

An Unforgettable Person

Tony

Tony was a big, partially balding black man that came into my life when I was six. He was a man of many interests. He enjoyed being a gourmet cook, liked making pottery and was interested in people. He made his living by teaching swimming. He managed to become at various times – my idol, my inspiration and my pride. (At other times, he was also the object of some frustration and anger.)

He was for twelve years, my swim coach, my teacher and my friend.

Over the years I learned to fear him, to respect him, sometimes to hate him but finally, and most of all, - to love him. Big and fearsome, he came into a world heretofore occupied only by whites. His roar of a voice could shrivel my six year old soul and yet, his wide grin could make the whole world all right again.

He was to me many things; a god, a father figure, a dictator and an ogre all rolled up into one. He was a man of many moods. He ran the swim team as he saw fit and we were perhaps both overcoached and undercoached, but always – he was there – an overpowering presence.

He was not perfect, this Tony. He sometimes favored the stars and scorned the timid. He alternated between being fiercely competitive and somewhat disinterested. Yet somehow, he could charm us all by some little gesture. He could ignore me for days and then suddenly and sweetly send me one single yellow rose for a gold medal win at a swim meet!

As I grew older, I learned of his frustrations as a black man in today's world. I knew his chances of advancement were not always good, his vacation spots carefully selected and of his difficulties of purchasing a home in a "white man's" neighborhood. I once overheard his angry and yet sad comment, "I cannot understand how the white man can trust me with the lives of children and yet not want me for a neighbor." My heart ached with the injustice of it all.

I remember the yearly swim meet in Massachusetts where Tony decided my diet, my bedtime and my choice of friends. I remember the many trips we took where we laughed together over our victories and licked our wounds together over our defeats,

Although I've grown older now and am no longer a part of his swim team, I still feel welcome to return.

I know that I will, once more, be greeted with one of Tony's "bear hugs" where I can enjoy the comfortable and familiar feeling of being "lost in all his pounds" again.

Tony was not your typical, “ever driving” Coach. To him, winning was not the all-important factor. “Look back on these years as a period of fun and good times and I will have accomplished something,” he once said.

Thinking this over, I wonder if what he really meant was not always to take life (and myself) so seriously? – And, if this is so, I will have learned a valuable lesson.

Whatever the lesson – Tony made a lasting impression on me.

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