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In loving memory of Khalik “Drew” Al-Rouf
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*Note: I finished writing this essay only a few days before Drew passed away during a chemotherapy session. I decided against rewriting the essay; I believe this will preserve the happiness he used to bring to my life.

A large, Muslim, African-American man parks his Lincoln in the driveway of our white, Jewish household at 11am Sunday morning and, even before the doorbell rings, we know what time it is.

Since 1999, Mr. Khalik Al-Rouf (better known to his pupils and their families as Drew) has driven all the way from Mount Vernon, NY, to teach my siblings and me how to play jazz. Drew surrounds himself with all things musical; he’s always writing new tunes for us to try out, discovering new and foreign instruments to play, and exploring more and more of the mammoth 600-page volume of jazz that is known as “The Real Book.”

Every Sunday he sits down at the piano in our large living room that otherwise would remain silent and strikes beautiful notes that flow from his fingers like rivers in a still meadow; every vibration resounds throughout the room and sways even the most casual listener. The notes can rain down in furious flurries of shocking speed and precision; they can roll quietly like a gentle breeze over grass; they can be hair-raising, heart-warming rays of sunshine that make you want to dance and sing; they can be long, hard-hitting strikes like the cold wind slapping you in the face. Drew is a master of ethos, a man who can pluck heartstrings with his bare hands; the audience laughs, dances, and cries when his music enters their ears.

For many years I had no idea how he commanded such musical mastery. I could get people to clap for me when I played all the notes of a complicated song correctly, but as hard as I tried, I simply couldn’t evoke powerful emotions from my audience the way he did. I thought it might have to do with the level of difficulty of his music, but I quickly learned that he prefers to play the simpler tunes with us; I don’t know whether it’s for our sakes or his. I thought he might have prepared the solos before he came to practice with us, but I knew this would be far too difficult and the solos came too spontaneously; besides, preparing a solo beforehand would be cheating the listener, and Drew loved music way too much to cheat. What was his secret to entrancing his audience? “You have got to know the chords, man,” he said to me. “And most importantly, you have got to feel the music.” *Feel* the music? What kind of riddle was this? It took me almost four years to figure out exactly what he meant.

During the winter season of seventh grade, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, I broke my arm, and my grandfather went to the hospital for heart surgery; all of this happened within the span of three weeks. I literally saw my life get turned upside down as everything that seemed secure and constant was hurt or put into mortal jeopardy; it felt like a midlife crisis at the age of 12.

Needless to say, things were looking pretty crummy when, at a Christmas party, Drew and his band asked me to jam with them on a swing tune called “Equinox.” Feeling

more than a little out of place at this decadent Christian gathering, I quickly accepted the offer and strapped on Drew's shiny Cannonball Adderly alto sax. Without knowing it, I started pouring all my pent-up anger and sadness into my playing, painting the proverbial rivers, stream, hail storms, and sun rays that I had seen Drew create so many times before. In the blink of an eye I went from being the awkward Jewish kid in the room to the 'hippest cat in town'.

Drew and his band were shocked at my precision and emotion. The female flautist and I even had a "musical duel", something that I previously thought was meant only for professional musicians. To everyone's surprise, I kept up with her lightning pace and riveting solos; it was the first time I could really *feel* the music.

"I didn't know you could play like *that!*" my dad said to me after the party.

"Neither did I," I joyfully responded.

Not only have I learned more about my personal love for music and public presentation, but I have also learned a number of life lessons from my jazz teacher. One of the most important things in life is learning how and why feelings arise; inner feelings can have profound effects on one's ability to musically and verbally emote. I get in touch with my own and others' emotions by listening to the changes in their tone and preferences throughout the week; wavering pitches signify uncertainty and fear; deep breaths reveal lack of sleep or boredom; increases in volume show excitement or anger. Based on these changes, I measure and alter my own tone to make "harmony" and avoid clashes with friends and family.

The most important lesson that Drew has taught me isn't written down on a sheet of music or printed in a textbook. Despite the long drive, he has always come from his house in Mount Vernon, NY to give us a lesson in Stamford, CT; we have only been to his house twice in 9 years. When Drew was put in the hospital with leukemia, however, my father drove my brother and I for one hour to get to his hospital in New York City to play music with him. Thankfully, Drew was eventually able to leave the hospital and continues to come to our house on a weekly basis to enjoy Sunday brunch and play some "hot bebop", but we no longer play as a teacher instructing students; we now play as a band of friends and equals, all of whom listen to and work with each other to make great music. Most people wouldn't expect a skinny, white, Jewish kid from prep school to take weekly jazz lessons with a large, African-American, Muslim man. Not only is he my greatest teacher, but he is also one of my closest friends.