

We Are Our Ancestors and, Soldier For Peace (Introduction) Pt. I, Fight or Flight

I'm going to weave together parts of two personal stories that speak about the human behavior of fight or flight, which is an internal unconscious response that causes all humans to want to take arms or run when they feel threatened. I used both of the experiences that I will share to deepen my study of this one human behavior within me, and in people I taught in multigenerational, and ethnic communities in which I taught. The study ultimately led to the formation of We Are Our Ancestors and Soldier 4 Peace as one integrated approach to my social advocacy course work.

The first story was comical in hindsight and it occurred relatively early in my martial arts training, The second story happened many years later, well into my prime as a martial artist. The first story goes as follows. While driving, I accidentally bumped the rear fender of a vehicle in front of me twice, and a white man pulled over and got out of the vehicle. The woman I was dating at the time yelled, "he has a gun!" I jumped. I got out of the car while threatening to kick his ass if he didn't put the gun down.

The second story was when I was stopped for speeding in a rural area in the U.S. After running my license through whatever database he used, the state patrol officer returned to my car, and started yelling commands to turn off the engine and get out of the vehicle. When I asked what for, he immediately pulled his sidearm, pointed it at me while yelling the same commands.

In the fender bump situation I was generally confident in my martial skills, but I had never tried to actually disarm anyone. However, he put the gun down, and we began to argue. My girlfriend then called the police. They arrived on the scene within minutes, but as I learned later, she neglected to tell them that a gun was involved in the incident. So, naturally the cops began to ask questions to learn the details, and figure out who was at fault.

I admitted to tapping the guy's bumper, but the cops laughed when they saw my girlfriend's car.

It was likely the ugliest car in the city, I think. The roof was the only place where it wasn't severely dented. Before we started to date an artist friend of hers offered to paint rainbows, dolphins, clouds and mountains to mask the dents, and sadly, she accepted the offer. But, more than anything, the car kinda stopped like in the old Flintstones cartoons, with feet on the ground. That's why I bumped the guy's rear fender twice.

The cops also commented that they didn't see any signs of damage on the man's bumper, but they continued to inquire and the inquiry began to make me feel uncomfortable. Even though the police didn't do anything threatening, I began to feel more threatened by the two police officers with holstered guns than I did with the dude who initially pulled the gun. I have unfortunately experienced being stopped and assumed guilty by the police too many times in the past. It's not a sense that's easy to overcome, because the awareness remains with you. Situations like that can, and have, turned deadly. Those experiences are a form of trauma. I recall a friend and I being stopped in the pouring rain with multiple guns pointed at us by the police, all because of mistaken identity. And, as some blacks say, we can be guilty simply for being black.

My girlfriend and I were being questioned together. She was listening to me fumbling through my attempt to recall what happened, and I guess she wanted to assist. That's when she told the police that the guy had pulled a gun on me. At that moment I said, "oh yeah, he did pull a gun on me." In fight or flight mode, within a half hour maximum I had forgotten that a gun had been pulled on me. Once the cops learned that the guy had a gun, all of their attention shifted to him, and we were told that we could leave.

When I was stopped for speeding by the state patrol officer my wife and daughter were with me. As I mentioned before when I asked why, the state patrol officer commanded that I get out of the vehicle. He quickly un-holstered his firearm and his hands were visibly shaking. Once the gun was in both of his hands I could see that his hands were shaking almost uncontrollably. I intuitively recognized that he was in fight or flight mode. Thankfully, through my training I had arrived at the ability to remain calm in the face of danger, but inside, all I could think was, damn, he is the one with a gun. I had no doubt that any misstep on my part could cause my wife and daughter to be hurt or killed. I recall thinking I didn't want my daughter to see me killed. I only hoped that the way to get out of that situation alive or unharmed was to calmly but quickly respond to every command.

So, I didn't say or ask anything until I was on my knees behind the car and in handcuffs. Then I repeated my question, and I asked why (was) I was in handcuffs? I learned that a warrant had been placed for my arrest. I assume the officer was informed on a report that I was a martial arts instructor, which likely made him feel threatened. The shaking hands suggested to me that there was something happening other than him just doing his job. Maybe he thought I might have had the skills or desire to disarm him, or maybe he thought he had just caught his version of the outlaw Jesse James, or better yet, a runaway slave.

I shook my head wondering why I was in this situation. I thought it must be a mistaken identity. But, I was alive and in the back of his car, nonetheless, heading to jail. He drove about one half mile before he discovered that the warrant was non-extraditable. He had to let me go. So, he uncuffed me and my family and I continued our journey. I honored the speed limits for every inch of the rest of that journey. It took a couple of months to learn that a clerical error caused the warrant to be placed on me. It took an additional several years to resolve something that originated as a minor incident. A strange and somewhat comical twist to this part of the story speaks to a system that's broken. I returned to the area of the initial incident, tried to turn myself in, and the record of the warrant couldn't be found, so I wasn't arrested.

I began sharing the first story purposefully identifying the man by his race, but now let me add that I wasn't raised that way. I've had countless encounters of prejudice solely on the basis of being black, but I was raised to respect everyone, and treat others well. I was raised to see race, but not identify a person, first, by their race. In that reactionary moment of stress, the fear and anger made that guy push a button in me. Maybe my outburst was a stand against the multiple years of feeling less than because of white privilege, arrogance, and blatant or subtle discrimination.

It's possible that after I tapped his bumper the driver looked in his rear view mirror and he didn't see me by race first. It's equally possible that I represented all the myths and lies of who black men have been accused of being. Regardless, feeling threatened, the reactionary behavior kicked in. And, guns were, and are a learned response, and tangible form of protection against physical threat.

There is another possibility for both the man and me. We both may have seen each other as the bullies in our lives that we had not had the courage, or skills to stand up to before. Fight or flight is an automatic unconscious response that's hardwired in humans. This ingrained behavior can be considered ancestral, because it dates back from the earliest, to the most recent, human experiences. When flight or fight engages, it is not a rational moment. Training in the martial arts was one of the ways that helped me investigate and understand how to work with fight or flight within me, or my tendencies to counter the stresses, and challenges I faced. Trying to be a good parent, and mentor inner city youth caused me to step in and accept the responsibility to investigate and understand that part of me.

In retrospect, I place value on living long enough to have the credentials of being a grandfather. I say that, because when I recall my life, threatening to kick that man's ass is on my top 10 list of the dumbest things I've said or done. The state of fight or flight can cause anyone to make irrational decisions, including not recalling that a gun is

pointed at you. Another retrospective is in relation to the state patrol officer. Once I arrived officially as a martial arts instructor, I needed to list my occupation on an application, and I wrote martial arts instructor, somewhat proudly. However, I hesitated to do it, because I questioned that as a black man, was it wise to announce my occupation as a person that could possibly be seen as more of a threat? I felt that those words could come back to haunt me in the wrong hands, and many years later my life could have ended on a rural road, because an unnerved officer read those words. In both of those experiences, had they gone differently, I may never have known how wonderful it is to be a grandfather.