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LewRockwell.com

Henderson, D. The Art of Moral Self-Defense. LewRockwell.com, 2004.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/61561>

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The Art of Moral Self-Defense

By David R. Henderson

April 20, 2004

"The ally you must always seek is the part of your enemy that knows what is right."

~ Gandhi

A few months ago, I wrote on the Lew Rockwell web site about my successful experience helping fight a local sales tax increase. (See "[The Reluctant Activist](#)," "[How To Stop a Tax Increase, part 1](#)", "[How To Stop a Tax Increase, part 2](#)"). The tax revenues would have gone to bail out Natividad, a government-run hospital in Salinas, California, that had been in financial trouble many times before.

A couple of weeks ago, something happened as a result of that fight, something that I think is important enough to report here. It involved a prominent local politician who was on the other side of the sales tax fight and who tried to take the moral high ground in a conversation with me. After the sales tax fight, I had reread Suzette Haden Elgin's 1980 classic, [The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense](#) because I realized that it would have come in handy during the sales-tax debate. In it, she shows how to recognize when you're being put down and how to parry in an honorable way rather than in kind. I can't say that in the event I'm about to relate I used anything specific that I learned from her book, but the basic spirit and tone of her book helped me be effective. Here's what happened.

I was having lunch in a popular Monterey restaurant where one seats oneself. I saw the aforementioned politician looking around for a table to sit at and, because the restaurant was crowded, having trouble finding one. I waved at him and invited him over to my table. I would name this person, but he comes off looking partly good and partly bad — fortunately, the good came after the bad — and my point is not to single him out. I like him, and, especially in a small community like mine, I want to get along with him. In any case, my point does not depend on his identity.

I had met this man a number of times — our daughters attended the same local private school and we had seen each other at some of the girls' games. Also, we had both been on a panel at my daughter's school the year earlier in which we had both

spoken out against the war on Iraq. He had always been friendly and polite to me, which made what happened next surprising. (Author's note: I probably wasn't as articulate as the following story suggests, but each quote is as accurate as I can remember, except that I've avoided grammatical errors, something I'm not sure I did in the moment.)

He explained that he was waiting for another friend to show up and that he would just stand while waiting for her. Then he said, "So, you're the guy who wants Natividad to close its doors." There was a lot of anger in his voice.

"Scuse me?" I said, stunned by his manner, and figuring that once he realized how nasty he was being he would stop.

"You're the guy who wants Natividad to close," he repeated.

"You're putting words in my mouth," I replied. "You think that without the tax increase, Natividad would close, and you have the right to think that. But don't go telling me what I want or think."

"Well, how's it going to stay open without that money?" he asked.

"I have some thoughts about that, and I'm willing to tell you them in a minute," I replied, "but for us to have this discussion, you need to stop telling me what I think. You can tell me what you think and I can tell you what I think and we can discuss our thoughts, but please don't tell me what I think."

"So what would you do to make sure low-income people can get health care?" he asked.

I answered, "I would have massive deregulation, so that it would be easier for people to be doctors. The increased supply of doctors would bring the price down. I would have massive deregulation of health insurance, getting rid of mandated benefits so that low-income people would be able to buy catastrophic health insurance at a fairly low price. I would deregulate drug development and sales and the result would be drugs on the market much more quickly than now." I had given him the very brief version of the reforms I lay out in the health care chapter of my book, [The Joy of Freedom: An Economist's Odyssey](#).

"I think we have a responsibility to help poorer people get health care," he said.

"I can see that," I said, "but no one has the right to force someone to provide health care for poor people and that's what taxes do."

"Do you have employer-provided health insurance?" he asked. I knew where he was going, but my policy is to be honest in discussions and not try to wriggle out of traps that people try to set.

"Yes," I answered.

"Well then it's easy for you to advocate not having the government pay for people's health care when you've already got health insurance."

"Actually," I replied, "I'm a health economist and I was the health economist with President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers. I would've been a pretty lousy health economist if I had based any of my health policy views on whether I did or didn't have health insurance."

That went right by him. "The reason you're against subsidizing health care for others is that you already have health insurance," he said angrily.

"Bill, you're making an ad hominem," I answered. "You don't know me nearly well enough to know my reasons for my views. If you want to argue with my views, that's fine, but don't argue against my views by challenging my motives."

Something clicked. I think it was the phrase "ad hominem." Just as suddenly as he attacked, he understood what I was saying. "You're right," he said, "I apologize."

"Apology accepted," I said.

"But you have to understand," he said, "that I feel passionate about this."

"It's natural to be passionate," I answered, "but passion never justifies an ad hominem."

"You're right," he replied, "but I feel so passionate about this."

"No problem," I answered, "but just because you're passionate, that doesn't make it alright to make an ad hominem argument." I was simply unwilling for him to have the last word if the last word was the implicit assumption that passion justifies challenging someone's character rather than his argument.

"You're right," he replied, and then apologized once more.

Then he decided to discuss rather than attack and we had a good discussion. If you're interested in that discussion, read on. But if you stop here, I've accomplished my main goal with this article, namely, laying out the absolute importance of not letting your opponent get away with nasty treatment of you. By challenging him on this and not letting the discussion proceed until we had resolved this, I was the one getting him to apologize and I claimed the moral high ground. That's probably not what he expected when he started the discussion.

Now, on to our discussion. I laid out a little more detail about some of the reforms I advocated and he listened. Interestingly, this man, who, at one point, had almost become one of my elected representatives, didn't try to refute anything I said. I doubt that he believed what I said, but I don't know. Instead, he asked, "How long do you

that he believed what I said, but I don't know. Instead, he asked, "How long do you think it would take to implement these reforms?"

"Probably a few years," I said, thinking about all the minds that would have to be changed to get a truly free market in health care.

"And meanwhile what do you do about all the people who need health care and can't afford it?" he asked.

"That's a fair question," I answered. "But to put it in perspective, very few people go without health care now. And the few who do can be supported voluntarily by the rest of us." Then I decided to take a page out of the left's rhetoric. "If we say that we won't fix the problem but instead keep spending taxpayers' money on it, then we'll never get around to fixing the underlying problem. We've got to go to the root of the problem and not just treat symptoms."

[The Best of David R. Henderson](#)



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