

AGENDA

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Confronting the Fear

By Katy Mattingly

We are all taught that women have few or no options when it comes to sexual assault. And we are taught contradictory, racist, wrong, and useless information about those options we supposedly do have; lie back and enjoy it, don't struggle, don't make him mad, don't go out alone, don't go out at all, be afraid of black men, strangers, the man in the bushes, he didn't mean to, but you were drunk, it's not a big deal, it didn't happen, get over it... I have gone over and over my past assault wondering what I missed, why I didn't run, why I wasn't somewhere or someone else.

If you, like me, are a survivor of rape, incest, or assault and you are alive to read this article today, you did the right thing. Period. I am not here to criticize past action or inaction. I am here to ask what it would take for all of us to really be able to fight back. And for the first time in my life I have found part of the answer. There is a self defense course for women in Ann Arbor and a few other cities around the country called Model Mugging. This class teaches women, regardless of our physical strength, size or experience to fight back against an assailant who wants to rape or kill us, and to beat them unconscious. This class introduced me to both the ability and the will to protect myself physically against assault. And it gave me a powerful glimpse of the world we can look forward to.

Model Mugging (MM) was started in 1972, in San Francisco, by martial artist Matt Thomas and further developed by martial artists Danielle Evans and Julia Toribio. The class focuses on the particular ways in which women are attacked; while men fighting men tend to stand and throw punches, men attacking women tend to engulf them and throw them to the ground. The course emphasizes the strength of women's bodies, which is usually in the legs and hips, by emphasizing ground fighting and kicking techniques.

The course lasts five days, six hours a day which is spread over two weekends. The length of the course is important because Model Mugging trains women by incorporating the techniques into body memory. This means that if a student ever needs to defend herself she will not have to think "Now, how did that kicking position work?" but her body will simply react.

There are two instructors, a female coach and a male instructor who wears a huge padded "mugger" suit with a giant helmet. The suit, developed after early MM graduates actually knocked out their instructor, protects the instructor's vital areas to allow women

to fight full force. Many women have never known their own strength or ability to hit or kick someone full force, and let me tell you it's an amazing feeling.

In class, we practiced defending ourselves against assault in realistic scenarios: walking by someone in a park, verbal harassment that escalates to physical assault, assault by acquaintances and being pinned to a bed or floor. At first we learned specific moves, for example, just practicing an effective knee to the groin. As the class progressed and we became more skilled the fights became spontaneous, often we were completely surprised on the mat by the "mugger's" approach or technique.

I am not going to lie to you. Taking this class is scary. The assailants are extremely realistic. The aim is to train women in an adrenaline state that often initiates a freeze response. That way, if the techniques are ever needed in real life, the woman has already had the experience of being startled and freezing up and fighting past that fear.

Here is a story: I am lying on a mat in an aerobics room in Dexter. I have brought a lot of bravado to this class, but all of my fears of being too strong or too together for this exercise have fled. Each step, each escalation of this class has been difficult. From choreographed fights to unplanned assaults. From silent to verbally abusive assailants.

Now we are practicing what is called a reversal. The mugger has you pinned to the ground in the beginning of the fight. This is Everywoman's fear of someone breaking into her bedroom at night or her tent when she's camping alone. And this is a reenactment of many of the assaults in my past. I don't think I can handle this. Earlier we were shown the drill, the padded instructor will come lie on top of me and I will do two short moves to unbalance him and throw him off. It is daylight, I am surrounded by supporters and I know that this situation is pretend. But not only do I not fight back, I have no concept of even having arms and hands to fight with. I am frozen and I can't open my eyes.

"OK, I've screwed this up," I told myself. "If this were real life I would be raped now. I knew I couldn't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this. I won't come back to class tomorrow." I hear my female instructor's voice at my shoulder, "Open your eyes, Katy. Breathe. Open your eyes." I start to sob. At first I think that the crying means it's all over for me, but it has unleashed me from my frozen state. The women in my class gather around me. (If you're all reading this, I'm sorry but I have no idea what you said.) I just remember sobbing and no one walked away and no one told me I should go home and not come back and everyone lovingly acknowledged my terror and my grief.

A wellspring of fear, anger and will rises from my belly as I walk back to the mat and the padded assailant. I am ready. It is going to take every ounce of courage and rage I have but I am not going to go through this again. I bite his arm and he sits up to pull it away. I use his momentary lack of balance by sliding my foot up to my hip and pushing off of the floor to throw him to the ground. I move closer to him and slam my knee into his groin and then roll over onto my side and quickly kick him hard in the face three or four times. The instructor rolls over, signifying a knock-out blow has been delivered. And I am standing and free.

Just as powerful as fighting was watching other women fight. Women with long histories of emotional and physical abuse and women with none. Women of all ages. Tiny women and large women. I say a woman who thought she just could never hurt anyone, even if her life was in danger, kicking and shouting until an assailant twice her size is fetal and still on the floor. I watch women frozen with fear and whimpering like children reach into themselves and pull out the fierce face and claws of a warrior, kicking a man so hard he flies ten feet across a room. Our arms and hands fly out as fists and scissors and pull in to protect our heads and stomachs; and our arms hold each other in comfort and belief. As each woman practices a mugging on the mat, the rest of us cheer and coach her from the sidelines.

Model Mugging graduates who have been assaulted in real life report hearing their classmates and instructors cheering them in their heads. And we are not just giving support, each woman I watch fight for her life is a gift to me.

How many times have I watched movies or television or read in novels or the newspaper of a woman giving up, a woman lying down, or twisting her ankle, or pleading for her life, or shrieking ineffectively? I have now added many images of all kinds of women, including me, saying “NO” and backing it up. Scores of MM graduates have successfully used the techniques to physically defend themselves. Countless more have used the experience and will gained in the class to de-escalate and ward off attacks. In fact, the course actually over trains women. Most graduates report knocking out assailants quickly and easily. Think about it. Men who rape women have seen the same movies and television we have. They are so unprepared for us to protect ourselves.

Model Mugging has radically changed my life. On the third day of class I drive home exhausted, physically and emotionally spent. I pull into the dark barn, the only parking space left in front of our farmhouse. (We live on the west side, very close to the scene of Christine Gailbreath’s murder, very far away from any neighbors.) I jump out of the car and hurry towards the house, shoulders hunched, keys clutched. Halfway up the driveway I realize that I am not afraid anymore. Imagine, women, the power of that. I am not afraid anymore. This is not about denial, I am aware, listening and keeping my eyes open.

But I am no longer sick in my gut with anger and fear and inadequacy. For a long time I stay outside alone, my body tall and confident, laughing and singing and looking at the stars.