

*Some additional thoughts on “The Greatest” . . .*

## Thoughts on the Passing of Muhammad Ali

*January 17, 1942–June 3, 2016*

*Come on, death  
Bring it to me  
Take your best shot  
You ain't nothin'  
Come on, death  
How long you been tryin'?  
You can't beat me  
I'm immortal*

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### “They Look Like They’re Happy Together”

In 1996, Muhammad Ali and I co-authored a short book about bigotry and prejudice that was keyed to religious and racial divisions. To spread the message, we visited schools in a half dozen cities across the country, talking with students about the need for tolerance and understanding. In February 1997, our journey brought us to Boston.

Muhammad and I had talked on several occasions about gay rights. I don't know how his views evolved in later years. In the mid-1990s, he believed that a gay lifestyle was at odds with the Qu'ran.

Ali and I were staying at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston. As we got out of the limousine that had taken us around the city, the customary crowd gathered around Muhammad. Then I heard the unexpected.

“Omigod! It's Tom Hauser.”

The person who blurted out those words was Elizabeth Swados, a gifted playwright, director, and author whom I'd known in the early 1980s. Liz was with a friend, a woman named Roz Lichter. Muhammad signed autographs outside the hotel for a while. Then we invited Liz and Roz to join us inside.

I don't remember much about the conversation that the four of us had. I remember the aftermath clearly. It was obvious that Liz and Roz were coupled. After they left, Muhammad turned to me and asked, "They're lesbians, aren't they?"

"I assume so," I said.

A smile crossed Muhammad's face, the smile that the whole world fell in love with.

"They look like they're happy together," he told me.

The thought that Liz and Roz (whom he'd never met before and would never meet again) were happy pleased Muhammad. Ali wanted people to be happy. It was one of the reasons he gave as much of himself as he did. He loved the idea that, by giving someone a few seconds of his time, he could make that person happy.

I thought about that afternoon in Boston earlier this year when I read that Elizabeth Swados had died of complications stemming from esophageal cancer. The tributes were led by her wife, Roz Lichter.

Her wife!

That couldn't have happened two decades ago when Muhammad and Liz met.

I thought about it again on the morning of June 12, 2016, when, two days after Muhammad Ali was buried, I awoke to news of the horrifying mass murder at a gay nightclub in Orlando.

"They look like they're happy together."

What is it about that idea that the haters don't understand?

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Twenty-five years have passed since *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (my first writing about Ali) was published. Someone told me recently that the book has stood the test of time. My response was, "No! It was Ali who stood the test of time, and did so more successfully than any popular icon ever."

The world is a far different place now than it was a quarter-century ago. In sports, superstars have come and gone. Michael Jordan was replaced by Kobe Bryant, who was followed by LeBron James. Tiger Woods no longer sits upon his throne.

Ali himself receded from the spotlight after lighting the Olympic flame at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. New generations don't know the heady nature of what it once meant to be heavyweight champion of the world. Nor do they understand the social and political climate of the 1960s, when Ali was at his best as a fighter and his influence outside the ring was at its peak.

To fully appreciate Ali, one had to have lived through his time.

Yet Ali remained adored throughout the world. A real-life superhero, the champion of champions. And his legacy is vibrant. It can be seen in self-pride among oppressed people around the globe . . . In the belief that, unless there's a very good reason for killing, war is wrong . . . One can posit—and I believe it's true—that the acceptance by America of a black man with a Muslim name in the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

The cornerstone of Ali's emergence onto the world stage was violence. But he was a warrior who became a messenger of peace. The measure of his life isn't in the massive number of celebrities and dignitaries who marked his passing. It's in the outpouring of love from hundreds of millions of common men and women who celebrated his having walked among us.

Very few people from the beginning of time have had a farewell like Ali.

Several years ago, I collaborated with a young author named Bart Barry on a project designed to introduce Ali to a new generation of Americans. I lived through Muhammad's glory years, traveled with him during and after the writing of *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, and sat beside him on a sofa watching tapes of "The Rumble in the Jungle" and "The Thrilla in Manila." Bart had a different perspective. His appreciation of Ali was from a historical point of view. Yet we arrived at the same conclusion.

"Other fighters since Ali," we wrote, "have graced the sweet science of boxing and been great. More great fighters will follow. Someday, as surely as autumn leaves change color and fall to the ground, a young man

will step in a boxing ring and be greater than Ali. But Muhammad Ali will always be The Greatest.”

So let us turn to the literature of the ages in closing.

To Charles Dickens: “Man is but mortal. There is a point beyond which human courage cannot extend.”

Muhammad Ali challenged that notion.

To Shakespeare.

“I saw him once,” Horatio says of Hamlet’s father. “He was a goodly King.”

To which Hamlet responds, “He was a man. Take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again.”

And to Peter Pan, when Captain Hook demands, “Who are you?”

“I am youth,” the eternal boy answers. “I am joy. I am freedom.”