

The Art of Leverage

David Mamet

No opponent is too mighty when you know how to seize the upper hand.

October 30, 2016

www.bestlifeonline.com

Many of us who've had the pleasant misfortune of being involved with a builder, contractor, or decorator have, at the project's onset, been offered this choice: One may be billed by-the-hour or at a percentage of the project's cost.

Some slight reflection would reveal that this offer, presented as a courtesy, is, in effect, a confidence trick.

For no contractor would knowingly bill (if the amount of work were the same) such that he'd come out the poorer. And neither would you or I.

A contract based upon hours worked would, of necessity, induce the artisan to work more hours; one based upon the cost of materials, to buy more expensive goods.

Neither approach is reprehensible. In each the contractor operates in a way legitimately calculated to increase the value of the project. But in neither would he operate to pass any savings along to his client.

The confidence trick consists in this: He appears to be saying, "I will charge you the lesser of two fees." This illusion aids him in dispelling the (rather inevitable) hooting and hollering that will come when the client is presented with overages. ("But [the contractor ripostes] you chose this arrangement.") So a first step, upon the victim's enlightenment, may be rage. Rage may give way to expostulation (neither, of course, of any use whatsoever).

Preemptive enlightenment, however, might just possibly lead to a betterment of the situation. The client, realizing the "bargain," as offered to him, a trap, may accept it and then strive to deduce which of the two choices offered is best calculated to give him (a) the building he wants, (b) the price he wants, and (c) the security he wants.

He may opt for hourly computation, and then insist on a cap; he may choose cost-plus, and specify the quality of materials, with overages being absorbed by the builder, et cetera.

In each instance, the client has first recognized the nature of the attack, avoided its most unfortunate and immediate consequences, and then worked to improve his position.

He has, in effect, just practiced jujitsu.

What is jujitsu? It is a form of wrestling or grappling, specifically developed to enable one to defeat a larger or stronger opponent. As such, its first tenet is an absolute rejection of opposition of strength to strength.

Each culture has its preferred, historical form of martial arts.

These, one and all, began as a form of street fighting. The American version is “slugging it out,” which, over time, accrued rules and has coalesced as boxing. We Americans enshrine the boxing ring (and the football field) as the example of a Good Clean Fight; a trial of skill and strength in the meting out of and ability to bear suffering. Which is, not coincidentally, how we, until recently, have fought our wars. We will slug it out, assured that the side with the larger battalions, the more bombs or bombers, will win. Should it fail to do so, the opponent will be accused of “not fighting fair” (cf. Vietnam et en suite).

We may applaud the big fella who restrains himself from a melee (until that time when he’s had just enough), but we do not mythologize the little guy who through understanding, restraint, or patience may whomp his larger opponents. (The best that we may call such operation is cunning, a term of mixed approbation.) But a different tradition may characterize such as wisdom, not only giving it pride of place but also anathemizing those very qualities the West applauds.

Many of the Asian forms of martial traditions stress knowledge over strength, jujitsu particularly among them, as jujitsu is not primarily a striking art.

Tae kwon do, karate, mui tai, kung fu, the striking forms, rely upon blows or kicks to incapacitate an opponent. Jujitsu teaches the grappling techniques: Close with the opponent, and incapacitate him, through throws, locks (moving the joint to induce pain, dislocation, or fracture), and chokes. It is, thus, a system of biomechanics: a practical understanding and application of the way in which the body works.

The question is, Is such a system actually useful? And the answer is, You know it is. You've had your leg swept out from under you, and may have been brought down, by a medium-size dog running past you from behind; if you've held a child, you've found yourself bent over by the unschooled pressure of his hand or fist against your nose or the nerve cluster beneath it; you may have been in an embrace and found yourself gently, unintentionally overbalanced by your lover, and moving toward the ground. In each, the accidental application of a small amount of force caused you to lose your balance and, thus, your ability either to attack or to resist attack.

To cause another to lose his balance puts him, till he regains it, in your power. It doesn't matter how hard or accurately he might strike; deprived of his balance, he cannot strike at all.

The fight is now being administered by the person who has retained his balance. He may move to his opponent's back, to apply a finishing choke; he may proceed to a lock, or take the unbalanced opponent to the ground. On the ground the practitioner of jujitsu will first establish control and then attempt to finish or to improve his position to that point where he may apply a finishing hold.

(A rear choke correctly applied will render anyone senseless; however strong an opponent's arm, it cannot bear to support the entire weight of my body. The jujitsu practitioner will refer to first principles and not accept his opponent's invitation to succumb—such invitation, finally, a simple reminder of a difference in size.)

In an adversarial situation, in a legal action, for example, our attorney, broker, or counselor may say of our opponent: "They're so crazy they might do anything." Should we accept this appraisal, the other side has won the fight before it began. They have made frightening faces and we have been cowed.

The student of jujitsu, though, might say, "However large, rich, or fierce my opponent is, his body, his mind, and his emotions work the same as mine: Let me restrain myself from panic, employ my common sense, and discover his vulnerabilities. They will, likely, be indicated by the specifics of his protestations of strength."

Dictatorships, incidentally, function through the inculcation of terror, by depriving the opponents of the power to think clearly.

The terrified are those who accept, as offered, the facade of invincibility.

This is not to say that the oppressed may or will not be defeated by superior knowledge, organization, force, or chance, but that they need not cower, which is to say, surrender, simply because of the appearance of these.

The weaker, then, need not immediately prevail. He must simply avoid defeat; that is, endure, retain the ability to fight, and wait for developments. (Cf. not merely the North Vietnamese but also the recalcitrant child who does not want to go to bed. Every moment the parent is involved in reiterating his demands, the child has won his point. The weaker, in that moment, has defeated the stronger. As the weaker continues to dominate, his opponent comes to doubt his own strength, and that strength's usefulness. This doubt will lead to panic, and the subsequent presentation of opportunities to attack.)

Tolstoy wrote that in a contest of cunning, a stupid person will invariably defeat an intelligent one. Similarly, to allow, indeed, to induce, an opponent to exhaust his strength uselessly is to render strength not only pointless but also injurious.

The fighter, businessman, or nation that prides itself on strength will, when that strength begins to ebb, panic, thus squandering what strength remains and, in its wake, whatever remains of reason—thus eventually providing an opening for a simple finishing technique.

On the mat the great jujitsu masters fight (the term of art is roll) with an exquisite yielding gentleness. One may be pitted against a 200-pound, perfectly conditioned fighter and encounter just gentleness, the inexperienced opponent wondering at the master's grace and fluidity even as the finishing hold or choke is applied. Here we see the applicability of Bishop Berkeley's aphorism. Asked what is truth, he replied, "Truth is what you would trust your life to."

The great jujitsu fighters teach, on the mat, in the academy, in a brawl in an alley, the eventual triumph of superior technique; and of the greatest technique: that if one may conquer oneself, one may conquer lesser opponents.

In training, in studying jujitsu, one is constantly humbled by the continual reappearance of the lessons of the first class: Technique will conquer strength; self-control will defeat arrogance; one need not win, one need only endure, conserving strength until one may improve the position. These are the hard-won pillars of wisdom, learned only through constant application in practice and free-training (bouts with other students)

Here, through one's own trial and failure, is revealed an astonishing truth about human conflict: that an opponent must move, in order to better his position. That is, in order to advance toward his goal, he must commit himself; and any commitment, that is, any progression from a state of perfect balance, must create, in him, a vulnerability.

(In physical terms, he may be perfectly balanced over you, in the astride, or mount position, but in order to progress toward a finishing hold, he must abandon this static position, which position may now be seen [though in it he seemed to be in complete control] to be useless.)

Note that Nelson Mandela's indomitability defeated apartheid.

Where we may recur to the Stoical axiom "When the tyrant says, 'submit or I will kill you,' respond, 'I never told you I was immortal.'" Thus, Mandela offered the South African government two choices: Kill me or, eventually, fall. The lessons of resistance, which may be called restraint, like the lessons of the hunger strike, are essentially jujitsu. The tyrannical power presents an adamantine face. It inspires terror, it allows no criticism. The philosophic hero notices, however, that there is an occasion when the power must move. It may maintain the illusion of invincibility (stasis) or it may move to quench criticism, but it may not do both. The hero, then, can force the power to choose (that is, to move from a position of perfect control). And the act of abandoning this position reveals the position's falsity, which is to say, its uselessness; South Africa may silence Mandela, and, thus, display its fear of a lone voice, or it may allow him to speak, thus discovering its fear of employing the "limitless force" it proposes to project.

Dr. King said his supporters must be prepared to follow him into the streets, to the hospital, and to the graveyard, and this courage forced the segregationists to act, and, so, to fall. (We recall Admiral Hood's "Who imposes the terms of the battle imposes the terms of the peace.")

In the 1930s, Brazilians Helio and Carlos Gracie learned jujitsu from Mitsuo Maeda, who brought jujitsu to Brazil from Japan. They and their descendants refined the techniques, training, studying, and systematizing them in, effectively, a large and long-lived laboratory: their family and its students.

These techniques, which came to be known as Brazilian jujitsu, were brought to the U.S. in the 1970s by the Gracie sons (sponsored by Chuck Norris), and their cousins and students. These Brazilians proceeded to win every contest, tournament, challenge, and street fight in which they were involved, including those of the new, Mixed Martial Arts phenomenon, like No Holds Barred, Vale Tudo, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (founded by Rorion Gracie). This phenomenon of Mixed Martial Arts indeed may be seen as an outgrowth of the universal challenge of the Gracies: Here I am, what have you got? MMA matched and matches fighters of every description, tradition, and technique: boxing, kickboxing, the oriental striking forms (such as kung fu and tae kwon do), American wrestling, et cetera. And it was dominated for 2 decades by the Gracies and their students.

Brazilian jujitsu is neither magic nor completely original, but a reintegration and systematization of grappling methods known, of necessity, throughout the ages. For the human body does not change, and the same front choke or ankle lock rediscovered in 1950s Brazil no doubt occurred to the serious pancratist of 250 b.c., and to the street fighter of medieval China. (Stanislavsky, similarly, discovered nothing new about the universal human art of acting, he merely observed, and systematized his observations.)

The Gracies, with their sons, cousins, and students-and now imitators, competitors, and detractors-gave their system a name, and today they may be found around the world, each teaching individual versions of what they call Brazilian jujitsu.

Its techniques are many and varied, and, as with most arts, he who can master a few perfectly is an odds-on favorite to defeat him who knows two hundred rather well.

The Stoics taught, "Let your principles be few and simple, so that you may refer to them at a moment's notice"; and a 19th-century jujitsu master once said, "The thousand techniques are inferior to the one Principle."

What is that one Principle? That balance, understanding, knowledge, commitment, and endurance will conquer strength and arrogance.

Can the master be defeated?

Rickson Gracie has had over 400 formal fights, and countless less-sanctioned encounters. [As of this writing], he has never been beaten.

"Can I lose?" he said. "Of course. I am a man. Should I lose, the principles of jujitsu will allow me to deal even with that."