



MY FRIEND TIM CONOVER

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After being asked to write a memorial piece celebrating the life of Tim Conover, I didn't really know where to begin. What do you say about a guy who literally changed your whole life? Do you write about the funny stuff and try to be humorous?

That could come off as being callous or just plain silly. Do you tell the stories that you know will touch the heart? Well, that could come off as too sentimental. Do you talk about how great his love for magic was?

Everybody knows about that.

So where do you start. Well, at the risk of being criticized for a lack of originality, I'm guessing I should just start at the beginning.

I was first introduced to Tim Conover shortly after the National IBM convention held in Norfolk, Virginia. At the time I was performing close up magic in restaurants across the area. I had heard about Tim from a few mutual friends. First probably from Scotty York when I was visiting him up in the Northern Virginia area.

Later from another local magician, Mike Sears. Tim's reputation preceded him. Everyone talked about how good he was and how successful he was. He was also extremely private.

I think Scotty must have called him or something. I'm not really sure exactly how it happened, but Mike Sears arranged for me to meet Tim at his house. I remember feeling both excitement and a little nervous arriving at his house on Goldsboro Drive in Virginia Beach. I also remember being a little underwhelmed with his home.

I was expecting a mansion based on the legendary fees he was receiving. Instead he lived in a nice middle class home that was unassuming. Now looking back I see this home as sort of a metaphor for the way Tim lived his life. He was brilliant and an enormously charismatic performer in public, but in his private life he was

unassuming and quite humble. I'm sure his neighbors had no idea that they were living next door to one of the greatest close up magicians and mentalists to ever live.

I was kind of nervous because I was really hoping Tim would help me. You see, I really loved magic. My whole life revolved around learning and performing magic. I was proficient from performing nightly, but I wasn't good. I wanted to be great. At that time though, I didn't really even know what good was. I thought it was creating some novel new trick or routine. I thought it meant learning all the latest and greatest that had just come out. Like many I thought that if I could just buy the next big trick that was advertised in the magazines, I too could hit the Big Time.

Please allow me a moment to digress...

I should mention that this was a particularly difficult time in my life. My wife and I were having real problems. She didn't like me, and I wasn't real crazy about her either. At the same time I didn't have a lot of money. I was only earning around \$100 a show or \$50 a night at a restaurant. Times were tough and I was depressed. Not just a little sad, but smack dab in the middle of a real clinical depression.

Back to the story...

I was also excited at the idea of meeting Tim. I'd heard how much money he was making. I knew he was performing at trade shows and at corporate meetings around the country. In short, he was living the kind of life that I wanted to live. I knew that he could tell me how to get where I wanted to go...if he decided he wanted to help me.

I didn't know a lot about Tim before that first meeting. I didn't even know what he looked like. One thing I did know was that he was fiercely protective of his show and his own material. He was known for getting extremely upset when folks copied or stole his performance material. On the flip side of that, Tim was extremely ethical. Before I became involved with Tim, I didn't really understand why it was so important to give other people credit for their material that you performed. I would learn that Tim would go out of his way to get permission to use anything from the original creator.

I also knew that Tim was constantly beset by various magicians all trying to get something out of him. A lot of folks wanted him to just give them the material he had worked his entire life to develop. I knew he didn't like that, and for that reason didn't hang around with a lot of magicians. I didn't want to be one of those guys.

I didn't really have a plan as I walked up Tim's driveway that first time. I didn't really know what to say or what to expect. So I just knocked on the door and Mike Sears answered.

Mike was another wayward magician that Tim helped out for little while. Mike was also in a difficult spot. He had just split up with his wife and was putting his business back together. Tim graciously had offered to let Mike stay with him for a while until he got things back on track.

Mike ushered me into the living room where Tim was perched on a brown sectional sofa. The house smelled of cigarette smoke. Tim liked to smoke which was OK with me because I smoked too. The inside of the house was just as unassuming as the outside. Tim had nice furniture but it wasn't over the top. He had a nice TV, but it wasn't huge. He did get all the cable channels though!

I guess I kind of thought this would be kind of like an audition. I guess I thought that if I impressed Tim, he would be inclined to want to help me. I had brought a few props with me prepared to perform my best material. I had a deck of cards, and some coins in my pocket. I was ready to go.

I never performed a single trick, and neither did Tim. We just talked. We talked a lot about magic. What I thought it should be. What books I read. How I put together a show. Where I wanted to perform. Stuff like that. I thought I was smart back then. I thought I knew what I was talking about. Looking back now, I didn't have a clue.

After an hour or so things started to wind down. I had no idea if I'd made an impression on Tim or not. I didn't know if he would help me or not. I am not ashamed to admit that I was feeling a little desperate, thinking that this might be my one shot. So I looked at Tim and said, I know a lot of guys out there want you to teach them your tricks. I don't care about the tricks in your show. You don't have to tell me anything about your material and I won't ask. I'll stay completely away from Mentalism. I would like you to just help me to put together a show that I can perform. Something that is decent.

I don't know if it was that last statement or if it was the product of our previous conversation. Most likely it was a combination of the two. But then he ground out his cigarette in the ashtray, and just before he lit the next one, he asked simply, What are you doing tomorrow? That simple question was Tim's way of saying, I'll help you.

I know now that I didn't impress Tim. There was no way I could have. He didn't care if I was a great performer or not. I know now that the reason he decided to help me was because I was passionate about magic and willing to give him the space he demanded concerning his own material.

Over the next several years we became very close. He would put up with me at his house for 12-14 hours at a time when he was in town. I came to know Tim on a much more personal level. Yes, Tim was a brilliant magician. He had a deep reverence for the art of magic. He would read and research incessantly. When I expressed an interest in performing Ramsey's Coins and Cylinder, he pulled out a copy of a treatise he had copied from the Library of Congress on the trick and made me a copy!

Tim didn't sleep a lot. He would stay up until all hours of the night going over and over a trick until he had it the way he wanted it. He struggled to achieve what he considered perfection for each trick he decided to perform. He wouldn't stop until he had worked out all of the rough spots.

Tim, despite his reclusive nature, selflessly shared material and ideas with others. Tim would constantly get calls from other magicians asking for his advice on a method for a trick. Some of these magicians were famous names which everyone would recognize in the industry.

Everyone respected Tim's ability to come up with a method to accomplish just about anything. Tim was usually very happy to respond. Again, he would spend hours upon hours looking for a solution to help his friends. I never knew him to accept anything in return for the effort.

Watching Tim's mind at work was amazing in its own right. I remember asking Tim to help me come up with a better way of performing a poker deal routine that had been published by Darwin Ortiz. I was not particularly good at a certain move, and was looking to get around it.

Tim agreed to think about it, which meant don't bother him for a couple of hours. It was almost like you could see the gears of his mind turning as he created method after method to accomplish what I needed. He literally came up with at least a dozen ways to do what I needed to do. Then we would work through each one until he decided which one was the best for me.

I hear people talk about Tim having the best hands in magic. People routinely talk about his prolific skill with cards and coins. It makes me laugh. Tim was very adept at slight of hand skills, but he didn't use a whole lot of them. Most of his coin work relied on the humble finger palm. One of his favorite card controls was the lowly double undercut.

Tim routinely preached simplicity. There was simply no need to clutter up a good routine with finger gymnastics.

Instead of mastering moves, Tim mastered the psychology of performing magic. It is no secret, he was a huge admirer of Ramsey, but he was equally devoted to Slydini. Tim had an impeccable sense of timing.

Tim understood innately the art of misdirection.

Tim ingrained in me the power of the classics. I remember Tim telling me that there was a reason a trick was still around after a hundred years or so...People Like It! He impressed upon me the need to study the great magicians and tricks of the past. He taught me to focus on the performance. He taught me the difference between practicing and rehearsing. He showed me what made a trick entertaining to an audience.

I think most people know that Tim was a dynamic performer. Tim was convinced the energy you projected in your show would be returned by the audience. He deplored dead time, and he ruthlessly sought to eliminate any drag time from his show. I've heard a few people call him an Energizer Bunny of Magic. I used to tease him and call him the Televangelist of Mentalism.

I'm not sure how many folks knew just how generous Tim was even outside of magic. Like I said at the beginning, I didn't have a lot of money. I didn't have the money to buy some of the props that I wanted. Tim always made sure that I had the items I needed, not necessarily what I wanted, but always what I needed. Tim would constantly insist on picking up the check at restaurants. He was probably the most unselfish person I have ever known.

Tim's generosity can also be seen in his fierce dedication and love for his family. Tim took great pride and joy in helping his brother achieve one of his educational goals. He was so proud to see his brother succeed. I remember him bragging about how well he was doing. Tim was genuinely thrilled to be able to be part of everything his brother was achieving.

Tim was the epitome of a joyous giver. Not only did he lend his financial support, but anything else that was needed, including the pep talks at 1:00 AM. Everything he gave, he gave with sincerity. He never expected anything in return. In fact, he wouldn't let you pay him back in any way. After I had climbed out of the hole and started to earn a decent living with the show he put together for me, I tried to do small things as tokens of my appreciation. He wouldn't have anything to do with it. He wouldn't even let me pick up a check.

Something that a lot of folks wouldn't know was that Tim was tenacious. He was a fighter. I remember when a car dealer tried to cheat Tim in a car deal. Tim wouldn't quit. He went after the guy unendingly. Tim eventually sued the guy. Tim learned everything he could about the law and pushed things all the way to a jury trial. He won. When Tim thought he was right, there was nothing on earth that would convince him otherwise, and he would never back down.

As almost everyone knows, Tim was a perfectionist. I remember putting together Tim's first demo tape. I had a friend who owned a video production company, and we had just put together my first demo reel.

Tim decided it was about time he needed one too. He had some footage that a client had filmed for him at a few events so he had something to work with. After making the decision, Tim went to Barnes and Noble and bought several books on video editing and production. He read them cover to cover.

After reading for a couple of days we went to the studio. We spent two solid 10-hour days putting his video together. Tim analyzed his footage literally frame by frame to decide exactly where to cut different segments together. This was in the days before digital video editing. We were using an old A/B roll system. Tim knew to stay away from flashing effects relying instead only on hard cuts and cross fades.

Tim was a modest guy. While putting together his promo tape, he wanted to show that he did get standing ovations. (Actually he got quite a lot of them.) But he didn't want it to look like he was showing off. I told him he had completely missed the entire purpose of the bloody exercise. Showing Off was what it was about!

Tim instead elected to use some footage that was shot from the rear of the room. You could see the audience standing up in appreciation of his performance, but it wasn't the in your face, look at my standing ovation sequence that you see in most performers demo. Again, Tim was right. The effect was spectacular, and he came across as the classy act that he was.

Tim was funny, without intending to be. He had a really dry sense of humor. Tim couldn't write a joke to save his life. When he tried to be funny it just never worked. Then out of nowhere he'd make some kind of hilarious remark that would leave the whole room laughing. The funniest part was him just standing there with this look like, What?

Tim was a sensitive guy. He cared very much for the feelings of others. One time after I had performed a show Tim came up to say hello. I asked him what he thought. He said, It was crap! I knew he was joking. I laughed back, Blame it on my teacher! I just thought the whole thing was funny. Then several days later Tim came up to apologize. I just kind of blew it off. Again, I didn't really think anything of it. A couple of days after that Tim apologized again. He was really worried that he had hurt my feelings. Again I assured him that I was fine. For at least the next year, Tim still apologized routinely. It was completely unnecessary.

I could go on and on, but Tim probably wouldn't like for me too. Suffice it to say that Tim affected my life in many ways. He made me a better performer, and a better person. Yes, he taught me a lot about magic. I learned a lot of tricks, some of which I still perform today. I've been able to earn a decent living for almost 20 years using a lot of the material that Tim so freely gave to me. Everything, if anything, that I've accomplished as a performer, I owe to Tim Conover.

I'm more grateful for the chance to have been Tim's friend. We didn't always talk about magic. At the beginning of our friendship I think Tim expected that is all I was interested in learning from him. Over time we talked less about magic and more about life in general. I'm honored that he felt that comfortable with me. His friendship still means a lot to me. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have been able to get to know Tim.

I was looking to end this with some kind of deep philosophical statement. Maybe just some cool closing remark. Or maybe some kind of deeply personal statement that would be touching to all of you who have read this far. I can't come up with anything...

I miss him.