

“Living in Peace with that which You Cannot Change”

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Years ago I viewed a segment on CNN that featured centenarians who were part of a study being conducted by the Boston University School of Medicine under the direction of Dr. Thomas Perls. According to an overview and history provided on the website of the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) <http://www.bumc.bu.edu/centenarian/overview/>, the study began in 1995 and included all centenarians living within eight towns in the Boston area. Since then it has expanded to enroll individuals from throughout the United States and other countries. The NECS project aims to understand those lifestyle factors that contribute to “a model of aging well.” I was intrigued by their findings and will probably devote a future article to their work.

The CNN segment included interviews with centenarians who shared their insights about what led to happiness in their lives. As examples, a man soon to be 100 years old and still working 3-4 hours a day as a lawyer talked about the importance of being engaged in work and other activities that you found rewarding and enjoyable. A woman emphasized warm relationships with others while another woman spoke about the need for resilience and being able to “come back from great disappointments and hurts and truly, truly be alive.” She observed, “True maturity is living in peace with that which you cannot change.”

My Twin Brother’s Comments

I thought about “living in peace with that which you cannot change” many times during the past few weeks in relation to the article I wrote last month about the death of my twin brother Michael to amyloidosis, a rare disease with which he was diagnosed almost seven years ago. Before going on, I want to thank the many people who sent me notes of condolence and support. I found these notes to be very comforting during this difficult time in my family’s life.

In last month’s article I commented that in the almost seven years that Michael confronted his disease, I never once heard him utter, “Why me?” He never accepted the role of the victim. He never felt sorry for himself. His attitude was upbeat. He endured

his constant doctor appointments and followed his medication regimen with no complaints. Even during our last phone conversation the day before he died, he told me, “I just take life a day at a time.”

I recounted that although I was not aware of his doing so, Michael used words very similar to those I used in my eulogy in a letter he wrote to two dear cousins in Canada, Todd and Carol Herzog, whose daughter Steph Gilman is battling breast cancer. Family and friends have kept up to date with Steph’s courage and perspective through a blog she initiated titled passmeanothercupcake.com that has also been published in the Huffington Post. Todd himself had successfully confronted cancer both as a teenager and then again as an adult.

Michael wrote:

We have followed the plight of Stephanie and your family and would like to take this opportunity to let you know that our thoughts and prayers are with all of you. Todd’s own experiences will serve as an inspiration to all of you in meeting the challenges ahead. The most important aspect in the day-to-day living is the positive attitude. Many people ask, “Why me?” I always asked, “Why not me?” Having fought a rare incurable disease (8 in a 1,000,000 get amyloidosis) for the past 6½ years, I have come to appreciate life from a far different perspective than most people, as I am sure Todd has as well. From Stephanie’s blog, I can see that she too has adopted a great attitude and maintained an incredible sense of humor. I have always said that there are no real problems, only opportunities and challenges and I am sure that you will get through these difficult times. When you do, you will all be stronger and grateful for the support of your wonderful, loving family. You and your family are very dear to us. You always exuded such genuinely positive vibes. We will always keep you in our thoughts. If there is anything else that we can do to ease your burden, please let us know.

As I read and re-read Michael’s words I thought once again of “living in peace with that which you cannot change.” I also thought about Ryan Westmoreland.

Ryan Westmoreland, 22, Retires

“Ryan Westmoreland, 22, Retires” was the title that appeared in an ESPNBoston.com article authored by Joe McDonald earlier this month. Most likely,

many of my readers have never heard of Ryan Westmoreland unless they follow the Boston Red Sox with more than a passing interest. Westmoreland is a 22-year-old from Rhode Island who was a very promising prospect for the Red Sox. In 2009 he displayed impressive abilities with the Single-A Lowell, MA minor league team and was being touted as a future major leaguer.

However, in spring, 2010 Westmoreland underwent surgery to correct a life-threatening condition based on a cavernous malformation on his brain. Following that surgery he continued to train at the Red Sox facilities in the hope that he might be able to regain his competitive skills. It was reported that he was making remarkable progress in his quest to return to baseball, but he suffered a setback last July and required a second surgery. A few weeks ago, after attempting a comeback in the Red Sox minor league spring training camp, he announced his retirement.

Many years ago I wrote of a study of elderly people who were forced to give up activities that they had enjoyed because of physical problems that had emerged. Some became depressed, but a large number displayed resilience by finding alternative activities to replace the ones that were no longer within their abilities. I thought of this study as I read Westmoreland's retirement statement, although at first glance there were obvious differences. Not only had the elderly population been capable of engaging in their favored activities for years, but in most instances these activities were not associated with their livelihood. In contrast, playing baseball was not only what Westmoreland loved to do, but he had to give it up at a early age and, in addition, it had the potential of providing him with a very hefty salary. Such a situation could prove to be an emotional burden for someone so young.

However, his retirement statement exemplified the philosophy of "living in peace with that which you cannot change." As I have often written, we may not have control over certain circumstances that transpire in our lives, such as having a life-threatening illness, but we have far more control than we may realize over our attitude and reaction to such circumstances.

Westmoreland wrote, "With a clear mind and heart, as well as the unwavering support and friendship of my family, friends, agents, doctors, therapists, and the Boston Red Sox, I have decided to voluntarily retire as a professional baseball player. Although

it was a difficult decision for me, it has become clear that the neurological damage caused by the most recent cavernous malformation and surgery leaves me with physical challenges that make it impossible to play the game at such a high level.”

This young man then offered an outlook that captures those qualities essential for being resilient and stress hardy, including: finding meaning and purpose when confronted with adverse experiences over which we have no control; being free of regrets over things we did or did not do; and recognizing that alternatives exist when our initial goals and dreams are thwarted so abruptly. I believe we can learn and benefit from hearing how others perceive and cope with misfortune.

Westmoreland continued, “In my heart, I know that I have worked as hard as one possibly could to overcome the obstacles presented by this unfortunate series of events. It is with confidence that I am comfortable turning the page, and searching for ‘the reason’ that this has happened. I believe that there is a plan for me that will utilize my experiences, however, painful some may have been, to do something special in my life. It is time for me to find that path, and to pursue it with the same focus and effort that I pursued the dream of playing professional baseball.”

No regrets, no lost hope but rather the search for a different path to find meaning for one’s life!

The importance of connections with caring people was not forgotten by Westmoreland. “I have been very fortunate throughout my professional career and the last three years of recovery and rehabilitation. I have met sincere, caring people that have believed in me and have helped me to stay focused on the task at hand. I will never be able to adequately thank the wonderful people in the Boston Red Sox organization that continued to support me and my family throughout all of this. From the time of the initial diagnosis, it was never about the baseball. They cared for me as a person, a member of their family, and their focus was entirely on my physical and emotional well-being. . . . And finally, my family and friends have been by my side and supported whatever it is that I wanted to pursue.”

The Observations of Others

Given Westmoreland’s attitude it is little wonder that Red Sox General Manager Ben Cherington called him “a remarkable young man” and “an incredibly talented

baseball player,” adding, “Like I told Ryan the other day, for some reason some people don’t get dealt the same hand, and some of those hands are unfair and he got dealt a bad hand. But there’s a path for him he’s going to find, and there’s going to be a lot of happiness in his future and I can’t imagine anyone else handling this the way he did.”

Red Sox Manager John Farrell echoed Cherington’s sentiment. “It’s one of those stories that transpire within the game—you see a very talented player who’s got all the physical gifts you would see in a bright young prospect. And it’s certainly a shame what’s transpired, something that’s totally out of his control. I know the Red Sox continue to support him and I think we can all learn from the way he’s gone about the challenges he’s encountered.”

A centenarian, my brother Michael, and Ryan Westmoreland, three people of very different ages and backgrounds but all possessing a positive outlook, especially in the face of adversity—an outlook eloquently captured by those simple words “living in peace with that which you cannot change.”

It is not always easy to accept and take actions associated with those words, but to fail to do so often leads to a “why me?” victim’s mentality that contributes to a sense of sadness, helplessness, and regrets. It is far better to choose the road that while filled with the unknown at least offers hope for future satisfaction and accomplishment.

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