

TRAVELING LIGHT—AND BROKE!

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Inviting Risk

Some people, looking at my parents' lifestyle, would consider their lifestyle risky. But their tenuous situation of my father's periodic unemployment in the pastoral ministry—along with his disability of being considered legally blind—was balanced by their natural proclivity to frugality. They combined this with generosity— and of course the one helped the other! My brother and I were sometimes beggars! Several times each of us looked to my parents for temporary boosts—loans for an apartment security deposit, a car, school tuition.

I now have to wonder why my parents' sterling habits of keeping to a strict budget did not transfer to my generation. Maybe it opened me up to a riskier attitude! I know I developed a habit in my twenties of seeing how close to empty the gas gauge in my car would go before I had to break down and buy more. I ran out a number of times. With my second car, this tendency proved more calamitous, for I had learned the lesson with gas, and now it was oil. That turned out to be a costly negligence, requiring the grinding of the crankshaft.

Traveling Home from Costa Rica

You would think I would learn safer habits before embarking on my first trip out of the country in the winter of 1957. But this was a trip full opportunities to test my mettle in a series of confounding developments starting with the plane trip home.

After spending two weeks in Costa Rica, my trip home began with a series of small plane hops in Central America. The hops were small and short, but so were the planes! Propeller planes made for a choppy flight, and I upchucked the meal I had been served while landing in El Salvador. After boarding the next plane, a meal was served again, with no better results. The final leg of the journey, I determined to take no more chances. The stewardess came around with an attractive tray of hors d'oeuvres—little chunks of pineapple, or so I thought until I bit down and discovered they were cheese. Never mind, she followed up with tiny glasses of what appeared to be lemonade, which I thirstily put to my lips. My palate was totally surprised by what turned out to be a shot of rum.

Impatience Invites Risky Behavior

In Miami Sunday night, I learned that there was no flight space available to New York City until Thursday. This was incredible. I decided to take the cash I had left and embark on the train. In the south, in 1957, trains moved at a leisurely pace. I awoke next

morning only to discover with consternation that we were still in Florida, and had stopped in Jacksonville where we were expected to detrain and have breakfast in the station. I dashed over to a phone and called the airport. There was a flight I could make. My cash was dwindling now, but I thought I could manage by getting off the plane in Washington, D.C., and attempting to cash a check because of some connections I had there. But the stopover in D.C. was too short, and I dared not exit.

The Beggar Emerges

Arriving at LaGuardia, I frantically shooed away the cab drivers plying their trade, determined to take the cheaper method of bus to get downtown to Grand Central station. At the ticket window in Grand Central, I waited in line nervously clutching the few coins remaining in my hand, counting and hoping. I only had to reach New Haven and my parents who would be awaiting me there, full wallets in their pockets.

I got to the window and leaned in as far as I could, asking for a ticket to New Haven, and for the price. I unceremoniously dumped out all the coins packed into my fist onto the counter. The clerk counted them, looking at my desperate face, as I panted nervously. I was forty-eight cents short.

"Look, would you like to buy some stamps?" I asked the stunned clerk. He hesitated, eyeing me suspiciously.

All of a sudden, a deep bass voice behind me spoke with authority. "I'll buy those stamps," and flung down a dollar bill on the counter.

"Oh no," I protested. I didn't want a gift. I carefully handed him my stamps, and made a move to give him the change the clerk handed me. But he would have none of it, and I gratefully slunk away, going to a candy counter a few minutes later to spend my last bit of change on a candy bar.

So it was that my father's ability to live with a kind of inner elegance on very little money, and my mother's habit of frugality and ability to rise to the challenge of limited means as a matter of course—these intertwined somehow in me.