

## COMMUNITY

# The courage to embrace a meaningful life



HOMEFRONT  
CONSTANCE  
JOHANNESSEN

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear."

— Mark Twain

"He sat on the porch, cane by his side, observing the ants as they carried

extremely large loads. Items easily weighed four/five times their size. He mischievously nudged the ants' colony, which messed up their order. Immediately they regrouped, persevered and returned to investing and creating their community.

"He was intrigued with the ants' organization, order and strength. His world by comparison had become small. His curiosity however prevailed. His days were simplified by age, yet he con-

tinued to embrace meaning in each waking moment and share his wisdom with others. Shortly before his death, he disclosed a wish to live his life again. The desire was not from a place of regrets, nor because his life had been easy (he had faced many hurdles and adversities). Of utmost importance to him was the essence of joy and spirit within his journey.

"We all have the opportunity to find meaning in our daily lives, even during darkness.

"It's been told that in an Auschwitz day camp, inmates told Victor Frankl that they stopped expecting anything from life. Frankl responded that they had it backwards. 'Life expects something of you and it is up to every individual to discover what it should be.'"

— "When Life Throws you a Curve Ball," by C. Freeman

Agreed, yet what is challenging sometimes is discovering life's meaning as we travel through various life stages. Life's meaning may not always make sense. How often have we heard of someone who is in search of their identity? Or, someone who is in search of fulfillment?

Finding one's meaning may not always be a linear or predictable process. It may not easily be understood by an outsider looking in, yet for them be the correct personal path.

For example, a short while ago, I witnessed a friend doing something that baffled me. Her husband was unemployed, their finances were strained. This family of five was exhausted, feeling depleted on every front. The two oldest children were leaving home in the near future. They had not had a vacation or real ex-

tended family time for years. Instead of being weighed down further by the situation, they chose to take a break from it. As a family, they flew out west.

Initially I thought, won't this trip burden the family more? It seemed counterintuitive. Instead, paradoxically, they became stronger and returned home with clarity, more positive spirit and perspective. The father, shortly upon re-entry, sought employment and the family, with its newfound power, regained a healthy course.

This example speaks to recognizing options or alternative ways to confronting obstacles and having the courage to implement them. This family needed to step outside of their familiar restraints, connect more fully as a unit, and reassess their strengths. Climbing and embracing the magnificence of the Grand Canyon

enabled them to look beyond their losses of yesterday. They were then prepared to move forward and consequently become significantly stronger individuals and family unit.

As Dr. Crisswell Freeman expressed, "We live in a society that idealizes success and prosperity. Hard times translate into embarrassing circumstances (like job loss, bankruptcy, divorce)." It is challenging to ignore this truth, yet, as noted in the prior example, we often need to step out of this paradigm in order to move forward. We encounter a crossroad between crises of personal faith, holding one's head down in shame, and assuredly looking forward.

Often I view these hard times as moments when we can reassess and take inventory of what is meaningful to us. This begins with challenging old beliefs, shaking off soci-

etal embarrassment, exerting courage to overcome fears and disallowing loss of faith in ourselves. Next we do best by maintaining a positive outlook focusing on the opportunity for new direction, and doing a personal inventory of our strengths, values, resources and possibilities.

For the most part, we don't begin each day anticipating it is our last. Yet one hopes that when our time approaches closure, we can reflect and, similar to the man in the beginning of this article, express a desire to journey through life again.

*Dr. Constance Johannesen, a licensed psychologist in New Hampshire and Maine, has practiced for more than 20 years and specializes in couples, individual and group therapy. She is with Woodlan Professional Associates of North Hampton.*