

A Legend in His Own Time

When I was very young, perhaps seven or eight years old, I often heard my six older brothers and sisters speak of a man named "Mr. Ruppe." They, along with my parents, held him in such high regard that I, being at an impressionable age, began to think of him as a legendary figure. It was during my seventh grade year that the legend became a man.

Rudy Ruppe was, in fact, the most handsome man I had ever gazed upon. Being counselor and athletic director for the Reedsport schools, he came to speak to my junior high about the sportsmanlike behavior and hospitality he expected of us at any school function. He spoke with a graceful candor and his manner had the effect of the Pied Piper's tune: I am certain he had only to suggest it and I, as well as the remainder of the assembly, would have followed him out into a blizzard without inquiry as to our mission. His curly black hair, flashing brown eyes, lengthy dark lashes, brilliant white smile, and strong youthful physique captivated all the females, student and teacher alike, and held them spellbound. He was, indeed, a work of art. It was at this time that I began to recognize in him a few of the traits that had drawn my family into the admiration of him.

During my freshman year of high school, I spent many hours in Mr. Ruppe's office, seeking his guidance and growing to love him more each day. I learned he was not only beautiful to the eye, but to the mind as well. He was the warmest, most understanding, most dedicated person I have ever known. He had given twenty years of selfless service to the students of Reedsport High School and had saved many from dropping out by his patient and never-ending encouragement. Throughout those twenty years, he seemed not to have aged at all, yet within the next two years, I watched as he changed from an Adonis into an enfeebled, crippled old man.

In the winter of 1973, my hometown was made aware of a vicious truth: Rudy Ruppe had Lou Gehrig's Disease. In less than six months, Mr. Ruppe had lost the use of his fingers. His football player's hands became gnarled like the roots of a great oak and his beautiful, rich voice became muffled. Still, he smiled.

The town cried for Rudy. On Christmas Eve, with the aid of his sons and devoted wife, he managed to walk slowly up the aisle at Midnight Mass to receive Holy Communion. My mother and father were only two of many who turned to wipe away the tears shed at the unjustness of his plight. He was a beacon of sorts, and the hundreds whom he had touched, the hundreds who loved him, we all were

In the autumn of 1974, Mr. Ruppe was incapable of work. In the confines of the battery-powered wheelchair our community had given him, he came to every home basketball game. He would grunt hello to me -- any other words were inaudible. He would attempt to smile, but the lack of control in his muscles would not allow it. He was a ghost of the figure he had been: his arms and legs were frail and withered, and his head looked too large for his shriveled body. His sons and neighbors would carry him, as gently as though he were an infant, up to the balcony where he could watch the game in relative privacy.

As they carried Rudy down after one certain game, I stood by and watched as one of his admirers tried to find something to say to this maimed idol. The admirer, a man of around forty-five, reached out to shake Mr. Ruppe's hand, realized his mistake, and pulled back sharply. Rudy's eyes missed nothing, and I think the man must have known then, as I did, that Rudy needed or wanted no tactful pity. After awkward moments of silence, he realized Mr. Ruppe would most appreciate honesty and asked in an emotion-choked voice, "How are you, Rudy?"

I don't think either of us expected an answer, but when came the slurred reply, I was struck quite forcibly by the multitude of inner strengths of this faded man. Rudy pulled himself up in his chair as best he could, looked his friend straight in the eye, and said with great emphasis, "I'm okay." It was then I saw what before I had been blind to: the true definition of courage.

Courage isn't walking alone in the dark though one fears some evildoer may be waiting; it is walking alone in the dark with the certainty that some evildoer awaits. Courage is knowing the battle is lost, yet fighting as though victory be only a breath away; it is giving all that one can give every minute of the hour, with the knowledge that one will never know the rewards of one's struggles; it is to be filled with despair and frustration, yet remain strong and determined; it is to be humiliated, decrepit, and carried about like an infant, yet remain a man. Rudy Ruppe is my definition of courage.

Mr. Ruppe fought the clock to give everything he had before it was too late. Because he loved life, he allowed himself no room for self-pity and wasted no time on thoughts of what could have been. He accepted his affliction without clenching his fists and shouting out, "Why me? Why me?". He adopted his fate with dignity, while all near to him grew bitter and desperate for justification of his pain.

Rudy Ruppe died on October 5, 1976. I visit his grave whenever I am troubled, because though I cannot see him, I can feel a sense of security by just being near him. For me, he shall never cease to be, because from the first moment I loved him, the man had become a legend.

Eileen