

Life is meant to be challenging and hard at times

by Mark Pavilons

?Why am I soft in the middle?

?The rest of my life is so hard ...?

So wondered Paul Simon in ?You Can Call Me Al? on his 1986 album Graceland.

Touching on the impacts and mediocrity of a midlife crisis, the song takes you on a short journey of discovery.

I was sucked back in my chair by a force of self-examination recently. To sum up the experience, we're living our lives all wrong.

That may be a bold statement, but from personal experience, and observations from 30-plus years in the journalism game, I think most of us still don't have it figured out.

Maybe we're not meant to.

As we approach the Pearly Gates at the end of our journey here on Earth, there may be a being writing in the great big book. We may be asked ?What challenges, traumas and tragedies have you overcome and what did you do with that knowledge and strength??

We better start scratching our heads and putting pen to paper for this one. This may be the most important final exam of our entire existence.

Maybe life is meant to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would excel at it! Perhaps that's exactly why we're here ? to be hit hard, knocked down and to rise, stronger, and be better at being well, human. We leap over those hurdles and step carefully over those tripwires along the way. The prize??Simply to make the most of our human condition, teach others, do better and make things better.

Just how do we do that?

I think we do it every day without really knowing it.

Every day is a test of sorts. Each new sunny day brings a whole new set of trials and tribulations for us to overcome. We have to be keen puzzle-solvers, map-makers and maze-runners.

Humans have studied how ants work as a team; how beavers build their dams and how hummingbirds fly.

From our own history, we've seen how humans have had to trudge through the mud, summoning every ounce of strength and courage they had just to make it to the end of the day. We've seen how conflicts have laid waste to entire generations. We've learned, finally, to understand and respect nature.

For us here today, we should be celebrating this milestone. So many paths had to be cleared and so many mountains had to be climbed for us to enjoy what we do today.

Is life truly grand and is this the proverbial land of milk and honey? No. But life here in Canada, with our respect for individual rights and our tolerance for others, makes this a very decent place to live.

But is it cheap or affordable?

No. In fact, Canada is one of the more expensive countries in the western world. We have unusually high cell phone rates and utility costs. Our house prices are in the clouds and our cost of living climbs every year, while salaries stagnate.

It's hard work to live in this province and be successful, unless of course you're a civil servant.

My wife asked me the other day what would make me happy. I had to stop and think for a bit.

Money? A government job? A cottage?

Nope.

A new car? A cheese wheel the size of a mini-van?

Na, but it would be nice!

The truth is more love all around and our family coming together in a strong, unified, caring way. We need one another more than we think and more than we care to admit.

A traditional life path involves graduating school, getting a career, settling down and having a family. Those things alone can be immensely difficult. It may take a couple of tries to get it right.

But for many average Canadians, this is exactly how their lives unfolded. And now what?

Well, the plan is to enjoy the fruits of our labour.

And yet, double-income couples, many with more than one job, are the norm. Cutting costs, cutting coupons, cutting corners is the course.

I don't want to paint a bleak picture here, but the storm clouds are definitely floating, willy nilly, above our heads.

Recent media reports noted just how hard it is to enter the housing market in this province. Sure, federal candidates, and now newly elected MPs, made promises to provide more affordable housing, and easier access to mortgages.

Time will tell if these plans actually come to fruition. Just before the election, the feds offered grants to homeowners for repairs and upgrades. I'm anxiously waiting for this program to get into full swing.

I've asked many friends, neighbours and peers whether they'd enjoy being a young person growing up today. All answered with a profound, no way!

The idea of all things being relative went out the window a few years ago. One only has to look at comparison data and charts on food prices, cost of living, automobile expenses and home ownership to see the lop-sided scale of things.

When I was in my 30s, earning \$100,000 a year was a ton of money more than anyone could ask for. Now, it's just average for Ontario's government employees, teachers, police officers, etc.

So here we are. We made it. We should all give ourselves a pat on the back for getting this far.

The work isn't over. All the wiser, we can now look back with a smile, and look ahead with hope.

Our job is to tell stories, keep traditions alive, guide and pass on those hard-earned pearls of wisdom.

Are you up to the task?