Watch My Back The Geoff Thompson Story Part One

by Geoff Thompson

Before I recount my experiences, I think it is best that I tell you a little of my early days so that you may appreciate that any strength I have now was bitterly fought for, and, though I say so myself, well earned. Also, hopefully it will enlighten you as to why a man such as myself entered the many splendoured world of a doorman.
All my early life, certainly from the age of eleven, I was plagued by the fear of fighting and confrontations. My mind was weak and constantly under attack from fears too powerful to defend against. Doubtless, I was not on my own in this respect, but at the time I felt I was, so I could take no solace in the former. What I found to my distaste was not "being scared" but the thought of having to live under its dominion for the rest of my life.

Many's the time I found myself sneaking out of the school's back entrance to avoid my would-be antagonists waiting for me at the front, and running off to the sanctuary of short-sightedness and ignorance only to wake up the next morning with fear and worry ever-growing at the thought of having to go back to school and face the "enemy" again, often having to go under the protective wing of my Dad.

I vividly remember one Christmas morning sitting in my bedroom alone and crying, worrying about going back to school in two weeks' time, and the misery that would then ensue, and my elder brother coming in and asking me what was wrong. I shrugged my shoulders, too ashamed to admit my weakness. My whole childhood was marred by such incidents: these sad, scared, worried feelings came and went at will - I was at the mercy of my own mind.

Hope came on the horizon in the guise of the martial arts. Bruce Lee took on all "celluloid" comers and held no fear. He became my mentor and I enthusiastically, though not convincingly, mimicked him along with thousands of other protégés of the late great. This was my first and biggest misconception in the martial arts. It took ten long years of experimenting and soul searching before I could admit to myself that "real" fighting wasn't like that. Anyway, I plodded on, conscientiously learning technique if nothing else. Confidence was born to better technique and by my fourth year in comprehensive school I had begun to feel less scared, the bullies of the yesteryear were confronted and beaten and tossed to the wayside. My fears were temporarily checked, only to be replaced by a weakness as great in its own right, overconfidence. I had had reached an embryonic peak and mistook overconfidence for fearlessness.

I had worked hard and believed my lack of fear to be the fruit of my labour. I realised later, much later, that the goal was not to rid myself of fear (that can never happen), more to control and harness it. Anyway, there I was, sixteen, left aikido and by now a purple belt in Shotokan karate, standing on a "Sugar Pedestal", not realising that when the rain came down it would crumble below.

Inevitably, the rain did come, in the shape of a six foot, thirteen stone (or at least he seemed that big) Jamaican called Ronnie . He had a face like a robber's dog and a growl to match. His hands were the biggest things I'd ever seen without lungs and he wanted me. I'd given his mate "tarmac burns" the week before, and done it with little or no fear, and Ron was not H.P. when he approached me to tell me so. I felt the explosion inside, my legs shook and seemed to cry out "overload, overload". That little man popped up on my shoulder and said, "Now you're f---ed, ain't ya?"

In retrospect he was as wary of me as I was of him, but he hid it well and I didn't. The arse dropped out of my trousers and the sugar pedestal crumbled below me, leaving me back on the unfriendly floor of reality. Fear and worry were back on the curriculum. Insecurity crept back in, and every time I felt even a little confident I subconsciously reminded myself of "Ronnie the robber's dog". I still kept up the Shotokan but found it hard in a tough club under the auspices of sensei Rick Jackson. I was "catching a few" and didn't like it, thank you very much. The fear that had dissipated returned with a vengeance. Just getting to the dojo became a battle, and an hour and a half's training seemed more like a week and a half. I'd look up at the clock and it would say 7:30, I'd look again in an hour's time and it'd only be 7:35.

Time distortion seemed to have it in for me, and being hit was not exactly fun. Now that I understand training, I realise that if you're not getting hit, or there isn't at least the danger of it, it becomes unrealistic and impractical as a form of self-defence. "If you want to dance to the music, you have to pay the band". Every time I used to go training I'd pop my head through the high wooden dojo door to see who was there. If I saw anyone who was likely to "give it to me", my heart would sink to my stomach, and fear, worry, and time distortion ganged up on me like a pack of wolves. This kind of pressure coupled with the discovery of my "mating tackle" forced me into early retirement from karate, and for the time being I was content to live with the fears and misconceptions.

I married young, and had our first child at eighteen years of age. Things looked different now, I had a wife and child to protect. If I wasn't capable of doing that, what good was I? With this thought acting as my sponsor and catalyst, I began training again, this time with Alan Hines in Shaolin Motga Gung Fu, a form of Chinese boxing. I restarted my search. I eventually attained my black belt in gung fu, but after some disagreements with my sempais (not Alan) I decided to go

back to Shotokan. I trained very hard, but there were many times when I felt like throwing it all in. Even when I gained my black belt in Shotokan I still didn't feel mentally stronger.

I'd reached the physical goals I had set for myself, and hoped along the way my "mental physique" would develop and I would erase my fear of "real fighting". At times I kidded myself that I had, but I hadn't. I still worried that I couldn't control the massive explosion I felt inside every time I even smelt trouble. There was one occasion where I did rise above my fears.

My Dad was brushing close to fifty-five, and you couldn't meet a more amicable, placid chap. I love him. The two half-wits who followed him out of the working men's pub one late weekend evening never, unfortunately , shared my love. My sister, sixteen at the time her girlfriend and their two equally juvenile boyfriends walked from the club slightly ahead of my Mum and Dad. The chat was light and cheerful as they walked down the pavement towards home. The two that followed them were of ill intent. One was tall and weasel-faced, with heavily tattooed arms, the other was short and stocky with short hair, a pig's nose and narrow mean eyes. Both were in their late 'teens. My family had no knowledge of their presence until they struck, in a completely unprovoked, mindless assault.

They set about the two young boys arm and arm with my sister and her friend, beating them mercilessly to the ground. The young girls screamed in horror and begged for the slaughter to stop, but their pleas met only the vulgarity of verbal abuse. My Dad, being of the old school, ran in to separate hunter and its prey, expecting a little respect due to his seniority, but got a hefty blow to the eye that sent him crashing to the floor. He then received several heavy kicks to his face and body, and watched, semi-conscious, as the two kicked the still-horizontal youths so hard that their jelly, lifeless bodies shifted along the floor. Dad's face twisted in a writhing mask of pain.

This wasn't the first time they had done this; mine wasn't the first father to meet with their wrath. They were, by all accounts, making a career of violence, and were meeting little or no resistance. Their names were big in a wide spectrum of the area, and because of this they were suffering no comebacks for their unsolicited onslaughts.

This time, though, they'd made a mistake. This time it was my Dad they'd done.

Courtaulds was a big, thriving chemical plant in the north of the city and could be smelt for miles around. Its musty, vinegary, property-devaluing fragrance dug deep into its workers' paws and infested itself into their clothes, cars and furniture. Everything, in fact, with which it came into contact. I hated working there.

No one had told me of Dad's attack. The first I knew of it was when I saw its aftermath in the form of the lumps and black bruises that covered his face as we met by the works canteen. My greeting smile dissipated instantly and my stammering mouth searched for words but found none. My eyes welled with a blurry, salty film and my anger grew. I prayed that his injuries were just the result of an unfortunate, silly accident, but I knew my prayers lay on thin ice.

My Dad unfolded the pages of his encounter. As the details scratched into my heart and etched themselves onto the plateau of my mind I silently swore my revenge. Dad wanted an end to it, Mum warned me to "leave it", but the hurt inside me wouldn't let it lie. I had to let them, Dad's attackers, and everyone else for that matter, know that you don't mess with my kin and get away with it.

A month of detective work, asking anyone and everyone about the incident, resulted in the names Grinsell and Davis. By the time my search had ended I had addresses and telephone numbers. I knew more about them than their own mothers. I also knew that their time was running out. I decided not to phone them or visit their homes because they both had families and I didn't want to involve innocent parties. I would just bide my time and wait for the right moment.

The door knocker of my third floor masionette echoed at the 10:45 pm knock. I opened the door to reveal Ken, my wife's brother.

"They're at the club now, Geoff."

His simple message filled me with a concoction of fear and excitement. This was what I had been waiting for: my time and their time had come. I bowed the laces of my polished black, steel toe-capped "equalisers" and made my way to the club.

The huge, high-ceilinged concert room in the newly-built working men's club was filled to capacity. My eyes searched through old and young, tall and short, for the pair. Ken pointed Grinsell out to me as he headed for the toilet in the corner of the room. My blood raced and I smiled to myself as I thought of doing the dirty deed in the loo, forcing his head into the urinal. But as attractive as the idea seemed, it wasn't practical - too many witnesses and too many people to stop me. I didn't want to be stopped.

"I know what you're doing here," said Steve, a tall, ginger-haired friend of mine, interrupting my thoughts. "He's bad news, Geoff, be careful. He always carries a knife. I know you do karate Geoff, but be careful," he added, shaking his

head.

I knew he was concerned, but I also knew he was trying to worry -monger me and I felt a little insulted that he thought I would be put off so easily. Didn't he know that this was blood?

The last fifteen minutes of the night had me waiting in slow motion. I watched as Grinsell and Davis left their seats on the low balcony that rose slightly above and back from the sunken dance floor, two young girls following them as they passed Ken and I on their exit, not catching the look of hate I threw then from my despising eyes. We followed them out onto the pavement, appropriately only a yard from where they'd done my Dad. Their laughing and joking ceased as I approached them from the rear.

"Hey, mate!" I called with a slight quiver in my voice. Grinsell turned his head to me. I hated him, despised him, loathed him, I wanted and needed to hurt him. Everything I despised in a person was epitomized in this piece of sh-- that stood before me, that dared to share the same pavement as myself, that had the audacity to breathe the same air. I saw my Dad's face stretching in pain, felt his anguish as boot after boot landed heavily on his face, and sensed his feeling of absolute helplessness at the hands of this scum.

"BANG!" I put my right steel toe-capped boot into his eye, bursting it into a gaping, bleeding wound, the contact of steel on bone sounding like a hammer hitting a girder. He landed heavily on the grass verge behind him, the two lady companions jumped back in fright. Davis took a stance in front of me, his hands circling in a celluloid Kung-Fu style, puffing and sucking air in and out, trying, badly, to control his fear.

I took his measure then ploughed a left roundhouse into his lower abdomen. He crumpled over like a folded penknife, though before I could finish the job Ken, who was only light-framed and young, lashed into him with fists and feet, leaving him blood scarlet. Grinsell, who had obviously never played major league before, recovered some of his senses and ran for it. I gave chase, hurling much abuse at is yellow back. Two hundred yards up the road, when I thought I'd almost lost the chase, he tripped and fell: all my Christmases and birthdays came at once as I vented the anger that had been bubbling inside me. He covered up his head and crouched up his body as I kicked his frame savagely from head to foot. He begged me to stop but I couldn't. I kept seeing my Dad's battered face in my mind.

My body, which had been aching for revenge, went into overdrive and only his whimpering, begging pleas for mercy eventually stopped me. Was this weak specimen at my feet really the tough guy I'd been warned to be careful of? Was he really the man I ought not to have crossed? He was nothing and will always be nothing. Sometimes now, ten years on, I still see Grinsell and he cowers under my shadow.

As the skin tightened around the birth and abundance of his bulging bruises, I celebrated the death of his reign, as did his many other victims.

Through the searching and experimenting I learned that the explosion inside my stomach that I had struggled so much to control was the adrenaline build-up, the "fight or flight" syndrome, a chemical release from the adrenal gland that hits and goes through the blood stream like a speeding tube train, preparing the body to fight or flight. It makes you temporarily stronger and faster, and partially anaesthetises you from pain. The more dangerous the situation, the bigger the build-up and adrenaline release; the bigger the release the better you perform. But by the same count the bigger the build-up and release the harder it is to control, i.e. the easier it is for you to bottle out.

Cus D'Amato once said that the feeling of fear is as natural as the feeling of hunger or thirst or of wanting to use the toilet. When you're hungry you eat, when you're thirsty you drink, and so it should be with the feeling of fear: you shouldn't panic under it, you should harness and then utilise it. So my goal became to control and master fear, rather than to erase it.

Now came the hard part, putting theory into practice. I needed exposure to stressful situations in a bid to conjure up fear in the hope that in confronting that fear I would become desensitised to it. "Confrontation Desensitisation", if you like. How to go about it though? I couldn't just go out and look for trouble - that would be going against the strict moral and ethical codes of karate, and also the law of Karma, "A good for a good, and a bad for a bad".

The only way I could find around this was "bouncing" in the Coventry pubs and night spots. But I had to ask myself if I could hack it: Coventry seemed more famous these days for the monopoly it held on violence than for its three spires and cathedral. I was riddled with self-doubt. What if I got hammered? What if my bottle went? Getting the job wouldn't be too much of a problem with a black belt in karate, but if I was a success and held the position any length of time I knew the bow tie on white shirt would effectively mean I had to take on all-comers. I was having a severe attack of the "Jonah complex", or in laymen's terms a fear of success. Abraham Moslow, the famous humanist psychologist stated,

"We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments, under the most perfect conditions, under conditions of greatest courage. We enjoy and even thrill to the God-like possibilities we see in

ourselves at such peak moments, and yet simultaneously, we shiver with weakness, awe and fear before the same possibilities".

So if I did raise the moral fibre to propel me into the kitchen of violence, could I stand the heat once there? The thought of living with my fears seemed to me to be worse than the fear of getting beaten up, in that the former was long-term, i.e., forever, and the latter was short-term.

So began my term of office "on the door".

Geoff Thompson was polled as the number one self-defense instructor in the world by Black Belt Magazine. Mr. Thompson is the author of over thirty books, a stage play, a BAFTA winning short film and feature films. We thank Mr. Thompson for allowing us to share this excerpt with our members. Please visit his website at; www.geoffthompson.com . A special thanks to Jennifer Barclay of Summersdale Publishers Ltd. Copyright © Geoff Thompson.