

THE MARTIALIST: YEAR FOUR, ISSUE TWO

A Note from Your Editor

By Phil Elmore

Thank you for subscribing to *The Martialist*! This issue marks the continuation of YEAR FOUR of our publication. Remember that this is only half of the magazine, too. The other half is our free content at **themartialist.com**. You may not always agree with what you read here, but we hope you will find it interesting and informative.

The exchange of ideas is vital to education – and education is part of what makes survival and success in self-defense possible. **You may read things here that strike you as wildly inadvisable** or as spectacularly good advice. You may read things you love and you may read things you hate. **If so, write your own article and tell us what you think** in a future issue of *The Martialist*. We will regularly feature point-counterpoint articles that look at both sides of issues. I will seriously consider any article that crosses my desk, though I cannot promise they will all make it in. This is your magazine and I welcome your feedback.

- Phil Elmore, phil@philelmore.com.

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YOU MUST BE 18 OR OLDER TO READ THIS MATERIAL!

I AM NOT A LAWYER and THIS IS INFORMATION ONLY. I do NOT encourage you to do anything. You MUST consider the legal implications of everything you do, exercising YOUR JUDGMENT as an adult. You also MUST follow the law or PAY THE CONSEQUENCES. The Martialist is for entertainment purposes only and cannot be construed as legal advice.

Terra Incognita: Flame-Broiling Fellow Travelers (Grill Optional)

By Phil Elmore

The Internet can be a real flame-fest, particularly when online discussions turn to individual instructors' or self-defense personalities' abilities "to fight." I've seen many an individual flamed to charcoal when such a topic comes up. If that individual has given in to the temptation to embellish his background, the flaming is that much worse. After seeing this happen time and time again, however, and watching the crowing (on both sides of the arguments) about who can do what to whom and who has said what about whom, I find myself growing weary of the debate.

I ask myself, now, whether it is truly necessary to get so exercised over such claims of prowess (verifiable or otherwise). At the end of the day, all I care about when it comes to self-defense is whether a given technique is reasonable, logical, and reproducible by me. If I try it and it works, great. If it doesn't, or if it seems too complicated (at least for me), I don't worry about it. If it is wildly inadvisable, I just might write an article about that fact and tell anyone who will listen. I no longer, however, feel the need to embark on a crusade, to gather the pitchfork- and torch-wielding villagers, to embark on a pogrom to cleanse the village of the nearest shambling monsters who've dared not to meet my standards. It is, ultimately, a matter of perspective and proportion.

Truth is truth and must be respected – but before we set out to vilify, expose, or otherwise destroy an individual, before we decide to dismiss everything that individual has to say about self-defense, we should look at the content of what he

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or she has to say and examine these statements *on their merits*. This requires us to set aside our egos and our righteous indignation, to take a pragmatic and practical approach. It requires us to set aside the mantles of fraud-busting do-gooders and forces us actually to look at things through a lens both realistic and somewhat cynical.

I had this friend in college. Let's call him "Don." Don was a really great guy and part of a fun clique of misfits with whom I hung around for three of my four years at the University. He was a musician – a guitarist, specifically – a hippy philosopher, a pagan who enjoyed esoteric knowledge and research, and competent journalist who worked on the University newspaper. He took death threats over a review he did of a local music group, introduced me to the *Elric of Melniboné* series by Michael Moorcock (a favorite of mine to this day), and took over my campus radio show when I quit W.A.L.F., 89.7 FM (doing credit to both of us with his rich baritone and eclectic musical tastes).

A committed smoker, Don used to roll his own unfiltered cigarettes from "Drum" tobacco and papers. The running joke was that he'd set himself on fire more than once in the pursuit of his habit. One time, I almost set him on fire myself, using a "suicide lighter of death" – an adjustable butane lighter ratcheted up to produce a flame so high that it was decidedly unsafe. I can still see him rearing back from the five-inch flame as we exited the local Sub Shop and I offered him a light. He used to joke about the loss of his eyebrows and my careless disregard for his well-being. Don was, to put it mildly, a character, and I enjoyed his company immensely.

Don was also what you'd call "liberal" with the truth, sometimes.

He could spin a yarn that took days to tell, when he wanted to try. He was always entertaining. The fact was, though, that it seemed very unlikely that all of the details of all his stories could be true, strictly speaking. I was certain that some of his stories were at least based in fact, though I assumed he embellished many of the details. Our entire clique started using the term "Tenth Degree in Bullshitsu" to describe Don's storytelling abilities. When he'd get rolling, one of us – out of sight of Don – would start signaling to the others with Karate-style hand-chop gestures, to the endless amusement of all of us. I think Don knew we were doing it and didn't care.

I caught him inescapably in a tall tale only once that I remember. He was describing how he'd opened a door in one of the residence halls just in time to stop a running man, some obnoxious student none of us liked. While it was amusing, I'd lived in the building in question. "All of the doors in that building," I told him, "open inward, not outward." For him to have erected a barrier into which the miscreant could have run, comic-book-character-like, was thus a physical impossibility. Don stared at me for a while. Then he smiled, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand. The rest of us gave it no further thought, because, ultimately, it made no difference to anything that affected us.

So, I ask you: Was Don a liar?

Of course he was. He was also a really good guy who, to put it bluntly, was also

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a bullshit artist. Anyone who knew him understood that this was just his personality. This fact didn't change the very real skills he had, from his musical talent to his academic accomplishments. Don was really quite intelligent and could hold his own in the deepest philosophical debates. He and I had many great arguments too, given my right-wing perspective and his own more left-leaning outlook. Nothing about his tendency to spin yarns affected the fact that he was, fundamentally, a good person from whom I learned a great deal.

Now, bear with me, because I'm making a point. I've written profiling articles specific to the martial arts, articles that run the gamut from spotting a bullshit artist and martial fraud to recognizing and avoiding the dangers of becoming obsessed with fraud busting. What all these articles have in common is recognizing the truth – applying an active mind in order to exercise critical thinking in your life, your choices, and your training. What an active mind requires, however, is not just the ability to be critical. It also requires that you recognize context and that you maintain a sense of perspective and proportion.

Were I to have concluded, "Don is a liar," and from that further concluded, "Don cannot be trusted and I will not associate with him," a very valuable and worthwhile friendship would have been lost to me. It is my habit to recognize my friends for who they are – and to recognize without rancor their personal foibles and character flaws, just as I hope they would do where I am concerned. I accept my friends on these terms. Yes, my friend Don enjoyed telling tall tales – but that did

not in any way diminish him as a person, nor did it detract from the many things he could do and that he did well. It would be the most obvious of logical fallacies, for that matter, to conclude, because Don was liberal with the truth when discussing his life and his exploits, that anything he ever said to anyone was a lie. In even the most extreme cases, this means that someone you do not trust is not automatically wrong simply because you do not trust him. The truth or falsehood of any statement does not depend on the credibility of the person making that statement, though it does affect your willingness to accept that statement at face value without verification.

Now, I am not making excuses for lying. I am, however, arguing for *perspective*. In the article *Tenth Dan in Bul Shi Tsu* (www.themartialist.com/pecom/fraudulent.htm), I asked the question, "Can a martial art with a fabricated history or lineage be effective?" The conclusion that I reached was, while the marketing of any given style or system has no bearing on the efficacy of its techniques (physical techniques either work or they do not), the approach of the individual practitioner speaks to credibility. "...[Y]ou cannot afford to trust those who place such a high value on pretense," I said – meaning those who overvalue the fictitious origins of their martial arts or combat systems.

What if the embellishment or fiction is not in the lineage of an art, but in the background of the practitioner himself? Let's say that my friend Don, the guitar player, used to claim to have played with various Blues legends in the clubs of New York City. (He never made this claim, but he could have.) When

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listening to Don play the guitar or jam with friends (something I did more than once; his acoustic and impromptu rendition of "I Used To Love Her" was impressive), no amount of discussion about his history would change the fact that he was just plain /good/. While his willingness to lie about his background certainly would affect his credibility (regardless of whether his personality and my regard for him could or would mitigate this fact), it wouldn't change how his music sounded when it was played. Whether he was capable of playing well was readily apparent to anyone who observed him. When I watched him, I was impressed. Had he lied about from where his talent came and I later discovered this fact, it would have changed whether I believed anything he had to say in the future about his past in the music business, but it would not affect what I thought of his musical abilities as I had observed them.

A person's skill in the martial arts is likewise observable and can be evaluated *on its merits*. Techniques demonstrated can be compared to the repertoire of techniques known to the observer. Assertions of combative theory can be compared with conventional wisdom and with the experiences of those judging that theory. Relative comparisons between the individual and other individuals engaged in similar pursuits can be drawn. While all of these judgments are subjective (emphasizing the importance of objectivity and neutrality in the observers – one can, should, and even must weigh differently the criticism of a neutral party and that of a critic who has an axe to grind), they are not useless and they are not irrelevant. Any

informed martial artist or self-defense exponent can, when discussing martial arts theory with a given individual, when observing technique demonstrated by a given individual, form a reasonable opinion about the abilities of the party in question. A motivated, educated observer can indeed form opinions about the advisability and viability of any body of techniques. The worth of such an evaluation varies depending on the knowledge and objectivity of the evaluator, but that worth remains extant (however variable).

Given this, it is not merely possible to separate an individual and that individual's claims from the individual's abilities and the worth of that individual's ideas, assertions, and techniques. I would argue that is *necessary*. Especially when the individual in question is known to you and has redeeming qualities, it would do you both a disservice to dismiss all that individual has to offer on the basis of his or her flaws. We all have flaws. Some of us demonstrate them to greater degrees than do others, but no one is perfect. Some of us are a bit more liberal with the truth than I would prefer – I am, in fact, a harsh and logically consistent moralist – but I recognize the value of perspective and proportion when dealing with individuals and weighing the value of their friendship or acquaintance. Those I count as my friends, or as associates with whom it is worth my time and effort to deal, I accept as they are. I do not dismiss all they have to offer on the basis of their flaws. To do so would be more than a logical fallacy; it would be *hubris*. It would be precipitous. It would be counterproductive.

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I have reviewed martial systems that I thought were absurd because those pushing the systems insisted on using falsified histories to grant value to those systems. The fighting arts of the ancient Egyptians or the gladiators of Rome may well have been superbly effective, but anyone claiming to teach them today is naive at best and a liar at worst. If, however, my study of the supposed Egyptian or Roman fighting systems yielded material I thought would be effective, I would gladly incorporate that material into my repertoire while winking knowingly at the systems' less than honest purveyors. A valid idea, a workable technique, and a fact of reality *have no provenance*. Their content is not a function of the character of their messengers.

I can think of at least one major knife company whose owner is roundly regarded as an obnoxious blowhard. Let's say that all the stories of his poor character are absolutely true. Does the fact that the man can be an asshole really change the nature of the knives his company produces? Whose opinion of the knife is more valid – that of a reviewer who knows nothing about the company and evaluates the knife on the basis of his tests, or that of a reviewer who despises the knife company's owner? In theory, the reviews should be identical if the reviewers are honest and objective. In practice, the only opinion that matters is the opinion of someone who can separate the merits of the product from the problems of the producer.

When judging an individual, do not confuse that individual's abilities or the viability of his or her techniques and theory with your personal judgment of

that individual's character. You may or may not conclude that a given person is someone with whom you wish to associate, but to conflate that assessment with all else that individual offers, producing a single negative judgment, shortchanges you both. It removes from the scope of what is available to you a host of ideas, methods, concepts, and tools that could be of value, while reducing all those around you to caricatures of themselves. Most human beings are remarkably complex and more than a few of them willingly engage in paradox. I am no fan of paradox myself, but if I condemned all those who were inconsistent, I'd spend my days alone. I'd be able to spit on those others from the heights of my ivory tower, smugly secure in my own righteousness – but if I did I'd be a miserable hermit at best and a contemptuous hypocrite at worst.

As far as I am concerned, unless there is a direct conflict, there is no conflict at all. What works is what works. What is true is what is true – and what is false may or may not have any bearing on what can work for you. That is pragmatism. That is martialism.

That is simple fact. ♠

There is no squabbling so violent as that between people who accepted an idea yesterday and those who will accept the same idea tomorrow.

- Christopher Morely