

Be Kind to Yourself

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I've been very lucky. I grew up surrounded by love and affection. My parents would have been married 63-years this past August, and my mom still mourns my dad. I was never told to hide my emotions, and I never felt ashamed of who I was. If I ever needed help, there was always someone I could depend on. No one ever gave up on me.

All through school and into my adult life, I've been just as lucky. Don't get me wrong, I've met plenty of people who didn't have my best interest in mind, but I've had many incredible teachers who encouraged me, and I've met many people who were kind and helpful.

I moved to Atlanta in 1996 when I was 22-years old, the next year I got a 2nd job on the weekends at Atlanta Water Gardens, Inc. They had just opened, and I was their very first employee. There was an elderly gentleman named Tom Troutman who would come in often to buy plants. He asked me that autumn if he could pay me to help him winterize his pond, and I agreed to go over that Sunday.

In the 1940's, Mr. Troutman, as I called him, built the first house in his neighborhood after he returned from serving in World War II. He bought the lot he built his house on because there was a giant beech tree with someone's initials carved into the trunk and the date "1848". He had been the president of the local Hosta and Camellia societies, and he was also one of the original volunteers that raised money to build the Atlanta Botanical Garden in the 1980's, so his yard was practically a private botanical garden.

As I rang the doorbell, I could see him just inside the door, and he shouted in a south Georgia accent, "Get inside this house!", like we had known each other for years. We chatted in his den for a bit then we went out to the yard. We walked around the yard, and he showed me all his plants, giving me details on each one. Next thing I know he asked if I could go to lunch, which we did, and he insisted on paying.

After lunch, we looked at more plants, and then 5pm came around. We didn't do a single bit of work, but he pulled out his checkbook and asked how much he owed me. I definitely needed the money, but I declined it, because I had figured out he was just lonely and wanted some company. This became a regular routine, and we developed a friendship that would continue for the next decade.

Mr. Troutman had been a psychologist for the State of Georgia, and he taught me how to understand myself. He never told me what I wanted to hear; he always told me what I needed to hear. It didn't always feel good, but he was always right.

In 2008, I was living in Nashville because I had been laid off from work due to the real estate crisis, and Nashville was the only place I could find a job. I still spoke to Mr. Troutman on the phone at least once a week, and I came down to visit him about every other month. He didn't ask me to. I didn't have to. It was the right thing to do.

That year, he became very weak after undergoing a procedure to remove a basal cell carcinoma, and his health declined rapidly. I got a call one afternoon from his neighbor who told me that if I wanted to say goodbye, I didn't have much time, so I left work and drove straight to Atlanta. I got to town just in time to give him one more hug. He passed away shortly after at the age of 88.

He was the best friend and mentor I've ever had. I was a naive kid from a tiny town in Tennessee with only one stop light. Even with his guidance, I still made lots of mistakes, but he never gave up on me. Instead, he helped me learn from my mistakes. I think that if I had not met him, my life might not have turned out so great. Almost every day, I think of some bit of advice he gave me.

I was reminded recently of one of the best things Mr. Troutman taught me. A real friend loves you, and accepts you, "warts and all". By this, he meant that, due to no fault of our own, we all have things about us we can't change. A real friend recognizes that and accepts us anyway. They don't try to change us, because that's not possible, but they try to help us be happy.

Mr. Troutman not only gave me lots of valuable advice, but he also lived by example. He never said, "goodbye", instead he always waved and said, "Be kind to yourself" in his south Georgia accent.

I've had to remind myself of this simple, yet valuable, piece of advice recently, which is why I decided to include it here. If you are reading this and you are also going through a difficult time, I'd like to take a second to also remind you... be kind to yourself.



Mr. Troutman and me in his backyard around 2001.



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