

Two Fighters Meet After 34 Years

Written by Pete Wood

Sunday, 11 December 2005 19:00

My index finger slides down the page of the New York City phone book. It stops on Herbert Goings. There's only one on 215 Madison Avenue. Is this my Herb Goings? I doubt it.

Thirty-four years ago my Herb Goings was a tough, black thug from Harlem knocking out opponents in the 1971 NYC Golden Gloves. He had a god-given killer instinct. Then we fought. I knocked him down three times and copped a three-round decision. I'm now 51 and he's 57. How would he react when he heard my name? Would he even remember me?

I pick up the phone and dial. It's a long shot. My Herb Goings, a former pug, living on Madison Avenue?

"Hello?" answers a gruff voice.

"Herb Goings?"

"Who is this?"

"Is this Herb Goings? The former fighter?"

"Who's this?" repeats the voice.

Already we are sparring. "Did you fight in the 1971 Golden Gloves?"

"Where'd you get this number?" he counters.

"Are you Herb Going?" I repeat.

"Who're you?"

"Pete Wood."

"Pete Wood?" I hear him gasp. "How the hell are ya?"

Eventually he lets his guard down and we reminisce our fight. Herb was destroying every opponent that year in the 160-pound novice division. No one wanted to face him. Especially me. Just looking at his muscular shoulders and rippling biceps made me nauseous. But since we were both 5'8" and 163 pounds we were matched. That night, in a 20-by-20 foot ring, I knocked him down three times and advanced to the quarterfinals in The Felt Forum at Madison Square Garden.

"Man, you threw a wicked left hook!" he chuckles. "You knocked me down in the first. Only time I ever be dropped!"

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“You scared the hell outta me!” I say, evening it out. I’m tempted to correct his ‘only time,’ but don’t.

We’re embracing each other, this time, with laughter. There’s not a mean bone in his voice. We are no longer angry kids punching people. I learn Herb is now a New York City bus driver, a vegetarian, swims laps every day and has attained a 5th degree black belt in karate. He’s engaged to a woman from Tanzania and is learning Swahili. His son attends Fordham Prep. As I listen to Herb’s voice on the phone, I can almost smell his onion breath, as we stood toe-to-toe during the ref’s instructions before our fight.

I tell him I’m now teaching English at White Plains High School. I’m happily married and have one beautiful nine-year-old daughter who’s learning tennis. My wife is from Guangzhou, China, and even though I am not learning the language I know a few words and phrases: watermelon; thank you; I love you. Herb and I seem to have cleansed ourselves of our aggression, anger and hate.

Cleansed of anger and hate? Was The New York City Golden Gloves the cathartic experience it claimed to be? Was The Golden Gloves a form of hospital? Or sanatorium? s encouraging a kid to spew out three rounds of aggression, anger and hate onto someone’s face therapy? Isn’t boxing, in truth, a sickness called sport? Isn’t boxing tidy violence? Yes. But boxing is also artistic violence. Violent art. It allowed me, with left hooks and right crosses, to be an inspired Jackson Pollack swinging and spewing punches above a different canvas. I hope Herb Goings is no longer punching the world. Whatever his problem was then, I hope boxing has helped him punch it out. Is boxing healing? Are boxers physicians to each other?

Herb was born in Hell’s Kitchen and raised in Harlem. After leaving the ring at 28, he adopted the Hebrew faith. “The first Jews were black,” he claims. “I’m not a Negro, a pickaninny, a black or an African American; I’m Hebrew. Judaism isn’t a race. Moses, Abraham and Noah were black. My two sons, Solomon and Joshua, are Hebrew. Too many black boys lack role models. Michael Jordan and Jesse Jackson aren’t role models; they’re figureheads. Black kids need homegrown male figures in their lives.”

“Elephants is an analogy,” he states. “In Africa there was once a large herd where all of the mature elephants were captured or killed. When the younger bulls took over they be killing each other. The herd was in danger of extinction until older bulls were adopted from The Serengeti and India. It worked. The older elephants calmed the younger ones down.”

I’m an English teacher, not a psychologist, but I sense a connection with Herb’s elephants, adopted religion and boxing; his search for stability and meaning.

After boxing, my quest for stability and meaning led me, at 32, to write “To Swallow A Toad.” Writing about emotional upheaval in one’s life, research suggests, increases physical and psychological health. Writing, indeed, grounded me. Jabbing out words and punching out paragraphs helped scrub out the residual sadness and anger boxing had missed. In my novel, my Herb Goings is Jamal Green, a violent street thug, a loud-mouthed Black Muslim who vows to “kill my white ass.” A raging bull.

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“I’m in your book?” he murmurs. “What’s the title?”

“To Swallow A Toad.”

‘How do you spell Swallow?’ he asks, writing it down.

Hey, I have spelling problems, too. Spelling grammar, attendance and schedule is always a dilemma – and I’m the English teacher.

We agree to eat lunch in White Plains. We’ll meet on Mamaroneck Avenue in front of the YMCA. He knows a good Japanese restaurant in the area. Before I hang up, I tell him I’ll bring along something extra special; a videotape of our bout. “No way!” he shouts. Once again, he’s floored. After 34 years, Herb will relive a precious morsel of his youth: our three-round fight. Unfortunately, he’ll rediscover he was down three times.

What did I get myself into? Herb is standing in front of the YMCA at 12:00 sharp. Is he scowling or smiling? He’s wearing a black leather jacket, black shirt, black pants and black shoes. In his hand is my book. Is he angry at the perceived slight at being named Jamal Green? Is he still a raging bull harboring a grudge? Is he thinking rematch?

I walk closer and am pleased to spot a smile in his eyes. We embrace. We’re Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. We’re Muhammad Ali and Jerry Quarry.

Once inside the restaurant, he plants his elbows on the table and orders miso soup and steamed vegetables. He has a bullet bald head and his nose is slightly bent to the right. On his left forearm is a tattoo: Born To Raise Hell. On his right forearm is a nasty 12-inch scar.

“I’m sorry if I was rude over the phone,” he grins. “I thought you was a bill collector.” He looks me over and adds, “How much you weigh?”

“One-seventy-eight. You?” I counter.

“One-ninety.”

“I thought you’d be a construction worker or something,” he says. “Not a teacher! Hey, it’s great to see you doing good. Not all of us are.”

Our life stories gush out. We’re two small men – an inner-city bus driver and a suburban schoolteacher – two little success stories – spilling our guts. During our meal, I sense we are both gentle souls yearning to discover commonalities and be at peace with each other. I sense our minds, for years, have been saturated and pickled by years of tabloid headlines and scandalous news. I sense we long to transcend a racially charged society and find harmony, a shared sense of humanity. Hence, we tiptoe around difficult areas, like politics and race. We bob and weave around the Iraqi War and the upcoming mayoral election. Is this timid shadowboxing typical of all first meetings?

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He tells me about his morning bus route, the BMX 18 Express, connecting Riverdale with Wall Street. He's been driving it for years. "I always keep my passengers positive. I'm always talking to them. If they come in frowning, I leave them smiling. If it's raining, I always tell them "don't let a little water ruin your day."

He sips soup and asks, "So, what's To Swallow A Toad mean?"

"Toads is an analogy," I state. "If early in the morning a kid is told to swallow a toad for breakfast, just do it, and the rest of his day, by comparison, will be better. It's just like in childhood. If something bad happens to you, get over it, and the rest of your life, by comparison, will be better. In my book, a kid swallows a toad."

Herb smiles. "We're so much alike." He must have read page 25 in my book: "There was more emotional and physical violence in our house than in one block in Harlem. Family dysfunction, heroin and alcohol addiction, violence."

At the end of lunch, I need to ask Herb a personal question. Till now, we've kept it neutral. But I need to know something. Perhaps this is the reason why I called him in the first place. It's not my place to ask indelicate questions, or force Herb to express painful feelings, but I personally think a kid needs to be hurt into boxing: "Herb, why did you box?"

He reaches with his chopsticks, deftly tweezes a head of broccoli, pops it into his mouth and chews. "Because I was good at it," he grins. Then he adds, "Plus, I didn't want to end up like everyone else, robbing, dealing, or pimping."

I'm in my 4th period English class reading Macbeth. I tell my students: "Plays purify the morals." This might be true, but boxing does something better: it disinfects the soul. After a fight, I always felt strangely cleansed and pure. I felt no anger or hate. After fighting, I felt an inner glow, something, perhaps, like a Catholic feels after confession. Or Herb feels after making a passenger smile on the BMX 18 Express.

Herb and I are small men. Neither of us became a champion, but we became something much more important – healthy and happy. Herb gets them smiling on the BMX 18 Express and I teach Macbeth at White Plains High School. We are old bulls who have swallowed our toads.