

TATO: PRIDE...AND REGRET...

STORY ABOUT AN ADMIRER FATHER

(Tato -- Ukrainian for 'Dad')

Time is rushing past us much too quickly -- I can barely catch my breath! When all the world is careening along at such a breakneck, hell-bent for leather pace, it's hard not to get caught up in it. It's Fathers Day again and I've got to put my two or three cents in.

Tato was a remarkable man. Although it may seem that I speak from bias, I make that declaration from the point of objectivity. We live in a world that is day by day rejecting the concept of objective truth and wholeheartedly embracing relativity. I know -- most of my life, I, too, have enjoyed the comfort of relativity, believing that I was, indeed, the captain of my own soul. Now that I'm older -- 63 -- not much wiser, but one thing I DO know for certain is that the ultimate end of relativity is madness.

Life has raced by me much too quickly! I wish I had the opportunity to go back and start from the beginning -- and yet somehow -- in my subconscious mind perhaps -- remembering the mistakes, blunders and bad choices I've made, and their disastrous consequences on my life...as well as the lives of my family, my sisters and brothers. If I had to do it over again, knowing what I know now, I would take EVERY BIT OF ADVICE AND WISDOM OFFERED TO ME BY MAMA AND TATO -- WITHOUT EXCEPTION, THEY WERE 100% CORRECT! OUT OF LOVE THEY TOLD ME, REASONED WITH ME, WARNED ME -- PLEADED WITH ME -- THERE WAS A RIGHT WAY TO LIVE AND A WRONG WAY TO LIVE -- I CHOSE THE LATTER! I KNEW BETTER... AND I HAVE CERTAINLY LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO RECOGNIZE THE HIGH PRICE OF MY OWN UTTER FOLLY!

Am I being hard on myself? Sure. But I see now how bad it was -- how bad I was. No excuses.

Consider Tato, coming to America after surviving the Eastern Front, a patriot of his beloved nation Ukraina, caught up in the insane maelstrom of nazism vs communism. Imagine having lived under that demonic mass murderer Stalin, who was so monstrous that he made Hitler look like a preferred option in comprison! That's the kind of choices Tato had to make -- and live with. AND DESPITE THAT, DESPITE HAVING GONE THROUGH ONE OF THE BLOODIEST OF WARS

KNOWN TO HISTORY, HE NEVER LOST HIS MORAL COMPASS, NEVER LOST HIS INNER HUMAN DECENCY, NEVER LOST HIS BEARING, NEVER YEILDING TO HIS DARKER, BASER INSTINCTS!

I'll say it -- TATO WAS/IS THE NOBLEST, MOST HEROIC HUMAN BEING I'VE KNOWN IN THIS LIFE! (Excepting Jesus, but then, Jesus is GOD!!!) When you look at Tato's life, how he came as a refugee to America, the land of freedom, the land of promise -- in spite of everything, he came with a new hope in his heart! Speaking very little English, he nevertheless worked a day job and went to school at night to improve himself -- so that he would be able to provide us, his children, with the necessities of life -- and more.

Over the years, on many occasions I had the chance to visit Tato at his workplace. It was remarkable to see the respect and high regard he invariably received from his co-workers. And that is at EVERY ONE of his jobs I visited -- WITHOUT EXCEPTION!

Tato did not have a big ego. What he did have was a innate sense of right and wrong -- and acting on it! I remember when I was very young how he stood up for me when someone had done me wrong, and I was not capable of defending myself. Tato did not hold grudges, instead believing in forgiveness -- even to the point of making certain that a former enemy was employed.

I have to retell this story because it perfectly captures the spirit of the kind of human being Tato was. A Polish engineer, fresh off the boat, came to Tato's company seeking employment. Because the man's English was very poor, and because Tato spoke Polish, he was asked to interview the man to make an assessment of his capabilities. When the interview was over, Tato gave the Polish man the highest recommendation he could. The fellow was literally in tears. He knew Tato was Ukrainian -- blood enemies of Poles. So he asked Tato, "How is it you, a Ukrainian, got me, a Pole, this job -- after everything that has transpired between our peoples?" Tato told him, "America is a nation of new beginnings -- let's leave the old conflicts in the old countries."

Another Tato story -- I know you've hard them before, please bear with me. With the Ukrainian Division in Yugoslavia, on guard duty outside a movie theater, Tato saw a very nervous young man with an obvious bulge in his pocket -- almost certainly a pistol. In his mind -- in his heart! -- Tato identified with the young man as a freedom

fighter -- just as he considered himself to be. So he went over to the terrified young man, relieved him of the pistol and told him to go home. If his actions had been seen and he had been reported, Tato would have been executed!

And I couldn't write about Tato without retelling the burning bridge story!

It was during the Capitulation, when the Eastern Front had collapsed and the Axis armies were fleeing the Red armies who were in relentless pursuit. Tato was in a convoy of trucks carrying wounded soldiers, clearly marked with red crosses on top to be spared from aerial attack. Ignoring the display, Russian fighters began strafing the column of trucks, spreading panic and confusion below. The trucks frantically speeded up in an effort to escape the assault from the air. As Tato watched in horror, one of his men riding in the truck ahead, was bounced off onto the road. Unable to stop that short, Tato's truck ran over the soldier's legs, crushing them. His pitiful screams of pain prompted Tato to action. Under fire from Russian fighters, Tato got a board and then requested that his men give him their belts. With these, Tato then made fast the soldier to the board, and placed him in another passing truck. (The man survived the war, made it to America, living to tell the tale!)

The scene around Tato was pandemonium! Trucks were burning fiercely, wounded and dying men were crying and screaming in anguish. And still the fighters came. At some point Tato was blown off the bridge into the river below. Filled with a cold rage against the Russian pilots, he made it to shore. Looking around, he found a German machine gun with ammo belts, the fleeing troops discarding everything in panicked desperation. Tato sat down on the ground with the machine between his thighs, began firing back at the Russian planes...

Now I'm not going to say Tato shot any planes down -- Tato never embellished his stories of the war and always told them as true narrations. I know this to be a fact because of confirmation from some of Tato's fellow soldiers. And over the years as Tato recounted the stories, they remained essentially unchanged, with perhaps more details filled in...

This is Tato. This is the man who is my father.

This is the man I should have appreciated and honored far

more than I ever did...

I tell you true, Tato loved me unconditionally, ALWAYS
welcoming me home -- NO MATTER HOW MESSED UP I WAS...

I did not and do not deserve the father I was given. I will
never measure up to the MAN he was. I am filled with regret
over the disappointments and heartaches I caused him and
Mama. He never stopped loving me, in spite of everything...

And I love him now more than ever, it having taken me a
lifetime to appreciate just what a blessing was bestowed on
me in Tato...

My treasured, most cherished memories are of those warm
wonderful times we spent together -- walking in the middle
of the road in the too-high-for-cars snow to get a
Christmas tree on Christmas Eve...going to the movies with
Tato, I remember 'Taras Bulba' and 'The Hill', with Sean
Connery, ("I quits this army!") and so many, many others.
I'll take those memories to the grave with me...

If only...

Nestor Jaremko 6-13-2013