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Some thoughts for rough times

By Paperitalo Staff

Many, including a number of you readers, are experiencing some severe emotions at this time. No doubt, if not personally, you know people that are very angry and possibly very fearful. I want to share some thoughts this week that may help. This is a tough column for me to write, for I am going to share some very personal experiences I have had, not in a prideful or "can you top this?" way, but hopefully as an encouragement as you look to the future. Also, with my policy of holding back nothing from you readers, I must tell you these things, especially if they can be helpful.

This past July, I attended my 40th high school reunion. We did the usual thing, going around the room and stating some significant experiences in our lives. One thing I noticed was when we were younger, say at our tenth or twentieth reunions, there was a lot of bragging going on. Now, some are walking with canes, several are deceased, and the old bravado is gone--replaced by years of wisdom through the experiences of life (and the disbelief that forty years could pass so quickly). I had given some thought as to what I was going to say, and when it was my turn, I stated the following: "I have experienced life in twos: I have lived in two countries, had two wives, cancer twice and been bankrupt twice."

I am living proof that you can survive and prosper no matter what life throws at you. The bankruptcies were tough, and tough to tell you about--but you can get through such experiences (both happened due to mismanagement of companies I owned; clearly I, and no one else, am responsible for both of them). Yes, bankruptcy--one I'll characterize as many, many years ago, the other many years ago. Are there consequences? Sure, particularly if you were raised to have a strong sense of responsibility for everything you do--you'll carry such experiences with you the rest of your life. The point is you can live through these kinds of catastrophes.

Divorce--another devastating matter, even if you initiate it (or, stated another way, even if you broke a solemn promise). And it carries consequences, heavy consequences, for the rest of your life and the lives you affected. But, again, you can live through it.

Cancer or other life-threatening events--been there twice. The physical and (particularly) mental toll is excruciating. But, once again, you can live through this.

I am told (but hope I never experience it) that the loss of a child or grandchild is the most traumatic experience of all. Yet, I have seen those who have experienced this terrible event

survive and go on to live their lives.

When I went to work as an engineering co-op in the spring of 1970, I received my first real paycheck. One of the things I immediately noticed was the involuntary deduction for social security taxes. I stated at the time that I would feel no different about that than little deduction if the government stood in front of me and burned the money. I just may be proven correct about that one (by comparison, the coming insolvency of the US social security system is going to make the financial problems of 2008 look as if you were merely given incorrect change). When I worked for companies that offered pension programs, I never paid any attention to these--I did not believe those promises would ever be kept. I am certainly being proven correct on that one. Having always had low expectations on these matters keeps me from being angry or fearful when they become unfulfilled promises--I have never counted on them anyway.

If you are angry this holiday season, you are most likely angry about similar promises not kept: about jobs lost, about pensions that have evaporated, about investment accounts devalued. If you are fearful, you are most likely fearful about what to do now that your financial support system has collapsed. There are widespread reports of suicide amongst financial professionals this fall (particularly in London, now in New York). I have known suicides--one experience a couple of years ago was particularly devastating--I saw the person about an hour before they did it and had no idea what was on their mind. This is not necessary and not a solution to anything--you can overcome any hardship.

Neither is the place to direct your energy pertaining to these matters towards entities whose lawyers have already figured out how to thwart your every assault. Rather it is to direct your energy inwards, to look at the mirror and say, "What am I going to do about the situation in which I find myself?" If you have faith and a support system, that can help, but if you do not, there are plenty of examples of people who have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is personally destructive to dwell on promises not kept by others and over which you really never had control in the first place. I have seen such personal devastation happen many, many times where those affected cannot mentally move on.

It is a waste of time to seek revenge or play the martyr. Life is too short for either of these silly activities. Set a course and find a way to fix your problems yourself as you go into 2009. And one last piece of advice: be generous. I wrote a column about generosity a couple of years ago. Generosity is not only the right thing to do; it will help your own attitude about yourself as well. Tip better, give away or share part of what you have with the less fortunate. I have done this through thick and thin. It helps the receiver, but it helps the giver more--it truly is much better to give than receive.

You have brains, experience and initiative. It is time to fire up those neurons, honestly assess your situation and go out and make your future success yourself. You can do it.

Trauma, by definition, comes in rapid, quick events. The good experiences in life come more slowly and more measured. For instance, if all goes well, I am going to be a grandfather in

February, perhaps sooner. I am looking forward to the arrival of my grandson (gender already confirmed by modern science), trusting he will be a perfect baby, ready to accept him anyway if he is not. Celebrate the slow-in-coming, good things, in life. Overcome the traumas--they will not last forever unless you let them--for they are only inflection points.

Safety is free, accidents are not. You can practice safety in tough times, as long as you don't let your distraught attitude (which I hope I have helped you improve this week) distract you.

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukah, the coming Muharram Festival, and if I have missed covering you: Happy Holidays to all. I wish for Peace on Earth, but at this time am especially fearful for our papermaking colleagues in India and Pakistan. It looks like your governments may cause you to experience a very bad time in the near future.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##