

Surviving or Thriving? One is a Given, the Other a Gift

Not long ago, I gave a presentation at a continuing education conference in Hawaii, a place I had not been before but was interested to visit. An added bonus was meeting and spending time with another of the conference speakers and learning that she was a Partisan hiding from the Nazis in a forest in Eastern Europe during World War II. Her story was indeed an inspiration, as it is not only about her survival, but also about her choice to joyously thrive today, even after all of the tragedies she has faced throughout her life. Her topic at the conference was about resilience in the face of adversity and how she brings that to her work with her clients.

The woman shared the story of her life as a young girl in Eastern Europe, and how when it became obvious what the Nazis had planned for Jews, her family and other families in her village made escape plans and hiding plans. When the family learned of a Partisan group living in a forest, they made their arrangements to join the group. Sadly, her mother didn't survive the war - she was ambushed by a Nazi patrol and was killed. Her father survived the war, but died soon afterwards of illness.

Not only did this Partisan woman survive, but she also found her true love in the group of Partisans. They married soon after the war and emigrated to the US, where they settled on the West Coast and raised a family of three children. Then the next tragedy occurred when her husband died of complications from heart surgery in 1977. The woman was emotionally devastated, but she eventually took the suggestions of her children and went to college and then graduate school and finally to the job she holds today, working with Jewish families who come to the US from other countries. She speaks five languages - English, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew.

This remarkable woman is petite, five foot one inch tall, with coifed hair and bright red lipstick, beautifully dressed and groomed. What really captured my attention is her warmth, and openness, and the twinkle in her eye. She moves through the day with some aches and pains, dealing with the difficulties of aging. But she doesn't let these things slow her down. In fact, she is eager to meet new people, and appears interested in everything and everyone. And she's a great storyteller, as you can imagine. Despite the tragedies in her life, she continues to move forward and embraces new experiences in her work and in other aspects of her day to day living. Her spirit is strong and her choice is to thrive within her life, rather than to merely survive it. Of course she has accomplished the latter, in the face of many hardships. The greater gift she shares with others is her attitude about the life she lives today. She seems eager for life and work and purpose and she has opportunities for it all and she takes full advantage of them.

We all have the same choices to happily thrive instead of merely survive. And with choosing to thrive, we are giving something back to the world in that we are growing, blooming, embracing our environments, our lives, our choices. Think of what the word choice is all about. In this woman's history, her family made a choice. They heard about the Partisans and they made the choice to join them. Of course there was risk and they could have been killed, and some of her family were killed. But she and her husband survived and thrived. When the woman's husband died at a fairly young age, there was another moment when she could have turned from thriving

to simply surviving, and for a while she did. But eventually she went back to the thriving lifestyle that seems to be her preference.

This preference or choice is one we make each day, and it's a simple one. Do we go through the motions, passively participating in our lives? Or do we reach for something more, do we strive to thrive, and make this extra effort in order to actively engage in life? Myself, I choose the second option. I am always fascinated when someone tells me they live a boring life. Thankfully, I do not say the same. For me, every day is different, and that keeps life interesting. I am in the business of serving people, which brings so much variety to my life. Naturally, there are some days when the load seems heavy. Not everything is blissful. Many of the surprises in my life are not pleasant ones. But without the hard times, we might not appreciate the wonderful ones as much. Without pain, how much can we really understand joy?

If meeting this woman taught me anything, it's that life and the daily living is a blessing. This woman is thankful for each day that comes. I admire her courage, and her resilience and I am honored to have met her. And there's another example of how my life is enriched with each new encounter. There's a saying I've heard: "Into each life a little rain must fall." But I am reminded that after the rain often comes a rainbow. There's the balance of life once again, ours for the choosing, one day at a time.