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night, aggressively lighting him up from the driver's side. He reacted beautifully, shielding his eyes, demanding that I get the light out of his face, and even trying to use a CD to reflect the light back at me, all while cringing and wincing under the bright beam. You could not have asked for a better example of the tactical advantage of such a torch.

– Phil



Photo by Phil Elmore

Creation vs. Criticism

By Phil Elmore

Some time ago I was visiting an online discussion forum when I noticed the name of an instructor whom I respect. A participant at the board was asking if it was worthwhile to train in this instructor's system. A couple of people responded and, surprisingly, had very negative things to say. Their comments did not at all match my opinion of the man and his curriculum, but on the Internet there is never any shortage of disagreement. Some of the people who criticize a given person, style, or system know what they're talking about and some do not, but the Web is a great leveler and renders all opinions at equal volume.

The instructor in question posted a message at the forum after I let him know it was taking place. (I'll stand up for anyone in whom I believe and I don't

care how unpopular my opinion might be in a specific venue. I won't talk about someone behind his back if I can help it.) I was surprised at the intensity of the instructor's reply. He let his critics have it in no uncertain terms, pulling no punches and sparing no feelings.

Reaction to his words was fairly negative. An instructor should rise above such criticism and discuss things intellectually, some asserted. Where, others wondered, were the instructor's de-escalation skills? Why could he not keep a cool head under pressure? Why was he so "defensive?" Was he "insecure?" These and other questions were asked with the sort of wide-eyed incredulity one sees in people who don't really believe in the questions they're asking. They were, I think, simply piling on and refusing to see the instructor's side of it.

I defended the instructor and was accused of sycophantic devotion to him – a laughable charge when you consider how much grief I get for refusing to align myself in a martial arts "camp." How could I give the instructor the benefit of the doubt, I was asked, when his chief critic claimed to have trained with him in person and I most definitely had not? How could I claim to understand the instructor's "overreaction" – a reaction that could only be construed, his critics claimed, as "Do as I say, not as I do?"

How, indeed. The issue is one close to me – and one that, interestingly enough, the instructor and I had discussed just prior to the incident. While criticism – punditry, if you will – abounds in the self-defense field, precious few people *create* material of value and make it available to their fellow citizens.

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It is very easy – and not terribly risky – to tell the world why System X, Product Y, or Instructor Z *sucks*. It is *not* so easy to be Instructor Y or to develop, promote, and *teach* System X. It is easy to say, “The System X textbook sucks!” It is *not* so easy to expend the time and effort necessary to *create* that textbook, market that textbook, and then *defend* that textbook in the face of sometimes ignorant, sometimes biased criticism – all while being told you should “rise above” or even ignore any and all attacks on your character and your work.

As you can imagine, this is a wearisome and often aggravating situation in which to find yourself. Those relatively few people (compared to the size of the audience) who *create* within the self-defense industry are, on the whole, a committed and hard-working bunch, who live and breathe what they do. They sacrifice sleep, make enemies, injure themselves, and drive family and friends crazy with their often obsessive pursuit of the ideals in which they believe. They are repaid for their efforts – as are most public figures – with an endless litany of criticism, negativity, backseat driving, armchair quarterbacking, 20/20 hindsight, and – yes – the occasional “attaboy” or piece of fan mail.

I’ve lived this myself to a limited degree. A *lot* of work goes into *The Martialist* and my other projects. While I do get some positive feedback on my ventures, it’s a fact of life that people generally communicate more when they’re *not* happy than when they *are*. This means that, apart from a complimentary e-mail now and then (not to mention a healthy

roster of subscribers and advertisers), my only reward for my constant effort is a near-constant drumbeat of ignorant criticism, willful misinterpretation, childish ridicule, and pointless insults.

This is perfectly normal. Russian-born novelist Ayn Rand eloquently warned of the persecution we may expect when we dare to *create*. There are many people we’ll call *spectators* who, having created little of value themselves, resent the work of others out of some suppressed envy or barely concealed insecurity. Then, too, there are legitimate critics found almost at random amidst those spectators, which just makes the whole issue that much thornier.

I cannot fault anyone for reacting harshly when they encounter a crowd of largely anonymous critics online. Yes, we should strive for the high road, the “professional” approach. Yes, we should let most foolish criticism go, ignoring it or addressing it to standards much higher than those with which it was presented. Yes, we should ignore those people whose opinions are beneath us. That is the standard to which we *should* strive – and it is a standard few of us meet (or meet consistently).

Consider this the next time you speak negatively of someone’s work. I’m not saying you should not speak your mind. Just remember that the people of whom you are speaking are *human* and, as such, have limits to their patience and to their capacities to absorb unfounded or ill-conceived criticism.

We all are and we all do. ♠