

Essay: Don't judge a book by its cover. Same for an O.G.
A work of non-fiction

In the spring of 2014 I arrived at Pleasant Valley State Prison in a bright red paper jumpsuit, a "onesie" if you will, for the adult criminal population, issued by the budget-conscious California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation that morning at 4 am as I boarded a bus from Wasco Prison Reception to go to mainline yard. After a brief stop at Avenal Prison I was delivered to PVSP, which I quickly began to call "Unpleasant Valley," because really, how pleasant could a prison ever be, even one with an "enhanced" program?

On this very morning I met Cory, a kid in his mid-20s who is smart, handsome, and a bit of a poet, if somewhat lacking in direction. At 5 am, in a holding tank at Wasco, we struck up a conversation in which I learned that he was two years into a term of seven years to life. He quoted me a couple of his poems from memory, and I was impressed enough by his writing and his friendly attitude that we became friends and cellmates and have remained so ever since.

We spent nine days in orientation, during which time we were locked down 24 hours a day, let out only to shower every other day, and taken once to the laundry service to get our "blues." Even our meals were brought to our cells. Woo hoo! Room service! Except the person bringing the "chow" on plastic trays was a CO called Miss D; she had a really huge butt, which so many inmates regarded as a positive thing. I just thought she was about as attractive as the overall architecture and decor of the facility itself. A five, though somewhat kind and helpful. I remember thinking she needs to eat way less grain, having recently read Dr. William Davis's excellent book, *Wheat Belly*.

On the first day in our new building I met Mike, a 29-year-old guy from my very own neighborhood. We went to the same high school though I graduated 16 years before him. I had even taught at my old high school, but left for another district and missed teaching Mike the student by a year. We knew some of the same people from my old stomping grounds, but I was blown away to learn that the victim in his case, his friend who was killed when the car Mike was driving went out of control, was the son of my colleague at the time. I remember so clearly in September '07 when the news reached me that Mrs. Thresher's son had been killed in a car accident. I was quite sorry for her loss, but never really learned too many details of the accident. Now here I was talking with the man who had been the driver that night. Mike admitted to me that he had been driving in a drunken state, even as I explained to him the folly of a legal system that imprisons a man in a case with no malice, when really what should be happening is that Mike should be making recompense. It is stupid to imprison the man who should be out working, earning a living, paying restitution to the family of the victim killed due to his negligence. Without claiming to have a perfect solution, I do know for certain that it is wrong on every level to imprison Mike. Regarding the folly of drunk driving, I read somewhere about "a rod for the fools back." Just sayin'.

This part you're not gonna believe. As Mike was telling me details about that night, it dawned on me that my brother, a police officer in the community, was probably working his graveyard shift that night. When I mentioned it, Mike told me he thought my last name (an uncommon hispanic name) sounded familiar. The whole circle was completed when my brother confirmed to me at a visit that, indeed, he had been on the scene, in fact calling it a "horrific" scene. There's a ride at Disneyland called "A Small World."

Over the next week, Mike and I began to talk about topics such as strength and conditioning training, mixed martial arts (I've been teaching it since 1990), beautiful women, philosophy, fiction, and movies. We trained together and I quickly dropped into the role of coach, even picking up that term as a nickname or "handle."

One day we were out on the yard and I introduced a mixed martial arts drill. It was pretty basic, involving alternating turns doing a squat thrust then exploding up into a kickboxing combination. I'm quite certain that many readers have heard that there are politics in prison. I can tell you that they can be quite serious. Think race riots, stabbings, jumpings by multiple assailants, etc. Suffice it to say that only a total fool would want to cause problems with the politics. It is just asking for trouble. Some of the trouble must have begun on this day.

For a week I had been out in the yard, thrilled to get so much outside time, as I had a long career as a P.E. teacher and just love the fresh air and sun. I did all kinds of different exercises, many of them regarded as crazy or bizarre. I would do headstands and handstands, one-arm push-ups, bridging (like a wrestler) on my head, and other "different" exercises of that nature. Mike was loving it; Lew was not. Lew is a guy I had met that first day out of orientation, a tall dude, maybe about 190 to 200 pounds, with a really good grip. As a true warrior and martial artist, I always size up everything about other men, from their size and weight, to their eye contact and handshake.

Lew was frequently around as I was doing my strange exercise routine. In a conversation with Cory, after we'd been on the yard for four or five days, he asked him, "Is your cellie this much a 'J-Cat' in the cell?" A "J-Cat" (Category J) is a reference to the CDCR designation for those deemed in need of mental health support. In other words, the crazy ones. So Lew's remark was intended as a light insult, nothing major. As Cory relayed this to me, I sort of laughed and brushed it off, while filing it in the memory banks under the category "future potential problems."

A couple of days later, Mike and I were doing a similar drill out on the yard when Trader, the "shot-caller" for the whole yard came over and said, "Hey you guys need to knock that shit off!" When I asked what the problem was, he added, "You can't be doing that yoga shit either, handstands with your balls in the air, and all that weird shit." When I said, "Yoga is really great and it's fabulous exercise for mind and body," he replied, with depth, intelligence, and eloquence, "You're in prison now. You can't do that."

Hours later, back in the cell, Cory told me that he had been asked by Trader if his cellmate (that's me) had had a problem with what Trader had said earlier. It seems Trader had picked up on the fact that his unilateral declaration of no yoga nor MMA had not sat perfectly well with me. And he was right. I am a thinking person, so hypocrisy and ignorance, blended with bullshit rules to form the "white politics" as I was experiencing them, was frustrating to say the least. We were expected to "work out" in case of a race riot. Well, I was doing cutting edge training to keep my edge as a truly functional warrior while getting grief from Trader, an obese, ignorant jackass. Yet at the same time, I'm not foolish enough to look for trouble in a place like this, where a fair fight is not guaranteed. I have a nice healthy fear of getting stabbed or jumped because I "broke the rules." So, the wheels were already turning in my head with questions like, "Is yoga practice against the white rules or is it just that Trader, and maybe Lew, are unfamiliar with it and because they have small minds, they fear it and don't like it?"

A couple of days later, out on the yard again, Mike and I were finishing up a strength session in which we were grabbing the wrist of our partner to train the pulling musculature by yanking the partner's resisting body weight. Imagine a lightweight, not very-combative wrestling move. After maybe a minute of this, a couple of guys, one white, one south-sider, came over to us to say how cool they thought our training was. We briefly explained the value of functional training, something that is rare in prison where most inmates have not a single clue about proper training. In fact, the level of ignorance about training is breathtaking. For example, you have guys doing the exact same workout (exact) for years and years on end. Um, sorry guys but there's this thing. You see, it's called adaptation. And it like shuts down your progress completely if you keep doing the same thing over and over. Or the dudes doing long, slow

cardio, jogging around the track, plodding along with their adipose tissue a-jiggle, gathering overuse injuries, and not changing their physique at all because later in the day they would go eat a "spread" of ramen, beans, bologna, and mayo, served on bread. Blind leaders of the blind, I say. Both shall fall into a ditch. More like a rut in this case.

But there we were, Mike and I, training hard and smart. Getting the maximum return on our investment of time and energy. Then, we were rudely interrupted by the voice of Mutt, the shot-caller of the building Mike and I lived in, "I thought you guys were told to knock that shit off!" Now Mutt is a guy I already liked. We had had a couple of conversations about college education because he knew I had my Master's degree from UCLA and had asked for a bit of advice. He was fairly sharp, a good communicator with a sense of humor I liked. Trailing Mutt as he approached, his words causing us to turn toward him, were Trader and Lew. A conversation ensued, dominated by the reasonableness of the discussion between Mutt and myself, occasionally punctuated by lame remarks from Trader and intelligent inputs from Mike. "Isn't it a good thing we are training like warriors, getting fit and strong?" Yes, Mutt admitted. Even though Trader had control of all the whites on the yard, he was deferring (wisely) to Mutt, either because we were from Mutt's building or because Trader knew that Mutt was smarter and better with people. All the while Lew was standing a couple steps behind Mutt and Trader, arms crossed, chest puffed, traps tensed, chin up in a display of force and strength. The intimidation posture.

When Mike said something to the effect of, "We're just trying to work out," Lew, standing maybe five feet away, barked at him, "Well your workout is disrespecting me!" As he said this, his body language, including a half step toward Mike, said, "I'm the man and maybe this needs to be settled, mano a mano, so to speak." Instinctively, I took my own half step toward Mike so that I was a couple of feet away from him at this point. I also very specifically directed my visual focus onto Lew, and even now as I write this I can feel an adrenaline surge exactly matching the one which occurred at that moment, including even the increase in activity of underarm apocrine glands that produce nervous or fear sweat. I so clearly can remember Lew, perhaps noting me edging closer to Mike, shifting his gaze directly onto me. Mutt was positioned at this point between the three of us in just such a way that from my perspective I saw Lew's head go from one side of Mutt's head as he was mad-dogging Mike, to the other side of Mutt's head as his bravado changed focus onto me, the gray, thinning, fat(ish), soft-spoken, first-termer who had arrived so recently. He said "what?!" In just such a way as to mean, of course, "You got a problem?" I, quite nonchalantly, though the adrenaline was ramping up radically, replied, "Wait. You...you want to fight me? Fair? As in, in a cell, one on one? I'll hurt you."

Now remember, I'm not one to look for trouble and am quite the diplomat. I've always loved Teddy Roosevelt's geopolitical motto "Speak softly and carry a big stick." So, I immediately regretted the "I'll hurt you" part, which did not fit with the rest of my friendly, composed, and soft-spoken manner. But, within the one second following my words, two things occurred: 1. Lew's body language demonstrated a subtle yet distinct backing off, and 2. Trader said, "Oh you shouldn't have said that.... This guy (referring to Lew) just got out of the hole for hurting people." Analyzing these two things now, it seems clear that Lew was second-guessing his bravado, having realized that the O.G. (old guy) who does one arm push-ups in sets of 12 and puts 225 pound dudes on his shoulder for full squats, was not intimidated by his words. This is a common reckoning for bullies who think they're hard. It's also clear that Trader's words were meant to scare me while pumping up Lew. In any event the ball was now set in motion.

Mutt and I agreed that any MMA type stuff, if at all, would have to be done next to the heavy bag. Yoga would be no problem once I got some boxer briefs to deal with the flailing testicular tissue (I still think reports of genital over-exposure were exaggerated). So, the "problems" we're being fixed peacefully, reasonable men coming to reasonable solutions. We all

shook hands; Mike, who had done absolutely nothing wrong, even apologized to Lew. I apologized to Lew for saying, "I'll hurt you." Mutt asked, "Everything cool?" To which Lew and I both replied, "Yeah, everything's cool." We broke up the group and Mike and I went back to doing strength training.

An hour or so later, in the day room inside our building, Mutt called me over to him and said, "I guess there's a problem... Lew's not o.k. With things. He told me he was going to just rush you, but I told him I couldn't and wouldn't let him do that, that it would have to be more like man to man, no cheap stuff, no dope fiend shit." I immediately said, "Thanks for that, for keeping it all above board, no dirty stuff." My respect for Mutt, already at a good level, nearly doubled. Even though he was friendly with Lew and had known him a while, he wouldn't let him get the jump on the new, apolitical nice guy [REDACTED]. I clarified, "So, even though he said 'everything's cool' he wants to fight?" "Yes...and you can't really pass up a fade." "I understand...so how does this happen?" Mutt said, "The cops in our building are cool with dudes having one-on-ones. Props and I will be the refs...you know...make sure no one gets too hurt...and it's hands only, you can't kick him." I asked, "What about grappling?" as my mind was already envisioning a fist fight in a 6 by 12 concrete and steel cell with a metal storage shelf, a metal sink/toilet combo, metal bunks, and a metal desk and stool set-up. I got the OK on the grappling, which made me very happy, as I'm a strong MoFo, at 5'9, 220 lbs., 13 true dead-hang pull-ups, but did not want to have to use percussion only in a cell with so many unforgiving protuberances. "O.K. So when can we do this? The sooner the better," I explained. "Tonight after chow," said Mutt. "We need a cell with no TV in it...wait, do you guys have a TV?" "No, we can do it in my cell." (I was working for home field advantage.)

By now it was noon and Cory and I always had to be back in the cell for a special count, so as he entered the cell I said to him, in an attempt to be funny, creating the irony of the educated man talking like a gang-banger, "I caught my first fade today." Appearing somewhat confused, Cory asked, "What do you mean 'fade'?" You mean 'fight'? To which I replied "Yes," and went on to tell him the whole story of the morning, of the ridiculous events which had locked me onto a path of having to engage, in hand-to-hand combat, with a fellow inmate.

Many are those that will say, quickly or casually, "I abhor violence." But without clarification, I have found that statement to be not only quite common, but quite meaningless. I've never spoken those exact words myself, though my 40 some years on Earth, more than half of which have been spent not only training in serious, street-real martial arts but in teaching them, have been characterized by a general aversion to seeing people get seriously hurt. What does this mean? I'm glad you asked. It means that I have compassion for people in general, and especially for the weak. It means that in my several (though not many) childhood fights (all except one of which I either tied or won), I always felt bad for the other guy. It means I had a reputation for sticking up for and encouraging along those of my peers who needed some help. It means, in high school, I was voted Senior Class President, and nominated for "Senior Bests" as "Friendliest" and "Most Polite," even though I played football for the sheer joy of slamming into others at full speed. It means that when my college girlfriend told me she had been raped (not acquaintance raped) while in high school I felt bad for her and anger at an anonymous him. It means I enjoy a good sport fight, whether boxing, wrestling, or MMA, but cringed when I watched Joe Theismann snap his tibia and fibula in an NFL game in the mid-80s. It means I don't want my countrymen dying for oil, but would definitely take up arms to repel foreign invasion. It means that while gun violence makes me nauseated, I would shoot to kill someone who is trying to harm my family and friends. It means that when, in February 1993, I happened upon a horrific head on collision on the Pacheco Pass that had happened just seconds before, and which had left one woman obviously dead and the other trapped in her overturned vehicle with her head literally smashed between the head rest and the roof, her arms

reaching desperately in all directions for salvation. I pressed down my physical nausea, and began desperately, along with my friend Steve [REDACTED], to try to free her, even crying out loud to "God" to help us. It means, in short, that, like a lot of people, I hate to see people hurt, but realize that sometimes ya gotta roll up yer sleeves and get 'er done.

So, it's noon on a Friday in mid-April and I have a first fight scheduled for 6 p.m. that evening. So what do I do? As usual I go into my systematic thinking mode. Cory, like the man he is, steps up as my cornerman, and begins to aid me in my analysis. He's like, "Dude, you got this." "Lew doesn't train at all and has a relatively weak looking physique." I'm like, "Dude, he's 6 feet tall, 200 pounds, and has a great handshake." Cory, encouraging me, goes, "[REDACTED] I don't think I've ever seen a dude as big as you who is as strong as you." He had been impressed by watching me haul my lard ass up and down on the pull-up bar for 12 1/2 reps. I handed him my pillow, had him stand in the doorway, and proceeded to throw progressively harder shovel hooks til he said "that's enough" at about 65% power. We analyzed the layout of the cell, noting how hard it would be for anyone to land any curving blows if I crouched slightly between the bunks and the shelves. We talked about the possibility of engaging the intruder right as he came through the door, and complained about what a bad idea it was to have Mutt or Props inside the doorway to act as "ref." I began shadowboxing and playing at various scenarios in which I could transition from the inherently dangerous (and often flailing) mode of punching into the relative safety of a grappling situation. Glock, another white dude a few cells over, said an hour later, "Just ground and pound him." Good idea, I thought.

Psychologically I was now on edge. I was at a remote risk of life and a serious risk of limb. I went into a fasting mode, knowing that the sympathetic nervous system was now dominating and so digestion would not go well. I was nervous like an athlete before a huge competition. Cory told me that Lew was probably up in his cell totally stressing. Mutt had joked, "You guys will probably gas out in under 30 seconds." I was at probably 16 to 18% body fat and Lew just never did any exercise at all. Still, six feet to my five-nine? Back from the hole for hurting people? I'd had exactly four scuffles in my six years of unjust incarceration. I was 2-1-1. One guy cheap shot me then stood 1 inch from my nose. I threw the greatest hook of my life, and watched (it seemed like slow Mo) as he literally left his feet and landed on his side some four or five feet from where he had been standing. Alas, he got up and we exchanged a few more blows and had a tie basically (I'd whip him today as that whole thing occurred during my Great Depression and I didn't really care). One dude attacked me and left to the infirmary in a bloody heap. Another chump flipped out on me and I literally put him to sleep (though reasonably gently setting him down on the concrete). And I had words with one guy at the mental hospital and the wuss sicced his minions on me and I definitely lost that five on one. Jackie Chan would have won. In the movies.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. 5:30 p.m. and were walking to chow. Lew comes up and says, "So we're going to do this, huh?" While I was inwardly willing to back off if Lew initiated it, the reality is that Lew had backed himself into a corner. I'd apologized but he kept running his mouth. "Yeah, that's fine," I replied. Still a nice, soft spoken guy. No dirty looks, no trash talk. But a steely resolve. The politics would probably have required a fight anyway, even if the two participants had reached a diplomatic solution. Yes, we were locked in. I skipped dinner, so Corey got his double-ups. Cory warned me, [REDACTED], after chow Lew will probably just run into the cell swinging." As we got back to the building, I went to Mutt and he said, "These guys ain't going to allow it," meaning that the crew of C.O.s was not conducive to a sanctioned cell fight. Desperately wanting to get it over with and let my body shift back to a parasympathetic mode, I said, "Well, when then?" It was rescheduled for after chow the next morning.

7 a.m. Saturday. Not much sleep. Skipped chow. Hurried back to my cell, a minute or two ahead of my opponent. Conversated with "Lil Pikey," Lew's cellmate, right outside my door,

who said that we had the go ahead from "Sporty," the tower cop, and that Pikey himself would serve as the ref. Dudes drifting back to their cells, eyes pinned to windows and door frame cracks. Cory waiting just outside our door. Mike (unnoticed by me) walking up just in time to catch the whole darn spectacle. Standing between the bunks and the shelf, hyper, hyper-focused, arms up, chin down, semi-crouched, MMA stance; Drew bolts through the door, head too far forward, right arm cocked way back, an all-business look of "I'm. Going. To. Kill. You." on his face. Engagement. In a millisecond or three, I drop and shoot for his legs, my left shoulder buried deeply into his hips. The fastest I could possibly move my largeness (normal fighting weight for me would be 185 or 190.) Both arms gain fabulous purchase behind and around each of his legs. Yippee! I'm already at my desired grappling situation and the idiot is not even fully through the door yet. I'm not going to get cut, not going to break my wrist from errant blows to his cranium or the dense surfaces of the cell, and best of all, I can use my substantial strength and skill to dominate him. Which is exactly what happened. O, dear reader, did it happen.

I had been doing a lot of wrestler bridging, even getting up to a six minute hold. So, here I am, owning both of Lew's lengthy legs. I straighten my back, drive my hips, and lift Lew's 200 pounds just high enough that both feet are now airborne, and I slam him to his back like a sack of Idaho russets. He feels light, I think. Must be the adrenaline. My head is still slightly pinned between his left arm and side. As I'm dropping my weight on him during his free fall, my left lateral thigh bumps with some force into the front of the toilet (I later found a good bruise, the only mark on me). As I work my head free (approximately two seconds time), I use my right hand to check his legs, then cross my right leg over his body and sit on top of him. I am now in the mount position and it's all bad for Lew. When I was 11 and some what of a dick of an older brother, I used to get this same superior position, and then threaten to drop loogies onto (pulling them back usually) my younger brother. BTW, stop doing this when your baby brother turns into a 6'2, 225 lb., UCLA-educated, construction-company-owning, police officer, as mine did. So, I'm in a full mount on top of the hapless Lew, having completely overwhelmed his haphazard entry into the ring, er, the cell. But, instead of raining saliva, it's now raining fists, and an inordinate number of those fists are landing with devastating force on the bony and cartilaginous structures of Lew's face. His cellmate is two feet away, just outside the door, simultaneously cheering on his cellie and preparing to stop the fight if necessary. After five to ten seconds, deep and large pinch-cuts (the skin gets cut by being pinched between a fist and the bones of the face), are opened above both Lew's right and left eyes. He is trying to throw punches about my face, but to little effect. Fat drops of crimson blood are running off his head onto the floor of my cell. Hope he doesn't have hep-c, I think. It's been twenty seconds tops and Lew is getting his ass handed to him on a freaking platter. And I'm just getting started. I'm thinking of either doing some less superficial damage like ruining one of his joints, or maybe putting him to sleep. Either way, I admit that I was mad. Mad at his jackassery. Mad because he ruined my day and a half and caused me chronic stress. Mad at the hypocritical bullshit politics. Mad at an intruder in my home, the cell that I strive to make a place of comfort, peace, and efficiency. About this time, Pikey realizes that his homeboy is done, that I'm most assuredly not letting the dumbass stand back up to try to rain some haymakers on me. He commands, "Stop!" I stop not, instead punch, punch. "Stop!" Not. Punch, punch. "Stop or I'm going to jump on you myself." Thinking about it. Punch. "If you don't stop I'm going to fight you myself." Thinking about it, saying, "It's over then? If I let him up he can't attack me again?" "O.K., O.K. It's over. You win." I spring off the very bloody Lew and return to my original position between the shelf and bunks, backing even further now into my cell as Lew gets up, examines his torn up face in my mirror, and says, "You got me good, [REDACTED]." I say to him, "Dude, you got saved. I was going to hurt you much worse." He spent one to two minutes trying to stop the blood, but then just gave up and hustled

through the walk of shame back to his cell. He shook my hand as he left and said, in response to me, "Yeah, we're good now, everything is cool." Respect, I said. Respect. We did not see Lew again for two weeks to the day. Two weeks the politics prevented him from going to chow with his face looking like he was in a head on with the red Ford F-250 Diesel that I used to drive.

Cory entered the cell with a grin, "You handled that." Yes the celebratory shit-talking began. In my excitement, I said, "Dude, I'm throwin a big spread for us tonight when we watch the UFC fight's." I said, "That basically went according to plan, you know, the whole ground and pound thing. It really couldn't have gone better...I don't have a mark on me as far as I can tell." I explained it to Cory how I could really have hurt Lew much worse but Pikey had threatened to double-team me. "Cellie, I had your back. If Pikey had jumped on you, I would have jumped on him." This solidified my friendship with Cory even more, and back we went to cleaning the blood pool off the concrete and our banter of braggadocio. "Dude, he's cut bad over both eyes...he needs stitches, for sure." Cory replied, "He probably ain't gettin 'em cause he can't go to medical because of the politics...in fact, he probably won't come out of his cell at all for a while so the other C.O.s don't notice his injuries." I was torn between not wanting to get into any trouble, especially over some bullshit which was entirely not my fault, and a desire to not watch Lew suffer anymore. "What about chow?" I asked. "He won't go for a while." "What will he eat?" The Woodpile will look out for him. "Should I send him some food?" "Nah, that will just be double humiliation if it comes from you." The UFC fights that evening were especially poignant. Cory joked, "Remind me not to piss you off." I explained to him that I am very difficult to anger and that the automatic prison-fight-provoking words of "punk" and "bitch" would almost always just be shrugged off by me. I am a nice guy I explained, and extremely reasonable. Kind, but definitely not weak. Smart, while perhaps still naïve about prison stuff. I said, "Cory, you want your enemies weak and dumb, not strong and smart. I would be a terrible enemy to have."

Later that same morning things were hilarious to me. Dudes of all sorts were falling over themselves in their deference, or "courteous respect" to me. Super friendly, ridiculously polite, comically gracious. Mission accomplished, I thought, as I liked the idea of creating a mystique which would keep dumbasses from challenging the O.G. You see, Lew had been acting like he was hard and so people had feared him. So, when I not only defeated him, but did so with what basically amounted to a crushing first round knock out, lots of that fear of Lew transformed into a fabulous blanket of respect for me. Mike came up to me first thing in the day room with an enormous smile on his face. "Did you hear what happened," I asked. "Hear? I was right there. I saw the whole thing. It was awesome. [REDACTED]...the most dominating prison fight I've seen in my seven years. I was so giddy afterward in my cell." We and had a good conversation about how I really had been forced into it, that I probably would have been stabbed off the yard if I had backed out, and that therefore I was not a hypocrite in my frequent preachings about living a life guided by reason, knowledge, kindness, and health. But, we did definitely high five. And Mike was the more excited about me coaching him in his training, especially in martial arts. Dave, another white guy, asked me a couple weeks later, why I had not been wearing my toe shoes. I told him that I did not want to push issues too much, and his response basically illustrated the new paradigm of people's attitude toward me: "Dude, ain't no one gonna try and tell you how to live now."