
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



The Boxing Lesson

When I was a kid I lived by the Midway Airport in Chicago and went to a school where everybody, it seemed, was bigger and stronger than me. One kid — let's call him Dillinger — used to steal my lunch money, and this transaction always involved a bloody nose.

That's when I turned to my grandfather, Kemp Brake, for boxing lessons.

Now, Grandfather Kemp was a West Virginia coal miner of Swiss descent who later went to work for Sears and Roebuck in Chicago selling tools, and he was just the kind of guy to teach me how to defend myself. He reminded me of John Wayne. He was a man of few words and strong principles who took me to church on Sundays and always made sure I had a quarter to put in the plate.

I was just a little skinny kid, but Grandfather taught me to box. The lessons in self-defense were always delivered with this admonition: "When you make your point, stop."

The next time Dillinger demanded my lunch money, things were different. He's the one who went home with a bloody nose.

But, I didn't feel good about it, and told my grandfather so.

"Good," he said. "You're not supposed to."

I've never forgotten the lesson. It's important to stand up to bullies, but you should never gloat after a win — because then you become a bully yourself. I've never had another fight after putting Dillinger in his place, but I discovered other ways of standing up for what I believe in. Turns out, I was pretty good at talking my way out of things.

Later, I learned I could persuade people, to urge them to work for the common good, to reach compromises that benefit all. I was able to develop these skills because I was lucky enough to be the first person in my family to receive a college education, something that still seems like a dream come true.

A friend recently told me about another Kansan who turned his back on violence and channeled his talents on behalf of the common good.

Gordon Parks was born in Fort Scott in 1912 and had a rough life. His mother died when he was a teenager, he was turned out by relatives and eventually he found himself playing piano in a brothel just to make a living. A high school teacher told him that,

because he was black, college would be a waste of time. But, even though he had to quit school to find a job during the Depression, he continued his education by borrowing books from public libraries.

He eventually landed one of the few good jobs available to black men at the time, as a railway porter. In 1934, on the North Coast Limited's Chicago to Seattle run, he found a camera in a pawnshop. It was to change his life.

"I bought what was to become my weapon against poverty and racism," Parks recalled in his autobiography.

Parks went on to become the first prominent black photojournalist, and he became a staff photographer to "Life" magazine. I'm sure you've seen his iconic photographs — his fashion photos, his depiction of gang life in Harlem, black cleaning woman Ella Watson in front of an American flag.

He was a composer and filmmaker as well, and he turned the story of his youth in Kansas into the shot-on-location movie "The Learning Tree" in 1969. He also directed "Shaft" in 1971.

By the time Parks died in 2006, at the age of 93, he had a mountain of awards, including the William Allen White Award for Outstanding Journalistic Merit given at the University of Kansas.

By turning his back on violence — and embracing art and learning — Parks paved the way for generations of black photojournalists, composers and filmmakers. He knew how to stand up for himself and what he believed in. His contributions not only helped minorities, but have enriched us all.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the boxing lessons with my grandfather — and about the example set by Gordon Parks. Our choice of weapons matter. A physical confrontation may end in a bloody nose today, but lead to something worse tomorrow.

Choosing a more gentle approach, one that embraces learning and art and the peaceful resolution of differences, has lasting positive consequences for all of us.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
