

Ground Zero

MIKE SELVES was a former neighbor of mine. Retired military who still worked for the army as a civilian. Red-headed, florid-faced, jovial. Every morning we'd smile and wave at each other as he pulled out of our townhouse development in his pristine, white BMW. And every evening when he came back he was still smiling. A round trip of battling Northern Virginia rush hour traffic, day in and day out, and he could still smile.

More than I could do, most days.

Maybe that's why I didn't feel too intimidated to ask him about his tennis game. Mike and his friends spent a lot of time playing on our neighborhood courts. Which was right next to the tot lot where I took my daughter in the evenings to swing and slide and climb on the equipment. And when my idle question elicited an offer of free tennis lessons, I had no hesitation about accepting.

Let me be clear. I am no athlete. Never was, never will be. There is nothing about the mechanics of tennis (or any other sport) that comes natural to me. So if Mike was disappointed that he'd committed himself to coaching someone who would never be a worthy opponent for him on the tennis court, he never let on.

And Mike was good. Not just at tennis, but at teaching. He had infinite patience. He had just the right mixture of compassion and correction. He could point out exactly what you were doing wrong, tell you how to do it right, and never make you feel like the uncoordinated nebbish you actually were out there. Get that racket back early, step across and keep your weight forward, and don't forget to follow through. Great. How did that feel? It sure looked good. Let's try a few more of those.

I don't remember now exactly how long Mike and I struggled out there. (I struggled, he didn't.) Sometimes on weekends, one or two evenings a week. A few months, any-

way. Long enough for me to reach the point where I could get three or four solid rallies over the net before finally falling apart. Long enough to forget my self-consciousness and fall under the spell of Mike's relaxing confidence in my ability to do this and even feel good about it.

And then we moved away. Not far away, but far enough to lose touch with Mike and for the magic of his particular genius to wear off. Without a convenient court and a supportive coach, my tennis racket gathered dust in the basement. It's there now.

A year ago, I learned that Mike had died. On the morning of Sept. 11, he'd gotten into his white beamer and battled traffic all the way into his office in the Pentagon. He was killed there when American Airlines Flight 77 literally flew into it—point of impact—and exploded. He was five days short of his 54th birthday. He was a few weeks short of retiring with his wife, Gayle, to a golf course in Hilton Head.

I don't know anyone else personally who died that day. One is more than enough. And somehow I didn't get a chance to write about Mike a year ago, when it happened. This seems like a good time to correct that. Why? I'm not sure. Because I've often thought about Mike and what he gave me, even before I knew he was dead. I missed it then, and I miss it now.

Everybody should. Because hell, the world can use all the compassionate correction it can get.



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