Greg Louganis Surfaces

The Journey of self-discovery begins for a gentle Olympic champion

May 12, 1995 By Sean Strub

I loved Greg Louganis from the first time I saw him diving on television nearly two decades ago. He was—and is—beautiful. But more important, his modesty and elegance stood in stark comparison to the smug arrogance with which I had come to associate extraordinary athletic accomplishments.

As for millions of other gay men, jocks were the enemies of my youth. They tormented us in school corridors, they humiliated us in gym class, they fed fuel into an engine of self-hatred that drove so much of our lives. Greg, somehow, seemed different. Now, of course, we know why. Greg Louganis's extraordinary life has been a life full of athletic excellence and accomplishment that was accompanied by an uncommon anguish. Now, finally, he is tired of his secrets, tired of being judged by others and justly tired of the pain. "When is it my turn to be taken care of?" he asked me.

Truth is a weapon Louganis discovered late in life, but one he's now wielding with a vengeance—part of it is about coming to terms with himself and his past and part of it is about giving something back to a community he's grown to love. But still a bigger part of his new campaign for truth is about his own survival. Greg Louganis's honesty is in the interest of his own self-preservation. Going public reduces the stress in his life, by removing worries about disclosure, and increases his access to information, where before it was restricted.

The "other" in our society has now been expanded to include one more American icon. One more champion. One more living, breathing, loving, frightened proud human being. One more just like the rest of us.

In fundraising, utilization of celebrity time is divided into media time (showing up at benefits and interviews) and real time (actually serving meals, cleaning toilets and grooming dogs. Greg Louganis is about real time for real people, including volunteer work last year for Pets Are Wonderful Support (PAWS/LA), a Los Angeles-based group that works to keep pet owners with AIDS together with their pets.

"One time I went to a guy's house and rang the bell and said 'Hi, I'm Greg Louganis and I'm here to groom Lady.' And the guy says 'Oh, my God, yes you are!' Later he called up the PAWS office

and said ‘You guys said that you were sending Greg, you didn’t say it was Greg Louganis! I thought I was suffering dementia!’”

Greg remains reluctant to speak about specific treatment strategies or AIDS politics of any kind. He doesn’t feel informed. Even when I ask about his dinner the night before with Larry Kramer, a person about whom everyone has an opinion, Greg says simply “Oh, he’s such a sweetie!”

The exception is when the topic turns ot the value of loving relationships with pets, when he is confident and informed. “For somebody who is ill, to enable them to keep their pets at home is a form of unconditional love and support is key. Studies have proven that pets prolong life and improve the quality of life.”

Greg Louganis is not afraid of death and describes himself as “more spiritual than religious. My God is a loving God and a forgiving God. He’s not about judgment, he’s not about any of that.”

The pain of non-forgiveness and the pain of judgment make people do things. In Greg Louganis’s case, it made him write an honest, provocative and moving chronicle of his life thus far.

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