

Poor

I have never been poor. I don't know if I could take it. We didn't have much when I was a kid, but we certainly had enough. We lived in a flat in a small industrial city and my brothers and I went to the local church's parish school, which at the time was free. Meals at home were hearty. The first fruits of my father's working life went to the A&P and Devins Dairy to feed three growing boys. Dad never skimmed on the food budget. He would have wanted to make up for the times he had gone hungry as a child. We didn't have exciting vacations or new cars, but we ate well.

I remember walking home from school in the afternoon during fourth grade terrifically hungry for a snack, a slice of bread with peanut butter spread on it or a couple of those small cookies that all tasted the same no matter what color they were. I don't remember ever going without a snack after school. And I never went without dinner or lunch or a light breakfast. Never. Not once did my parents sit us down at the table and explain we would not be able to have a regular meal with meat, potatoes, a vegetable and a glass of milk. Or two more mystery cookies for dessert. "Close your eyes and pretend they're chocolate," said my older brother when I complained about having to eat cookies labeled vanilla that tasted more like wax. He was right, it worked.

When I entered the eight grade, my mother found a job. Most mothers in our neighborhood didn't work in the 1950s. For the generation before my parents, married women were practically not allowed to work.

In the 1920's my spinster aunt was told by her employer at age 25 the company wanted to provide jobs for married men so they could support their families. She should get married, she was told, or quit her job to make room for a man with dependents. Without an income she would have been destitute. She couldn't depend upon her family because in fact they really *were* poor. She was the only breadwinner at the time and took care of the needs of her younger brothers and sisters. Her employer magnanimously offered her an alternative to unemployment ... less pay for the same work as an office clerk. Less pay than the already diminished wages normally paid to a woman of that era solely because of her sex. Her boss explained that reducing her pay would make more money available to pay a married man. She had no choice but to take less. Her five brothers and one sister went without what was already a meager lunch, nothing but an apple.

At age 16 my father found a job at the local newspaper, eventually became a pressman and was paid trade wages, which were considered an adequate living in that day. He had a steady income from it after the union gained some footing at the newspaper in the 1930's. Before workers organized Dad was compensated fair wages one week and less the next for the same work. It varied by as much as 50%. The company paid their non-management employees based on how much profit the business made each week. Workers had no idea if they were told the truth about the newspaper's finances and anyway had no control over profits, since the balance sheet was mostly influenced by advertising sales and newsprint costs. The company's owners, whether stockholders or management, smoothed out their own incomes and made up

for their corporate mistakes by short changing the employees.

My father had seen money troubles at a young age, but through no fault of his own. In my case, a very short bout of being broke was clearly my fault.

When I went to live in New York City at age 20, I had little experience managing my money. I was living away from home for the first time, not watching my cash and spending too much on beer and items I did not need. At one point I ran out of funds and realized there was nothing left in my checking account. A paycheck was a couple of days away and I remember that evening as I sat around watching a snowy picture on TV while hunger gnawed at my insides. I'd had nothing to eat since lunch.

The next day I asked a fellow worker if he would buy me lunch at the cafeteria. Embarrassed, I chose an older man in his forties because he was rather fatherly and always free with advice to us young guys. I got advice rather than a meal. He derisively told me I should grow up and become responsible. My starvation continued until the next morning and was probably the best lesson I ever received.

On that morning he came up to me and asked if I'd found any money or food. Annoyed, I told him to mind his own business and began to walk away. He grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me around, the only time in my entire career when someone put a hand on me. He shoved a ten dollar bill in my hand and said, "Don't be a shithead. Go eat. I'll cover for you." I won't mention it, but I still remember his name fifty years later. And that's the only time in my life I remember being hungry.

There were times when a simple greed for a richer life drove us to get educated, keep up an income to feed self and family, play the game of life. It seems ... I don't know how true it is, but it SEEMS ... we did a lot more for ourselves than some in the current

generation of young people. My young wife and I lived in a house trailer while I attended college and she worked in a shopping center. The trailer measured 10 by 32 feet and had no interior doors. When the west wind whipped up across the hill today known as Fairmont, NY, the rear wall of the trailer popped like the top of a tin can. Water seeped into the closet during the winter and froze our shoes to the floor. I had two part-time jobs, one with my former employer and the other nights and weekends at a drug store. I learned to fix my car because I couldn't afford to take it to a garage. I remember going to a dentist with a toothache two weeks after our son was born while I was still a student and trying to pay him, but he fixed my tooth for free. And when we had to move, our 15 pounds of hamburger got misplaced and spoiled and we had to go without meat until I told the story to a fellow employee as a joke on myself. He informed our manager and the boss insisted I borrow \$20 from him to buy food for my family.

And absolutely none of that seemed like the end of the world. Not when we were young. Except for the time the main drain in the trailer stopped up and I had no idea how to fix it. After trying various plumbing snakes, I finally gave up. I had no money. I would need a small loan to hire Roto Rooter. When I called them to ask how much they would charge, they told me they did not work on trailers because the T's in the drains often ruined their equipment. I remember sitting there in the kitchen, my pregnant wife at work that evening, feeling the full weight of facing a problem I could not solve. Tears of frustration may have begun to wet my eyes as I kept trying to think of a solution. The phone rang and it happened to be my brother in law in Atlanta calling to say hello. He had a solution. A longer, thinner snake I didn't know existed, and he knew where I could rent one cheap.

We knew we'd get through it, that someday I'd have a good job and we'd have

two cars, a dog, two kids, a house and all that stuff. We just needed to keep ourselves from going into debt.

That's what saved us. Never taking on any debt. Driving a car with the fenders falling off, suffering the looks of people we parked next to in parking lots, stretching our clothes till they were threadbare and finding our furniture at garage sales. So that when the money began to come in we could apply it to items we needed rather than use it to pay off loans taken out on things we didn't need. That was called basic money sense by our parents and those before them.

Things could have turned out differently for me. Life is a game of chance and I was lucky enough to win some of its prizes. Yes, of course, I worked hard, took advice, made what turned out to be smart choices and struggled on when the going got tough. But I've known others who did the same and wound up broke.

I never knew the awful feeling of realizing there was not enough money to buy food for my children, or clothes or school supplies. Or had to tell a landlord or a bank that I could not make a rent or mortgage payment this month. Or be forced to start selling household items or the furniture or keepsakes out the back door to get enough for groceries. Or to stand on a corner waiting for a bus because my car was re-possessed or my insurance cancelled.

But I've known men and women who suffered those consequences. I've tried to help them in my volunteer work. It bothers me when the luckier members of our society paint poverty with a broad brush and demean anyone who is down on his or her luck. Some of the downtrodden in America are there through no fault of their own. Many are probably complicit to some degree ... poor work habits, a worse attitude, no clue how to manage money, graduated from a school that cared more for itself than the students, or caught in a deceptive race baiting dance

orchestrated by their politicians.

I would rather encourage someone than scold them. There will always be those who game the system and will sneer up their sleeve at your fine words of encouragement. Let them. I suppose they have some cause when they view what I have and what they don't. And I can't know all the circumstances that sunk their boat and left them stranded on the shore. I really don't know why the worse-off are in their predicaments. I only know I've been very lucky.

When an old yellow school bus pulls up in front of me filled with needy people from south of the border, it's time to put away my opinions on national immigration policy, shaped for the most part by the news media, and to simply help a brother and sister and child in distress. We can quibble over federal programs later.

Late one afternoon not long ago I drove through the neighborhood where I grew up in the upstate New York city of Utica. The section of town is called Cornhill and I keep the car doors locked when I visit and never come to a full stop at the stop signs. The streets have decayed and the homes are dilapidated. Many of the burned out shells were once the homes of friends whose parents spent their money and weekends keeping the properties looking nice. Today many are crack houses. It's not unusual to hear shots in the distance, which is better than nearby. The same sidewalks that once were filled with kids at that time of day and fathers returning home from work were dark and empty.

I drove by street corners on James Street, the main thoroughfare, where I had waited as a teenager for the bus to take me downtown to meet friends for a movie and French fries and a Coke. Today young men menace each other on these same corners and fights are frequent. I think the buses no longer run to this part of town. I passed the remains of a school and playground where a kind hearted janitor

repairing a window put a Band-Aid on my elbow when I fell off my bike almost sixty five years ago. Graffiti covers the walls of the building now and almost all of the windows have been bashed in. Down the street the church my family attended was closed up, having spent its declining days as a neighborhood drop-in center where no one dropped in because they were too busy dropping out.

An anger rose in me toward the people who had turned a living neighborhood into a diseased and dying quarter of the city where the inhabitants mostly depended upon the government to survive.

I am from a Cornhill working family, none of whom were educated. With grants, part time work, multiple jobs, and while starting a family, I was able to progress through undergraduate and graduate school. I am an accomplished professional and I am proud of myself, in case you can't tell. My parents did not value education very much, but they had strong beliefs and a strong ethic. Mostly, they loved each other and their children very much.

After my main career, I worked with crack addicts and some of the people in this world who are "underprivileged."

As angry as I get when I drive through Cornhill, I cannot fix the blame on any particular group. There are too many villains to indict. From the businessmen whose capitalism turned from enterprise to opportunism to pure greed at the expense of the people, to the politicians who survive on the misery of those they swore to help, to today's Cornhill residents themselves, there is plenty of blame to go around.

You can give the impoverished all the grants in the world, but you cannot give them the caring that was often missing in their families. Nor can you give them the positive experiences many of us benefited from. You cannot take away a child's crippling sense of misplaced guilt because he could not find all

of his mother's teeth as he crawled around the floor looking for them, hoping they could be put back in after her boyfriend's fist blasted them from her mouth.

You cannot quiet his seething anger when a young out-of-work black man turns on the TV and sees smiling, happy families on their way to Sears to buy a \$1500 color TV. And you cannot convince him, as he walks the streets of a Cornhill he didn't create, that James Street could be a home, a cherished place to take care of and to build upon.

Neither he nor I was born to wealth. But I am lucky beyond imagining to have come from a loving family and supportive environment. In that more important sense I was never poor.

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