More than “Something from Nothing”

by
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Until I grew up, I never realized that we had been poor, because we were no different from anyone else we knew. It made for a close community, especially if you lived in an apartment building, as we did in the East Bronx. (We never knew anyone who lived in a single-family house.) Neighbors cared about each other. I remember writing letters to the Welfare Department and other government agencies for neighbors, complaining about problems, which had not been resolved. The neighbors told me what they wanted to say, in Yiddish, and I would write the letters in English. I also remember trying to teach a young boy with Down’s Syndrome to read. And when I was about twelve, I used to proudly wheel babies in their carriages in the street so that their mothers could take care of household chores. (I had always wanted a baby sister or brother.) I would not accept any money because our family motto, based on the cigarette slogan "I'd walk a mile for a Camel," was "I'd run a mile for a mitzvah." (a good deed).

We never heard of therapy in those days, but the people we knew would not have been able to afford it anyway. My mother was known for her kindness and wisdom. As a child, I remember being present when neighbors asked her for advice. Even my girlfriends came to see her when they were having problems at home.

In those days, during the Depression, there were no computers, no Internet, no text messages or E-Mail, no jet planes, no Xerox or FAX machines, no refrigerators, no microwave ovens, and no food processors. In the winter, milk was kept in a crate on the fire escape. When it was really cold, the top of the milk shot up, and we raced to get the cream. (No skim milk in those days. People didn't worry about dieting, but about getting enough to eat.) Telephones were located in the halls of each floor, and someone always answered the ring. It meant little privacy, but lots of advice, wanted or not. And long-distance calls were only for dire emergencies.

We knew there was little money, but did not feel deprived or resentful. Our parents were imaginative. Our father used to bring home the largest, most beautiful apple he could find every Friday, and, at the Shabbat table, divide it into five pieces. We called it "the family apple" and I continued the tradition with my own children.

Once, when I was a child, we were eagerly looking forward to going to Coney Island, a famous beach and amusement park, on Sunday. In the morning, it was raining in torrents, and I remember standing at the window, just heartbroken. When it was clear that the rain would not stop, my mother said, "We were going to have a picnic today. We can have it right here."

So she spread out a blanket, opened a beach umbrella in the living room, and took out games and the food she had prepared. It became an adventure.

I realized later that it was experiences like this, which stay with you, not times when everything goes smoothly.

We were given money to go to the movies every four weeks. Once, we were desperate to see "Gunga Din," which was playing only three weeks since our last movie outing. We pleaded, and our father asked if we would be willing to wait five weeks for the next movie and see "Gunga Din" now. We agreed, and signed a contract that he locked in the safe. We felt it was a fair agreement.

We learned optimism from our father, and from our mother that every person deserves respect and support regardless of financial circumstances. And we learned perseverance from both.

Once, my father was unemployed and had a temporary WPA job shoveling snow. My oldest sister, Edith, did have a job at that time. On the way to the subway one morning, she passed a group of men who were taking a break from this hard work. My father was doing Russian dances to entertain the men. They were stomping their feet, and clapping to keep warm.

The WPA (The Work Progress Administration) did more than create snow-shoveling jobs. It came into being through an Executive Order by President Roosevelt in 1935 to help the unemployed. It lasted until late 1943, when gearing up for the war effort provided many jobs. While it lasted, it provided work for 8,500,000 people, at a cost of over 11 billion dollars.

Highways and roads and bridges were built as well as public buildings and parks, and development of rural areas took place as well. It included the Federal Writers and Arts projects. Musicians organized concerts. The Federal Theater Project created stock companies, which toured the country. I remember a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* which was performed from a huge flatbed truck in Crotona Park. It had costumes and scenery and music and fine acting. It was so magical that it sparked an interest in theater that still lasts.

More than once, however, I saw the Sheriff evicting tenants who could not pay the rent. It was called "being dispossessed," and people felt great shame at having their belongings put out on the street. It was a time when men would go from building courtyard to building courtyard singing or playing the violin. Tenants would wrap a few coins in pieces of newspaper and throw them down. Destitute people also came door-to-door asking for a donation. My mother welcomed them and offered refreshments, and always found a way to give them something. She would say to us "After all, I don't go to the beauty parlor or wear lipstick or smoke cigarettes." (Picture Mother Teresa making such a statement, and you can imagine my mother.) We were reminded of the Biblical injunction to remember that "We were slaves in Egypt," and to consider those less fortunate.

Our mother was frail, and had a serious heart ailment. So we helped as best we could. My sister and I, at different times, learned to cook at our mother's bedside.

After Rosy married, I took over doing the laundry on Sunday mornings, by hand, using a washboard, with a book propped up so I could read at the same time. We hung the clothing on lines stretched between the two buildings. In winter, the sheets froze so hard that you could practically break them. I would do the ironing listening to BBC plays broadcast on WNYC. Thursday nights, I washed the floors, and put down newspapers to keep them clean until Shabbat. In removing them, I often got caught up reading news stories I had missed.

While our family was not in such bad straits as many others, the Depression affected us as well. Our oldest sister, Edith, her husband and baby, had to move in with us, because they could find no apartment they could afford. We made room, and Rosy and I shared a bed. (I used to say that she slept diagonally and left me no space.) One thing, for sure, we were never lonely.

Rosy finished high school and went to work. I knew I, too, would not be able to go to college, even with a full scholarship, since I needed to contribute to the family finances. So I

studied stenography, typing and bookkeeping instead of choosing the academic track. After the High School graduation ceremonies, when my friends were celebrating, I fled into an empty classroom, sobbing because I felt my life and dreams were over. Two weeks later, I went back to high school four nights a week for two years to acquire the academic courses which would make it possible to be accepted by Hunter College, which I attended at night after work. I got home around 11 p.m., had dinner, and then studied. On my job, I napped during the lunch hour, and co-workers woke me.

I realized, then and now, that I valued my formal education--college, and then graduate school, much, much more than if it had come easily.