all see me, and if the fellow I wanted to talk to was there, he always got to his feet and came toward me. Our interaction would be simple, brief, and I would go on my way—pleased by the fellow's personality and also glad to have the information.

In truth I don't think I ever knew the names of either of these two people. There was no nameplate on any of the desks, and I had no memory of the younger professor ever introducing himself to me by name, but since it seemed that I should already know his name I was embarrassed to ask him what it was. As for the other fellow, I didn't care to know his name. Suffice it to say that the two men were totally different from one another in personality, in physical build, and probably they were very different in rank too. The red-faced fellow sat at the first desk as one entered the office; the younger fellow sat all the way at the back of that long, narrow room. This caused me to think that the red-faced fellow was the chairman, and the fellow I was fond of ranked lowest on their totem pole.

As matters turned out I would, many years later, come to know a third member of that department. I don't even remember how we met, but he was in poor health, rather fat, and quite bisexual. Having

been married, he had two children, but now he was divorced. When I met him he was romantically involved with a man, but their relationship would soon end. As a result, although we had shared a couple of meals in a cafe, and had enjoyed some discussions about Virgil's Latin, our relating soon became complicated because since I was uncoupled at the time, and even though I had made it clear that I was completely heterosexual, he began earnestly courting me. The atmosphere was highly charged, his romantic overtures were scarcely subtle, and I became so emotionally uncomfortable with him—so sexually uncomfortable—I attenuated the relationship so effectively it soon came to an end. I considered this unfortunate. We had shared a good collegial relationship. His expertise was in ancient Latin; mine was in medieval Latin. He certainly was no brilliant Latin scholar, but he was good, so we both enjoyed some intense scholarly discussions. But a sexual relationship? No. I wasn't interested in sex with any man. Certainly not with a pudgy, unhealthy man who spent much time talking about problems with the vascular system around his heart and the more dangerous vascular problems with his kidneys. Sex with a flabby male vessel of flaccid, leaking veins? That definitely was not for me. I backed away.

But getting to know this man (I need not mention his name) would happen about 10 years later. Meanwhile, twice a week I stood outside that Latin seminar taught by the red-faced pudgy fellow who made sure to cast a withering glare in my direction as he left that seminar. I doubt he was ever a nice fellow toward anyone and I did not have good feelings about him. I didn't enjoy being judged with what seemed to be resentful suspicion whenever he saw me, which was about three or four times a week—as he left his classroom, or when I would run into him by accident or enter his department doorway. Even though I had become a familiar face to him, and surely I had never done anything to offend him, he never once, not even once, looked at me with a trace of warm recognition—or warmth of any kind. Also there was the fact that I had come to the conclusion that he probably taught Latin badly. (A major crime, in my scheme of values!) So ... I saw him three or four times a week, I had good feelings about one of his colleagues and sometimes spoke briefly with that colleague, and I was (if I may say so without boasting) an impressive scholar of Medieval Latin. That red-faced, surly chairman of the Latin department should have had reasons for feeling good about me. Surely he overheard some of the conversations I had with his Latin colleague. Also, on the simple grounds of human decency,

he should have treated me with at least a modicum of friendly amity. But no. His attitude toward me never varied. It was so negative it bordered on rank hostility.

And yet, for the simple reasons that I saw him about three times a week, knew one of his colleagues, and stood outside the door of his dreary classroom, this man had somehow become my neighbor. And when someone becomes my neighbor, I take care of them. The result is that this fellow—a fellow who always glared at me—caused me to come very close to getting my ass whipped in a fight, maybe perishing in that fight, and I did it all for him. I even inflicted so much damage upon the fellow I fought, on this professor's behalf, I later realized I had run the risk of considerable legal consequences. All because I felt neighborly toward this professor who obviously didn't even like me and seemed to not like anybody.

Yes. Because we were in close proximity on a fairly consistent basis, because I knew one of his colleagues, because I entered the door of his department, because we recognized each other even if we did not know each other, he had the lucky privilege of becoming my neighbor. Which would suggest that maybe, contrary to popular wisdom (which often isn't very wise), some things in life are free. Especially when Baumli is involved.

The incident—the fight—began so undramatically one could almost say its beginning was nonchalant. Having put my books on the floor because I knew there would be a long wait, I was standing at my usual place outside the professor's door. I had just gotten there, so about 15 minutes would transpire before the professor emerged. And as occasionally was the case, the door to the seminar room this time was closed.

Another fellow, about my age and size, came walking down the hall and stopped right beside me. I had been watching him out of the corner of my eye, sizing him up. I could tell, already, that he was a trained fighter. He had the springy, balanced, confident step that such people have. Also he was thoroughly alert. I could tell he was either a boxer or a martial artist.

All this I had already figured out when he looked over at me and grinned. Was he being friendly? Conspiratorial?

I said, "This class won't let out for another 15 minutes or so. Are you hoping to see the professor?"

"That's my plan, but he won't like seeing me," the fellow said, still grinning, acting as if something was afoot and I would approve of it.

“What in the world does that mean? What business do you have with him?”

“I’m going to beat the hell out of him. When I walk away from him he’ll be on the floor and in a lot of pain.”

“What?!” I was incredulous. This was the university campus in Columbia, Missouri. Not a backwoods bar in rural Northwest Missouri where I grew up. “Why?!”

“For my roommate,” he said. “Last year he goddamn flunked my roommate, and I’m going to beat the hell out of him for it.”

My response was scarcely eloquent. I said something like, “Over my dead body you will.”

If my response lacked eloquence, his response didn’t lack spontaneity. He pretended to move forward, as if to shove me, but I sensed the feint in his move and was on guard for everything. And as it turned out, this everything was what he had to give. He was muscular, wiry, and obviously experienced as a fighter—evincing a very eclectic ability with the martial arts—the kind learned in the military. In fact, I later would marvel at how good he was, and wondered if maybe he had been an instructor in martial arts for the military. But at the moment I wasn’t wondering anything. I was too busy defending myself against dozens of punches and kicks, every

one of them intended to injure or kill. He was about my age, my size, and he possessed a strength that probably matched mine. At the time I weighed right at 177. This was about 6 pounds less than what I had weighed when I was in my fighting prime about 3 years earlier. In those 3 years, I suspect I had lost about 10 pounds of muscle and gained about 4 pounds of fat. I was still lean and muscular and we were evenly matched in ability. But 3 years earlier I would have had more of an advantage.

But we were not evenly matched in our fighting styles. This gave me an advantage, but it also made me more vulnerable. My style was what I had learned. A style of Okinawan karate which is almost, but not quite, strictly defense. Any blow I might throw was intended primarily to defend myself. His approach was the opposite. The military style means that every blow is an attempt to kill. Or to set the other person up for a kill. So he was coming at me hard and fast and lethally; I was ducking and parrying and blocking while fast moving in the direction of becoming lethal myself.

Here an explanation is in order, and while it might seem odd to pause mid-fight to explain something, the alternative would be to give a blow-by-blow account of that fight which would be impossible. It was happening too fast, and I do not remember every detail.

What I wish to explain is the mentality of the fighter in Okinawan karate. Everything is defense, but sometimes a good offense is the best defense. Something in the fighter's psyche goes on automatic. There are three levels in the offensive tactics a fighter might use with Okinawan karate. The differences are simple, and they ascend: After using defense only, the strategy then includes offense, and the three levels of offense naturally lead from one to the next: first there is inflicting pain, then inflicting injury, then going for a kill. If pain stops the person, that is enough. You only escalate to the next levels if you need to. And of course the levels are not easily adhered to. One might intend to merely inflict pain and end up injuring. An attempt to injure might kill. But what is important is that one's entire body, with the mind somehow involved, makes a decision to stay at one of these levels and only moves to the next level if the other person's tactics become more dangerous.

This was going on with how I was fighting this fellow. My body had made a choice, but there was no gradual opportunity for slowly escalating my response from inflicting pain and going on to the more dangerous levels. I knew this fellow was using lethal force, he was capable of killing me, and this was exactly what he was trying to do. So if most of my defense was merely avoiding his blows, I was alert

for any chance I might have for putting him out of commission—
whether it be with injury or with death.

In a fight it is difficult for me to judge how long it lasts. When I boxed, it was always interesting that most boxers said each three-minute round felt like half an hour. For me they seemed to last about 45 seconds. So my estimation as to how long the fight with this fellow lasted may not be accurate. But looking back now, remembering the punches and kicks he threw, how some of them were feints and others were relatively benign while most were intended to kill, I would guess that our fight, until I downed him, lasted about three minutes. I am even so daring, here, as to suggest that it probably lasted almost exactly three minutes.

The door to the Latin seminar, as I already indicated, was closed. That meant our fight was not being seen by the people in that room. But we also kept the fight quiet. It was almost as though we had made a pact with one another to keep the fight silent. Moreover, this is the way people who are experienced with the martial arts conduct themselves in a fight. The moves are fast, graceful, and relatively quiet. In a dojo, where a sparring demonstration is going on, there are yells and loud grunts and the slapping of blows blocked and the thud of feet shifting on the mats. Not so in a real fight. It is

quiet, except for the occasional sound of a blow parried or delivered. So for about three minutes we plied that struggle like Beowulf and Grendel in the hall as they strove mightily, but unlike the tumult of that struggle, our battle would never have awakened Beowulf's sleeping companions.

I had been in probably 200 fights in my life. About 80 percent of those I had won. Maybe 10 percent ended in a draw. About 10 percent involved my defeat. Most of these defeats had happened when I was very young and hadn't yet learned how to fight, although a few significant defeats happened even when I was in my prime. But this fight was different from all the others in one important aspect. I was mortally afraid. Mortally. I had known fighters, whether in karate or in boxing or on the street, who truly felt no fear. Unlike them I always felt fear. A lot of it. But that seemed to be a strictly physiological response. In those fights I never felt fear because I thought I might die. Now however I was fully aware that, with this fellow's speed, skill, and strength, plus the style he was using, I might die. Did knowing I might die make me a better fighter? I don't know. I merely know that I did my best. I was fast, strong, and skillful. He was fast, strong, skillful, and determined. His style terrified me; my style obviously bewildered him. He was accustomed to fighting with

people who used the same style he did. His style had the advantages of terrorizing the opponent and containing no reservations about killing. My style had the advantage of being able to concentrate on defense. His style was merciless. My style was benign as long as my defense did not turn into a lethal offense.

In the end, it was the difference in our styles that defeated him. And later I would realize that there were several other aspects of our fighting which gave me an advantage. One was that I obviously had more experience than he had. I had done karate, American-style boxing, and a lot of street fighting. And with every one of these three types of fighting, I had done a lot of it. This fellow had mainly sparred. That was obvious. The punches and kicks he threw, though intended to kill, when they missed or were parried confused him and threw him off balance. I also had the advantage that I was fighting on behalf of someone else. For me this has always been a huge advantage. I am always at my best when I am protecting someone else. In this case, even though it was me he was trying to kill, the fight had begun because I was protecting that Latin professor. My third and most significant advantage was simple. In Okinawan karate, since you are fighting a defensive battle, there is much less to do. You are alert, you duck or parry or block instantaneously, and although this is a

defensive style of fighting, you nevertheless, when the fight has escalated to a lethal level, are always vigilant for a chance to throw a killer blow. But vigilance is very different from constantly trying, and failing, to throw that killer blow. In those three minutes (which, as I admitted, I hypothesize) I would guess that this fellow threw more than 50 blows that were intended to kill. So far I had thrown no such blows.

At the end he did what is called a dragon's tail kick. It was directed at my chin but I jerked my head back and he missed. As he regained his footing he almost lost his balance. This reminded me (in an unconscious way) that long ago I had learned that one of the most effective strategies in fighting is to pretend you are off balance. It is so effective simply because it requires much better balance to pretend you are off balance while yet maintaining your balance. So when your opponent tries to take advantage of you because he thinks you are off balance, he thinks he is taking advantage of a weakness when actually, at that moment, your balance is at its best.

So I made a move toward him, pretending to be unsure, quickly drew back, and pretended to become slightly unsteady on my feet. Quick as lightning he struck. It was a killer move. Two spread fingers,

right to the eyes, which would have punctured my eyes, maybe gone to the brain and killed.

Apparently this fellow didn't understand that in the civilian world—the nonmilitary world—that is called homicidal intent. But of course I was not thinking any of this at that moment. I saw the puncturing blow coming, raised a knife hand, and he struck the edge of that knife with the web between his index finger and middle finger. It hurt. I could tell. It also disoriented him. This was the turning point in the fight. I knew it and he knew it. Things were now changed because he was feeling significant pain. He had lost focus and concentration. And he had suddenly lost all confidence.

I threw a kick with my right leg across to his right knee, hard, intending to break that knee. But even though he was disoriented, and not as experienced as me, he still was savvy. He lowered himself so my blow would hit his thigh. But probably because of his pain, he misjudged. He lowered himself too much, and that kick got him right in the testicles. A kick to the testicles from the front can hurt like sheer hell, but a kick that hits the testicles from the side is worse. It crushes, and the pain is (or so I have been told) so acute as to make the person feel like they are losing consciousness. He hit the floor, on his back, and I immediately kicked him in the testicles again, this

time from the front. This couldn't have inflicted as much pain, but he flipped over on to his stomach to prevent another such kick. This is when I put my karate aside and used something I had learned in street fighting.

He was wearing a belt. A strong belt it seemed. I simply reached down and picked him up by the belt as if I were carrying a bucket and began striding down the hall. A few times he tried to grab my leg, or throw a punch at an ankle, but each time it was weak and each time I set him down and delivered a strong downward kick to the back of his head, then picked him up again and kept going. At one point he tried to twist around, and this time I set him down and gave him another hard stomp to the head, but this time I made sure to miss his skull and instead raked his ear and cheek. I could tell it hurt like hell, and this time when I picked him up there was blood.

I simply walked down to the end of the hall outside the philosophy department. The philosophy department's door also was closed. I opened the door to the stairwell and gave the fellow a heave down the steps. He landed, sprawled askew about halfway down, and at that moment I felt rage. This fellow had tried to kill me. Tried to make a corpse out of me. I wasn't through and I wasn't stupid. I knew I had to hurt him bad enough to keep him from trying this again.

There was some blood on the floor of the hall where I had stomped his ear and cheek. But there was a lot of blood on these concrete steps where he had landed. But he hadn't yet learned his lesson. I was sure of this. I moved down to where he was, careful to avoid the slick blood, and with both hands picked him up like a sack of feed and threw him to the bottom of the flight of stairs. He landed hard, on his face, and I followed.

Then I did the stupidest thing I have ever done in a fight. It is called a "diving knee drop," and is commonly used by professional wrestlers in the ring. An opponent is down on the mat, close to a corner, and the other fighter climbs up on that top rope, then drops to the downed fellow with a knee. It is part fake, part real, and very obliterating. I didn't have a rope to climb up on, but I was on my feet and he was on his back. I dropped, with a knee aimed directly at his belly. But he was tough—still alert, still fast, still able to fight. He jerked himself to the side, and my knee should have gone right into that concrete which would have smashed that knee to pieces. But in a fight, if I am nothing else I am fast. With my knee maybe eight inches above that concrete floor, I flung myself prone and my entire body took the fall with the force spread evenly. So I wasn't injured. Meanwhile he had managed to get to his feet, but he obviously was

hurting. He kicked at me twice, each kick barely connecting. By this time I was sitting up, and I did a move I had thought about but had never before used and had never even practiced. From a sitting position I hooked his ankles with a leg sweep and pulled both of his legs right out from under him. Even then, amidst that fight, I was amazed at how much power a leg sweep delivered from a sitting position could have. He sat down on that concrete floor so fast and so hard I could hear his teeth clack together. The two of us were sitting, facing each other. He looked scared and disoriented. I hope I looked the way I felt: focused, determined, and not finished.

From then on it was total helplessness on his part. The fight had started on the fourth floor of GCB. We now were on the landing between the third and the fourth floor, with one more flight of steps to go before reaching the third floor. That meant five more flights—two zig-zagging flights for each floor—before we got to the first or bottom floor.

I kicked and stomped as, step by step, I moved him down those five flights. There was a trail of blood the whole way. At one point I very deliberately drove a hard, downward kick into his upper chest. From the sound I could tell I crushed something. Within seconds there was more than a few globules of blood coming from his mouth.

Now there was a trickle. Years later I would wonder if one of his ribs had punctured a lung.

I stomped his head several more times. I could have aimed a downward kick that would have broken his neck, but though my fury was unleashed, my homicidal intent wasn't. I kept stomping his head, his balls, his belly. Finally, at the bottom of the steps, I opened the door and looked out into the first floor's hallway. People would be coming in very soon for the next class, but there wasn't a single person yet. So I dragged him out there, then I turned away from him quickly, and started walking north toward the far end of the hall. I walked slowly, as if completely unaware that anything behind me had happened. I wanted to look back, but I fought off the temptation.

I walked to the end of the hall, exited the building from the north door, then cut to my right—to the east, toward where the side door was which opened in to the steps at that end of the building. I came back in that door and ran up the steps to the fourth floor. Again, walking at a leisurely pace, I went in to the hall from the stairway, then walked a little more than half its length to where I usually stood. The door to the seminar room was still closed and my books were on the floor where I had placed them. I picked them up and resumed my usual position.

In less than half a minute the door opened and out walked the professor with his usual suspicious glance. Once the room was empty I went in. I appeared to be reading from one of my books as the other students, then the incompetent professor, came in.

The class started. About five minutes in to it, I heard the wail of a siren. No one else seemed to pay it any attention. But I was scared. It was only one siren, so surely it wasn't a police car. At least not yet. The ambulance would come first. The seminar dragged on at its usual boring pace, but my mind was elsewhere. I was still feeling mortally afraid. I had come close to being killed. There are usually self-imposed, and mutually-agreed-to, tacit limits in such fights that involve the martial arts. But this fellow had only one mentality and one method. His intent had been to kill, and this involved using a military martial art which knew only one thing—the art of killing. He had actually tried to kill me. This was not merely a matter of vague intent. He had delivered many a punch and kick aimed at my vital organs. And they had been delivered with impressive force. Those were blows intended to kill. Intent to kill, of course, is not always successful, not even when the blow connects. But had he scored such a blow, even if it had not been fatal, it is possible that he would

have inflicted an injury so bad—so serious and damaging—it would have incapacitated me. Maybe permanently.

So I sat there, afraid, stunned, and also assessing what I had just done in that fight. I was quite sure I never before had kicked a man after he was down, much less kept on abusing him to the point where I was probably inflicting injury. What I had just done was completely unlike me, and I was reviewing in my mind what my motives were. There was fury. But mine had been a controlled fury. I was not beating that fellow because of fury although certainly I had felt furious. That fellow had tried to kill me. Actually kill me. But my fury did not stem from that alone. It stemmed even more from the fact that during the fight I was convinced he intended to kill that professor. (How could I not think this, given that he was trying to kill me?) And that professor, unlike me, would not have been able to defend himself. Not at all. He would have been killed.

My fury had been on my own behalf, even more on that professor's behalf, but it had been thoroughly controlled. I had been punishing the fellow, not abusing him out of cruelty. I wanted to put mortal fear in to him. I was convinced that if I did not punish him terribly he would be back, intending again to kill that professor. And maybe he would be looking for me too, this time with a gun.

I had wanted to punish his body so badly that his soul would be indelibly marred. I wanted the very idea of coming into this building again to terrify him. He would not be able to do it. I needed to make sure of that. So for the first and only time in my life I had kicked a man when he was down. I kicked and jumped on him and maybe broke his ribs and later I realized I possibly punctured one of his lungs while doing everything I could to make him hurt terribly and feel a dread so overwhelming he would be emotionally incapacitated at the very idea of ever going after that professor or me again.

Yes; that had been my state of mind during the fight. When one is fighting on behalf of one's neighbor, the intent is quite simple, even if the results are unpredictable.

That was what my intent had been during the fight, but what about my state of mind while sitting there in that seminar? I was relieved to be alive and I was wondering what that fellow might say when he got better. Would he tell the truth? I doubted it. He would be too embarrassed. Maybe even afraid of the police. But now I was wondering what the police might do to me if somehow they managed to find out I was the one who had injured the fellow. If the police arrested me, it would be bad. I would be suspended from school. My story would likely seem plausible. I would change it in one respect: I

would explain that long trail of blood by stating that the fellow was fighting me every inch of the way. That way it would look like I was defending myself the whole time, instead of—after that first stairwell—trying to hurt him badly enough, i.e., scare him badly enough, that he would be afraid to come back. Still, it would have been a grueling interrogation. In the end I would probably have been exonerated. But because I would have been suspended from classes for a time while the investigation was going on, many of my classes would have been missed, and there would have been grilling by the police and maybe the expense of a lawyer.

The siren had come, it had stayed silent for a few minutes, then I had heard it go away. Since the siren was on as they drove away that meant they were in a hurry. So I suspected it meant they were taking him to a hospital. Had I killed him? I was sure I hadn't. When I left him in that hallway there were only three things I was sure of: I myself had almost been killed. He had left an impressive trail of blood. And he appeared to be unconscious (although I thought he was faking that).

As I sat there, trying to believe the fracas was entirely over and behind me, I felt, not like a tough, invincible fighter, but like a scared

little kid wanting his mommy to come and assure him that everything is going to be all right.

An odd thought came to me. Not odd because of what I thought, but odd because I would even think it. I suddenly realized, clearly and surely, that I couldn't for a minute believe that the fellow I had just defeated had intended to hurt that professor in order to avenge his roommate's bad grade. Sociopaths don't care about a roommate's bad grade. They don't really care about a roommate at all. This fellow was merely using this as an excuse for a gleeful exercise in being mean.

A second thought came to me. Something I had realized for a long time, but this was the first time I had fully realized this particular practical aspect of a very strange part of campus life. Over the years I had become aware of it slowly, and then more thoroughly on two occasions when I watched the phenomenon from two places on high: From the very top floor of Jesse Hall—the administration building—and the very top floor of the Memorial Union—which included a student union, i.e., gathering place with food selections for students, plus many “campus life” administrative offices and an auditorium. Looking out over the campus from these two vantage points gave me a view of a large part of the campus. I found it fascinating how the

entire campus could seem virtually deserted and then in that 10-minute break between classes, there would be droves of students either hurrying to their next class or headed home. Those 10 minutes would pass, the only people left would be a few dozen stragglers hurrying because they were late, and then they would be gone too. Maybe a pair of people in earnest conversation would remain on one of the sidewalks. Maybe half an hour later, a single student, probably headed for the library, would be walking along at a steady pace.

That was the rhythm. Thousands of people. Five thousand? Ten thousand? I have no way of knowing even an approximate number but I am sure it was several thousand. All of them moving like insects following the trails of those sidewalks. Then gone. A deserted scene. All those people now stuffed into buildings.

As I sat there in that seminar, my belly filled with adrenaline, I realized what a service had been done for me by this strange phenomenon involving the movement, and then the interim of disappearance, of all those people on campus. That fight had begun, run its course, and then ended during that 45-minute period when one could count on there being no one, or virtually no one, moving about on campus. So (aided by the fact that some crucial doors to classroom and offices had been closed) the fight had had no

witnesses. And there had been no one present to watch the punishment I meted out to that fellow after the fight.

All that violence had been done in private because of the strange rhythm of how students moved on that campus, and then how between the movement those thousands of students were sequestered behind closed doors. This rhythm, I realized, would be difficult for anyone to understand unless they had actually attended a college. All that scurrying, and then the disappearance, of thousands of people was so uncannily predictable it seemed that one day a sociologist should do a major study about it. To what end I wasn't sure. I knew my thoughts were wandering to strange topics right then because I was scared and distracted.

When that seminar I was sitting in finally let out, I decided to go toward the stairwell where I had beaten the fellow all the way down those steps. There, on the first flight down, a custodian with a big bucket of water and a mop was working at cleaning up the mess. To me it seemed he was merely spreading the blood around and not cleaning it up at all. I started to go down the steps, but then stopped, realizing that I should act shocked by all this blood. "What in the world happened here?" I said to the janitor.

“I think somebody must have had about the worst nose-bleed ever,” he answered.

“I’ll stay out of your way, and go down the steps at the other end of the building,” I replied, keeping it simple.

That fellow didn’t realize it, but he had just given me a very valuable piece of information. Since he really believed all that blood was from a nose-bleed, then the police weren’t involved. Of course, they still might be later, but that fight had happened over an hour ago. If the police weren’t involved by now, I didn’t think they would be.

The semester was far from over. Thereafter I seldom waited outside that classroom. I waited outside the building. When I did go up to that fourth floor I was vigilant. I went around corners carefully. I kept a watchful eye without appearing to. That fellow had lost a fight. But he had had military training. Next time he might come back with a gun.

But I never saw him again. I suspect he felt ashamed at being defeated. I suspect, too, that he felt very afraid of getting hurt that badly again. Most of all, though, I suspect he felt afraid because he was thoroughly confused. He had tried to kill me, but had failed. I hadn’t tried to kill him, but I could have. Probably the result of all this

was that he had an image of me as someone about three times tougher than I actually was. Likely he had no idea how close I had come to losing that fight. He probably figured I was smirking at what an amateur he was. That I had toyed with him, as if I had been swatting a gnat. He didn't know that actually I had been fighting for my life. That I had come very close to losing that fight and maybe my life too.

Come to think of it, this fight happened for the same reason most of the fights I got into happened. Usually I was defending someone, or protecting someone, I cared for. Not that I cared very much for that Latin professor. But he was in my proximity a good deal, an associate of his was one of my associates, and that was all it took to make him my neighbor. Maybe this is a tribal attitude. Maybe it is a primitive attitude. Maybe it is even a primal attitude. But for me none of this matters. It is not something I ponder. I simply act upon it.

Thinking back on that incident now, it occurs to me that my adversary probably wouldn't actually have done much harm to that professor. He wouldn't have killed him. He probably wouldn't even have injured him. I suspect a few good blows would have felt sufficient. He would have inflicted some pain, would have felt smug about that, and he would have walked away leaving that professor

hurting, angry, and humiliated. The professor would have been helped to his feet, and then to his office, by some of his solicitous students.

This incident caused me to do some serious thinking about what it is that makes someone a neighbor. And when pondering what it is that makes someone a neighbor, it helps to consider the ways neighbors and friends compare.

I have, for many years, asserted that there is a crucial way your neighbors are more important than your friends. I could here go into a lengthy discourse about what a friend is, but I think Aristotle has done this quite well in his Nicomachean Ethics. (His discourse on friendship being, by far, the best part of that book. Maybe, in fact, the only worthy part of that book.) I need not here repeat what he set forth. I can simply add the very simplistic remark that most of us know what friendship is, and so it does not well warrant an intensive discussion here. However, it does help to keep in mind one salient quality of a true friendship, and this is that in a close friendship there is love, although this certainly need not be romantic love. (Except as in, for example, friendship with one's spouse.) This love has varying degrees depending on the closeness of the friendship. We are lucky when it persists and grows, and we know that most of the time it does

not last but eventually fades away. Compared to neighbors, one can say (even if it is somewhat an exaggeration): “Friendships come and go, but neighbors are here to stay.” Having grown up on a farm, this is a lesson I learned early, learned well, and experienced first-hand in various ways. The people whose land abuts yours are always your neighbors. Your neighbors also are the people in your community you work with, depend on, buy from and sell to, call on for help, trade work with, and sometimes you even have the delicate task of dealing with their truant kids. Always there can be problems. The problem might, for example, involve water drainage. A farmer’s adjoining land might have so much water running off his field on to your field that it is cutting ruts through your land. You would like him to build a pond to help solve this problem, but he can’t afford to, or maybe he just doesn’t want to. Or maybe the drainage issue is quite the opposite. You have a pond on your property which fills with water drained off of your own property, and also from the water that drains off of his property. But then he decides he is going to graze cattle on that field adjoining your property, so since he needs a pond to water his cattle, he builds one. Now there isn’t enough water to fill your pond. All this can cause problems. Major problems. Most of the time, though, a problem between neighbors with adjoining land involves fences. One

neighbor doesn't do a good job of keeping his part of the fence up, and this means his cattle get on your property and destroy your planted corn or eat up your hay crop. Or it means your cattle get on to his property and then go through another fence he doesn't keep up, get out on the road, and one of your cows gets hit by a car. The driver of that car then sues you.

These kinds of problems can bring about a major "falling out." I have known situations in which neighbors, stubborn and sullen, did not speak to each other for years. It made for uneasy, hostile, and sometimes dangerous relations.

However, even if that one farmer, always irresponsible and uncaring, gets in an accident and his frantic wife makes a phone call, every neighbor who can be reached will be there within minutes. They will do everything they can to help. They will do his chores while he recuperates, they will help in small ways financially, they might even get together as a crew and spend a couple of days fixing those fences. This accident allows them an excuse to display a benevolence they were too stubborn and resentful to display before.

So when that farmer recuperates, if he has an ounce of decency he then feels grateful, tries to make amends for past wrongs, and usually succeeds ... at least for a while. A few years down the road

another falling out might happen over the same thing. But regardless, that neighbor was there the entire time, and unlike a friend, he wasn't going to go away. You had to figure out a way of relating with him, even if this involved avoiding him as much as possible. And when the emergency arose, you didn't have to figure out anything. You responded instantaneously, and you gave the help that was needed.

On the subject of neighborliness the Bible has something to say. There is "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37) which is well known and quite instructive: A man, traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho—presumably an Israelite, is attacked by robbers who take his clothes, beat him badly, then leave him half dead. A short while later, a priest happens by, and ignores the injured man. Next a Levite passes by, and also is unmoved. But then a Samaritan (a member of a tribe that was not in good standing with the Israelites) happens by. He takes pity on the injured man, tends to his wounds, then puts him on his own donkey and takes him to an inn where he can be cared for. He pays for the wounded man's care, and then, as he is about to resume his journey, tells the innkeeper that when he travels back through he will pay for any balance owed for costs incurred caring for the injured man.

The Bible then, in the words of Jesus Himself, is very explicit. Which of these three men was a neighbor to the wounded man? The priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? The Samaritan, of course. He was the one who showed “mercy.”

So a neighbor is one who shows mercy during times of need.

But however wise are Christ’s words, and however much wisdom is in this parable, it lacks thoroughness. (This is true of many parables in the Bible, but a commentary on this topic here, however deserved, would be distracting.)

I must add that this Good Samaritan’s act of neighborliness showed more than mercy. It also showed courage. After all, the man lying beside the road might have been a decoy. He might not have been wounded at all. Instead, he might have been a member of a band of thieves, lying there appearing to be injured so that a merciful person, rushing up, would be completely oblivious to the threat of danger and then would himself become a victim. Or the man might indeed have been robbed and injured, but the thieves who violated him might be waiting for a merciful soul to come along, then rob and beat that next person too.

So courage was involved here. And when mercy unites with courage, there is an emergent quality that is perhaps best defined as

loyalty. The person rushing to the aid of the wounded man has made a commitment. Mercy is his impulse, courage sustains his impulse, and this impulse finds focus toward the victim and will discharge all necessary duties—all in the spirit of beneficent loyalty—toward this needy person.

This, I say, is what neighborliness is. It has the basic prerequisite of physical proximity—without this simple, practical aspect it can not assert itself. But once asserted, its impulse is mercy, courage gives that mercy momentum, and a spontaneous commitment toward discharging all duties which this courageous mercy might encounter becomes a persisting loyalty.

This was what was going on in my show of neighborliness toward that Latin professor. He was my neighbor. I was there, near him, many times. This was the practical, even mundane, aspect which helped define the relationship. And he had a co-worker—a colleague—whom I felt good about. That older Latin professor had a relationship with me even if there was little that was good in this relationship—in fact, even if there was some small degree of acrimony—given his surliness and the mild resentment I felt because of his attitude. And even though we didn't know each other's names and had never spoken to one another, he was there, I was there, and

at the very moment I realized he was in danger an impulse of protective mercy spontaneously came forth. I had the courage to act on it instantaneously, and this mercy that now was united with courage asserted itself as an unflinching loyalty. I was willing to die for him. I came close to dying not only because my adversary used such a lethal form of martial art, but also because I would not back down. While it may be true that refusing to back down is part of my general nature—part of my stubbornness and pride and even a habit, it also is the fact that in this fight I was mortally afraid. In most fights, once the combat begins, all fear leaves me. The grim struggle leaves no room for fear. But with this fellow I was up against an attitude I had never before experienced. In previous years there had been drunks who tried to kill me, or people using a knife or a gun who spent a few seconds trying to kill me. But then the fight was over and the issue was settled. Never before had I gone through a fight with an adversary this powerful, this skillful and strong and brutishly homicidal, who threw dozens of punches at me, any one of which could have killed. Each of these times I successfully evaded his punches. But many of those evasions were narrow escapes.

I suppose I could have run away. I could have become lethal myself right at the beginning. But I needed to protect that pudgy, red-

faced professor now and for the future. If I ran away, in another week or two this fellow might have been back, with renewed resolve toward injuring that professor. Running away from this fight would not have protected that professor from future harm. My act of mercy, my courage, was a loyalty that took every eventual possibility into account. That neighbor needed my protection, now and for the future—now and forever, amen.

This also is why, as I stomped that fellow all the way down those flights of steps, I went beyond my usual training and tendency, which was to engage in a defensive fight only. I knew I needed to scare that brute so badly I could be sure he would never risk trying to hurt that professor again.

And yet, a very curious, even baffling, thought comes to me just now. As much as I feared, hated, and wanted to obliterate that punk, the mere fact that we fought one another—that we plied with our bodies in tandem—causes me to wonder if maybe, in a vague and curious way, the perverse intimacy of this shared animosity resulted in his also becoming my neighbor. Yes; somehow I suspect that, in some ways, I subsequently would have acted neighborly toward him simply as a result of this strange bond which arose (erupted?) between us because we, together, had engaged in lethal combat. Of

course I am not sure of this. But I feel (even believe) that there lurks a disturbing truth in what I am here speculating my way toward. And of course I am fully aware that any sense of neighborliness I might subsequently have felt toward this fellow would not have been easy—could never rest easy. I would have been cautious, untrusting, reluctant. But I do suspect, even fear, that there would have persisted some degree of obligation, loyalty, even protectiveness toward him in certain situations which could have come up.

Does fellowship—even estranged and hating fellowship—warrant a neighborly attitude? Perhaps, somehow, it sometimes does. But I am not sure of any judgement here (which fortunately was never put to the test) and I do not well understand this terrain I am failing to demarcate even as I contemplate it.

But (almost as an aside) one very salient matter bears emphasis here. There may arise the suspicion that my act toward that professor actually was not so neighborly. That really it was my macho inability to back down from a fight that made me do battle on that fellow's behalf. I have already registered a denial to this possibility, but that denial was too cursory; someone might judge it as more peremptory than explanatory.

Perhaps the veracity of that act's being a show of neighborliness, rather than a show of macho pride, can be believed if I here recount some of the details about the fights I backed down from. Even fled from. There were not many such fights, but I do remember four.

The first happened when I was in the 6th grade. In other words, I was 11 years old. The student I was up against was in the 8th grade. He generally was a nice fellow, but things had come to a ruckus, although I have no memory of what brought this about. We both were attending a Catholic parochial grade school, this school had a limited budget, so each of its two buses ran two separate routes taking the children home. My trip involved the second trip of the bus I rode. This meant about an hour wait after school let out. That 8th-grader informed me that during the hour between the two bus trips there would be time enough for us to have our fight.

He was taller than me by a foot, he weighed probably 30 pounds more than me, and I was a scared little kid. I went in the restroom, entered a stall and closed the door, and sat on one of the stools with my feet pulled up so if he came in looking for me he would not readily see me. I thought to lock the door of the stall, but then I realized that

if I left the door slightly ajar and he looked in the room, he would assume no one was in the stalls.

I think this ruse worked. I did hear the door to the restroom open at one point, it was held open a few seconds, then the person went away. I stayed in there, very afraid, while listening carefully for the bus. At last I heard it pull up. I ran out to the bus, got on, and my adversary was already seated. He challenged me loudly, saying he looked all over for me, and I answered bravely that I had looked for him but hadn't been able to find him. Surely everybody knew I was lying. That was a relatively small building, with an open schoolyard, so we would have had no trouble finding each other.

I felt embarrassment and ashamed, but by the next day, it seemed we both had forgotten about the matter. He was generally good-natured, we normally had little to do with each other, and I think it was just plain more convenient for him (and more true to his basic nature) to let the matter drop. I was glad the threat had gone away, but I could not deny to myself that I had cowardly avoided a fight. This may be understandable. I was just a child. But still, that is one fight I was afraid of and ran from.

The second one has no excuses. I was not a little child. I was a seasoned boxer and well trained in karate. I also spent a great deal of

time with my best friend Roger, who was a poor boxer, but very good in karate though not as good as me. He was bigger and stronger than me, but I was tougher and more skillful. I was by nature an easy-going fellow who wanted to stay out of trouble. Roger was a sociopath, enjoyed always being in trouble, and I think part of my attraction to him was the fact that I gained a kind of vicarious pleasure in spending time with someone who routinely did the crazy things I couldn't bring myself to do.

Roger was a pool player and a pool shark. Sometimes we would take a road trip for one or two days, having little money, and we would stop at a "pool hall" where we knew people would not know Roger's reputation as a good pool player. He would start playing, and then very carefully move the competition up. He would lose, then win, then almost lose but win, and so it would go until he would be playing people on bets. The trick was to keep people convinced that he wasn't a pool shark, and to keep the bets low enough that no one got angry when they lost, and stop the games before tempers escalated. The sharking often ended with Roger going out to the car pretending to get something. I would already be out there, and we would drive away.

So on this day—when I was fast moving in the direction of getting a black belt in karate, had been in (and usually won) a lot of street fights, and had proved myself quite good in American-style boxing, we were in a pool hall that also was a bar. I was seated on a stool at the bar, Roger was already winning money while doing a good job of pretending to be baffled by his winning streak, and I had allowed myself the indulgence of ordering one beer. I was only 20 years old, so could not drink legally for another year, but in those rural, out-of-the-way joints, no one really cared about your age if you looked reasonably close to being at the legal age of 21.

As I sat there, watching Roger play, a fellow walked over and sat down on the stool directly to my right. Then, in a quiet, steady voice he began berating me. He had seen my car outside, had noticed the Missouri license plates, and wanted to know what the hell I thought I was doing coming up to Iowa? Didn't I know that Iowa people beat the shit out of Missouri people every chance they get? He would beat me up so bad I wouldn't be able to drive home. I would have to call my mommy to come and get me. And he would take a ball bat to my car, break every piece of glass, and put a few dents in the body of the car too.

This raised my temper. My beautiful 1950 Pontiac hearse? Do that kind of damage to my precious car? He went on to tell me I was ugly, any minute he was going to make me uglier and then obliterate me, and I became aware that I was becoming very, very afraid. My main fear came from the fact that he just seemed so calm. Plus he was about the most muscular fellow I had ever seen. He was about my height, he was as lean as I was, but he must have out-weighed me by at least 20 pounds. All that muscle. And I could tell it was hard muscle. Muscle that got used.

This was truly making me lose my nerve. That calm steady voice of his as he told me all the awful things he was going to do to me, and the fact that I had no idea why I had evoked this kind of hostility, was totally surreal.

I was afraid. Soon I was more than afraid. I was trembling. I looked down at my bottle of beer. It was about half full. I reached for it as if to take a drink, put my hand down over its neck, and in one hard swipe smashed it to my right directly against his jaw. The bottle broke with a loud thump and shattered.

I expected him to immediately start fighting. But instead he just smiled at me, with a kind of sardonic disbelief while shaking his head slowly, as if to tell me that he couldn't believe I would be so stupid as

to think that merely smashing a beer bottle across his jaw would hurt him, slow him down, or in any way injure him.

In a second I lost all nerve. That fellow had “freaked me out.” He had psyched me out. He had beaten me down with words and his confidence and his apparent imperviousness to pain.

I flung myself off that stool and ran for the door, yelling at Roger to follow. Roger did, not because he was scared, but to find out what was going on.

“I’ll tell you in the car!” I yelled, and he obediently followed.

I started the car, spun gravel as we headed out, and we got away from there fast.

I didn’t see the fellow, in my rear-view mirror, emerge from the building. No one else came out. We were on the little two-lane blacktop and moving fast. Roger was annoyed. “I was winning that game, Francis. What the hell happened?”

I explained, as best I could. Roger couldn’t understand, and wanted to go back. He would fight the fellow. He insisted on it. But no. I would have nothing to do with either of us fighting that fellow. I was convinced that he could handle both of us and still be smiling with disbelief that we had thought we could possibly beat him. And then he would start demolishing my car.

So that is one fight where I definitely was a coward. I had no excuse. All I have is an explanation. Somehow that fellow made me lose my nerve. Completely.

What would have happened if we had fought? I don't know. He was tough. So was I. He definitely had to be stronger than me. But I doubt he knew karate. So it is difficult to say what would have been the outcome. I was about as tough as they come, but I am sure I was not as strong as that fellow was. Roger probably was, but Roger had too many deficits. The main one was that he didn't have stamina. He fought best when we fought together, against a group. I knew how to use his strength in a fight while making sure I did what required stamina. But a fight against this fellow: two against one would have been considered cowardly. Had he fought us one at a time, I suspect he would have nailed Roger in less than a minute. Could he have beaten me? I don't know. Here applies the old Chinese Kung Fu saying about martial artists: "When two tigers fight, one will be killed, and the other badly wounded." If I had fought that fellow, I believe this would have been the outcome.

Yes; in this situation, I was a coward. I can give many an excuse about how the fellow caused me to lose my nerve, how he just seemed so weird, how the situation itself seemed so weird, but the

fact remains that I lost my nerve. I succumbed to cowardice and I ran. Yes. I literally ran.

The third situation also involves pure cowardice. It happened during the early summer of 1969. I had taken a class at The University of Missouri-Columbia in geology with a fellow named Lowell German, and even though I felt he was basically a low-life sociopath, I enjoyed his company. At the end of that school year—my junior year—he hatched the scheme that I come back to his home in Illinois, where his parents lived, and we would find employment together.

No other employment opportunities had presented for the summer, so I went with him, taking along my cat Plato. The trip was a dismal failure. There were no job opportunities. We went to the employment office, and I would witness the morning rituals of the approximately 50 employees. For the first 45 minutes or so they would read their newspapers, drink coffee, make personal phone calls, and one fellow even shaved with an electric razor every morning at his desk. Finally the names would be called. One morning my name got called first, and I went to a desk near the back of the big room. The 50 or so employees all sat at cluttered desks, with no partitions separating one person from the other, so there was a great deal of talk and clatter. I sat down at this fellow's desk and waited

perhaps 15 minutes while he phoned several junk yards trying to find a rear-view mirror for his Studebaker car.

At last he picked up the form I had filled out, looked it over, and said in a bored voice, “Well, we don’t really have any jobs right now. But we’ll keep your name on file.” I said a few polite words, but the futility of the situation was all too obvious. There were no jobs for people like me. But there were 50 jobs for people like this fellow whose only job was to tell other people there were no jobs.

Low-life that he was, Lowell had the conviction that the best way to search for a job was to go from one bar to another and have a beer (“bee-yer” he pronounced it, with a strong accent on the first syllable), and “ask around” about whether there was any work. So we would go into a bar, order a bee-yer, he would talk to a couple of people—usually people he already knew, and it soon became obvious that he wasn’t even looking for a job. He was just finding an excuse to stop at a bar and drink another bee-yer.

At one bar we had just entered, as I was looking around getting my bearings, a very pleasant-looking fellow walked up to me and, in the most affable and friendly voice imaginable said, “I want you to know that I have a friend over here and he wants to fight you.” I was just stunned. A fellow so friendly, so gentle in demeanor, would say

something like that? I looked around, confused, but that friend of his stepped forward, both fists up, and without hesitating threw a punch that I saw coming but didn't do anything about. The punch hit me in the mouth and raised a welt, but he then backed up, as if expecting me to start fighting. I just stood there, totally confused, doing my best to act as if I was oblivious to what had just happened. Then I said to Lowell, "Let's go. There's nothing here." We went to the door, and once outside, ran at a sprint for his car. As we took off, spinning in loose gravel, several of the fellows ran outside, clapping their hands at us as if they were driving away pesky dogs.

"I can't believe that guy managed to hit you so easily," Lowell said. I replied that I couldn't believe it either.

Later that evening I would discover why he had managed to hit me so easily. I was getting sick. Lowell was too. We had some kind of flu, and we would spend several days in bed with a high fever. So that is probably why I made such a poor showing of myself—actually, no showing of myself—when it came to ducking or parrying a blow that day. The confusion was part of it too. But the fact remains, whatever state of mind I was in or whatever state of physical malaise my body was succumbing to, I became a coward and ran. Just plain ran to that car. As did Lowell. We both fled.

I stayed there with Lowell and his parents about another week after we got over the flu. It had become obvious that there were no employment opportunities, and I went back to my old home grounds in Northwest Missouri. There I found employment. Lowell later would get a job that his dad found for him.

This was, as I stated, summer of 1969. A little more than a year later, in fall of 1970, I would fight the grim battle this story is mainly concerned with.

The fourth time I ran from a fight was maybe a year after the battle with the martial artist. I was playing in a jazz band, about 70 miles from Columbia where I lived, the gig was over and all the band members had left except for myself and Barry Bush—the saxophone player—who was riding with me. We both were about the same age (early 20s), we both had long hair and beards, and we were playing in a small rural town out in the middle of nowhere. (So to speak.) We were leaving, and in a kind of vestibule just before the main door, there were maybe a dozen men of various ages gathered. As we were going through that little room, being friendly and polite, the room suddenly grew silent and there was tension in the air. Several fellows blocked our way to the door. A fellow over at the side of the little room said to me, “What do you call that thing on your face? A womb

broom?” I had never heard this expression before and rather liked it, but at the moment I was not taking time to savor anything because I sensed a fight brewing. A fight between hippies and rural rednecks.

This was a relatively classy club. “Relatively,” considering that this was a backwoods rural town. The men were all dressed in suit-and-tie. Barry and I were dressed in our performing uniforms. And now in this atmosphere things were tense, the possibility of a fight was being weighed by several people, and an insult had just been given. The beard on my face was being called a womb broom.

Usually quick on the come-back, I said, “Yes, that’s exactly what it is. And it’s a nice thing to have, because after I have oral sex with a woman, her juices stay in my beard and I can smell her for at least a full day, sometimes two. Having a beard is a real advantage when you know how to use it as a womb broom.”

I was grinning and laughing as I said this, trying to appear relaxed and friendly, but the result was seething silence. Absolute silence. I looked them over, judging the odds. Barry wasn’t a fighter at all. But I knew I could probably whip this entire group of men. In fact, I would have been surprised if I couldn’t have. But something had just unnerved me. That fellow referring to my beard as a “womb broom” was maybe being lewd, but it was just one phrase. I had gone

far beyond that. I had given them an entire scenario they had already decided was way more than merely lewd.

Yes; they had advanced a small joke they considered obscene, but I had turned that joke into something that was more than a momentary obscenity. I had changed it into a significant “encounter with the enemy.” I had crossed a moral line. They had nudged up against it, but I had crossed it. If they wanted to push matters in that direction, they would have the law on their side. And their grim silence—hostile glares from men, wearing suits, toward two hippies wearing flashy uniforms—told me that these men, wearing their suits, now were not thinking about a fight. They were thinking about calling the law.

I could probably have avoided their calling the law by challenging them, right then and there, to a fight. But a challenge like that went against my nature. It wasn't my usual defensive stance. So I knew I was not going to challenge them to a physical fight. I knew one of them would be calling the local police or sheriff any minute, and I decided to get out of there immediately. With Barry following, I shoved past the fellows between us and the door, then outside, on the well-lit parking lot we literally ran to my 1950 Pontiac hearse—where our music equipment was already loaded. I started the car as

quickly as I could, backed out of its parking slot, and got that heavy car moving. Sure enough, just as we sped away—off that parking lot and onto the highway, we saw about seven or eight men run out of that building. They had opted to fight.

But with us already speeding away, I knew they would call the law. About two miles down the road I pulled about 150 yards up a dirt road to my right, shut the lights off, and put the car in gear so the brakes, which would turn on the brake lights, would not have to be used.

We waited about two minutes, and sure enough, a police car with its red lights flashing roared by. I had been in this situation before, and I knew the best strategy to use. We backed down to the highway, I turned out on to the pavement, and we went as fast as we could following that police car. We saw his lights way up ahead, putting more distance between us, and soon enough we didn't see him. Several miles later—ten? twenty?—we passed him as he was coming back the other way. His police lights weren't on now, and he wasn't driving as fast. I had slowed my car when I saw him coming, but as soon as he was past us, I floored it. That old car could only do a little over a hundred, but I am sure it soon put considerable distance between us and that police car. I knew he might turn around

and come after us again, this time with his flashing lights off, and maybe his headlights off too. But I figured the fight had probably gone out of him by now. I kept a wary eye on the rear-view mirror, but apparently I was right. He never did come up behind us, and we made our way home without further incident (not counting the task of driving a car that weighed well over five-thousand pounds at a speed of over 100 miles per hour).

In that fight that didn't quite become a fight, I was afraid of an encounter with the law. I didn't want to end up in a local, small-town jail for the night. That was my main fear. I also felt fear because I was in a place that was a far distance from home. And I felt afraid, too, because the hostility had been entirely unexpected and I was fully aware that this group, all of them having conducted themselves as gentlemen the previous four hours, were now ready to do battle even though all of them were still dressed in suit-and-tie. So I had a lot of reasons for feeling as unnerved as I did. But still, whether it would have been a fight or an encounter with a hostile sheriff, I was frightened and I ran. I hurried out of that building, we ran to my car, and we fled down the highway. Because danger threatened I became a coward and fled.

Looking back on those four encounters, I don't feel ashamed of them. Maybe because they happened a long time ago. Maybe because I don't consider it odd that a man, however willing he may be to fight most of the time, might every now and then lose his nerve. His bravery.

If I don't feel ashamed of these times I was cowardly, I do feel ashamed of certain fights I lost. There were others I lost I don't feel ashamed of. Maybe I feel bewildered, or surprised, or merely accepting that I didn't beat the odds. But there are a few fights I lost and think I should have won, and those still make me cringe with shame.

But I wanted to describe the four fights I fled from. I want it known that I am capable of being a coward. And the reason I want this made clear is because I do not want anyone to think that what kept me going during that lethal fight was a pride that would not allow me to run from a fight. I had run from several fights before. I had already proved that I could be a coward. But this time I wasn't a coward. And I couldn't let myself be. Instead I had to be a neighbor. Knowing that professor as well as I did evoked mercy for his situation, the mercy engendered courage, and the two attitudes of mercy and courage converged into a feeling of loyalty. Mercy,

courage, loyalty—all these make for neighborliness. I absolutely would not—could not—back down from that perilous battle. I was fighting on behalf of a neighbor. Maybe not a very good neighbor. But still, a neighbor. Always, with no exceptions, it is absolutely fundamental to my upbringing and my nature: I am my neighbor's keeper.

Maybe two months after that battle, with the semester just over and the campus almost deserted, I happened to be there on the top floor of GCB. I had been in the philosophy department, and was walking north, so that meant I would walk by the Latin department's door. Then I would walk on down the hall toward the stairs that would take me down to the ground floor.

As I came close, maybe 15 feet away from its door, who should walk out but that pudgy Latin professor himself. He saw me, gave me his baleful look which I was quite accustomed to, then lowered his eyes to the floor and changed his course slightly so he could walk past me.

Imperceptibly but quickly, using the same technique one uses in karate, I maneuvered so as to be directly in front of him. Instead of trying to go around me again, he stopped. This time there was seething anger all over him. His face turned even redder, and I

remember it occurred to me that maybe this fellow didn't really have a drinking problem—that maybe his face was always red because he was always angry.

Trying to act as friendly as I could, I said, “We have crossed paths, more or less, several times. But we have never been introduced, and there is nothing amiss in that. But I wanted you to know something. It may be the case that, a couple of months ago, I saved your life outside the door of that Latin seminar you were teaching in the afternoon. I don't suppose you would like to know the details?”

His face grew redder, his fat cheeks seemed to get even more puffy, and in a grating, imperious voice—more articulate than I would have expected, he said, “You're right. I don't suppose I would like to know the details.”

With that he pushed past me and headed down the hall.

I turned and watched him. I thought he would, at some point, halt his course and look back. But he didn't. Not once. He went down to the far end of the hall and out the side door—the very door I had dragged that fellow through before I tossed him half-way toward the stairway's first landing. I was surprised at his not looking back. I had thought curiosity would get the better of his pride. But it didn't.

Maybe he wasn't a very curious person. Or maybe he really was as angry as he appeared to be. At me. Maybe at himself too. Maybe at the entire world.

Usually that kind of rebuff would have taken me aback. It would have hurt my feelings. Even a total stranger could have hurt my feelings by treating me this rudely. This fellow, even though it was obvious that he didn't like me, surely owed me the courtesy of a few decent words. Maybe even a few moments' worth of collegial familiarity. But he had offered nothing. No warmth. No courtesy. Not even the rudiments of basic propriety. Normally the tender part of my feelings would have been crushed by such unkind behavior.

But not this time. I realized I was grinning as I watched him walk down the hall. It was a grin of sheer delight. Not cynical delight. Not delight in witnessing another human being display how bestial he could be. I felt pure delight in myself. Delight in the fact that he could treat me this way—be a cad, a malevolent cur, and (in a word) an asshole—and yet I knew I was feeling completely unaffected—completely untrammelled—by his attitude.

I had risked my life to save him from getting a beating. I had risked becoming a corpse just to keep him from feeling physical pain and humiliation. He did not know any of this, and likely would not

have felt grateful even if he had known, yet the truth remained that he could act this unsavory toward a young fellow—myself—who surely seemed like a decent and convivial young man, and yet not succeed in making me feel bad. I was still able to savor, at the center of my soul, the fact that when a neighbor of mine is in trouble my own sense of decency—my beneficence—comes to the fore.

After the Latin professor had gone through that door, and was going down those steps which I am sure still contained miniscule traces of that fellow's blood, I thought to myself, "His attitude doesn't matter. I'm still his neighbor. He doesn't know it, but I actually am his neighbor. It's obvious he doesn't want to be my neighbor. There's no fairness in this. But being a neighbor doesn't have to involve fairness. If it did, then being a neighbor wouldn't be very neighborly."

I continued walking toward the north end of the hall. I would go down the stairs, exit that building, and even though I later would go by that Latin office, and even go inside it a few times to see the young professor I knew well, I never saw that older red-faced professor again.

All that anger inside of him! I would not want to feel that burden. Thinking about it didn't make me feel sorry for him. But I was glad I didn't have to feel what he obviously did.

This last time I saw him was January of 1971. That is about 45 years ago as I now write this. Almost half a century.

If I saw him again, would I be courteous and friendly? Yes. If I had to fight for him again, would I risk that much? Definitely. Would I expect him to be any more worthy of my beneficence? No. But that is the nature of mercy. It does not require that the other person be worthy. And that is the nature of courage. It is not daunted by the magnitude of the risks involved. Mercy, conjoined with courage, is what makes you into someone's loyal neighbor. But being a neighbor is never a passive thing. Being a neighbor is not just what you are, or who you are. It mainly is a matter of what you do. Or what you are willing to do. Now, again, I am forced to acknowledge the unyielding maxim: Once a neighbor, always a neighbor.

Maybe neighborliness is much too rare. Or maybe it isn't rare at all. Maybe it quietly keeps us company all the time, loyal and steadfast. Maybe we witness it so often we take it for granted.

This is the nature of life's blessings. They are plentiful, but often they are unobtrusive and humble. They do not flaunt their presence, much less their value. However, this one time, for didactic reasons, I wanted to say what is true about who I am and what I did and what it means to be a neighbor.

I know what the truth is on this matter, and now you know the truth: I am my neighbor's keeper. A lot of people know they can count on Baumli for this.

(POSTSCRIPT)

Long before I wrote this article, I had told several people about the fight that is recounted in this story. Most people I talked to about it commented with dismay, or even criticized me, because I had walked away from that fellow when he seemed unconscious, perhaps even was nearly dead. They claimed I was wrong to leave him unattended, to presume someone else would find him and rescue him.

The truth is, it never occurred to me then, and never occurred to me until these criticisms were first leveled, that I should have even considered that the fellow needed immediate medical attention, much less might have been near death. I suppose this comes from the fact that I grew up in a tough area, saw many men (and older boys) beaten as badly as he was—sometimes by other men, other times by animals or machinery, and always it seemed that if they were not killed outright then they were—or soon would be—more or less okay. Either killed or okay. So truly it never once occurred to me that this fellow was in medical danger, much less, mortal danger. I just presumed that if he was tough enough to take a beating that severe, then there was no question but that he would survive the beating. Also (not

least) I presumed that if he was capable of actually trying to kill someone, then he knew enough about what he could withstand to incur and survive the risks. Moreover, I felt sure I had not killed him.

So my getting away quickly perhaps involved ignorance on my part, but it did not involve callousness. Why should I be the one to answer questions and risk getting taken into custody by the police when someone happening upon him within a very few minutes would not be able to answer any questions and would not have to risk being arrested? It was merely a prudent decision weighed by matters of practicality and (however much I might have been in error with regard to my assumptions) what seemed to be logical thinking.

But what if it had turned out that he had died? I would have experienced throes of inchoate anguish, perhaps dire legal consequences, and some life changes that would have assaulted all that I had directed my soul and my schooling toward. But would I have felt I had acted wrongly?

I hope not. He had chosen to fight a battle, with intent to kill me. If I had killed him in our struggle, it would not have been intentional. I merely wanted to save my own life, and once I knew I had won the fight, I wanted to hurt him badly enough he would forevermore stay away from that building and not try to harm that Latin professor or

me again. The equation is clear: He intended to harm that professor; he failed. He tried to kill me; he failed. I tried to defeat him; I succeeded. But barely.

Lethal combat can go two ways. Kill, or be killed. I accomplished the miracle of managing to not be killed, while also inflicting pain but doing it skillfully so as to hurt him but not kill him. He tried to make me dead. I showed calculated restraint.

I do not pretend omniscience in judging this matter, but at present I feel no remorse. I do not like what I did. But I do not regret that I did what I had to do.

Was I proud of being able to defeat him? Some people have asked me this. Some people have suggested that I am boasting about what I accomplished. People who level these attitudes are entirely askew with their judgements. Am I proud? No. I barely defeated him, and on another day I might not have. Am I boasting? I don't see how. How does one boast about succeeding in not being killed? My writing about that fight, herein, surely has no boastful tone. In fact I probably never would have written about it except it seemed to me a fitting—even perfect—allegory for writing about the topic of neighborliness.

“Why didn't you just yell for help? If other people had shown up, he would have run away.”

The word “just” in that question is misleading. This word always makes everything sound easy when actually such things are never easy. In truth I didn’t even think of yelling for help. And probably the reason I didn’t think about it is because there wasn’t time. People do not realize that in a fight like this everything happens so fast. In a fight there is no time to consider alternatives and there is not the opportunity. Up to a dozen blows are being exchanged and parried or blocked or connected every five seconds. In a fight like this, you are doing what you are trained to do, and most of your moves are automatic. The split second required to yell for help would have distracted me, broken my concentration, made my breathing uneven, and this could have meant immediate defeat.

People who have never been in this kind of situation do not at all understand that everything is a blur of uncertainty and risk. In this encounter, for about the first minute, even though I was busy fighting what was a struggle for my life, somehow I wasn’t quite convinced that this fellow was so brazen and bold and foolish that he was actually trying to kill me. Surely he was such an amateur that he simply did not understand the difference between restrained sparring and lethal combat. This vague feeling soon left me though, and indeed it was only a vague feeling. It

was never a conscious thought because I did not have time for thinking. So we fought it through to the end. An unhappy end, yes, but what was the alternative?

As to what I did, I admit that my conscience does not rest easy. It is scarcely at peace. But with regard to the morals of battle and survival, I believe I acted correctly. As a civilized man, I feel badly about what I did to that fellow. But as a rational man, I do not feel I acted wrongly. Also, as a man who is still alive, I do not feel I acted wrongly. Such is my conclusion, in tandem with an awareness that no part of life is ever allowed the comfort of simple conclusions or unerring judgement.

As for other people's interest in this part of the story, i.e., the fight itself, their interest unsettles me. After all, I did not write this story with the primary intention of telling about a fight. I wanted to tell about the fight only for the sake of giving a context for constructing a moral fable about neighborliness. I wanted to present to others a didactic exercise that has intimations of (if not intimacy with) the holy.

So to my reader I present a salient question: Which would you rather ponder? An account of a bloody battle I fought, but did not want to fight, so you can gain voyeuristic glee from reading about a

blood sport? Or would you rather ponder the moral implications of a mystery? You need not hope to solve this mystery. But perhaps you could find spiritual value in attempting to make it sacred.

Yours is the choice: Perversion or prayer.

***July 31, 2015
to August 6, 2015
(Written in 7 days.)***

Posted: June 16, 2019