

People are More Important than Rules

by Stephen DeVoy

Tanya and her daddy were sharing a lane. It was open swim night and all the lanes were full. Tanya took one side of the lane and her daddy took the other side. Tanya's dad was an avid swimmer. He'd be swimming laps for at least an hour. Tanya preferred to play. The two had made a deal. After daddy finished swimming, he'd play with Tanya for fifteen minutes.

An hour is a long time for a young girl of 10. Tanya liked to race her father now and then, but that made her very tired, so she'd play for stretches inbetween. A Vietnamese family entered the pool area. The father, seeing that all of the lanes were full, was distressed. He didn't know what to do.

The club had rules and there was a rule about what to do in a case like this. If you wanted to use a lane and someone was swimming laps in that lane, you had to ask the person for permission to share the lane. The Vietnamese father had not read the rules. He might not have even known whether or not there were rules. Whatever the case, one thing was sure, he didn't know what to do. His two daughters were itching to swim.

The Vietnamese father decided to use the lane that Tanya and her father were using. Descending, as he did, with his two daughters into the lane without asking was rude by Western standards. Tanya was indignant. The three had invaded her side of the lane. "They didn't even ask!" she thought.

When Tanya's father swam towards the end of the lane where Tanya stood, Tanya stopped her father. "They took my lane," she said with a confused tone to her voice. "What should we do?"

"For now, though it may seem strange to you, let them be," said Tanya's dad. "I will explain to you later." Her dad continued swimming.

After about 15 minutes, another lane opened up and Tanya asked her father to change lanes. The two swam together to the empty lane. When they arrived, Tanya's dad said, "If they were Americans, I would have been very upset because what they did is rude. But I know the Vietnamese well..."

"How do you know the Vietnamese well?" Tanya interrupted.

"I'll tell you in the car," her dad answered. "It's a long story, but let me assure you that I know Vietnamese culture as well as I know your mother's culture."

"You know everything daddy," said Tanya.

Tanya's dad answered, "No, I don't know everything, but I do know Vietnamese culture. The reason I did not want to confront him is this. The Vietnamese have a very sensitive notion of honor. This father is with his two daughters. They look up to him. If I were to confront him, he might feel that he was losing face..."

"Losing face?" laughed Tanya. "How can someone lose his face?"

"It's a concept that is common in Eastern culture, Tanya," her dad said. "To lose face is to feel embarrassed and dishonored. If you lose your face, you feel ashamed to show your face. That is the concept. It is a very important concept to them and much less important to us."

Tanya thought for a moment and said, "I see."

"Besides," said her dad, "he may have been complementing us by wishing to share the lane with us. Maybe he wanted you to play with his daughters. You could have played with them, you know?"

"I was too upset about them coming and taking our space without asking," Tanya said with a sorry voice. "I didn't think that what they did was friendly, but now that you've explained it to me, I think you might be right. I guess it's important to think before acting when the other person has a different culture?"

"Yes, it is Tanya," remarked her dad. "Maybe next time, if you see them again, you will play with them."

Tanya's dad continued swimming his laps. Tanya thought about what had happened and glanced over at the girls. She felt sorry for ignoring them. She dove under the water and continued playing. "Next time I will play with them," she thought.

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