

*What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. — Micah 6:8*

## The Spaghetti Years

Hard times turn us into historians. Barack Obama demonstrated this truth in recent months by reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals*, in preparation for the presidency. Goodwin's research focuses on Abraham Lincoln's unusual decision to place many of his political opponents and critics in his cabinet. President Obama, now facing another crisis in American history, clearly took notes from the great Emancipator in crafting his own cabinet.

It is difficult to read the paper or watch a news program these days without seeing historical references to the Great Depression. If you were an alien who just stopped by to check out life on Earth you might think some guy named FDR is the current leader of the United States. Lots of old debates have been rekindled as to the efficacy of the New Deal. It's interesting how people who were desperate for jobs saw Roosevelt's policies versus those who had no immediate economic worries. History tends to be told in different ways depending on whether you are suffering or in good shape.

As our country, and our own church, wades through this scary economic landscape I have been doing my own historical reminiscing. Only my thoughts haven't turned to great presidents in our past to seek inspiration and solace. My mind keeps drifting to an unusual period in my childhood when everything got turned upside down and worries were around every corner.

My parents divorced when I was in elementary school, and before I began sixth grade my mother and I moved out of the only home I had ever known into a small apartment. It was in a different part of town, much smaller than our old house, and there was no question that we had moved from solidly middle class to something else. Whatever you want to call it, it didn't feel solid at all.

For the first time in my life my mother went to work. She got a job as a secretary at a bank, and while I don't recall her precise salary, the figure \$600 a month sticks in my head. She made a game out of how low we could keep the electric bill each month. You can imagine our sweaty pride when we made it through a summer month in the West Texas desert on less than \$30 of power. We also ate a lot of spaghetti. At the time I didn't think much of this since I enjoyed spaghetti, but I now realize the economic benefits of noodles are hard to beat.

But if you ask me my primary memory of that difficult time it is the mood and manner with which my mother carried herself. I have no doubt that there were lots of sleepless nights for her as she tried to figure out how to pay for the basics of life. But I rarely saw that. What I saw was a woman determined to make the best of a bad situation by using her creativity and imagination. More than thirty years later I think of these things with great admiration and realize my first lessons in faith and

leadership came from my mother in the most vulnerable time of our life.

Several years ago, sitting in a restaurant with Mom waiting for our food to be served, I asked her a question. I'm not sure exactly how I phrased it, but it was something like "What time in your life were you happiest?" To my great surprise, she named the time I have just described for you. The Spaghetti Years as I have come to think of them. The more I thought about it, the less surprised I was by her answer. Facing the greatest challenge of her life, she survived and then some. Of course she would look back with pride and satisfaction, and see that in some of the darkest days she was actually happy. Oh, by the way, when Mom retired from the bank she no longer was the \$600-a-month secretary. She was an officer.

I don't know what the days ahead hold for our country, our church, and many of you. Some of you have already lost jobs and others are fearing that prospect. It would be stupid and glib for me to say "Don't worry, everything will be just fine." My only advice is that we should look to our past to see that periods of crisis and despair also carry seeds of opportunity.

The Bible contains numerous stories about times of crisis that are so well-known that we speak of them in shorthand: the exodus; the exile; the cross. There is much tragedy and loss in these stories, but beyond that there are examples of faithful people doing their best in desperate situations. We read these texts and take heart. We understand when their faith wavers and we are inspired when they keep moving forward despite the circumstances surrounding them. And in these days, we also sense that these stories reflect part of our story.

May God's peace and strength be with you wherever you are in your story. And may we find solace in our past, and in our faith, and in each other.

—Jack