

What are We Up Against in Life

Back in the 1960's Joe Matthews of the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago invented the word "upagainstness," (or up-againstness). It became part of the common language of the institute and has survived to this day in the Closing Rite of The EXODUS Program. You will not find such a word in the dictionary, but you will find the phrase "up against" as meaning "that which we are confronted with," and it comes remarkably close to what Joe Matthews was talking about.

We experience many things in life. There are barriers, blocks, disappointments, failures, and then there is the up-againstness. The first four can be dealt with and have the potential of being moved or eliminated. The up-againstness cannot be moved. It is there and will always be there as part of a person's life. The only option is to take a relationship to it and decide what it is going to mean. We all are born, and we all are going to die, as Matthews often said, they are part of the "just thereness of life." Part of your task in life is to decide what they are going to mean.

There are many examples that help us to understand this concept. Take the person who has been fired from a job. Can they ever again be a person who has never been fired? They may find another job or be rehired, but the fact remains that they are someone who once was fired. They can deny it, make believe it didn't happen, or rationalize that it was not important. These are simply ways of relating to what happened.

Sometimes we treat things that happen in our lives as an up-againstness, when in fact they are not. The person in prison who decides that life is on hold and nothing significant can happen until he/she gets out, is treating the experience as an up-againstness when in fact it is not.

About ten years ago a man, Joe, came up to me in the hall at Wallkill Correctional Facility. He told me that the superintendent was insisting that he go to school and earn his GED. He wanted

me to intervene and ask the superintendent to excuse him. I explained that I wasn't in the business of getting people out of school. He went on to explain that he had AIDS and was convinced he was going to die and would not make it to parole. As we continued to talk he mentioned that he had two young sons. I pointed out what it might mean to them if they could attend his graduation and see their father achieve this important goal. He pondered all this and a year later, when he graduated, his sons were there and quite proud of their father's accomplishment.

Prison and AIDS had become, for him, an up-againstness. Life had stopped and no further creative steps could be taken. We all live between our birth and our death. These are certainly realities that we live against. But the journey between them we call life, and we certainly have a lot of control over its meaning and purpose. Joe cursed the day he was born and there is a whole industry out there that tries to offer ways of staying young and avoiding death. Joe used to say, "if any of you know that you will not die you ought to get a postcard out to the rest of us." We all have heard the saying, "You only have one life to live." Joe used to say, "You only have one death to die."

Each week in Exodus we recite the Opening and Closing Rites in which this journey we call life becomes part of our common memory.