

DIALOGUE WITH A STREET FIGHTER

ALFRED FLEISHMAN*

“**W**HAT WOULD I DO IF SOMEBODY CALLED ME a son of a bitch? I’d get out my ‘peacemaker’ and use it on him, and he wouldn’t do that no more.”

“What’s your ‘peacemaker’?”

“Call me a son of a bitch and you’ll find out. I don’t tell nobody what it is until I use it.”

“What do you mean, ‘he wouldn’t do that no more’?”

“Well, he just wouldn’t be around to say that again.”

“Do you mean you would make him extinct, rub him out?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“Just for calling you a name? Okay, you rub me out, make me extinct. I don’t have any more feeling. I’m gone from the scene. But now let’s look at what happens to you if I get rubbed out because you couldn’t handle the way I talked to you. What does happen to you?”

“Well, that’s a considered thing by me. I have to take the risk.”

“What’s the risk?”

“Five to ten if I get caught. But I would take it because that would be the natural thing to do, and I couldn’t let you put me down. It would be a thing of passion and it’s only natural for me to do what I have to do.”

“Let’s look at it again. Is it really worth five to ten years of your life, and maybe the rest of your life, to kill me because I called you a name and you couldn’t let me get away with it? Is that what you are saying?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you kidding?”

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"Hell, no. I'm not kidding. I can't let you get away with calling me a son of a bitch. I gotta do something about it."

"Why?"

"I just gotta, that's all."

"Do you know what a 'son of a bitch' really is? It is a son of a female dog. Most people like dogs. Why would you get so uptight about being called the son of a female dog that you would be willing to risk five to ten years and maybe more of your life to keep me from calling you that again? Is that the only way to handle words or names like that?"

"It's the only way I know. I'm saying it ain't manly to let you get away with that."

"But, can I make you the son of a female dog by just calling you that? Besides, who told you it wasn't 'manly'?"

"Never thought about it that way before."

"How did you come to think that it was 'natural' for you to take out after somebody with your 'peacemaker'? Where did you learn that?"

"Don't know. I just did."

"Could it be a bad language habit?"

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it could mean that you picked up what to do, how to act, when somebody calls you a name from somebody else and then you think that's the thing to do, the only way to go. Could that be it?"

"Could be."

"How about trying something else? A different way to look at what people call you."

"Like what?"

"See what I have in my hands."

"Yeah, it's a pair of glasses."

"You're wrong, it's the smallest color television set ever made."

"You're nutty."

"No, I'm not. If you look close enough, you'll see the program."

"You're nutty! That ain't no color television set. It's a pair of spectacles, and you can't change it by just calling it that."

"Are you saying that I can't make this a color television set just because I called it that?"

"Yeah. You can't make it that, and you know it."

"Oh, then, can I make you a son of a female dog by calling you one? Can I make you a liar by calling you one?"

"I guess not."

"What do you mean, you guess not? You just said you'd use your 'peacemaker' on me if I called you that. And you said you couldn't let me get away with that, and that it wasn't 'manly' for you to let me get away with that, and that it was 'natural' for you to do something about my calling you a name like that."

"Well, I don't know."

"You told me that you would take your chances on five to ten years in the penitentiary to quiet me from ever calling you that again."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Do you still think that? Is there only one way to handle people who call you names? Can their words make you what they call you?"

"I guess not."

"Then, do you have to fight with people or rub them out just because they say something you don't like?"

"Yeah, but if I let them get away with it, they'll think I'm yellow. And I can't let nobody think that."

"You really think being able to handle people without fighting means you're yellow, no guts?"

"Yeah."

"Well, suppose I told you that it took more guts, more moxie and more sense to outsmart the other guy?"

"How?"

"By just thinking about it more. For example, thinking whether or not my words, what I say, are really the same as what you are."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I just said it. Can I make you what I call you just by calling you that? Of course not. Of course, I can get hurt by names, but not because the names hurt me, that is, the words used to call the names. The words are just noise. But because I let them hurt me, they cause me all sorts of problems and troubles. Like wanting to rub out a guy who calls me the son of a female dog. I suffer more than he does."

"That's mostly highfalutin book stuff."

"The hell it is. It's for real. It's gut stuff. It's the kind of stuff that, if you understand it, can make a whole new life for you and for the people around you."

"You've got to be kidding."

"I'm deadly serious. Do you have any idea what words can do to your insides, to your gut, to your nervous system? You're the one who said your 'passions' get aroused by somebody calling you names. And you could only think of one thing, to put your 'peacemaker' to work and maybe risk five to ten years of your life in prison just because you couldn't handle a few words. Hitting a guy for what he said is just plain dumb, and the guys who try to make it seem smart or brave just don't understand. Who needs to copy them? The big thing is to be able to live with, to handle words and not let them handle you."

"Maybe you have a point."

"Well, you think about it yourself. I don't have any right or wrong answers. What I see is people getting into all kinds of trouble when they just talk to each other. There ought to be a better way."

"Is there a better way?"

"I don't really know. But we keep looking for better ways. So we don't have so much misunderstanding, so many frustrations, so many times when we feel that the only way out is to reach for your gun or your fists."

"I thought that was the only way."

"I know that's what you thought. That's what you told me. And I said it was like a bad habit. How did you get that habit? Who taught it to you? From whom did you pick it up? And what about the people from whom you got your ideas? What kind of lives do they lead? Are they always in fights, in misunderstandings? Do they always go around seeming to have a chip on their shoulder? Like they are always daring somebody to knock it off so we can find out who has the strongest muscles! What the hell kind of sense does that make? When all we're talking about is the words people use on us that gets us upset."

"Yeah, but I never considered that I was upset. That's just the way I always thought it was and that's the right way to handle situations like this. Life is just a big fight, like a big battle all the time, and you have to keep your guard up and be ready to fight."

"Fight for what? We're not talking about somebody beating up on you or stealing anything from you. We're talking about somebody talking to you, making sound through their throat. How can their hot air hurt you?"

"It hurts me when somebody puts me down. I can't take that. If somebody hits me, I hurt. But the pain goes away after awhile. What doesn't go away is when somebody puts me down, makes me feel like a damn fool. That never goes away. I can't remember who hurt me last with their fists. But I got a whole list of people that I won't forget."

"Why won't you forget them?"

"Because they made me feel like I was dirt, like I was nothing."

"How did they do that?"

"By the way they talked to me."

"Now, we're getting someplace. You said it! 'By the way they talked' to you. You see, it's not just *what* people say, but also *how* they say it. Is that what you're saying?"

"You're damn right, I am. Sometimes people say one thing, but I know they don't mean it."

"You mean they lie to you?"

"Oh, I guess they do that, too. But that's not what I mean, I guess."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I mean, like sometimes *what* they say is one thing, but the *way* they say it makes it mean something else. That's the way I read it anyway."

"You read them right. If I had a word to put in the dictionary it would be *what-how*. It means that *what* you say isn't *all* there is to it. *How* you say it has a lot to do with what people understand or how they read what you're saying."

"Hey, are we getting anyplace?"

"You bet your life we are! We just came up with some real stuff."

"Like what?"

“Like, for instance, words are pretty potent stuff. We need to watch out how we use them and how they affect other people and us. We also talked about that words can be handled if we know more about what they do to us and how important they are as tools for us to use. If we don’t handle them right, we can end up with that ‘five to ten’ you talked about before. But if we understand that, we can handle them so they don’t hurt us. We can try to find other ways to handle them and ourselves. We also found out that *what* we say and *how* we say it are important.”

“I’m beginning to get a headache. I didn’t think there was so much to this stuff.”

“Oh, there’s a lot more. We haven’t even scratched the surface! We’ll talk about it sometime again.”

“Thanks.”