

## **This I Believe**

My father was a sports fan, mostly baseball, who was not aligned with a particular team. Geography inspired his attendance at mostly Yankee games as the Mets arrived in his native Queens the year after he died. It wasn't that he didn't like the Yankees. It was that he always rooted for the team he called the underdog. That is, he explained as I sat on his lap pursuing the New York Times together over bowls of Corn Flakes, the team that's coming from behind, that the odds are against, who have had the worst luck. "They need to win more than does the successful team," he said. And like the soggy corn flakes, I digested that notion.

My father himself was an underdog of sorts, born the sickly metaphorical runt/youngest of a large family with all but he successful siblings. His brothers became doctors, lawyers and business executives; his sisters became teachers who married doctors, lawyers and business executives. My dad played his life's hand close to his chest, where rheumatic fever as a child left weak valves that gave out completely when he was 50. (Valve replacement took even longer than the Mets to come on the scene.) Before he died, my father worked as a teacher, a travel agent (who never traveled) and a copywriter in his brother's advertising firm where he wrote brief manuscripts for children's books about the life stories of anthropomorphized food stuffs, like Chiquita Banana (in her Carmen Miranda hat), Whitey the Egg (before #Black Lives Matter) and Taffy the Apple. The books were never published, although I loved looking through their fragile mock-up pages that are still with me in my San Francisco home.

My father never made it big, was never even the breadwinner of our small 3 person and 4-room apartment dwelling family. But even as he spent many of his days at home, clad in robe and slippers, sitting with me and that New York Times, to which he added the World Book Encyclopedia for colorful reference as I aged into school readiness, my father broadened his underdog theory to explain why the people we then called Negroes needed their Civil Rights, why JFK deserved to be President (he may have been rich but he was a Catholic in a Protestant country) and, more personally, why a parakeet we named Julius was as worthy—and possibly more—of our love and affection as any cat or dog our neighbors, family or friends might possess.

I like to think that my father would be pleased that, although not a sports fan myself, I've carried on his affection for rooting for those against whom the odds are unfavorably stacked.

My first choice in parenting was to provide foster care for and then adopt children from the public social service system. Among my nearest and dearest are gender variant folk. In my work life, as a patient advocate, recreation counselor and psychotherapist, I've served the frail elderly, the physically and emotionally challenged, people without families, people tormented by their families and long have lived with an assortment of literal underdogs—and cats—from animal shelters and the streets.

I, too, with my working class background, multi-generational propensity to depression and short, slightly deformed body, consider myself an underdog, ever fighting for my right to be heard, seen, appreciated and respected. I've been told often that I'm a very smart and talented but far too gentle soul in a world that values greater assertiveness, formidable character and physical structure than I've been granted. I've tried to become more of what is more valued: more muscular in both bodily and psychological presence, but my default mode is definitely more quiet and small than tends to do me good.

"It's just not fair," I remember saying as a child as I learned about life's many injustices and experienced the not being chosen for the team, not being asked to dance, and not being accepted into the first choice college. It's been five decades since my father first voiced his sports fan philosophy to me. I'm glad he never said, as many parents do, that "life's unfair, get used to it." Instead, he encouraged me to root for the underdog: to encourage them/us with our helping hands, to believe that they/we can get ahead. And although odds are that we rarely win, I still believe that giving such support is what really matters most when it comes time to even the playing field for engaging in life's games.

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