

Puzzle me this...

What jigsaws have taught me about aging and life

BY JANET REYNOLDS

I never really saw the point of jigsaw puzzles. Unlike word games such as Scrabble or the *New York Times* crossword, sifting through a pile of random colored pieces of cardboard seemed like an exercise in frustration and delayed satisfaction. Who needs that?

Then came COVID and, like much of the world, I was in my home, wondering how I would entertain myself when I wasn't working. I love to read, I play the cello and I also knit, so I had a bit of an edge over people without hobbies. But a month into lockdown left me picking up and putting down more books and knitting projects than I finished. Clearly, I needed another distraction.

An avid jigsawing friend suggested puzzles. *Why not?* I thought. Having a project like this on the dining room table could be a fun diversion from a world that, at least currently, extended only to our street and local nature preserves. It would take my mind off the frightening global mess and create order as I slowly pieced together an image.

Short version: It was an epic fail. After borrowing three puzzles from my friend (left in the garage, of course, so we didn't actually get too close to each other), I quickly discovered I apparently had neither the patience nor the spatial awareness to sift through 1,000 pieces that looked pretty much the same. Back to my friend they went.

Fast forward a few years, when foot surgery meant that I

was not going to be hiking much during our family's annual vacation in the Adirondacks. Maybe it was time to give jigsaw puzzles another shot. It could be a kind of communal event with people adding a few pieces periodically, I thought, and I could devote more time to it while the others were climbing the next mountain.

For whatever reason, this time puzzling stuck. Maybe it's because I'm older and thinking differently about time and how I spend it, even compared to a few years ago. Or perhaps it's that analog living is of more interest to me now. Whatever the reason, I did not expect that working with these cardboard pieces would actually teach me lessons about life in general and aging in particular. For instance:

- **The way forward or the plan from start to finish, no matter what it is, isn't always obvious.** That's just not how life (mostly) works. But if you keep going, eventually — and literally, in the case of jigsaw puzzles — things often do fall into place. Sometimes the only way through, really, is one step or one piece at a time.
- **Putting something together that's in pieces takes time.** While we as a society are increasingly impatient with anything other than instant gratification, the reality is that creating something from whole cloth takes time.

Not everything is a mouse click away. Whatever the "it" is that you desire, it *can* come together if you persevere.

- **Pushing — and its recalcitrant cousin, wishing — rarely work.** Sure, you can try to jam a piece in and force it to be the piece that will bring your puzzle closer to completion, but we all know that rarely works. Even if we do make the piece "fit," it's a temporary solution that is only going to mean we come back later, admit defeat, and try to find the real solution. The same is true of life. Trying to smash your way through a problem or challenge rarely works — and often creates more chaos than it solves.
- **Sometimes the best way to move forward is to stop.** Stepping away from a problem or challenge can give us space to change our way of thinking precisely because we're not thinking about this one damn thing. How many times have I tried a puzzle piece multiple times only to walk away, return later, pick it up and immediately put it in exactly the right spot? Or I've looked at a piece 10 different times and am sure it's right — but only see the real answer when I come back later and it slips easily into the right place, not the place I wanted/hoped/demanded it fit? Would that I had understood this strategy in a few different work situations.

- **Perspective matters and, yes, it can change.** If you're willing to turn a piece around and try it in different spots, you'll find where it goes. But you have to be willing to be flexible and open.
- **Sometimes it takes more than one person's view to find the right answer.** I can't tell you the number of times my granddaughter and I have done a puzzle together and each of us saw easy fixes to a section or image the other one had been struggling with. Collaborating is sometimes the only way to success.
- **Fixing something that is literally in pieces takes time and requires slowing down.** Full stop.
- **Sometimes you just have to walk away, and that is perfectly fine.** Now, this can be a tough lesson for people for whom the only answer is completion — consider my hand raised here — but sometimes the act of doing a task as far and as much as you can is not a failure. Instead, it's enough. In fact, that might be the lesson you're supposed to learn from that particular puzzle. Life, after all, is short, and one of its potential joys is its infinite mystery. And besides, some puzzles just aren't meant to be solved. ■