

If you only have a minute: Rooted and Unwavering is all about connecting deeply with ourselves, others and our service in the world. Sometimes we have to go to the brink of despair and experience the unexpected love of others before we can reconnect with our true selves.

From Isolation and Control to Deep Connectedness

By Esther Groves and Hylke Faber

Meet James Christensen, CEO of Gateway Bank and Mesa Citizen of the Year 2023. James advocates for small businesses, marginalized groups and people in need, inspiring his audiences to greater well-being and financial health. He has always been a hardworking, generous and giving person but there is a vast difference between the James of several years ago and the James we meet today.

In the not-too-distant past, James felt he had to be in control of everything in his life and always be available to everyone else. He was adamant that his team not work overtime, but he did. He gave up vacation time, was tied to his phone, didn't sleep enough, and was often anxious.

He gave the outward appearance of having it all: a successful career, a beautiful family, and fulfilling community work. Inside, he was lonely, with the real James nowhere to be found – trying to keep the different aspects of his life separate from each other and turning off his true feelings. He became so disconnected from himself that he started seeing the idea of suicide as a comforting way out.

In a very fortunate turn of events, before he was able to harm himself, James had another breakdown while he was hiding in his bedroom closet, making plans to kill himself, when his wife Anita walked in. Anita, he says, "...is the reason I'm still here." Anita listened, gave him comfort and guided his care and helped him find his way back.

On his road to recovery, he found a level of kinship and support with people that he had not experienced before. "Probably the biggest thing I learned in the hospital," he recalls, "was...this group of people you spend time with, that are going through the same thing that you're going through, literally from every walk of life from homeless to incredibly wealthy, male, female, LGBTQ, veteran...after a couple days together sharing in group or doing yoga together, the love they can show you is mind-blowing."

"Initially," he says, "I was looking at [my breakdown] from a point of guilt or shame but I don't look at it that way anymore. It's a journey. A lot of folks have battled depression and anxiety – [they] just haven't talked about it."

James committed to an intense journey of healing. "Everything I thought in my head that was selfish," he says, "is not. It was self-care and getting healthy. At the bank, we've grown significantly. I work less hours, I take all my vacation, I take plenty of time to relax. And my team feels that."

James used to believe, “If you’re having a bad day, don’t bring it to work.” But, following his own transformation, he says, “If you’re struggling, it’s okay to share that.” He makes himself readily available to others who are facing their own struggles.

“I feel like I’m thriving now. And I feel like my team is thriving and I’m like, wow, this is way better than just trying to get through the day. I’ve been amazed at how much deeper of a relationship you build with somebody when you’re really authentic with them.” - James Christensen