

Meeting Challenge with Grace

Coaching for Greatness

by Joan King

Flowers bloom. The air is redolent with aromatic allure — signs of a burgeoning summer. This time, considered one of great joy, celebrates the warmth and abundance of summer. Some, however, face daunting challenges even during this glorious summer time: breast cancer, death of a family member, loss of a job or estrangement from a child. How can we confront these challenges and at the same time bask in the glory of summer?

“I have an engineering problem” says Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon professor whose last lecture — “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams” swept through the Internet. Diagnosed with pancreatic cancer with 10 tumors in his liver, Randy has months to live; yet he refers to his condition as an “engineering problem.” Asked why by Jeffrey Zaslow, his co-author, Randy responded “Framing it as an engineering problem... I have things that I can do to make a difference, things that will help my wife, things that will help my kids... put the focus on ‘okay, I may not like the situation but what can I do with the remaining time to make the best outcome I can’?” Finding meaning in his remaining days gives Randy the strength to continue to find ways to support his family after he’s gone — including writing his book *The Last Lecture*.

Are you or a loved one facing a challenge? You may not be confronted with imminent death as Randy is, but nonetheless you may face a daunting challenge or difficult decision. What gives you the strength to face up to and navigate your way through this challenge or make that hard decision? Randy’s focus on his family, doing all he can to support them now and once he is gone, gives meaning to his remaining days.

Facing unimaginable challenges bestows a startling clarity upon everyday life — a clarity that pervades every aspect of our beings. Priorities change. What was once of immense importance yesterday becomes trivial today. How can we authentically navigate the waters of unimaginable change?

Exploring our thoughts, beliefs, feelings and fears in writing — or authentically conversing with close friends, a coach or consultant — allows us to share the burden, clarify perspectives and create greater strength through a support system. We need not wait for a catastrophic event to occur in order to share intimate aspects of our inner life. Research demonstrates that when we explore our innermost thoughts, beliefs, feelings and fears through writing or authentic communication with others, we enhance our well-being.

- What had you planned on occurring in your life in 2008?
- What is occurring in your life, personally and professionally, now?
- What are your thoughts, beliefs, feelings and fears about these ongoing or challenging events?
- Will you set aside time to write about these in order to gain greater clarity?
- Who will you converse with about your thoughts, beliefs, feelings and fears — openly and authentically?

You may find yourself changing as you confront the ongoing or challenging events in your life.

Psychologists speak of “possible selves” — conceptions of ourselves as we want to be or fear to be.

Take time and consider:

- Who do you want to be as you confront ongoing or challenging events in your life?
- What qualities could your “possible self” use to meet the challenge?

Humans have a capacity to thrive — even in the face of trauma. What is it that gives us this capacity for resilience? Grasping the meaning, we begin to perceive resources, internal and external, that could help us cope with the challenge. Witness the amazing ability of a mother to lift huge weights to prevent her child from harm’s way. Our ability to create meaning opens the door to coping behavior.

What meaning permeates the ongoing or challenging events in your life, now?

Looking for the meaning begins after you have calmed the initial denial and anger at the emergence of the challenge. Resisting is not resilience. Understanding the presence of this challenge, or need to make a decision as having a meaning to you and your loved ones fuels resilience.

To build resilience:

- Distinguish the facts from your interpretation of the facts.
- Challenge old beliefs about yourself and your capacities.
- Put the challenge in perspective, find the meaning.
- Stay calm, focused and choose your behaviors.

Practicing resilience even in response to small challenges and decisions will prepare you to meet the daunting challenges that life might bring as magnificently as Randy Pausch.

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