



Fueling a Life Lived Large

By Pam Martin



How pursuing life's passions strengthens the recovery process and stokes life after amputation.

"Find a place inside where there's joy, and the joy will burn out the pain."

Joseph Campbell

Peak performance in sports happens when the mind and body unite in the elusive moment referred to as "being in the zone." Banking turns at adrenalin-pumping speeds, a racecar driver's perception of time slows down, and his concentration and reflexes sharpen to razor-fine edges. But any pursuit approached with extreme focus can achieve zone-like results, especially when it also feeds the intellect and paves avenues for self-expression. Such pursuits can see people through hardships as dire as near-death experiences by providing the continuity so essential for making sense out of life post-injury. For patients with traumatic amputations, for example, pursuing a passion can provide that extra oomph that sees them through the injury and back to living life with the gusto he or she had known before.

Mike Hummel, Powerlifter

Mike Hummel recently won the World Powerlifting Congress (WPC) world championship title (242-pound weight class) against able-bodied powerlifters by bench-pressing 661 pounds. He's been a fierce competitor since he was seven years old, and that drive sustained his recovery when his car flipped over in 1998, leaving him without his left arm below the elbow. Afterward, Hummel spent a mere 17 days in the hospital and was back at work a few days after that despite a broken leg, a "shattered



Mike Hummel credits the terminal device on his prosthesis for allowing him to bench press 661 pounds. Photograph courtesy of Mike Hummel.

up" face, and "stitches all over the place," he says. An entrepreneur who owns a marble company in Delray Beach, Florida, Hummel says his wheelchair had to be replaced after six weeks: "With drywall screws all along the wheels, it looked like it had been through a war zone." Hummel says he had a business to run and a family to feed, so there wasn't time for a pity party.

The rehabilitative process was humbling, he notes, and he credits the gym, in addition to the support of his wife, two daughters, and friends, for his success in overcoming some of the debilitating issues, including "brutal" pain, associated with his limb loss.

"It was tough," he says, adding that "people have asked me [about that time], and [I've told them] it's kind of like you're standing on top of a mountain and it would be very easy to teeter backward, instead of falling forward." He continues, "I was very fortunate to fall forward."

During the day, Hummel goes without a prosthesis, but for weight lifting he wears one with a specially designed terminal device invented by Bob Radocy, founder of TRS, Boulder, Colorado. The device locks onto the weight bar, "So there's no danger in it for me," Hummel says. While he admits to having a competitive disadvantage because he "[only] has one arm," he adds, "I never let it stop me because I lift more now than I ever did before." He merits the terminal device for paving the way to two post-injury world championship and five national titles, "100 percent."

Nancy Whittington, Textile Artist

For North Carolina textile artist Nancy Whittington, the creative urge came with her to the hospital where she sketched on paper during her recovery from a hit-and-run speedboat accident in Texas, in 1997. The accident damaged her lower leg and eventually led to a transtibial amputation. Until that time, she'd been a studio artist for more than 20 years, and she began the trek back to making large commissioned pieces by working on a smaller scale.



Nancy Whittington says her art gave her a "wonderful sense of continuity" after her amputation. Photographs courtesy of Nancy Whittington. Rippling Pond by Nancy Whittington.

"I was...gingerly stepping back into my old world," she says, and didn't "want to put a lot of pressure on myself."

Even now, she works around challenges from her amputation. She can't stand much longer than an hour while she does the heavy work of dyeing or silkscreen printing, for example, but she says her Modular III Flex-Foot (Össur, Reykjavik, Iceland) allows her to sit and stand naturally, and to climb a stepladder, useful for studio labors. Any discomfort related to wearing the prosthesis, however, relegate to the back burner during long periods on the floor or at her worktable, when she's consumed by the design or hand-stitching phase of a current project. Her large-scale pieces can take longer than six months to produce and hang in churches, business centers, and government offices throughout the world.

In 2005, seven years after her injury, an engineering firm commissioned a work from Whittington, saying they wanted something that would bring nature indoors. The resulting artwork, Rippling Pond, measures nearly 2x3 meters and came to embody, for Whittington, a narrative of her rehabilitation. The setting—a still body of water that she describes as "a very quiet moment"—is interrupted by a ripple. She discusses how the viewer is drawn to the ripples' repeating undulations that convey a sensation akin to being "carried into the future." She notes that she had emotionally moved on from the accident by the time she created Rippling Pond, but the artwork was a "kind of... revisiting and a confirmation" of her recovery process.

Though Whittington had been victimized by a faceless speedboat driver, she notes that one of the beauties of her passion is that she is never at anyone's mercy, will, or wish when at work in her studio. This sense of personal freedom carries into the rest of her life, helping her mitigate some of the limitations of living with limb loss, she says. For persons with amputation who may not have the luxury of self-employment, she advises the pursuit of a passion where "you are not a victim while you are doing [it]," because empowerment comes from fulfilling work where decisions are under the direction of the creator alone.

Shawn Findley, Diversity and Outreach Coach

Shawn Findley found his calling after his left hand was caught in a machine while working as a sheet-metal fabricator in 2005. He underwent a mid transradial amputation in 2009. Out of work for ten months, he was hired at Lowe's Distribution Center, Mount Vernon, Texas, to unload merchandise from trailers. "I met some challenges," he admits, "trying to do it with one hand..." but eventually he began "to excel and succeed." Findley caught the attention of Lowe's higher-ups with his can-do attitude, and when he applied for the position of diversity and outreach coach, he landed the job. "They looked at me and what I brought to the table as an example of someone who can overcome challenges," he says, a quality that would serve him well as a mentor to persons with physical and mental disabilities in the workplace.



Shawn Findley (left) with Ryan Spill, CP, clinical manager of the Advanced Arm Dynamics (AAD) Northeast Center of Excellence, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during a company upper-limb technology symposium. Photograph courtesy of AAD.

Along with the state's Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), the Lowe's outreach team brings "in folks that normally couldn't find a job because of a disability, and we put them with a job coach and...spend countless hours getting them trained," he says. Because of his own disability and the tasks he continues to struggle with—among them cutting steak and tying his shoes, he says—Findley has endless patience for coming up with novel ways to get a job done. One particular employee was challenged by a pair of fused wrists and mental disabilities, for example. Battling depression, the employee worked with Findley and began to overcome "the physical barriers and realize, 'I can do this—I [just] need to find a different way,'" he notes. When the trainee's lightbulb turned on, Findley says it made him "feel really good that somebody else [was] figuring it out. [The employee] feels like he's very rewarded because of the opportunity," and because of his newly awakened job satisfaction, he is now "paying it forward" by enlisting friends and relatives who would qualify for Lowe's outreach efforts.

Because Findley's disability is visible, he can easily connect with his trainees. "[They know] they're not alone, and they feel like they can talk to someone who's gone through similar struggles," Findley explains, such as "feeling like an outsider...."

Findley doesn't cover up his MyoHand VariPlus Speed (Otto Bock HealthCare, Duderstadt, Germany) except to wear a protective prosthetic glove. "I'm not ashamed of it," he says, explaining that exposing his prosthesis brings awareness to others—especially at his kids' school. He enjoys being "able to sit down and talk—[to] break that barrier of fear."

Findley maintains that his trainees are "just really thankful to be given the opportunity." He says their attendance is excellent, and "they're very dedicated, and very loyal just because...somebody's reached out a hand to help instead of...saying... this environment may not be suited for you." While his paycheck affords a level of remuneration, more importantly, his job is gratifying "for the simple fact that I matter to folks," he says.

Marsha Danzig, Yoga Practitioner and Instructor

Marsha Danzig discovered yoga several years after her transtibial amputation due to Ewing's sarcoma at age 13. In the 1970s, she says the prostheses then available were not conducive to movement, so she became far more active later thanks to advancements in prosthetics technology. While at her studio in Wenham, Massachusetts, she wears a Springlite II carbon fiber foot by Otto Bock that has a "large



Marsha Danzig says that her yoga practice and amputation together have "given me an even greater understanding of how to work with possibility and capability." Right: Danzig instructs a yoga teacher-in-training. Photographs courtesy of Marsha Danzig.

toe with some give," necessary for stability in a practice she considers a calling.

Here in the West, yoga is seen as a series of poses that are synchronized with the breath, or asanas, but Danzig clarifies that this is only one aspect of yoga's scope. It is rewarding for her to motivate others to health and wholeness through teaching yoga's spiritual as well as physical

benefits. "When we are doing what satisfies us, our emotional and physical well-being are harmonious," she says. In addition to balancing her nervous system, strengthening muscles that are underused, and lengthening muscles that are overused, the practice facilitates a wider range of motion and positively impacts her eating habits and lifestyle choices.

She can still "get into proving that I can do something, or pretending that having a prosthesis is no big deal," she admits. A few years ago, this "denial" led to injuries when she broke some scar tissue while hyperextending her left knee. Now she's more careful. "The practice of yoga starts with non-harming and honesty. It keeps you humble," she says.

A more refined and intuitive sense of her body have been positive effects of her limb loss. Because of the need to be patient with some of the challenges that have resulted from her amputation, such as a bony residual limb, she has to be forgiving, and because of this process, "I only see possibility where others might think, 'that's it.'"

As an instructor to yoga teachers-in-training, she sometimes notices new students who are taken aback when she first enters the studio. While she's not immune to feeling as if she may not measure up to expectations, she says she doesn't get into proving she's a "good" instructor anymore. "I am no longer afraid to show up barefoot," she says. "I am no longer afraid to be 'seen!'" Because her scars are on the outside as well as the inside, "There is freedom in that," she adds. Tenderness springs from her visible vulnerability, present in classes with special-needs children, for example, where the non-judgmental atmosphere acts as a safeguard from the drive for perfection that often results when yoga is approached as a competitive sport. "Adaptability is something that amputees know well.... The moment we try to squish our agenda into 'how things should be,' we lose loads of improvisational, inspirational moments," she notes.

Finding Life's Rewards

Hummel, Whittington, Findley, and Danzig have developed a raw courage through their readiness to take the reins of their own lives. Through near-constant adaptability, they've developed a fluid perspective on life, essential when its rules suddenly, and inevitably, change course.

Hummel combines a genetic predilection for strength with discipline in a competitive arena where his instinct to win finds expression. Whittington chronicles "timeless qualities" in work that takes painstaking effort, achieving dimensions through light and shadow that, while static, appear to be constantly shifting—the visual ambiguity a testament to her belief "that there is no one fixed way to view anything, positive or negative, good or bad, beginning or end," she says.

With some accommodation for alternative approaches to daily tasks, Findley is able to coach Little League. As a mentor to others with disabilities, his own limb loss, coupled with creative problem-solving skills, is a reminder that with some ingenuity, no assignment is impossible. For Danzig, patience with her body's seeming limitations has given her a sense of life that has an expansive horizon.

Whether one's personal motto is "I am the master of my fate," or "I matter to people," one thing is clear—pursuing one's passion is integral to living life large.

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