

Postscript: Growth And Spirituality Through The Ironman Journey

First of all, I have always believed that sport is a great metaphor for life – and Ironman certainly embodies this. All that happens during training and racing is but a microcosm of what our lives entail.

In training for Ironman, you are reminded of some very important things. You learn how to set boundaries – with your friends, with work, within yourself. Sometimes, the people around you simply don't understand why you can't go out on a Friday night. Sometimes, you fall by the wayside and realize that the people that you thought understood, probably don't because they don't respect those boundaries. You set goals and work towards them. There is a true meaning and intent to each and every day because you are focused on making each day constructive. You focus on what to do to recover effectively ... how to eat well (or better), how to optimize your efforts. Your body awareness rises. You become a finely-tuned machine and you are acutely aware of your presence, your essence, in the world.

In and amongst all of it, you work hard. Anything worth doing is worth doing well. I came to the realization that every day was indeed special – something that, at times, gets lost in the distractions of daily life. If you live in the moment and take care of today – tomorrow, amazingly, takes care of itself. Life becomes simplified while training for an Ironman – and though some people may call that insane or obsessive, I would tend towards the beliefs of Ayn Rand – that selfishness is, indeed, necessary for our growth and survival. If I don't take care of me, will anyone else? I think we all know that answer.

And as Stevie Ray Vaughan once said – “live each day like it’s your last performance”.

Ironman is a long day, no matter how you cut it. In that day, just like any other, you will experience the highs and lows, the emotions that make us all human and vibrant and powerful. You will face distractions – with your goal being to get past them and to focus your energies on the things you control – right here, right now. If you keep moving forward with relentless conviction, you will see the end of your day reflected as a finishing line. You start your race in the wee hours of the morning – you end as the sun goes down. No matter what happens, you will live to race another day. The race doesn’t define you – you define the race. The same holds true with life. The day doesn’t define you – you define your day.

Though it sounds like hindsight, I can say that I never really had any internal self doubts about becoming an Ironman. In my heart, I knew it was something I’d lived before – but just not on this particular stage. My training would prepare me physically and mentally – and the rest were mere details. The day would bring whatever the day would bring – but I would go in with the knowledge of having the strength to undertake the task. I ascribe to the thoughts of Yoda – “Try not. Do or do not ... there is no try”.

So here’s the question: was it a life-changing event? Honestly? Not as such, no. I’ve had the beauty of experiencing many awe-inspiring events in my life, and yes this was perhaps one of them (for reasons I will mention below) – but did it change me? I don’t think it did. Thankfully, that wasn’t my reason for doing it, otherwise I might have been disappointed! I also think that my prior experiences as a spectator and coach (having watched 7 Ironman events in the past) probably took a lot of the newcomer’s uncertainty (and exhilaration) out of the mix.

Ahhhhh but it did do something amazing. It brought to mind all of the beauty of life itself. It reiterated some very important issues that should be front and center in life. Many of you might think that sounds a little “new age” but I say it with sincerity. If you are open to the world and its ways, sometimes it will show you things you might not have seen otherwise. I had many moments of pure joy and beauty, and that is what I will remember when I am old and (even more) grey.

I distinctly remember a point in time during the swim ... when I was experiencing true “flow”, being totally in the moment, feeling myself move effortlessly through the water, being fully in touch with my breathing, my cells exchanging oxygen, my eyes catching an intermittent glimpse of the sun rising on a beautiful July morning.

Then there were the last three or four climbs on the bike, climbs that would cause me to dig deep, to revel in the feeling of my quads firing in anger, feeling wonderfully alive ... and feeling wonderful to be alive. That latter thought struck me countless times during the day. I am here, competing in an Ironman triathlon – and I am thankful to have the physical and mental capacity, the lifeblood, to be there, experiencing the moment. It took me back to age 15 – when I was simply thankful to be alive.

I have felt true love – I know what it feels like – and I know that it is something you feel from all of the volunteers on the course ... and all of the spectators, those known and unknown. These people give their hearts for us, we’re supported by friends and family at home and at the race – and that “relentless expression of love” can do nothing but make your heart warm – if you are open to it. Even when the day was more difficult – a smile from a volunteer would always be met with a “thank you so much” and some renewed energy to push onwards along the road ahead.

I remember being alone with my thoughts on River Road after dark. There were 6 miles left and all I could hear was my breathing and the pitter patter of my feet, knocking out a rhythm to live by. I could hear the brook at my side – and though everything hurt, I had the deepest sense of peace, of inner knowing that everything was indeed right with the world.

It's not all about the finish time. It's not all about the bike (Lance was right on this one). But it is all about the microcosm of life and love that we call Ironman. For an event that represents toughness, I think it reminded me of the Zen-like, enlightened aspects of life – of courage, of love, of inner peace, of living in the moment – and of letting the universe provide for us.

These are the things I am thankful for – and that is what made Ironman such a beautiful experience for me. I hope you enjoyed sharing my journey. I certainly enjoyed having each and every one of you along with me.