

On Becoming a Warrior¹

For most of my adult life I have worked two full-time jobs, because choosing between them is not an option for me. In my day job I am a philosophy professor, and I moonlight as an artist. The two fields are very different. Academic philosophers teach, do research, serve on committees, and give talks. Artists who teach do all this, and also produce, document, market, exhibit, and sell their work. But the two jobs are alike in that the more success you have in either, the harder it becomes to manage the workload without assistance. Successfully managing both at once without assistance is physically impossible.

Only one employer ever seriously recruited me to do both at once – by promising me the funding assistance to carry it off. I accepted gladly. But the more success I achieved, the less funding I got. Each time I applied for it, my employer offered a different, courteous reason for rejecting my application. Finally I was doing both jobs full time but being paid only for one. I protested, discussed, and conferred. Meanwhile my health, my productivity, and my personal and professional relationships deteriorated. I couldn't do my work, so I couldn't get a job elsewhere. I was stuck.

Nobody wants to be a doormat or a fool. But being suspicious and mistrustful, or automatically assuming that another is "out to get me" would damage my spirit even more. When others thwart my expectations or best interests, I try hard to find the balance between masochism and gullibility on the one hand and paranoia on the other.

Ever since I made a serious commitment to yoga and meditation several decades ago, one goal of my inner work has been to see clearly, feel compassion, and act appropriately. Seeing clearly means not deceiving myself, and not

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allowing myself to be deceived about reality. When someone I have trusted acts unjustly, that reality is painful to acknowledge. And when I am the target of that injustice, seeing the person clearly is even harder. It threatens my faith in my perceptions, in myself, and in human nature. I often flinch, and escape into self-deception: I make excuses for the person, undermine the authority of my own experience through self-doubt, or suppress the whole incident (I tend toward the doormat/fool extreme).

I try to avoid this type of denial by following a "three-strikes-and-you're-out" rule (I usually need more than three). The first time I witness the behavior I ask myself: Did I really see what I think I saw? Am I jumping to unfounded conclusions? Are there other interpretations of the person's action I'm overlooking? Am I being oversensitive? Thinking about these questions helps me monitor my own impulses. It also prevents me from making premature judgments that may only cause me unnecessary pain. Because I know all too well how easy it is to let plates drop when you're juggling a lot of them and each one is full, I was reluctant to charge my similarly overworked employer with deliberate malice toward me.

The second time I experience the injustice I ask myself: What am I doing to contribute to this situation? How am I enabling or inviting this behavior? These questions help me experiment with the situation by changing my own behavior. If this stops the other's unjust behavior, I learn what kind of further work I need to do on myself. So I rewrote my applications for funding, and provided more information, and explored alternative funding possibilities, and deferred my applications until different higher-ups could review them, and sought advice from knowledgeable others.

But sometimes my efforts are not enough, and the person acts unjustly toward me a third time. Then the question is: Is the behavior intentional? Dialogue can reveal when hurtful actions are rooted either in misunderstanding or miscommunication – or in an intention to inflict harm. Then the challenge is to acknowledge that with full awareness; to let into my mind the frightening reality

that the other person is deliberately trying to thwart or harm me – without allowing it to turn me into a demoralized, corrupt or cowardly person; or, even worse, into a self-pitying victim. I find this challenge difficult because I don't want to believe anyone is out to get me. But the reality is that some people do inflict harm knowingly and deliberately.

Can I see such people and their actions clearly without dehumanizing them – and thereby dehumanizing myself? Can I see them clearly without demonizing them – and thereby poisoning myself? Can I see them for what they are without poisoning my perception of everyone else (the paranoia extreme)? Most important, can I see them clearly enough to actually understand and feel compassion for them, and for the pain and fear and rage and despair that ultimately motivates all human injustice? To succeed is to protect my center and my equanimity. To fail is to sink to their level.

I knew I was dealing with such people after I submitted an application for funding that quoted the application guidelines themselves – and was again rejected. Reason? The application guidelines were wrong. In that moment I experienced strike three. I saw the intent to undermine my work whether my application was "correct" or not, whether the guidelines were correct or not, whether they had been correctly applied or not, and whether the excuse for rejecting my application made sense or not. And I saw the fears, resentments, self-dislike, and personal disappointments that motivated this. My employer had struck out.

But the ultimate challenge was still to come: what to do about it. How should I respond to someone who is causing me pain intentionally, or out of indifference to my wellbeing? This is where the real balancing act begins. How much punishment should I, or anyone be willing to take for the sake of continuing a relationship? How much punishment would I inflict on myself by ending it? Or by trying to improve it? And at what point is it appropriate, and not sheer paranoia, to take out the big guns and wage a war of self-defense?

When my employer struck out, I saw clearly the imminent threat to my work, my health, and my life – to my *self*. In that moment my will to live and create surged up with uncontrollable force. Some would call this anger, but it was much more than that. I became live electrical current, awake to the reality that I am a warrior, not a victim; and that I believe in my self and my work enough to fight to the death for them. I learned that there is *nothing* more empowering or liberating than fighting against injustice for what I most deeply believe in – with the law, my artwork, my intellect, and every ounce of energy I had. I fought that war; and, with my employer's descent into overtly malicious and illegal tactics, won it. That victory gave me the freedom to let it go. Now I feel gratitude every day for the luxury of having protected my integrity without being forced to sacrifice my life.