

# **THE HOMELESS THREAT**

## **DEALING WITH STREET PEOPLE**



***PHIL ELMORE***

***Phil Elmore***

*The Homeless Threat: Dealing with Street People*  
By Phil Elmore

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118 Julian Place #227  
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[www.themartialist.com](http://www.themartialist.com)

Direct inquiries and orders to [phil@philelmore.com](mailto:phil@philelmore.com)

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*The Homeless Threat: Dealing with Street People*

*For My Wife*

***Phil Elmore***

*“In other words, I don't improve; in further words, once a bum always a bum. I fear the disease is incurable.”*

— John Steinbeck

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*“Beggars should be abolished entirely! Verily,  
it is annoying to give to them and it is  
annoying not to give to them.”*

— Friedrich Nietzsche

## **SPECIAL THANKS**

I'd like to thank Craig Douglas for his insights into "managing unknown contacts" and the training he provided along these lines. No endorsement of this work on his part is implied or should be inferred. Mistakes made are my own, but Craig's training helped me understand the concepts herein much better and he has been a considerable influence. Thanks, man.

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Finally, I would like to extend my best wishes to the readers of *The Martialist* e-zine and the members of *The Martialist's* discussion forum. My thanks, my apologies, and my hopes to you all.

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*“All true language is incomprehensible, like  
the chatter of a beggar's teeth.”*

— Antonin Artaud

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Sir! Sir! Sir! Sir! Sir! Change? Change? Sir?”

The barking continued unabated for half an hour. The disheveled black man, shambling about in front of a shopping facility downtown, accosted each person who passed him on the street as these people entered or left the building. The homeless man was wearing one sneaker and carrying the other. Literally barking at the top of his lungs, he sent a barrage of begging at every individual he saw.

He was quite obviously mentally deranged, chemically altered, or both. He was dirty and doubtless carried any number of diseases. Several people cringed, crossed the street, or otherwise backed away when he approached them. The intimidation these people felt was obvious.

It made me furious.

What I’m describing is a scenario all too common to anyone who spends time in any urban or suburban area. If you live, work, attend school, shop, or otherwise visit any public place in any reasonably built up area, you too have encountered one of these creatures. Call them con artists, call them hustlers, call them street people... it doesn’t matter how you choose to classify them. They might be beggars and panhandlers, or they might be simple street denizens who may or may not even be moving about under their own power. Regardless of the terminology, the homeless are a modern plague, a fact of life in every city in North America. They are everywhere. You *will* encounter them, if you have not already done so, and you will interact with them many times.

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To most people, this fact is merely annoying. Some shake their heads at the state of decay that now characterizes modern urban and suburban areas. Some blame the nearest Republican politician for failing to fund whatever government handout programs are supposed to win the “war on poverty.” Some feel pity for those who are “less fortunate.” Some become irate, sneering, “Get a job” at those who accost them. Some become fearful and clutch their handbags more tightly, or check to make sure their wallets are secure.

What too few people stop to consider when confronted with street people, however, is the premise of this booklet. What you *should* be thinking, each and every time you are accosted by such a street person, is that every time it happens, *you are experiencing a personal security threat.*

What do I mean by “personal security threat?” Whenever another human being moves into your personal space — that space in which he can touch you, speak with you, interact with you, the first of these being the most critical — he is a potential threat. This is because someone in your personal space can strike you, take your wallet, stick you with a used hypodermic needle... anything and everything one human being can do to another when within touching distance. This is true of everyone you encounter every day, of course, not just street people. The point is that whenever someone enters that zone, that “safe area” outside of which someone cannot easily touch you, hit you, or otherwise harm you (without working at it), you must be on your guard and evaluate that threat to your person. If you don’t, you run the risk of letting yourself become a victim. This booklet presupposes that you wish to prevent such victimization.

The overwhelming majority of people you meet have no designs on you other than the obvious. Almost everyone

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who interacts with you wishes you no harm. The probability that you will be the victim of a violent crime is, thankfully, relatively low, and many if not most people will go through their whole lives never experiencing a violent crime in any meaningful way. The problem is that the possibility you could become the victim of such a crime is real and significant. The *chances* are great enough that it is not unreasonable at all to assume that someone approaching you could conceivably have a mugging — or worse — on his mind. Turn on the news and read your daily paper. You'll see plenty of examples to prove me right. J. Kelly McCann, CEO of Crucible Security Specialists (and writing as Jim Grover in *Street Smarts, Firearms, & Personal Security*) put it this way:

*“Simply put, you must pay attention to your personal security. Failure to do so may result in total tragedy for you or your family. If you don't pay at least nominal attention to your personal security, then you deserve what comes your way.*”

*“The crime rate right now (1999) is lower than it's been since the mid 1960s. However, the incidence of violence in those crimes is much higher — less crime, more violence. The FBI has amassed statistics that tell us a person generally stands a six percent chance in his or her lifetime of being victimized in some way. Of course, all statistics are capable of manipulation and don't normally reflect the reality of any given situation. The fact is that if your experience in that six percent includes a stabbing which results in your requiring a colostomy, that mere six percent becomes pretty life altering. If it includes a nonconfrontational property crime — your mailbox gets destroyed by vandals, for example — you got off easy.*”

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*“This is not melodramatic, just truthful, prudent, and appropriately concerned.”*

Given the fact that few people can avoid interacting with other human beings on a day to day basis, nor enforce a strict area of inviolable personal space (misanthropes notwithstanding), your choice as a thinking man or woman of action interested in taking responsibility for your self-defense is to maintain a perceptible but relatively low level of alertness at all times when out and about. When someone approaches you, you must evaluate how much of your attention to devote to that new contact, and you must prioritize your response.

What you are doing, essentially, is engaging in personal profiling. The premise of this booklet, stated another way, is that one of the profiles to which you should assign a high level of alertness is that of the street person. Street people can be homeless people, or they can be the variety of hustlers and con-men one encounters in urban and even suburban areas. Each time you encounter one of these people — you’ll know, because they’ll be accosting you on the street or in some other public area — you must mentally consult your profiling guide and determine the level of wariness to assign. Once you’ve determined that a high degree of alertness is necessary, you might choose to transition to physical defense of your personal space. While actual physical techniques, beyond the rudiments of maintaining space, are not the subject of this booklet (I have books available on that subject if you need them), the fact remains that in some cases you will have to be prepared to enforce your boundaries with physical technique. Get used to the idea now, because you cannot afford to learn on location if you are physically assaulted.

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The concept of profiling, personal or otherwise, makes some people very uncomfortable. They'll say that such profiling is unfair and therefore "racist," or they'll claim that it constitutes some other politically incorrect sin. They might go so far as to dismiss it on the grounds that profiling must mean doing so to *exclusion*, ignoring the real threat posed by people who don't necessarily correspond to a "warning" demographic.

Both of these judgments are wrong. In the first case, it is no crime, politically incorrect or otherwise, to recognize reality for what it is. In the second case, learning to assign your awareness according to demographic probability is simply the wisest way to allot your time and energy. It does not mean doing so to exclusion. You will still ramp up your awareness for those individuals, regardless of profile, who exhibit threatening behavior, despite the fact that their demographic group is otherwise benign.

For example, if a teenager with his pants hanging off his ass, throwing gang signs and walking in the company of a group of three others just like him, walks into a convenience store while you're standing at the counter, there's a good chance you'll assign a high level of awareness to him and his actions as you go about your business in the store. This isn't racism (if he happens to be of a race other than yours). It's simply a recognition of the fact that young men dressed and behaving as this one does have committed and do commit violent crimes at a rate that outstrips this young fellow's proportionate representation in society.

If, in the same store, a man in a three-piece suit walks in, chances are you'll be less concerned with his presence. This is true unless and until you notice, for example, that he's sweating profusely on a cool night, or walking around exhibiting shifty, furtive movements as if he's high — or as if

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he's trying to work up the courage to pull out a gun and rob the joint. There's no crime in assigning your awareness based on demographic *in the absence of behavior*, and there's no shame in reevaluating how you apportion your attention when potentially threatening behavior becomes apparent.

Despite this, when I tell you that street people should be *profiled* in a way that causes you to assign to them a high degree of alertness, many bleeding hearts in the audience will cry foul. Often, this is because the very word "profiling" is deemed somehow dirty. What *is* profiling, however?

Profiling — by race or any other demographic characteristic (or a combination thereof) is a simple process of deciding whom, among the members of a given population, should be assigned greater scrutiny and awareness. In a world of limitless time and resources, we could afford — financially and logistically — to subject every individual to the same security screening in our minds, regardless of what crime (in whatever venue) we were attempting to prevent.

In reality, however, our resources are finite, our labor limited. This is true whether we are speaking of an individual's human awareness or of the security screening at an airport. Basic economic theory tells us that when resources are scarce, we must exercise judgment in their use if we are to maximize the gain to be had from our expenditures. Our emotional energy is as finite as are the numbers of airport screeners and police on the job. As we, just as they, are constrained by the hours to which we can devote our highest levels of mental awareness and security scrutiny, we must exercise judgment in how we apply our efforts to the problem of self-defense.

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Quite simply, considering the possibility of robbery, rape, assault, or the contraction of various communicable diseases from the homeless and other street people, we cannot afford *not* to maximize the chances that a given object of our scrutiny *will be* a potential threat. What I mean is, every person we scrutinize has a probability assigned to them, the chances that they'll end up deserving that heightened scrutiny. Given the dangers present in society, we can't afford to waste time scrutinizing people who aren't likely to be dangerous, unless and until they give us a reason to do so.

More generally, there are limits to what any individual member of society will do to prevent crime and violence from touching him or her. It is within our physical power, for example, to devote ourselves so completely to security that we cease living our lives, refusing to leave our heavily fortified homes. This would eliminate crime almost completely — but we as a people are not willing to spend the enormous portion of our productivity and our lifestyles that would be required for this solution. Stated another way, *that's simply no way to live.*

Unless we want our personal security efforts to be wasted, though, we must do what we can to increase the chances of a "hit" when using our scarce resources. That means we *must* profile.

Does profiling work? I know of no statistics on the issue, but basic logic and mathematics tell us irrefutably that it does — provided the profile used actually applies to the situation. If young male Arabs are far more likely to be hijackers than other individuals (which they are, statistically and historically), selecting young males of Arab appearance and/or heritage for higher scrutiny at airports increases the chances that a potential terrorist will be intercepted.

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By the same token, If the average homeless person is much more likely to be on drugs, or to be desperate for money to buy alcohol, there's a very good chance he's hoping to get what he needs from you. By contrast, purely random scrutiny of every person we encounter must have a much lower mathematical probability of falling on a real threat — of producing a “hit” — because most of the people you meet are just ordinary people going about their lives.

Quite simply, the burden of proof rests with those who claim profiling doesn't work or is somehow immoral. To make such a claim is both illogical (from a mathematical probability standpoint) and counterintuitive, which is why those making such a claim bear the task of substantiating it.

Innocent members of demographic groups selected for profiling will, of course, object to its use. It is not fair, they will say, that they are subjected to greater scrutiny based on their membership in such a group. It is mean and cruel, they will insist, to treat every homeless beggar as a security threat, rather than as an object of pity. Why compound others' misfortune by treating them “badly?”

It is unfortunate that the actions of other individuals (to which you may be linked through some demographic characteristic) may confer on you greater suspicion, but this is the fault and the responsibility of those individuals — not of law-abiding citizens trying to go about their lives without becoming victims of violent crime. It is those citizens who must take probabilities into account when assessing a given situation and the security threat it offers.

We *must* profile street people. To do so is neither morally wrong nor logistically inadvisable. In fact, it is the opposite of both.

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Unless you live a rural existence, street people are a fact of life. If you consider your normal activities and attempt to identify the security issues you face daily, you will realize that encountering a street person is the *most* common potentially threatening scenario you face. Any time you're on the street in any urban or suburban area, street people are passing you by or walking up to you and engaging you in conversation. They're unavoidable. They're real. They're a blight on every city and town in the United States and they're not going anywhere soon. If, up to now, you've considered them just another part of the urban landscape, I'm here to grab you by the collar and demand that you see them for what they are. They're a personal security threat.

There's another facet to this, however. Right now, in every city in America, street people decrease the quality of life for everyone who encounters them. They do this through aggressive panhandling, physical intimidation, and a variety of other behaviors that make law-abiding, productive citizens feel uncomfortable in some way. What we must do, in recognizing the security threat represented by the homeless and their ilk, is stand up for ourselves as citizens. We must refuse to be intimidated physically or socially. We must stop feeling guilty for daring to have jobs, for refusing to live hand to mouth. We must stop believing, quite erroneously, that we're all only a paycheck away from homelessness, and that any success we do experience must come at the expense of someone else. We must refuse to feel guilt or remorse and instead feel righteous indignation and, yes, even suspicion. We must see the threat as real, treat the threat as such, and walk proudly as productive members of society.

The homeless man wearing one shoe and barking at passers-by had no right to bother people that way, to demand what they have earned simply because he had the

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gall or the guts or the lack of shame to stick out his grimy paw and shout for it. He had no right to intimidate people. He had no right to get in their faces. He had no right to make demands on anyone. By rights, he shouldn't even have been walking free, so obviously deranged was his mental state.

That day downtown, I got out of my car firmly believing that when I got home, I would start writing this booklet.

When the car door closed, the homeless man fixed on me, his staccato demands for change alternating with his rapid-fire attempts to get my attention. "Sir! Sir! Sir! Sir! Sir!" I simply stood there and stared at him. He did not approach, so I did nothing. At that moment I felt more hatred, more loathing, than I think I have ever felt in my life. He did not know how to react to my complete lack of response, so he stopped shouting at me. Eventually he wandered into downtown traffic, still carrying one sneaker.

I was left with the firm conviction that people across this nation have absolutely no idea how very real is the security threat they face every day. It's time we acknowledged it. It's time we prepared ourselves to deal with it.

This booklet tells you how. When I went home that day, I *did* start writing this, and now it's finished. I hope you find it helpful. It is, to date, my best body of work, for it represents things I have myself experienced directly for years.

Good luck.

## **FRAMING THE PROBLEM**

Exactly what makes the homeless and other street people a security threat worthy of heightened awareness and personal scrutiny?

To put it simply, the homeless (and all those who spend more time out on the street than not) are desperate because they've got nothing, relatively speaking. I mean, if they had *stuff*, they wouldn't be out on the street hustling or preying on others, would they? This means they're desperate and they're willing to resort to violence to get money. Many of them have drug or alcohol problems, which also makes them desperate and willing to resort to violence to get money (for drugs or alcohol). A significant percentage of them suffer from mental illness, which means they'll act erratically or otherwise unpredictably, resorting to violence for any number of often inexplicable reasons. Finally, the homeless and other street people suffer from a variety of communicable diseases at a rate higher than that of the population at large, making them a security threat through casual contact alone. Let us sum up:

- The homeless have nothing and may be willing to resort to violence to get it. Total poverty creates desperation.
- The homeless have substance abuse issues and may resort to violence because they're chemically altered, or to get money to buy substances.
- The homeless often have mental problems and may behave violently because they are irrational and unwell.
- The homeless have and can spread communicable diseases at a rate greater than that of society at large.

These are facts borne out by statistics. Even homeless advocacy groups readily admit to the problems within the

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street person population. For example, the Treatment Advocacy Center ([www.psychlaws.org](http://www.psychlaws.org)) estimates, in its fact sheet on the homeless, that one third of the 600,000 homeless persons (as estimated by the Department of Health and Human Services) are schizophrenics or manic depressives. *Healing Hands*, a publication of the HCH Clinicians' Network ([www.nhchc.org](http://www.nhchc.org)), estimates that 38% of homeless adults have mental health problems, while fully 46% of homeless men report alcohol problems (and 30% of them report drug problems).

The Treatment Advocacy Center's Fact Sheet cites a 1993 study of HIV among homeless men in a New York City shelter, in which 19 percent of those living in the shelter tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS. According to a later study (April, 2002) in the *Journal of Clinical Gastroenterology (Viral Hepatitis and Other Infectious Diseases in a Homeless Population)*, "Chronic hepatitis C and co-infections are common among the homeless population."

Still another study, *Ectoparasitism and Vector-Borne Diseases in 930 Homeless People From Marseilles*, published in the journal *Medicine* in January 2005, concludes grimly, "Homeless people are particularly exposed to ectoparasites...Over 4 years, 930 homeless people were enrolled. Lice were found in 22% and were associated with hypereosinophilia... Twenty-seven patients (3%) with scabies were treated... The uncontrolled louse infestation of this population should alert the community to the possibility of severe re-emerging louse-borne infections."

There you have it, the bleak reality of the homeless. Not only do they carry diseases with which they can infect you, they aren't deterred by security precautions or physical actions that would stop rational, lucid human beings from

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carrying out their intentions. A sober criminal in his right mind, just out to make his day's pay through muggings or carjackings (or simple burglaries), will be discouraged by an alert gaze, the presence of a security system, or the display of a defensive weapon. A mentally deranged or chemically altered street person covered in body lice won't give a good damn (and may not even notice that you're trying to warn him off). On top of all of this, we have the threat that such a population can and does help spread parasite-borne diseases that have previously been largely eliminated. (This is one reason the rise in illegal immigration in this country is a problem akin to homelessness — aliens are bringing onto our shores increased rates of diseases previously well controlled or even largely wiped out, such as tuberculosis).

No, the reality of the homeless, of panhandlers, is that the overwhelming majority of them have mental problems, drug dependencies, communicable diseases, or some combination of all of these. Crazy people and people "on something" are the most dangerous of all potential assailants because they are completely unpredictable. As I said, it is for this reason that they are not deterred by actions or words that give rational people pause. These are also the people most likely to carry diseases like hepatitis and HIV — and the people most likely to be carrying used hypodermic needles. I remember reading of an incident in a major city in which a homeless man jabbed a woman's daughter with a dirty needle.

How many women must be harassed and made to feel physically threatened simply trying to get from home to work and back again? How many honest citizens must be made to feel somehow guilty for daring to work hard and lead productive lives, simply because some grasping, filthy beggar demands a hand-out? How many people must wonder if they will contract lice, tuberculosis, hepatitis, or

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other communicable diseases when forced to work and walk in close proximity to the vile refuse of humanity? How many commuters must be stabbed with *fucking used hypodermic needles* before we recognize the danger?

Panhandlers, the homeless, street people... these people should not be objects of our pity. They are potential *threats* who must be recognized and avoided. Their *need* does not constitute a right to victimize you — and refusing to deal with them at the societal level produces disastrous, systemic consequences.

Consider my northeastern neighbors. On Sunday, 7 January 2007, the *MetroWest Daily News* reported on the arrest of a homeless man in Framingham, Massachusetts. The 61-year old man had “warrants for assault and battery with a deadly weapon and disorderly conduct on a person,” according to police. This poor, down-on-his luck homeless man “has been arrested or taken into protective custody over 65 times” since 1987 and “more than 20 times since 2004.”

Any rational person asks, “What is this dangerous predator doing on the streets of any American city? Why is such a person not locked up or otherwise removed from society for the very real threat that he represents? Why shouldn’t any human being this homeless man encounters treat him with fear and revulsion, avoiding him or otherwise dealing with him as a personal security risk?”

There is no *rational* reason not to acknowledge these realities.

Express these sentiments and you’ll be told that you lack compassion, that you are paranoid, that you are overreacting, and that you are being “hateful.” My favorite responses come from those people who tell me, “Well, I’ve

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dealt with the homeless every day for years,” perhaps because they walk in urban areas infested with these latter-day CHUDs<sup>1</sup>. “I’m still alive,” they tell me, sneering contemptuously — and thus I must be paranoid or simply mean-spirited because I see these people for the threat they represent.

Before you let others make you feel guilty about recognizing this very real threat, however, let me personalize and demystify the problem for you. Bear with me and read on.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers*, from the classic B-grade horror movie of the same name. In it, homeless people are turned into malevolent predators after exposure to toxic substances.

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*“If we take the route of the permanent handout, the American character will itself be impoverished.”*

— *Richard Nixon*

## **DISPELLING MYTHS**

I was annoyed with myself as I got out of my car downtown. I'd done a bad job of parallel parking on the busy side street and was worried I'd managed to pop the tire. Glancing around, I stooped to check the wheel. That's when I heard the voice behind me.

"Excuse me, sir? Excuse me, sir?"

I ignored it. There is no one downtown to whom I need to speak on the street. When the query was repeated, this time more loudly and closer, I realized whomever it was had continued to encroach on me. I stood and turned on the speaker.

He was, predictably, a panhandler, though he looked less obviously deranged and was a little less dirty than many. Muttering something about wanting two dollars to buy a bagel at a nearby coffee shop — the surest sign that you are being panhandled dishonestly is when the beggar offers too many specifics about what he is going to do with the money — this twenty-something white male was approaching me with his metaphorical hand out.

When I studied a traditional Chinese martial art, we were taught that a potential threat must not be allowed to close within striking distance of you. You must attack the opponent preemptively when he enters this range, we were told. When approached by someone whom you do not trust, we were taught, you must put up your hands and maintain a safe distance. As the panhandler approached, my first thought was that I must, at any cost, keep him outside that distance — or else I would have to strike him, as I did not want him approaching me. I did not want to strike him. I

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wanted nothing to do with him. So I reacted as I had been taught.

I was only too aware, even then, that every panhandler one meets is a potential threat to one's health and well-being. Those who dwell in urban areas, I knew, will face no other self-defense scenario more often than that of being approached by street people. Under no circumstances whatsoever would I allow a street person to get close to me. More importantly, I believed then, as I do now, that nobody has the right to violate my personal space without my consent. Let me say that again:

*Street people do not have the right to approach you.*

Something clicked in my head, as these thoughts came at me. Here I was, just trying to go about my business. I was already irritated over the tire. I'd had it replaced not that long ago and the stress of parallel parking downtown in the busy traffic had taken its toll. Why was it that I could not go about my business for *thirty frigging seconds* without being approached by a panhandler?

As that miserable beggar made his way toward me, my anger hit its flashpoint. I thought about the way street people decrease the quality of the lives of every honest man and woman who walks down the sidewalks of every major American city, harassed and intimidated by beggars who believe the world owes them something for nothing. I thought about these societal parasites who see nothing wrong with simply asking for what others have earned because they think they have some claim to the labor of others.

I pointed at the beggar, bringing my rear hand up in a guard like the one I will show you in this booklet.

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“Step away,” I ordered angrily.

Now, a lot of people have made fun of me for describing this incident in this way. I’ve been accused of everything from Austin Powers posing (“Judo...*chop!*”) to paranoid overreacting. But that’s not the *point*. I’m not describing this because I think I’m cool or because I think I have the ability to put the Fear of Phil Elmore into random strangers. I was simply enraged and I hissed at this beggar with a hostility I did not realize I possessed. I reacted instinctively — but my instincts were, in this case, developed by training that simply took over under stress. I was pleased that when I needed it, I did not have to think about it. That is the goal of training to defend yourself for real-life problems. That is also the goal of the strategies I am trying to impart to you herein.

As I pointed and glared at the homeless man, the street creature froze in his tracks. He actually apologized, turned, and scampered off in the other direction as if I’d threatened him. I looked down at my hands, exhaled, and was immediately hit with an attack of the shakes as the adrenaline dump had its way with my nervous system.

Now, I’m not telling you this because I think the situation was actually life-threatening. It *wasn’t*. I was just *mad*. To be perfectly honest with you, this happens *each and every time* I get into an altercation of any kind. The sad fact of the matter is, I’m not a confrontational person. I’m not even particularly assertive unless I constantly remind myself to be. I don’t like conflict at all. Any time I am forced to yell at someone or otherwise assert myself, it makes me red in the face and shaky with adrenaline. That’s just how it is. I guess I’m kind of a wuss, really.

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I was a little shocked at the vehemence of my reaction — but you know what? Even though I hate conflict, even though I dislike confrontation, *I was not sorry*. What I did was necessary, and it was part of the realization and revelation I had concerning dealing with street people, the reasons for which caused me to write this booklet.

So why did I get so upset? Why am I on this soapbox now? It's simple. I've lived with the homeless problem for over thirteen years. For as long as I've lived in Syracuse, New York — a relatively small city in Central New York that is plagued with homeless people — I've dealt with the harassment of street people. The problem isn't even really my own, because as a large, relatively strong male with martial arts training, I'm more than capable of taking care of myself (even if I don't find it overly pleasant). No, the problem is that I have friends and family members who've worked downtown for as long as I've lived here, and I've had to watch as, daily, they walked that gauntlet of homeless beggars and predators.

Let's be clear on something from the outset, too. Our popular entertainment media love to push the mythology of the down-on-his-luck average homeless Joe, somebody to whom fate has simply been cruel and who, through no fault of his own, finds himself penniless. As we learned in the preceding section, that's a load of crap. Most people who are homeless are homeless because they have mental or substance abuse issues.

The media also love to spread the myth of the homeless family — a poor, noble underclass eking out an existence under our overpasses and on our subway grates, desperate to make it in a cold and uncaring world. This is ridiculous and not at all borne out by the demographics of homelessness in the United States.

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According to *Healing Hands*, the publication of the HCH Clinicians' Network that I cited earlier, 84% of the homeless are single men ages 25-54. (Another 9% are over 55, while just 7% are between 19 and 24). Men comprise 77% of single homeless adults, but only 15% of adults in homeless families. (Also, if you care about the race breakdown, 41% of homeless adults are white, 40% are black, 10% are Hispanic, and 8% are Native American.) About one third of homeless men are veterans — but that's the same representation as found in the population at large, so the myth of the homeless vet is just that, too.

Stop and think about those statistics for a moment. The overwhelming majority of the homeless are single males aged 25-54. According to the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, single males in that age range (especially those 35 and younger) were among the most likely groups to commit violent crime. That means the very group that makes up most homeless people is also the demographic group *most likely to assault you*.

Just last year, the reality of the homeless problem was brought home in my adopted home town of Syracuse, New York. For years, my wife and I have commented that there are always people in the road near a certain onramp that we take to a major traffic route through the city. It turns out that this was the case because there was a major “homeless encampment” nearby off Pearl Street in Syracuse. Many homeless people had erected makeshift structures and were living there, emerging to panhandle and otherwise prey on Syracusans living and working in the surrounding area.

The decisive action of razing the “homeless encampment” was decried as “precipitous” in the local newspaper. The editorial “Hard-Core Homeless,” published January 17,

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2007, mewled, "What should be done about homeless people who refuse help from social service agencies and insist on living outside, in makeshift encampments? The question is a difficult one and there are no easy answers. But the city of Syracuse decided on a quick, clean answer two weeks ago: Raze the encampments and essentially leave the residents to fend for themselves."

While city officials originally claimed they were trying to protect the street people from themselves by forcing them into shelters and out of the cold late-December weather, it came out that several women in the area had complained of lewd comments made by the homeless denizens of the "camp." Anyone who's been in an urban area knows that there's more to these lewd comments than, "Hey baby, hey baby." Quite often, when you're a single woman walking alone, such catcalls carry with them the very real threat of sexual assault. They aren't benign things like, "Oh, baby, you look fine." More often than not, they're on the order of, "*Hey, I'd like to fuck you, you whore!*"

The next day, the newspaper followed up its report, continuing its drumbeat of complaint about the fact that the homeless camp was swept up and the residents cleared out, rather than plied with any number of feel-good social problems. Interestingly, after the news of the Pearl Street encampment's destruction, employees at a nearby National Grid (a utility company) office building came forward with complaints that local homeless men were leaving feces on and around the employees' cars in the company parking lot, not to mention flashing and making lewd comments at employees as they entered and left the building.

Staff writer Delen Goldberg, in *A Portrait of the Homeless in CNY*, brought more bleeding-heart hand-wringing to the issue in the pages of the *Syracuse Post Standard*. Between

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the editorialized lines, the following facts and admissions about the homeless in the Syracuse area came through:

- Schizophrenia and depression were said to “abound in the homeless community.”
- A “psychotic” man was found living by himself in a tent city on the shore of Syracuse’s Onondaga Lake, near the area’s most popular shopping mall. The man regularly drank out of the incredibly polluted lake and “suffered violent bouts of vomiting.”
- 70 percent of the “homeless veterans” in the area “struggle with mental health and/or substance abuse problems,” according to the coordinator for the VA Medical Center’s Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program.
- Over 25% of people receiving assistance from something called AIDS Community Resources were homeless or “at risk of becoming homeless.” The majority of the infected were men.

As you can see, the local reality of the homeless mirrors that of the national problem. I’ve dealt with the security threat offered by such people — people who suffer from physical and mental diseases and dependency issues, people who occupy the key criminal demographic in the United States, and people who are both unpredictable and not easily deterred by basic personal security precautions — for more than a decade.

Every time I go downtown, I end up with yet another “homeless story” to add to my collection. Some of the stories are minor, while others are colorful enough that they found

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their way into this booklet. Regardless, the *fact* is that street people comprise both a personal security risk and a societal problem at large. They represent a problem that cannot be solved through feel-good government programs or misplaced compassion. It is a problem that can only be solved by *removing the threat from society* and thereby *protecting productive citizens from the depredations of the homeless*.

What does removing the threat mean? It means passing laws outlawing aggressive panhandling. It means destroying homeless encampments wherever they are found. It means rousting vagrants and street people wherever *they* are found, clearing them out of the communities on which they prey and placing them in institutions where they can be contained, treated, and controlled.

Society, however, is unlikely to do this. We simply do not have the stomach to institutionalize the nation's vagrants. Given that they will continue to prey on society, we must take steps individually to protect ourselves.

This means recognizing the ploys, strategies, and tactics used by street people so that you can deal with them effectively when you encounter them. Once you understand how they operate, you can adopt some simple strategies for coping with them.

## **STRATEGIES FOR STREET PEOPLE**

First, let's talk about some of the common confrontations you'll likely face on the street. The people accosting you might or might not be obviously homeless. Many street people look perfectly "normal" and aren't smeared with their own offal. Regardless, anyone approaching you in the fashions listed here, even passively, should be treated as a security threat.

### **OFFRAMPS**

Anyone who drives in urban and suburban areas will, sooner or later, be confronted by one of the more obnoxious manifestations of panhandling — offramp beggars. I say "obnoxious" because I find it particularly galling that someone would both ask for money *and* ask in such a way that those inclined to give must put themselves at great physical risk to do so.

You are never in more danger than when seated and belted in your automobile, stopped, with your window down and another human being standing nearby. You have very little mobility and even less leverage sitting in your car.

In Texas, an uproar occurred when a holder of one of the state's then-new CCW (Carry Concealed Weapon) permits shot and killed another person in a "traffic dispute." What didn't always make the left-leaning news reports of this example of "gun violence" was the fact that the shooter fired in self-defense. He was sitting in his car when a road-raging fellow traveler reached into his open window and started striking him repeatedly.

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Being struck in the head again and again can result in serious injury, permanent blindness, and even death. The armed citizen knew this and reacted accordingly. Given his relatively helpless nature sitting in the car, his gun was really the only option available to him. This emphasizes just how big a disadvantage you face when sitting while attacked by a standing assailant, especially if you're strapped in and going nowhere.



Consider an offramp. If you're trapped at the light at the bottom of the ramp, the beggar has a captive audience. He can approach your vehicle and there's little you can do about it except refuse to roll down your window. Most of the time, this is sufficient to protect you — but remember, few car windows are brick-proof.

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If you think you're going to drive away when a threat appears, forget it — unless you're keen on trading a mugging for a car accident. You're stopped at that light for a reason. If there aren't cars both in front of and behind you, chances are you'll have to pull into oncoming traffic to drive against the light.

To give that offramp beggar money, you must essentially offer him your throat in complete trust. Reaching through your own car window to hand him a dollar, you are totally vulnerable.

Never give money to panhandlers, especially if you're in your car. It is not worth the risk. You may successfully give money to scores of street people before encountering one who's inclined to do more than quietly take what you volunteer — but why subject yourself to this unnecessary danger? If you wish to give to charity, do it through channels and not to individuals. You have family and friends who count on you. Your continued health and well-being are more important than those of someone rude enough to corner people in their cars.

### **GENERAL PANHANDLING AND PLOYS**

The same is true when you are approached outside of your car. Again, *never give money to panhandlers*. For one thing, at least one of your hands is occupied when you hand something over to someone else. For another, you are telling the panhandler that you *have money* when you give him some of it. Oh, and please, for the love of all that is holy, do not take out your wallet and start selecting a suitable donation from your available funds. You might as well wear a sign around your neck that says, "Rob me."

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When someone asks you for money, the appropriate response is to *keep moving*. I stare down panhandlers out of my overdeveloped sense of outrage, but this could provoke a confrontation and I don't recommend it to others. Either ignore the request or state flatly that you have no money (even if this isn't true). Keep walking away as you do so. Make brief eye contact to show that you are aware of the threat, then focus your attention onward as if you have someplace important to be.

Most of the hard-luck stories beggars tell you are confidence games and nothing more. How can you tell? Most beggars commit the classic error of offering too much information. The more elaborate the song and dance, the more complicated the backstory justifying the begging, the greater the probability that the whole thing is bogus.

Beggar ploys have one thing in common: they are all, pardon my language, bullshit. The following indicators comprise by no means an all-inclusive list, but they serve as a great thumbnail guide to some of the more common street lies. All are ploys with which I've been confronted personally. Granted, there are people out there whose hard luck stories are actually true, but they're much fewer and farther between than many people think.

#### **Too Much Information**

This is the big one, the ploy indicator most frequently encountered. Liars and beggars almost always fail to keep things simple. They launch into incredibly involved stories on the theory that the more detail they include, the more plausible the ruse will seem. This is not the case. A *good* liar keeps things simple because this leaves fewer traps to remember and avoid. A *good* con artist lets *you* fill in the details.

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A young white man wearing gold chains over a muscle shirt once gave me an elaborate song and dance about needing money to make a phone call because he needed a ride to some outpatient cancer treatment center, an appointment he'd missed previously due to a number of factors (which he supplied). The whole pile of nonsense was obviously an excuse to separate me from my money.

#### **Gas Money**

Apparently we are in the grip of a nationwide epidemic of stranded motorists, all of whom just need two or maybe five dollars worth of gas to get them on their ways again. The only cure for this epidemic is the kindness of strangers, it would seem, for this army of stranded motorists is even now wandering the streets, asking passers-by for help. Almost every time you encounter this request, it's bogus.

Alternatively, you will see this request framed as the desperate need for bus fare. Often the beggar will tell you he is from out of town, and just needs a specific dollar amount in order to get back home again. I once saw a young man offering this story to people on the street. I was told, by someone who works downtown and who sees the young man often, that he is a local who uses this lie to beg. He's not a stranded out-of-towner at all. He's just a local beggar and a liar.

#### **Lunch Money**

I recall a study some time back — it might have been in *USA Today* or some other major media outlet — that speared a popular myth. Most of the “homeless” polled who were carrying signs saying “Will work for food” actually *wouldn't* when offered the chance.

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Take a good look at the next beggar who asks for money because, he tells you, he's *hungry*. He doesn't *look* like he's starving, does he? He looks dirty and unkempt, sure, but is he *emaciated*? People who are *really* starving look the part.

A beggar once accosted me citing a specific sum of money and muttering about the specific breakfast he hoped to purchase at the exact establishment he sought to patronize. Ploys are like that — they sometimes come wrapped in each other. This was “Too Much Information” within “Lunch Money.”

### **Speak Up**

I was waiting outside an urban coffee shop that is plagued by aggressive panhandlers (who, when they aren't begging, sexually harass and intimidate the female college students who frequent the shop) when I last encountered this ploy. A disheveled white male of perhaps middle age wandered up, muttering something I could not hear. I glared at him and he gave me a wide berth as he continued to work the area, accosting everyone entering the shop. Those who did not ignore him stopped and said something like, “What?” or “Pardon?” because he muttered so quietly. This is a deliberate, calculated decision on such a beggar's part. Mumbling panhandlers hope to catch you off guard, counting on the cultural reflex that prompts you to ask for clarification when you do not hear what someone says. I've fallen for this myself without thinking.

The appropriate response to anyone who accosts you and mumbles is no response at all, though you may choose to observe silently to see if the speaker repeats his or her plea.

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### **Help a Vet**

Most of the homeless “veterans” one encounters are veterans of long begging careers and nothing more. Those holding signs proclaiming their veteran status are hoping to cash in on your gratitude to those who fight and die for our country. Some will go so far as to dress themselves in soldier costumes, wearing fatigues or boonie hats as if they've just gotten off the first boat from Over There — only to find themselves destitute among spitting hippie ingrates.

Despite the fact that veterans are represented among the homeless population at the same rate they appear in the population at large, the majority of “veteran” beggars are liars who have never served in the U.S. military. Your heart is in the right place, but don't fall for this one.

### **The Grace of God**

Ours is basically a religious society. Many people will try to invoke religion as a means of gaining trust or allaying fear. Some subtle con artists will wear crosses (which are large enough to be obvious to those whom they accost). Others will work references to God or church into their ploys.

One early morning, while walking from my car to my office, a couple in a battered and fanbelt-squealing Cadillac stopped and gave me an elaborate song and dance about losing or running out of money. They were supposedly desperate to get gas money to get home but, shrewdly, did not directly ask me for funds. Instead they wanted to know where the nearest church could be found (which was their ostensible purpose for stopping me).

The implication was, of course, that they were good Christians who only sought the support of their network of

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fellow believers. One supposes that, lulled by their evident religious credentials, I as the mark would be inclined simply to give them money to help them on their way.

I didn't fall for it and neither should you. God doesn't care if you've got gas in your car. That's your responsibility. Anyone invoking God while implying a need for cash is simply using religion to mask a ploy.

**GOT THE TIME?**

If you're obviously wearing a watch, you have two choices when asked for the time. You can be rude and refuse to give it, or you can comply with the request. The problem is that when approached on the street by a stranger or a street person, there is a chance — not a great one, but a real one nonetheless — that someone who asks you for the time is trying to distract you in order to assault you. Think about it. When you look at your watch, you typically look down at your arm, making you an easy target.

If someone you don't know comes up to you and asks you for the time, you can easily minimize your risk. Step back casually, away from the stranger, preferably blading your body as you do so. Raise your arm rather than lowering your head, keeping that arm well away from your body and between you and the other person. In this way you can read the time while keeping your guard up.

Practice doing this so it looks casual rather than confrontational. There's no need to drop into your Daniel-san crane stance and fire off a flurry of snap kicks just to tell someone they're late for an appointment.

Since I started bringing my arm and my watch up into my line of vision, in front of my body, I do it now without

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thinking, any time I check the time. When something becomes your normal habit, it is not something about which you must deliberate. These are instincts it is very helpful to ingrain.

#### **GOT A LIGHT?**

The answer to this question is, *no*, you don't have a light. You do not, in fact, smoke, even if you *do*, if someone you don't know wanders up to you on the street and asks you this question. (Now, if you've got a cigarette dangling from your mouth, it's going to be harder to deny that you smoke. This scenario assumes that a stranger has approached you and you have given no public indication that you have a source of flame on your person.)

There's simply no way to light another person's cigarette for them on the street without incurring an unacceptable level of risk, unless you're willing to toss someone a lighter or a book of matches. (For you smokers, that's one option. Pick up a handful of those free books of matches people still give away here and there, or buy a box at the store. Carry a couple in your pocket in addition to your lighter. When someone asks you for a light, you can toss them a book of matches (from a safe, casual distance) and even look generous by adding, "Keep it.")

Picture standing in front of someone, holding your lighter to that person's cigarette. At least one of your hands — possibly two, if you're cupping one palm against the wind — is occupied. You're also giving that stranger a burning cylinder of tobacco with which he can put out your eye, if he's so inclined. (That's why cops will tell you to put out your cigarette when they speak with you during a stop or arrest.)

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## **PARANOIA AND PRUDENCE**

These are just a few examples of scenarios in which you must be extremely careful in today's world. Being mindful of these risks isn't paranoid. It's *prudent*. It's sad that we must be concerned about such things, but the reality of our world is that you simply can't trust people you do not know. Every one of these scenarios has been used before to victimize someone by playing to the individual's basic decency, his or her desire to help others.

I am not teaching you to envision marauding ninja crouching behind every parking meter, nor am I encouraging you to draw down on every Girl Scout who wants to know how long it will be before her bus arrives. You've got to keep things in perspective. That perspective, however, must include a recognition of the real dangers that exist in contemporary society. Every street person encounter is a potential "street interview," a precursor to assault.

## **MANAGING THE PHYSICAL THREAT**

This booklet is about strategies and tactics for dealing with street people. It is not, by any means, a system of fighting or an instructional text on how to defend yourself physically, for the most part. I will include the basics for maintaining space and guarding your person here, but keep in mind that you're only just scratching the surface. For a little more information on these topics, I recommend my book, *Shorthand Empty Hand*. Really, though, what you need to seek is qualified reality-based self-defense instruction. Check around and see what you can find and what is available in your area.

If you are accosted by a street person, particularly one whose pitch involves an obvious ploy, do not engage that person. No dialogue will improve the situation. A null response gives the street person nothing with which to work in attempting to involve himself in your life. More importantly, when you engage in dialogue with someone, it occupies your mind. Street people count on being able to distract you through getting your brain working on a conversation. This is the purpose of, say, asking someone, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" before punching them in the face. While you're busy wondering who Kenneth is, and what the hell is going on, you're not thinking about what's happening around you.

If someone begins to encroach on your personal safety zone, warn him or her off. A firm, neutral "Step away from the car" or "Do not approach me" should suffice. If the assailant does not listen and tries to engage you, maintain space as needed. If the encounter becomes an assault, do what you must. Do not engage in conversation or allow your mind to

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become distracted. Simply repeat your commands and maintain space.

Remember that most people who approach you in public *asking for money* are liars. You should not trust them and you do not owe them a blessed thing. Remember, also, that most people who approach you probably *aren't* trying to attack you — but any of them *could*.

Self-defense involves certain very specific, universal principles. We can argue over the specifics, but most people who know what they are doing will agree on the broad strokes. I have distilled these to eight.

The eight principles of fighting that I will list herein are not original. I did not invent them. I compiled them over fifteen years of martial arts training, not to mention almost as many years of dealing with homeless people. They are an amalgam of the best principles from the various styles and systems I have studied and researched. Applying these principles will help you succeed in unarmed self-defense only if you have the will to survive and to act decisively. If you have no will, no drive, you will lose no matter how accomplished is your technique.

#### **The Eight Principles of Fighting**

- Stay aware.
- Focus on nothing and everything.
- Keep your hands up.
- Maintain space.
- Move forward.
- Lead with the hands and the feet will follow.
- Palm Heel, Edge of Hand, Fist
- Face, Neck, Groin, Knees, Ankles

## ***The Homeless Threat: Dealing with Street People***

### ***Stay Aware***

Awareness is the most important component of self-defense. Only when you know what is going on around you can you possibly hope to deal with it. Only when you are capable of perceiving subtle (and sometimes obvious) cues in your environment will you have any hope of avoiding potential trouble before it becomes physical force directed against you. When you are out and about, you must make an effort to maintain a reasonable level of alertness.

This does not mean you must spend your days in a flop-sweating, trembling state of jittery paranoia. Rather, it means that when you are not someplace you can deem relatively secure — your home with your doors locked, for example — you must be prepared to meet physical force should you have reason to believe it is being offered.

When I am in public — at a movie, in an amusement park, walking from my car into a store and back again, walking from my office or my home into the parking lot and back, traveling on the highway, whatever — I do so in a relaxed but alert state, monitoring what is around me and assessing the behavior of those within range of me. If anything strikes me as unusual or potentially threatening, I pay closer attention to it, my awareness ratcheting up from baseline “aware” to “interested.” If my interest reveals the potential for danger, I move to “on guard” — at which point I would start using body mechanics to establish and maintain my personal space in preparation for self-defense.

When I am home relaxing, I lock my doors. I take off the considerable load of equipment I carry daily, from knives and flashlights to keyrings, firearms, and other implements. I allow myself to feel safe. This does not mean, however, that I become complacent. I've made that mistake before and always regretted it. Just because you are home does not

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mean you can simply suspend your judgment, refuse to check out odd noises or other strange occurrences, or otherwise act like the world outside cannot affect you. I keep weapons and tools close to hand at home even if they are not on me. When I answer the door, I do so on guard. When I leave, I secure the place as best I can to prevent a break-in.

Practice being aware. When you're in a restaurant waiting for your food, or waiting in line at the bank, ask yourself if you could describe the scene to a police officer. How aware are you of the people around you — what they look like, what they're wearing, and how they're behaving? When you're driving, ask yourself if you know the color of the car immediately behind you. Do you have any idea if there's even someone back there, possibly tailgating you? Is it a cop car? Awareness on the road will help you avoid accidents *and* tickets. When you're home, maybe lying in bed just before you go to sleep, ask yourself what you hear. Are there any sounds and, if so, what do they signify? Does anything sound unusual? Can you hear people or other activity outside your window or in adjoining rooms or structures? Once you strive to be aware *of being aware*, it will become second nature. You will be better off knowing what's going on around you.

### ***Focus on Nothing and Everything***

Much debate has taken place in the martial arts world regarding what or where to watch in a physical altercation. When you face someone whom you must fight, for whatever reason, do you watch the eyes? Do you watch the hands? Do you focus on the *dan tien*, the body's center? Do you watch the leading elbow, the shoulder, the hips? On what should you focus?

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The answer, much as it might sound like a convenient dodge, is all of these and none of them. When you face off with someone, blur or unfocus your vision slightly. Do not stare at any given part of the opponent's body. Instead, take in the whole body as a single entity, seeing everything and nothing at once. This slightly blurred holistic vision not only helps you perceive movement in the other person, but makes it easier for you to dehumanize him — to see him as an opponent rather than a person, which in turn makes it easier for you to deliver physical force if you must. Do NOT look into his eyes directly after you have established initial, brief contact. Don't let him psyche you out.

Believe it or not, many people have a hard time hitting and otherwise hurting another human being — even if that human being is a stinking homeless predator who has no such qualms. Decent, rational people simply don't go around injuring others. This is why dehumanizing your opponent will help you to defend yourself.

For that matter, many people are easily “psyched out” when staring a hostile person in the face (and especially in the eyes). By refusing to focus on the opponent but remaining visually aware of his entire body (so you can pick up movement cues within the range of your vision), you will see him without really seeing him. Your countenance will, in turn, have a better chance of unsettling him. Don't count on that, of course; if he attacked you in the first place he's probably less afraid of you than you are of him.

Readers of my online magazine, *The Martialist™*, have often teased me about the expression on my face in many of my pictures. I frequently have one eyebrow arched and am staring past the camera when my picture is taken. Many pictures of me show me looking over the top of my glasses, too. While my “eyebrow thing” is attributable in part to my

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childhood hero-worship of *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock (and an inside joke to my readers), it is also the result of my myopia. My eyes are nearsighted and unevenly so, which means one eye always works harder than the other when I stare intently. Staring over the top of my glasses helps me to blur my vision in taking in an opponent's entire form; it also brings my chin down, protecting my throat. In the process, one of my eyebrows invariably goes up as my eyes struggle to see the same unfocused picture.

***Keep Your Hands Up***

I was taught that a potential threat must not be allowed to close within striking distance of you. You must attack the opponent preemptively when he enters this range. When approached by someone whom you do not trust, I was taught, you must put up your hands and maintain a safe distance.

I described earlier in this booklet the incident in which a panhandler accosted me and I reacted to his intrusion. As the stinking, disheveled man approached, my first thought was that I must, at any cost, keep him outside that critical striking distance — or else I would have to strike him, as I did not want him approaching me. The only alternative was to let him get as close as he wanted to get, which is an unacceptable security risk when dealing with unpredictable, frequently diseased street people.

Some of the armchair experts across the Internet (after I described this incident in my online magazine) accused me of overreacting, of “dropping into a Kung Fu stance” to deal with a relatively benign situation. In so doing, these critics betrayed their ignorance — because the basic hand positioning to maintain personal space is universal.

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I've seen the stance referred to as an "I don't want any trouble" position, a "fence," and a "de-escalation stance." Whatever the terminology, the basic concept is the same. When you are approached by someone who represents a potential threat to your person — be he a panhandler, a drunken barfly, or an incongruously aggressive stranger demanding the time — you must keep that person outside striking distance to avoid making yourself a potential victim.

The basic self-defense default position is a bladed (angled) posture in which the hands are up, staggered, palms open. This will look similar to many kinds of conventional guards and stances.



***Basic Guard***

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If you wish, you can adopt a supplementary guard, bringing one arm closer to your face. This is more like a fighting stance and less like a “fence” position; it also looks more aggressive. The advantage it provides is closer, tighter protection for the face. The arms create distance and provide a protective barrier for your body (and, more specifically, your centerline). The body language is clear: Do not come any closer. The open palms are less aggressive than would be closed fists. Open-hand blows can be delivered easily from this stance, too.



***Supplementary Guard***

### ***The Homeless Threat: Dealing with Street People***

From the basic hands-up, palms-open, bladed posture, you have the option to deliver physical strikes if you must defend yourself. You also may choose to transition to a weapon (thus escalating the force used in the scenario). The most common justification for making this transition would probably be facing multiple opponents, in which case a “force multiplier” could be seen as a rational necessity on your part as the defender. (I’m not a lawyer, so don’t take this as legal advice. It’s safe to say that if you use a weapon in a violent altercation, you’re going to have to answer for your actions in court.)

It doesn’t matter with which side you lead, at least to me. This is a matter of personal preference and will depend largely on the types of strikes you like to do from the hands-up position.

There’s one more basic guard position that I described earlier. We’ll call it the Timepiece guard. A Timepiece is single-hand guard for use when your other hand is occupied. It’s a modified wing-like posture that looks like you’re checking your watch. It’s perfect for doing so safely, as I described in the section on ploys and strategies.

You see, if you’re obviously wearing a watch, you have two choices when asked for the time. You can be rude and refuse to give it, or you can comply with the request. The problem is that when approached on the street by a stranger, there is a chance — not a great one, but a real one nonetheless — that someone who asks you for the time is trying to distract you in order to assault you. Think about it: when you look at your watch, you typically look down at your arm, making you an easy target.

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***Timepiece Guard***

If someone you don't know comes up to you and asks you for the time, you can easily minimize your risk. Step back casually, away from the stranger, preferably blading your body as you do so. Raise your arm rather than lowering your head, keeping that arm well away from your body and between you and the other person. In this way you can read the time while keeping your guard up.

The point of these stances — and of any hands-up stance — is to place your arms between you and a potential threat. This creates a physical barrier while asserting personal space boundaries.

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### ***Maintain Space***

Your personal space is the range at which someone can touch you or reach you with a physical attack (a punch, a kick, etc.). Maintaining that personal space — guarding it against intrusion — helps prevent such attacks from succeeding. It establishes a barrier, a physical boundary, between you and the opponent. Whenever possible, do not allow people whom you do not know or do not trust to intrude on your personal space.

As we've discussed, keeping your hands up helps you maintain your personal space. Since I started advocating this method for dealing with being accosted, I've seen three major criticisms of hands-up ready stances and their use in space maintenance. These criticisms raise issues worth addressing. I will list each of the three criticisms and then refute them in turn.

***“Hands-up stances are too hostile.”*** Many critics see placing your hands up in front of your body to be very aggressive — body language that can escalate an altercation because it appears threatening. While it's true that assuming a double *Wu Sao* or flaring your fingers in tiger claws might look like the prelude to a duel, the appropriate posture for maintaining space is much less hostile. With the hands up, palms out, combined with appropriate verbalization (“Whoa, there, friend, nobody wants any trouble, let's not crowd each other...”) the combative nature of the stance is mitigated.

Of course, any time you put your hands up, you are being combative to a point. You're asserting your personal space and you're demanding that this be respected. Getting your hands up will always be more aggressive than passively allowing someone to encroach on your space. Yes, when

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you do this you run the risk of escalating an encounter, but that is the risk you run whenever you resist the will, the demands, or the approach of another person. That is what we train to do — to resist the use of force or the threat of force against us.

There will be those critics who say you should be ready to defend yourself from any position and with appropriate maneuvering of your body. Well, of course you should do this. Given the luxury of preparing for a potential threat you have identified, however, why would you not get your hands up? If action beats reaction, the man in a hands-up ready stance will always have a slight edge over the man whose arms hang by his sides. Given the option, getting your hands up provides a better shield than does waiting to put those hands up after an attack is initiated. Hands-up stances also provide an important visual cue for maintaining personal space — it just isn't as forceful to try to maintain space with your hands down or through body movement alone.

***“Hands-up stances constrict your focus.”*** Some critics complain that a hands-up stance inappropriately focuses you on one person, prompting you to ignore or neglect potential threats from elsewhere in your environment. While this is always a possibility if one is not mentally aware, it need not be a byproduct of such a stance. You don't need to turn off your brain or stop scanning the area with your peripheral vision simply because your arms are raised.

Even when dealing with a multiple attacker scenario, the greatest threat is presented by the person closest to you. Of course you should focus on that person, at least initially. Just how many ninja are hiding in the neighboring shrubbery is not your foremost concern. You must deal with the more immediate threat.

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Let's be clear about this, however. We're not talking about focusing on the immediate threat to exclusion. You must remain aware at all times, even when dealing with someone physically. (That's one of the reasons you must deal with a physical attack quickly and ruthlessly — because the person attacking you might not be alone.)



#### ***Transitioning from Hands-up Stance...***

***“Hands-up stances are vulnerable to grabs.”*** This is the complaint that always kind of irritates me because it speaks to mild ignorance on the part of the critics. I don't mean,

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though, that they must be “ignorant” if they worry about having a finger broken or a hand grabbed, because these are valid concerns. Rather, they’re ignorant of the way such hands-up stances are used.



***...To Immediate Non-Telegraphic Action***

Hands-up stances are dynamic, not static. If you're standing there like a potted plant with your arms extended and unmoving, you deserve to have your fingers broken. The whole point of placing your arms in front of your body is to facilitate action and reaction. The second your would-be attacker gets close enough to grab you, you should be doing something. If he reaches for your hand or arm, that hand or arm should be moving, countering, hitting, or whatever you're inclined to do. It shouldn't be just hanging there.

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### ***Move Forward***

One of the first things my martial arts teacher David W. Pearson taught me was, "Stop being afraid of yourself." His intent was to train out of me the hesitance that characterized much of my early training. I still remember the first time we engaged in the exercise, working outside one sunny Spring day. Dave told me to imagine that one of my feet was nailed to the ground. He was going to attack me. I was to defend myself, to counter-attack, without giving ground. I could move around the pivot point of my foot if necessary, but I was not to let him force me back.

It was a daunting prospect at first. Dave is much smaller than me but possessed so much more skill that sparring him was very intimidating. Over time, though, it became much easier. I reached the point where I actually preferred sparring Dave, because I knew that I would learn something each time.

Interestingly enough, roughly one year after Dave became my instructor, different coworkers of mine told me, at different times, that I was "more assertive" and even "more aggressive." They said at the time that the change was apparent "in the last year or so."

Coincidentally, both of my martial arts teachers at the time commented on the physical expression of this change. While working one-on-one with each of them, I repeatedly, subconsciously, and slowly backed each one of them across the room. The process was quite gradual. We would be training and suddenly discover that we were once again too close to the wall. Both teachers had to prompt me to back up more than once to give them more room.

Dave found this almost amusing and told me that it made him proud. To back up your opponent, to dominate the room

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in a way that gives you more space in which to operate while denying this to others, is an extremely useful tendency to cultivate. I would like to think this habit is a natural outgrowth of becoming more confident in one's skills as a martialist, but it is entirely possible that it requires conscious thought to develop.

When you spar and when you train (where applicable and prudent), push yourself. Resist the temptation to give ground. You may have to back up at times to take advantage of your footwork, but when you do, follow up by driving forward to keep the initiative.

Gaining and keeping the initiative is necessary to overwhelm the opponent. You never want to play his game; you never want to be on the defensive. "Attack the attacker," as the saying goes. When you must defend yourself, drive forward.

#### ***Lead with the Hands and the Feet will Follow***

The system of unarmed combat I advocate, *Shorthand Empty Hand*, as a realistic method for dealing with street people (not a complete martial art for sport or anything else), focuses primarily on the hands. The feet are used for mobility and for low-level kicking, but footwork is kept intuitive and kicks are deemphasized in favor of hand techniques. This is because in the stress of a real-life encounter, I would rather you had your feet solidly planted than moving all over the landscape or firing off kicks. Use your hands and your feet will naturally follow, taking you where you need to go as you press your attack forward. It's as simple as this and we'll complicate it no further.

#### ***Palm Heel, Edge of Hand, Fist***

These are the natural weapons of the hands. The palm heel and edge of hand are open-hand structures, the use of which lessens the danger of damaging the hands. The fist is

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the most commonly used of all natural offensive weapons and, properly conditioned, allows the user to hit with great penetrating power.

Teaching you to perform these strikes is outside the scope of this booklet, which focuses primarily on the theory of dealing with the homeless and not on the physical functionality of fighting. If you don't already know how to perform a palm heel, and edge of hand blow, or a fist, I strongly recommend you work on these with a qualified instructor. I can also recommend my book, *Shorthand Empty Hand*, which includes brief write-ups on a variety of basic hand structures and strikes that are ideal for use with the methodology described herein.

#### ***Face, Neck, Groin, Knees, Ankles***

These are the primary targets of any reality-based self-defense system. The face, the neck, the groin, the knees, and the ankles of every human being are equally vulnerable. No amount of conditioning, no amount of muscular development, and no amount of sheer size will lessen the effect of a strike to the eyes, the throat, the genitals, or the vulnerable knee and ankle joints (though, to be honest, most homeless people are not exactly giant muscular bodybuilders). Those following this method should seek to strike these as targets of opportunity — meaning that when they are presented (and not before), they are struck.

#### **POSTURES AND METHODS FOR MAINTAINING SPACE**

In life, especially if your social interactions are healthy, you will find yourself in venues you cannot control. There will be times when you have no choice but to permit others to violate your personal space because the quarters are too close. If you've ever stood with others in a crowded restaurant or bar, waited in line at an amusement park,

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walked the congested streets of a major city, used public transportation, or even attended church, you have permitted others to get within striking distance of you. These situations are unavoidable. It is neither practical nor possible to lead a normal life while keeping every other human being beyond arms' reach.

When you must allow people into your personal space, your only choice is to remain aware of them and what they are doing. Stay alert but calm, absorbing what is going on in your proximity. If you detect something inappropriate, act on it. Until then, be content simply to watch or even feel those crowding you. There will be times when you are so crowded that you won't be able to look around easily. At those times, your sense of touch (as others press against your arms and shoulders, for example) is your only indication of what is happening around you.

In self-defense scenarios, there will be those times when you cannot preserve your personal space. A sudden attack in which your opponent is abruptly on top of you is one such case. A seemingly innocent social interaction in which an individual surprises you through deception is another. You must be capable of fighting and of seizing the initiative even when taken by surprise. You will never be able to predict every conceivable situation in which something surprising could occur.

In those cases in which you do perceive a potential threat approaching and have both time and space in which to deal with that threat, you can employ the hands-up methodology. Keeping your hands up in the course of a physical altercation helps protect your vulnerable head and neck. Getting those hands up ahead of time provides that protection preemptively while helping to establish your

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personal space (and sending a strong nonverbal message to that effect).



***Basic Hands-up Stance***

When approached by someone whom you do not trust (anyone who trips one of your profiling scenarios, be it a stranger or, especially, a street person), raise your hands with your body slightly angled, your hands open, and your palms out. Combine this with assertive, non-threatening verbalization — something to the effect of, “Hey, that’s far enough, don’t approach me, don’t crowd me.” Do NOT allow

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the person approaching you to engage you in dialogue, for if they get your brain working you'll get distracted. Just keep repeating your commands until your commands are obeyed or until you must engage in more physical action.



***Forcefully Warning Off the  
Approaching Aggressor***

Combine your verbalization with movement. Step back if you must and if you have the room in which to do so; don't stay rooted to one spot. If the person by whom you feel threatened continues to advance, become more forceful. Warn them verbally: "Do NOT approach me. I do NOT want you coming any closer to me. That is FAR ENOUGH." If the

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individual continues to advance on you despite these commands, he is aggressing; it is okay for you to adopt a more aggressive demeanor in response.

You may or may not have time for all of these verbalizations, of course, because you may not have enough room to maintain distance between you and the attacker and he may be advancing quickly. When the individual approaches to within striking distance — the distance at which they can kick or punch you — you are out of time and you must preempt the attack. Be warned that **YOU MAY ONLY DO THIS IF YOU ARE IN GENUINE AND CREDIBLE FEAR FOR YOUR LIFE**. You cannot simply start hitting people preemptively in the absence of the credible threat of serious harm.

The courts will use a “reasonable man” standard in evaluating your actions. A judge or jury will ask the question, “Would a reasonable observer share your opinion that an attack is imminent and you should be in fear for your life?” If those around you would not similarly judge the attacker’s actions to be threatening (and sufficiently threatening to endanger you — you cannot go around hitting people who aren’t big enough or strong enough or armed well enough actually to hurt you) then preempting the attack is not justified. You will be arrested and convicted of assault if you make such a mistake. Always judge your actions by the standards of a reasonable, impartial observer. Make your choices carefully, for you will pay for them if you are in error.

Generally, you are only legally justified in using parity of force. This means you can only use that amount of force necessary to stop the attack. You are not justified even to do this if the courts judge you could have avoided the attack altogether — meaning that if you can simply leave and avoid a fight, you are obligated to do so. You cannot grind your

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attacker into paste after he's already neutralized; you cannot stomp him while he's down; you cannot take revenge on him for daring to attack you. You may only stop him from hurting you and then escape.

From the hands-up stance, as your attacker (who has made his intentions clear through words and body language) moves into range, you strike him and overwhelm him. Remember — “attack, attack, attack,” as long as he is still aggressing. Once he has faltered or even fallen, get out of there. Find a phone and call the police to report what has happened.



***Striking from the Hands-up Stance***

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You might choose simply to go your own way on the theory that if the cops don't know what you've done, you can't be sued by anyone after the fact. It's true that in our crazy legal system, people are often sued wrongly by those who've tried to hurt them and were injured in the process of failing to do so. However, if you are content simply to let a societal predator go his own way after vanquishing him, you reduce the chances that he'll end up in the system and then in prison. Reporting the crime gives the police a chance to link the suspect to previous crimes and put him away for them. (It's a fact that most societal predators are recidivists — repeat offenders for whom violence and crime are a lifestyle.) Weigh your decisions carefully and do the right thing.

Remember that your hands-up stance is not a frozen posture. It's a dynamic means of maintaining your boundaries. When someone reaches for your limbs, move them — and react accordingly.

Lists of techniques can give you the tools with which to fight, but they are no more a guide to fighting than a list of ingredients is a recipe. The question this begs then becomes: how does one fight? Only you can develop the flow necessary to move with the mechanics and integrate them as a coherent whole. This requires time, training, and practice.

I recommend working with others to practice developing your flow. Find willing training partners, wear protective gear as appropriate, and work through various force scenarios. Guidelines for dynamic training and sparring are outside the scope of this booklet. You're a grown-up and perfectly capable of designing a training schedule that will help you.

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Just remember to be honest with yourself in evaluating your progress.

A typical application of this method follows a hypothetical progression from initial contact and escalation to defensive posturing and then preemptive or reactive striking. Here's just one interpretation of how that might go:

You are minding your own business out in public somewhere when you are approached by someone. Let's say it's a homeless man asking you if you have spare change. You brush him off and say you do not. He continues to approach but is still outside of your personal space — the distance at which he could kick or punch you.

You raise your hands in the basic stance. You verbalize appropriately — “Hey, man, don't crowd me, I like my space.” He does not heed your warning and you are forced to become more aggressive, saying, “That's far enough! Do not approach me!” (You could even get clever, depending on the situation. “Don't get any closer, dude, I've got the flu and you don't want to catch it” is one way to deter people. Just don't let him engage you in a two-way dialogue. When it doubt, simply repeat the same instructions.)

He continues to approach. He steps into range and raises a fist, shouting something incoherent and profane. You rightly judge, in that fraction of a second, that any reasonable person would perceive the credible threat of violence in your attacker's actions and words. At this point...

A. You step in and deliver a trio of palm heel blows to the attacker's face, alternating right and left strikes, rocking him backwards. He staggers and falls down. You leave and report the incident to the police.

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B. You whip a strike into his face with the back of your hand. He puts his hands up and grabs for you. You raise a vertical guard, step to the side as his flailing limbs glance off your arm, snatch to pull him past you by grabbing the back of his neck, and throw him to the ground behind you. You keep running in the direction you face in order to find a phone and call police.

C. Your attacker is faster than you. He throws a hook punch. You intercept the hook punch with a block that strikes inside his arm. You launch a simultaneous palm heel to his face. You then hook the back of his neck and pull him past you. He does not go down, so you face him and drive forward, throwing a knee into his groin and then a series of palm heels to his face. He finally goes down and you flee to find a phone and call police.

D. Your attacker throws a punch at your head. You slap-block and check the arm, flowing into a palm heel to the face as you check, hooking the attacking limb and pulling it toward you as you palm the attacker in the face. He resists and you stomp his ankle, then twist and dump him to the side before you flee to find a phone and call police.

Not terribly complicated, is it? Here's a basic framework for fighting off an aggressive street person:

- When you have time, get your hands up and take your stance. Fight from there. Keep it simple — you must protect your head and neck.
- If you don't have time, roll with the sudden strike or your failed block as best you can. As you recover, get your hands up.

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- When attacked, drive forward. Bring the attack to the enemy. Take the initiative.
- When taking the attack to the assailant, overwhelm him. Don't throw a technique or two and then stop. Don't leave a "space" between your techniques. Strike and keep striking until the opponent goes down. Remember: "Attack, attack, attack."
- Use the techniques that seem most natural to the target and the situation. Strike targets of opportunity only and let those targets dictate what you do. As the different parts of the assailant's body move within range of your strikes, choose a technique appropriate for the target and throw it without thinking about it.

## **PARTING THOUGHTS**

On a pleasant autumn evening I was standing by my car, which was parked in front of a heavily trafficked coffeehouse in an area near a local university. I was standing *outside* the car rather than sitting *in* it because there was an attempted carjacking at that very spot only a week previously.

With the strap of my pocket-stick keychain threaded over my fingers, I watched the college students and basketball game spectators bustling past. Crowds were heavy in the wake of a recently completed exhibition featuring the Harlem Globetrotters. Parking spaces were sparse and I was grateful to have snagged a prime section of curb. There was plenty of people-watching to do. The location hosts a cross-section of urban society, including all races, income levels, and occupations.

One trend developing at that particular location is most unwelcome and quite sobering: an increasing street person presence. The beggars I noticed most recently were sexually harassing female pedestrians. "Hey, gorgeous, you got any spare change?" was the mantra. "Hey, baby. Hey! Baby!"

As you can imagine, this spectacle made me sick. Whenever I say that, I'm greeted with the usual chorus of bleeding-heart nonsense about how awful I must be to see the homeless as my enemies. With rare exceptions, none of the people blathering on in this manner have *any* experience with the homeless. A few of them wrongly extrapolate, from their own fortunately peaceful encounters, a distorted and utopian view of reality in which street beggars are merely kind-hearted, down-on-their-luck characters with hearts of gold. Worse than these are the people who've actually had

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encounters with violent street people who blame “the system” and see socialist transfers of wealth as the solution to these societal problems.

Anyone capable of holding these views has not walked the gauntlet endured by countless urban pedestrians every day. Men and women who actually contribute to society, who in many cases are walking to jobs they'd rather not work for less pay than they deserve, must suffer further by dodging the grasping claws and barked demands of harassing, unstable, persistent panhandlers.

Why does this topic make me so angry? I am, after all, a lone, armed white man more than capable of fending off a single panhandler. I am not angry for *myself*, though. I am angry for every woman who has ever felt disgusted and fearful listening to the catcalls and feeling the gaze of a stinking, too-close beggar looming in her path. I am angry for every peaceful man who has had to wonder if he must use his fists simply to walk through a parking lot or down the street. I am angry for every person who is walking with his or her children, who has a physical disability, or who just doesn't wish to be yelled at by strangers who want what they have not earned.

No one has the right to accost you.

That's a fact. No “right to beg” exists. No one has license to invade the personal space of others or to make unwanted demands of them.

As I said, the majority of street people have mental problems or chemical abuse issues — problems that make them unpredictable and prone to violence. Yes, *all* people you encounter, no matter what their stations in life, could be threats — but you'd be a fool not to recognize the

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heightened risks offered by those who are obviously ill-kempt and erratic.

All these thoughts went through my mind as I watched outside that coffeehouse. While I waited, a disheveled, gaunt, African-American man in his twenties or thirties came shuffling up, rattling the loose change in a paper cup. "Change?" he barked. "Any change?" He accosted several people, all of whom ignored him. He asked me for change too. I stared him down and he wandered a little farther away.

Had I left then, those who think street people are just misunderstood would be free to chastise me as callous and paranoid. There's more to this particular story, though.

When no one among the plentiful crowd would give the beggar any money, he became *hostile and belligerent*. "What the fuck..." he muttered, his voice growing louder as he worked up a head of steam. "I ain't so fuckin' bad... fuckin' assholes... sons of bitches..." He started punching the air, fidgeting about in what are recognizable warning signs of violence. Fortunately, he eventually wandered off... but the lesson was clear.

Was he a harmless hobo whom society had left behind? Or is it just possible that when approached by a shaking, angry, reeking man — who is yelling obscenities and cursing you out for refusing him money — you'll recognize him for the threat he represents?

Compassion is a wonderful thing. *Misplaced* compassion will get you maimed or killed. No amount of compassion will change the harsh realities of street predation.

Remember that the next time you're out on the street.

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## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Phil Elmore is a martial artist and professional writer whose work has appeared in a variety of print and virtual publications. He is not a lawyer, a police officer, or a member of the military. He is a private citizen who believes your rights to your life and your property are inalienable.



The publisher of *The Martialist™: The Magazine For Those Who Fight Unfairly*, Phil has published numerous books that you might find useful in your study of self-defense. These include the Paladin Press titles *Street Sword* and *Flashlight Fighting*, as well as the *Booklocker.com* text *Shorthand Empty Hand*. For more information, visit Phil online at [www.philelmore.com](http://www.philelmore.com) and [www.themartialist.com](http://www.themartialist.com).

*“One beggar at the door is enough.”*

— French Proverb

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