

TRUST AND SECURITY

Depression Diaries

I inherited a basically trusting attitude toward money from my family, growing up in the Depression. One could say “the Depression saved me from *depression—the worrying kind.*”

In the process of rifling through the files to see what I might review and maybe toss away or make some use of, I came upon a stack of papers entitled Diaries—of my father, which he kept in his own plodding and consistent way through the years. Mostly, he was recording his prayer requests, visitors and phone calls from friends and family, and then at times he added longer comments.

I looked carefully at the section from 1935-1941—years when I was aged five to eleven. Here I suddenly encountered an impassioned series of paragraphs about his money worries. I always knew we lived on the edge, but this was the first time I was able to read his thoughts about his feelings of responsibility for all of us as a 1940s era husband and father of two.

Entries about money began after his parents died in 1937. Imagine my shock when I read this entry:

“This is no way to keep accounts with God! Yet He still keeps our account and cares for us. When I had to go to Kansas City to care for my parents, less that \$100 was in their bank account.”

Here I had assumed he grew up in modest comfort. But in 1937, \$100 was worth more like \$1,600—the amount I tend to keep in my checking account now!

He goes on:

“Within a week money began to come in from Farms. In August, the insurance for fire on Barker’s Farm paid, carried us through 1937.”

Ah! A relief. I knew his family of origin owned several farms in Kansas and Missouri. The following year we moved to Wheaton, a suburb of Chicago. Dad was still unemployed as a pastor, so we scraped by, subletting rooms to college students to pay our \$44/month rent.

From his diary, I read:

“Still uncertain of God’s ultimate will, but led.” Then goes on to say , “Last Saturday, no money. I drew \$3 from Postal Savings, left only \$1 there. None in checking account. \$1 in silver, \$1 in gold left. Then a man came in buying old gold. We sold \$12.15 worth of odds and ends.”

Now it makes sense to me why I have this tiny stash of pieces of gold—glass frames, old coins—carefully preserved in tin boxes in the closet. But my father goes on with more:

“Again today, six days later, out of funds, but we know God, and He has never failed us. We need these delays and this discipline, for many reasons. We will not let God go until he blesses us. Our revival in College Church with Rev. A. W. Tozer has deeply moved us. Both Amy and I are ready to go to China again if God leads us there.”

Really? Would he have uprooted the family at that point? I doubt it. My brother had been enrolled in Wheaton College Academy. I do not know how my parents managed the tuition.

A few days later, this entry:

“\$40 received on the contract with my parents’ Kansas City house. So we are cared for. And this was unexpected! Praise God from whom all blessings—including this one—flow!”

Two weeks later, this entry:

“On April 22, received \$5 from Chicago Alliance Tabernacle for supply preaching. Just in time. Today \$113.40 interest came from Mr. Porter, just in time. Tomorrow I can give son Philip a little treat on his vacation. God is good to us.”

May 20 records this:

“Again God supplies our physical needs. Last night at the Tabernacle, I received \$5 for pulpit supply, and then a good brother came out to the car and gave me \$5 more. So we are cared for once more in God’s own delightful way, much more wonderful than just having ‘regular income’.”

And then, these bleak entries:

“And yet there is no harvest at the Meade farm, no income from the Kansas City house or the Excelsior Springs farm. So God provides when the regular sources fail. And the spiritual needs are being met as never before. Grace to trust although so uncertain. Why should I be discouraged?”

Not the usual question. Most people would ask, “Why not?”

May 29: *“Again God supplies my need, answering before we call. \$18.75 for the hay harvested at Bonner Springs, when we were almost out of money.”*

At the bottom of the page, he listed his prayer requests, listing the date when each was answered.

Item number 1 for paid work he marked as answered a year later, in October 1941.

Item number 2 for a home and payment of his debts was listed as answered two years later, in July of 1942.

Ah, at last! I know that his being called to pastor the nearby Glen Ellyn Church was wonderful for our entire family—with a lively and loving congregation that went through World War II together.

Buying a home was a milestone for me. And I do not know what “came through” to allow us to buy our own home. Likely his inherited home in Kansas City or the sale of some farms his father owned. But that one purchase in 1946 provided the necessary basis for a series of homes (I count four—Goshen, Hillsborough, Epson, New Hampshire and the final one in Camarillo, California). The sale of each one allowed for the next purchase without going into debt. That made it mark on me. I don’t see debt in modern terms as a necessary undertaking in order to leverage the future—indebtedness being a constant state that insures a continuing high credit score!. No, my father did not purchase until he could pay off his debts and own the home debt-free. Debt was something to get out of.

The Two-edged Legacy of Trust

The Upside: Reading all this in 2018 struck me forcibly. I realize that as a child in the family, I assumed that care would be provided day-to-day. I felt the undercurrent of trust—not aware yet of what it must have been like for my parents to carry this uncertainty—but in a way that did not transmit insecurity to me. It may have kept me somewhat blind to certain fiscal realities, but at the same time the current of cheerful trust was invaluable. I can vouch for that dual legacy being ultimately a good trade-off!

The Downside: The downside is more subtle, differentiating between dependency on God and on others. Like my pastor father, whose parishioners often looked out for us in a myriad of loving little ways—money, food, transportation—I chose a lifetime career in non-profit service-oriented organizations where there was a built-in assumption by others—and that I unconsciously carried—that others picked up the tab when eating out together, that a plane or hotel reservation would be paid for by them, that there might be offers of money or other gifts that would not need to be returned in kind. How close is this to an underlying sense of entitlement—not just trust in God?

My state of poverty is not shared in this era like it was for my parents when everyone was struggling to survive. I was born in 1929 just one month after the banks crashed!

There is also a subtle temptation toward pride about “not worrying about money.” Maybe the lack of realistic concern is as much a sin as worrying. It occurs to me now that had my father been more open about his genuine needs, he would not have focused so much on trusting God. Might it have been instructive to his “flock” to ask them for a raise when I was born, instead of bearing the burden alone and seeking a more lucrative pastorate in a nearby city—a move that eventually proved unsatisfying to him and then to the congregation he went to serve?

But that is a possible hindsight wisdom, and the importance to me now as I am writing this in my 90th year of life is to consider my own relationship to *trust* and *security*. How do I face the inevitability that we will run out of money in a couple of years. It is a subtle temptation to hope that my death will precede that humiliation. Unfortunately, the longevity genes I inherit from my family of origin may not cooperate in that perfect alignment. “Dying broke” has been a mantra for my husband and me, but we don’t have the freedom choreograph the perfect simultaneous ending of life and money.

So I am left with a mountain of insecurity—that sits restively beside a façade of trust. I am a complicated mix—insecure and trusting. The one requires the other. I leave it unresolved. Only insecurity pushed me to trusting.

Perhaps I need to become a child, in my Father’s care.