

“Hard Times, Good News”

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“To be ignorant of what happened before you were born”, writes Marcus Tullius Cicero “is to be ever a child.” I was ignorant of the Great Depression growing up, even though I heard about it all the time.

I am the last child of parents born in the early 1920s, and I grew up in the 60s and 70s. This was an era of national abundance, an era of prosperity in my own family – my three siblings were off raising families of their own, and my father made more money than he ever had in his or his parents’ lifetimes. I would hear about the depression – usually when I was asking them to buy me something. *We depression kids...* my father would say. And just about any child growing up hearing this knows that there was a strategy in listening to such stories: patience. Listen to the story about sharing a crummy old bicycle with three other siblings. Just wait it out, and sure enough, you’ll get your bike. I usually did.

So my generation would hear these stories, but somehow we never had a sense of what it was really like for them. Did they get hungry and scared? How long did they wait before it got better? What did they do in the meantime? Many of our relatives who lived through the Great Depression are, I think, like veterans who return from combat in war. They come back and do not tell their families what it was like. For any number of reasons: we wouldn’t understand. We didn’t want to know. They had become stoic; they were a generation who believed that mature adults spared other people from their feelings. (Mary Pipher, *Another Country*) But perhaps most of all, they did not want us to have to know how bad it was. They did not want it to ever, ever happen to us. And by working like crazy, providing for their children, and not talking about the past, they were aiming us - hard - at the future.

We were buffered by years, by money, by never experiencing hunger beyond 5:30 when Mom had dinner on the table. As a result, we came to believe that there was a firewall between our era and theirs. That it could never happen again. Perhaps it helped us to believe in ourselves, and to move ahead with more confidence. For most of my life, I’ve liked it that way. Ignorance has been bliss. Until now.

For one thing, it didn't help us understand our parents and grandparents very well. My friend Carol said that she didn't really understand her father until after he died. Two things happened. She saw the film, "Saving Private Ryan," and her mother started sharing with her stories about growing up in the depression. Her mother told her that growing up, the family prayed before dinner every night that her grandfather would keep his job. But she didn't understand it nearly as well as when people started being laid off at her husband's office.

The barrier between then and now has also made us somewhat naïve. Paul Krugman writes that most economists have believed the 1930s to be a freak occurrence, one which we now know better than to let happen again. In 2003, Robert Lucas, a professor at the University of Chicago and winner of the 1985 Nobel prize in economics, addressed the American Economic Association, saying, "The central problem of depression prevention has been solved, for all practical purposes." We should now focus on prolonged economic growth, Lucas said. We should move on.

We have pulled out of the crisis zone, Krugman says, and there are parts of the economy that are improving. Stock prices have started to come back, homes are selling a bit better than before. Jobs, however, are not, and job insecurity has got to have the biggest impact on our collective well-being. We truly don't know when things will turn around. And we don't quite know what to do with ourselves in the meantime.

When Robert and I were in Detroit this summer, visiting his family and some friends from high school and college, people talked a lot about the economy. "It's bad here," they said. "It's bad in Michigan." I found it difficult to listen to them, because I didn't want to go there. Delaware hasn't been hit as hard, I reassured myself. I didn't want to feel what they felt. If compassion is feeling with another, and the other is feeling fear, I could not feel compassion.

It doesn't do any good to live in fear. I believe that. But we must somehow learn to live WITH fear. We need to learn that feeling fear will not kill us. Right now, I believe so much of the anger and blame we are seeing for The Other comes from people who cannot or will not face their fear. Whether The Others are illegal immigrants who are now being treated with more and more suspicion and punishment, or The others are Muslims, with the enormous backlash in the wake of the proposed mosque and Islamic center – people are channeling their fears into anger and violence.

Just as we have our Glenn Becks, our Rush Limbaughs, the '30s had their demagogues. In Detroit, we drove by the Shrine of the Little Flower Church, where the infamous Father Coughlin preached, broadcasting his sermons on the radio. In the early '30s, Coughlin blamed the Depression on an "international conspiracy of Jewish bankers", and promoted the fascism of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. He was popular because feeling angry seemed better than feeling afraid.

It's still true today. It's easier to target Mexicans and Muslims than to take on the more diffuse forces that permitted the subprime mortgage crisis to happen. To "fix" this would require massive social change. With the massive partisanship in congress, and deep divisions about what to do, this will take a long time.

In the meantime, we need to "live the day," as Ma Joad advises us. (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*) And we need help. Where will we get it?

The people who grew up during the depression, who are famously called "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw, have given us much. They gave us freeways and Disney Land and television and the United Nations and prosperity after the war. They sacrificed and worked together for the greater good. They made good and sure that we, the generations that followed, had all the things they did not have. To the people of my parents' generation, I say thank you for everything you've given us. And now we are coming to you one more time, asking you for one more thing. You might think you have nothing left to offer, or you might be tired of us asking for stuff. We just need to ask you this one thing: Tell us how it was growing up in the Great Depression, how it really was. And then tell us how you made it. We might not have seemed very interested before. We are now.

I watched interviews with people who grew up in the depression, and solicited stories from some members of our church, as well as friends and family. I called my dad. I was looking for clues, for insight, for any advice they might have for us today. I want to thank everyone who was so generous in sending me their stories. *How was it for you*, I asked. *And what helped you make it?*

Glen Barbaras writes, "My parents were very frugal, saved every penny, wore clothes until they literally wore out and then sold the rags. Yet we were always neat and clean and always had enough to eat. One of my 3 sandwiches in Jr. High was always cream cheese because it was the least expensive. My father was able to work very little for 3 years as a steamfitter but his boss rotated small

jobs of a week or so among the men in the shop. We rented the downstairs of the house of my mother's parents on which there was no mortgage. We paid a neighbor (relative) five cents to use their telephone for important calls. My grandparents and those of everyone in the neighborhood were immigrants who had struggled very hard to get where they were so the attitude was "we can make it". There was no self pity. ”

It helped to have gratitude for what you had. One friend of mine said his father talked about having cornbread and onions for dinner many nights – and he was grateful for the nights they got cornbread. When they blessed the food and gave thanks, he said, they really meant it.

Church helped. It gave a sense of comfort and community, whatever the words that were spoken. Laughter helped. Psychologist Mary Pipher writes that her Aunt Henrietta joked that she was so hungry, she would eat a stick of butter if she could. The music of that time was happy. The Mills Bros, Bob Willis and the Playboys, and the Glenn Miller Band all cheered people up. Bluegrass singer Bill Monroe worked at WJKS, a station whose initials stood for Where Joy Killed Sorrow. (Mary Pipher, *Another Country*) Music helped.

Being able to shift roles helped. And there were radical, if temporary, social changes everywhere. In some places, barriers between races broke down, since everyone was struggling. Black helped white, white helped black, in ways that never happened before in the Jim Crow south, said Peter G. Holden. He was filmed by the New York Times on their web video series connecting people of the depression era to 20-somethings who are making their fortunes today. That change didn't last, Holden said. But it was a remarkable moment.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the roles of men and women reversed themselves. This was not unusual. Both June and Russ Peterson said their mothers were the bulwarks in their families; when their fathers lost jobs. Russ Peterson said that his father worked 12-hour days as a baker, and had his pay cut from, 25 to 15 dollars a week. With 8 boys to feed. His mother ‘cried uncontrollably’ when she heard the news, but she was still strong for the family.

Ma Joad says, “a woman’s life is in her arms, a man’s life is in his head”. Woman’s value wasn’t in the salary that went away, but in tending to the life around her, the life she held in her arms. I can imagine it might be easier to adapt if your job was caring for your children. It would give you daily practice in change – you would change along with them as they grew up.

Today's women probably live a lot more 'in our heads'. We worry about our jobs, our security, and our pride. If we base our worth on our working life, our wages, our status, our career, we are in just as great a danger as the men of the 30s. So Ma's advice applies to both men and women. It's the people you are given to care for – not just provide for, but care for – and who care for you - that count the most. My friend Carol said, "At the end of my life, will I care that we had a big house and nice cars? Will I care about how much I liked my job? Or will I care that my family was strong and healthy and loving?"

Building a strong family was paramount in the depression. Marge Meyermann wrote, "Somehow, there was always the comfort of family. My father lost his managerial job and worked for a year, managing a hatchery. Mom did the accounting. It was a killer job, round the clock." Her aunt supervised 100 young women and a switchboard and sent Marge's family the generous sum of \$5 a week. Her grandfather expanded his house across town and invited them to live on his farm. Her father was asked to help with the cows and chickens, which helped preserve his self-respect. In later years, she said, her father remembered the help he received, and paid people back – "not in dollars, but in special kind deeds". Being willing to receive help, even if it embarrasses you, even if you think you'd rather die, was important.

And not everyone went without work. George Roewe's father was actually promoted during the 1930s. When FDR started his "alphabet soup", George writes, the various programs like the CCC, WPA there was also the REA, the Rural Electrification Association, which brought electricity to farms. His father "became the chief administrator for 13 of the Southeast United States. This was a significant increase in his salary. We moved to Wash., DC. where I had never seen street cars and buses in such a volume." His allowance increased from 5c to 20c a week.

And for all my father's talk of being a 'depression kid', he said, "My dad never missed a day of work. We bought a new house in 1931 and a new car in 1934." But people all around him were struggling. Young guys in my father's neighborhood in Superior, Wisconsin, were malnourished and had never seen a dentist. One third of all those drafted for World War 2, he said, didn't qualify, their health was so poor. So if you could help, you gave it. My great aunt died penniless in California, and my grandmother sent the fabulous sum of \$200 to the West Coast for her burial. Glen Barbaras wrote, "Everyone was in the same boat and helped one another."

This may not sound much like our time. Many of us have scant relationships with our neighbors or our extended family. But the good news is that reaching out and helping someone is always a choice. However you define your family, you can build it up. (We in our time have the added benefit of recognizing and accepting a greater and greater variety of families now.) Being in a church community, we have practice in building community. We think of the 1930s as a naturally more communal time, but there were still people who turned inward and away from each other. People saw one another as fierce competition for jobs. People could walk away. It was a choice people had to make. And many made the choice to help. I loved reading about 10c sales that took place among neighbors with farms in the dust bowl. The government would put a farmer's belongings up for auction, and the neighbors would come, and agree to bid crazy low prices for tools and animals. A dime for a plow, a quarter for a cow. And then they'd give them right back to the neighbor. (Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*) People were capable of great kindness. Then and now.

Ma Joad advises us to see “everything like one big river, like one flow,” instead of “jerks” or moments that are disconnected from the whole. One moment or “jerk” in time may be hard. But if you can pull back and see it as part of a whole life, a bigger stream that keeps pointing toward people going on, then you can “live the day”. This perspective takes faith. It's not an easy point of view to have all the time, and so there have to be people who can see it when we can't.

The people who lived through the great depression can show us this faith, I am convinced. Even if your relatives are long gone, you can remember what they went through – and know that they made it. You can know that you are of the same human tissue, their courage is inside of you. If you know someone who lived through the depression, I encourage you to ask them something about their experience. You will learn something about your family, or the great family we all belong to. You will learn something about yourself and what is possible. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “Courage is as contagious as fear.” And it's all around us. Let us have eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen.