

Leadership in Challenging Times

"The market is up!"

"The market is down!"

"Wall Street gets a 'bailout' (AKA 'rescue')!"

"But what about Main Street?"

"Is my money safe?"

"What will happen next?"

In these times of economic uncertainty and turmoil, I am reminded of what Benjamin Franklin once said,

"If a man empties his purse into his head,
no one can take it from him."

We often say that the 'founding fathers' of our country had good ideas. Certainly in light of our current, turbulent times, leaders at all levels should give Benjamin Franklin's quote extra consideration. After all, we are learning in ways we never imagined that around the globe money can be devalued, stocks can go bust, banks can fail. But what you put into your head, into your own education, is yours forever.

To be sure, knowledge can come through books. Other times, it comes directly through experience. But sometimes we need others to help us answer questions like:

"What do I need to do differently?"

"How am I doing?"

"Can you help me figure out my next step?"

Depending on the situation, those who most often offer the best help, the most options, are considered role models, mentors, coaches, or others we know or, perhaps, admire from afar. Some of us are able to have direct conversations, structured to help us with strategies and tactics to be better communicators, decision makers, contributors.

Many of us have those in our lives who have helped/continue to help us answer the BIG questions. In my experience, it is the recollection of the stories and experiences they have shared that allow me to reflect back and use those 'lessons learned' to make current decisions.

Quotes from Ben Franklin are helpful, but for me the longstanding mentor is not a 'founding father'; rather, it's always been my mom. She believes in me, encourages me, and has always told me I could do or be whatever I wanted. Did she always agree with what I wanted? Of course not - after all, isn't it a rule of some sort or other that parents and children are not supposed to always agree? (I think it's on 'page 94' of the 'parents handbook':-) But she continues to find ways to demonstrate what she knows to be true and why she believes the things she believes.

Her love of people and her ability to always see the positive side and the humor in various situations taught me to behave in a similar fashion (at least most of the time):-)

Perhaps some of mom's own words about her experiences during 'depression times' will help you to remember stories from your past, and allow you to pass them on to help others:

"It was a warm June day in 1936 when I was handed my BA degree's diploma contained in a suede

maroon folder. Much had happened to me since September of 1931 when I arrived in Chicago. My classmates and I had spent the prior few weeks getting ready for the big day and recalling experiences of the past four years, vowing never to lose touch with each other.

I had learned much from books and perhaps even more from other sources. Leadership skills were honed as I served as Freshman Class Secretary. In my second and third years I had responsibilities with the Beacon, the school annual. First I served as Business Manager and then as the Editor, which provided many rewarding activities. My final year I served as Senior Class President.

Membership in the Glee Club was a learning experience. Classes in art and music appreciation, trips to the opera, and other musical presentations in the city were life-changing. I did rather envy the girls who didn't make the Glee Club and organized the Bushel Basket Club. Obviously, they couldn't carry a tune in a basket but had lots of fun and activity related to whatever they could think up which was different.

One class, required by all, was practical work. Because it was depression time, there were many physical needs in Chicago as elsewhere in the nation. So we had a class to learn how we could help meet those needs. Then we were sent out, two-by-two, with lesson plan in hand, to try to meet those needs. Those sojourns into the cruel, cold world were challenges that gave us many unusual experiences, but of course, paid no money. However, we did receive streetcar tokens. The assignments were changed each semester, so we had varying responsibilities. We were supervised and graded, so though it was fun to get out into new places, there was the demanding side.

One year I had the assignment to teach a group of High School boys how to cook. Never was sure why those great big boys needed to learn that culinary art; never knew of one who became a noted chef.

One day the menu was to be creamed, dried beef on toast. I didn't determine the menus. I began by asking if they knew how to make toast. One big boy -- they were all much larger than I would ever be -- stood and said, "You put the bread in the oven. When it is done, you take it to the sink and scrape the burn off of it." No one even laughed or registered surprise.

With this same group, the decision was made to organize into a club, complete with officers. I explained very carefully the duties of the one elected as President and emphasized his needed qualities of leadership. I presided and following my limited knowledge of parliamentary procedure, I asked for nominations. One big boy rose to his feet and said, "Teach, I nominates me." No need to take a vote with that kind of confidence, all the other boys loudly proclaiming him President. So ended that lesson.

Other experiences included working in a Community Center in the steel mill town of Gary, Indiana. Yes, the streetcar went that far. There was also the assignment at a storefront mission on Chicago's southside. The mission met physical needs, and always was a place for all ages to gather for varying activities. I was assigned to teach sewing, which became the standard joke of the entire student body, for everyone knew I couldn't sew. The plan was to gather used clothing and teach the women how to make them over to fit members of their families. I had been told that was the most difficult type of sewing.

Clothes were gathered, needles, thread, and other necessities were on hand and opening day was announced in the community. My partner and I were told to expect about a dozen young mothers. However, the group kept coming until there were 40 people crowded into the room and the ages ranged from 3 to 76. My partner, who was a senior, offered to take the children for games and stories; I was left with the sewing group.

Many of the older women did not speak or understand English. The class had to go on, so supplies were handed out and I noted that the oldest woman there seemed to be the one everyone went to for help. She was Italian and I discovered a girl who could speak both English and Italian. She became the interpreter and the 76-year-old grandmother became the teacher!

The 76-year-old sewing teacher saved the assignment for me until one day she didn't come to class.

We managed to get through without her, but it wasn't easy. Her interpreter told me that she was home crying because her husband died. Knowing I needed to go and express my sympathy, we went to see her. After much questioning, interpreting, and frustration, I learned the story.

Her husband was a patient at Cook County Hospital and when she went to visit, she was not allowed to see him. Her assumption was that he was dead. I called the hospital and discovered the confusion. He was in a ward with several men -- one of whom had a contagious disease, so the entire area was quarantined. Because of the language difficulty, there was no communication. The hospital assured me they would allow her to see him through the door, if she would return.

So the three of us, who had become a very friendly trio, got on the streetcar for the long ride to Cook County Hospital. Yes, I provided the tokens.

The problem was solved. The next Saturday we were back to 'normal' . . . 40 people laughing, playing, talking, sewing - apparently happy to be in a pleasant place together, even without understanding everything that was said.

Though I had spent six very scarce tokens, I was also relaxed, relieved and happy.

There was little opportunity or time for outside jobs because of the Friday and Saturday assignments. However, I did manage to earn a few dollars. The Second Presbyterian Church was in need of a Sunday School teacher and I was offered the job. The pay was ten dollars (\$10.00) a month, which was a lot of money for me. They also provided streetcar tokens.

The historic church was losing its members as people moved to the suburbs and the neighborhood deteriorated. There were some older people who were still attending. They became my class. It could have been a depressing situation with an almost empty, beautiful, old church, but it turned out to be a good experience. Rather ironic to have a college junior teaching delightful old people.

My senior year, I was dismissed from the usual weekend assignments to work part-time at the Englewood Baptist Church. It included some weeknight and Saturday activities with the youth. Sundays I assumed varying responsibilities along with conducting children's church during the morning worship services. Can't remember what they paid, but am sure it included streetcar tokens.

Summers provided some additional money and lots of experience. Joyce (my classmate partner) and I were enlisted to conduct Vacation Bible Schools during two summers. We did schools in Michigan and Illinois. We were guests in the homes of church members and spent two weeks at each church. The pay? Offerings from those in attendance, and transportation to the next place.

The third summer several of us ran a hotel. The World's Fair was in Chicago and our dormitory building was not far from the lake site grounds. Someone wrote the school and asked if they could rent a room while they attended the fair. Normally the building was not used in the summer. So, we became a hotel managed by a group of students. I had the responsibility of assigning rooms and collecting the money. Sometimes I helped with cleaning the rooms. It was an interesting time of learning, and most of the guests were agreeable as they put up with our inexperience, our mistakes, and our less-than-elegant accommodations. It was a tiring time but we were paid - not in cash, but in school credit for our experiences. We didn't even need streetcar tokens."

In times like these, we all need to think in terms of investing in ourselves and in our team, rather than in giving in to panic and frustration. Sometimes our best investment can be found in sharing our experiences, frustrations, concerns, and vulnerabilities - we may all be surprised at the strengths and capabilities we can mobilize to move forward in challenging times. And thanks (again), mom, for continuing to mentor me through stories and experiences that teach and inspire.

Aloha

