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Living and Learning...Sometimes the Hard Way

By Garrett Weber-Gale (blog)

A chef I befriended last year in Singapore once wrote me a short and direct email after a disappointing swim I had in Beijing...he said, "the greatest test of courage in the world is to bear defeat without losing heart." My heart was temporarily lost but has been recovered. I felt a bit defeated and lost partly due my nature of being very hard on myself at times and often expecting the world. This past swim season has been very difficult on my mind and body. I felt pressure from within my core to perform and out-do what I did last summer. My goal for the year was to do what I did last summer, but better. How did I prepare you ask? I worked my tail off spending many extra hours in the weight room and further refining my technique...I also sacrificed many things including going out with friends at times, desserts, going home to see my family, traveling and getting a break from the grind of training, and even some personal relationships which I deeply regret.

This summer was not, at first glance, what I had worked for, dreamt of, nor wanted. I never wanted to get third in the 50 and 100 freestyles at Trials. I never wanted to swim only the preliminary of the 400 free relay at World Championships (however this was the right coaching choice...I didn't swim fast enough in the preliminary to deserve a spot on the finals relay). I never wanted to stress over the suit issue within myself, with my coaches and with others. I never wanted to push a good friend away in order to make myself better for swimming (which in actuality made it worse). The point is that it doesn't always matter what we want or how hard we work to fulfill a dream. Life, as I've found out the hard way at times, doesn't always follow a direct path. We must be pliable. What matters is how we handle situations we encounter that differ from what we expected...and how we frame the obstacles that try to alter our paths to success.

For much of my life I have tended to see mostly black and white, and no, I do not mean in a literal sense. Something was either going to help my swimming or not, make me happy or it was not, make me better or it was not. The first glance of this summer was not the beauty I had imagined it would be. The vibrant shades of the spectrum were non-existent. What was existent was something I rarely see, shades of gray. Sometimes it takes the unexpected, the disappointing, and even the negative cold edge of life for me to see what is truly the right way. This summer was a cold and sharp edge for me.

When I finished my race in Rome I immediately thought this summer, and in part, the past year, had been a waste. Nothing I did this summer was better than last summer. Part of me thought that was it. I wanted to give up on swimming. For a brief period I thought I was going to. What was all the hard work and sacrifice for if my year didn't end in the success I had desired?

My mother always raised me to have confidence and truly believe that everything happens for a reason. Although it can feel like a bullet in the butt sometimes...I still believe this to be true. This summer of unexpected occurrences allowed me to see things I hadn't before. Here is a small list of things I learned this summer that I will take through the rest of my life.

1. I need more tests/meets/reality checks along the way which will help me indicate where I am and what I need to do in order to get where I want to go (this goes for most things...not just swimming).
2. Trying to be better and do more things right will not work if I'm not happy doing it.
3. Work towards letting go of things I cannot control.
4. Don't mistake swimming for being something bigger than it actually is. Swimming is swimming. Swimming is something I do, that has brought great joy and learning to my life, but it in no means defines who I am as a person.
5. Swimming is not more important than good personal relationships. Swimming will last for a little while...good personal relationships can and will likely keep me strong through the good and bad times, long after swimming is gone. Cherish those who really matter.

I'm not sure what the future holds. What I do know is that I am bouncing back from this stronger and smarter than I have ever been. There is so much I have already learned. Plus, I have already begun doing push-ups throughout the day...I will be up to 300 per day by the beginning of next week!