The Blessings from Poverty

Life Lessons from Growing Up Poor in Appalachia

I stared at the screen of our Zenith TV as the NBC Evening News showed the gleaming blue and silver fuselage of Air Force One as it landed at the airport in Huntington, WV. It was May of 1964, and President Lyndon B. Johnson was touring the Southern Appalachian region as part of his 1964 Poverty Tour. He had come to announce his plans for a War on Poverty.

During a commercial break, I turned to my dad and asked "Are we at war? Who is the enemy?" I was a little confused.

The TV reporter went on to show video of the President's tour of Eastern Kentucky that featured Appalachian families in their "Sunday best" clothes smiling for the camera. It also showed video of the stereotypical Appalachian family with several stringy haired children and their father in bib overalls with their bare feet dangling over the edge of the front porch of a rundown shack on the edge of a creek in one of the many deep hollers in the region.

The War on Poverty became a critical part of a massive federal government program that became known as The Great Society. The program resulted in the passage of over two hundred new laws that launched some of the most consequential, and expensive, social programs in the history of the country. These included Medicare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps.

President Johnson declared "the enemy is unemployment, and its ally is poverty." He promised a "cure" to poverty in the Appalachian region. I didn't realize it at the time as I watched the TV coverage from the family farm in Wise County, Virginia, but we were on the "front lines" of the battle.

Our family had dealt with a long history of tragedy and economic hardship. My grandfather on dad's side of the family was part of a massive Swedish migration in the late 1800's and early 1900's. He settled in Southwest Virginia and made his living in the expanding timber industry that ravaged the region while cutting the massive old growth timber that covered the steep ridges and deep hollers.

He eventually met and married my grandmother while working as a timber cutter in Wise County. They moved from timber camp to timber camp throughout the mountains as the logging companies logged out one area and moved to another. By the early 1920's, they had four young children with my dad being the second youngest. My grandfather was tragically killed in a logging accident in Bath County, Virginia, in 1924 when my dad was only three years old.

My widowed grandmother boarded a train back to Wise County with her four young children. With no husband, no money, and no job, she faced the daunting task of surviving with her children in the difficult years leading up to the Great Depression. She moved into her parent's home in the Rocky Fork section of the county. Tragedy again visited the family later that same year when her infant daughter died of whooping cough and was buried on my dad's fourth birthday.

My dad's first job came at the age of five when he rode on the back of a mule along with his grandfather as they traveled throughout the county and sold moonshine. Most of the family scratched out a living by making moonshine, farming, and trading with their neighbors. Times were so tough that dad and his older brother resorted to hunting wild birds with a sling shot to get enough food to survive. This practice almost eliminated the wild birds in the area.

Dad attended a two-room school called Riner School until he quit school to go to work full time after completing the sixth grade. He went to work in a sawmill. He met and married my mother when he was nineteen, and she was sixteen. He later went to work in non-union coal mines where he found his life's work and resulted in his early death from black lung disease. He spent his last years selling vegetables and apples from the family farm.

My mother grew up in a remote area of Wise County near the Buck Knob. Her family eked out a meager living from farming, cutting timber, and coal mining. Her mother came from an ancestry of some tough people that included the infamous Cherokee warrior Chief Bob Benge on her father's side of the family. She would board a bus from Wise County to Eastern Kentucky with a small cage of chickens that she raised on their farm and sell them before she returned later in the day. She tragically died as the result of an operation on a goiter, an affliction caused by a lack of iodine in her diet, now commonly available in table salt, five years before I was born.

Mom only attended school at the Riner School until the third grade. She was forced to quit school to help maintain the home place and take care of the family. Even though she lacked a formal education, she was one of the smartest people that I ever knew. She was especially good with math. She often faced the challenge of only having a meager budget of twenty dollars to purchase a week's groceries for her family of five children. As she made her way up and down the store aisles and filled her cart with only the essential items, she had the uncanny ability to keep a mental tab on how much she had spent. After the cashier rang up her purchases, the total almost always came to just under the twenty dollars in her purse! She spent most of her life as a homemaker, but she also continued her mother's tradition of entrepreneurship as she earned money by selling hand made quilts, canned goods, and produce grown on the family farm.

Life on the family farm in my early years was only slightly removed from the lifestyle that my ancestors had lived. We didn't have indoor plumbing. We did our "business" in an outhouse next to a cherry tree on the edge of the yard. Late night visits were especially challenging as we made our way from the back door to the outhouse while facing the fear of instant death from stepping on a copperhead snake!

Drinking water came from a well that provided limited water with the taste of sulfur and the smell of rotten eggs. One of my first jobs was to carry water for Mom's roller type washing machine from a creek across the holler. We carried water in a tub after scooping it up from the creek. We had to be careful to avoid scooping up minnows and crawdads with the water. Mom would then heat the water over an open fire until it was warm enough to pour into the washer. Several years later, dad installed a water line to a natural spring that flowed year round from a coal seam up the holler.

Like our ancestors, we learned to live off the land. Some of the steep ridges around our home had been "strip mined" by running bulldozers around the mountainside to expose the coal seams. These coal seams were then "augered" to remove the coal, and it was trucked off to market. These "strip jobs" became prime areas for growing wild blackberries and copperheads. I would arise early to beat the summer sun and make my way along the ridges while filling two metal buckets with sweet, wild blackberries. These blackberries were then canned to make mom's prized blackberry jam for consumption during the cold winter months or made into blackberry cobbler.

Our foraging wasn't limited to wild blackberries. We also picked wild raspberries and wild blueberries, although they were less common. We even knew of remote locations in the mountains where we could pick wild grapes in the fall. We called them "possum grapes," and they made delicious grape jelly.

Much of our food came from the garden on the family farm. We grew sweet corn, half runner beans, and lots of potatoes. My brothers, sister, and I spent hours during the hot summers hoeing and weeding the crops in the fields. We itched constantly from the pollen off the corn stalks and tried to avoid painful bites from the "buck flies" that tormented us as sweat poured down out backs. The annual crop was either sold to supplement the family income or canned to save for winter. Potatoes that were left over at the end of the growing season were buried underground to avoid them being frozen and retrieved for meals in the fall and winter.

We viewed all the critters in the mountains that rose from the family farm as potential food. We hunted squirrels, rabbits, and even ground hogs to provide meat for family meals. Although some of my cousins ate them, I drew the line at possums. We hunted with a single barrel twenty-gauge shotgun. Luckily, these safaris into the mountains never resulted in my brothers nor me blasting off a foot. Fried squirrel was a family favorite. My sister and I often claimed that our high intelligence level later in life came from eating squirrel brains!

I got my first job when I was in the third grade. I was attending the same two-room school that my mom and dad had attended. One day Mrs. Roberts, my third-grade teacher, approached me with my first ever job opportunity. The school had no central heat or air conditioning. Heat during the cold winter months was provided by a large "pot belly" stove in the corner of the room that scorched the faces of my classmates sitting near the stove while others farther removed from the stove shivered. The stove had to be constantly fed with firewood and coal that we carried in from behind the schoolhouse.

"Danny, how would you like to earn some money?" Mrs. Roberts asked me at recess.

Since I seldom had any money, it didn't take me long to answer her question. "Yes, Ma'am, what would you like me to do?" I enthusiastically responded.

"I need someone to come to school early and build a fire in the pot belly stove. Then the school room will be warm when the students arrive," she replied.

"How much does it pay?" I asked.

"Ten cents a day, and I'll pay you every Friday."

"I'll take the job," I replied. I could hardly wait to start as I looked forward to the riches to come.

I didn't think of myself as poor at that time in my life. I wore hand me down clothes, and we didn't always get a new pair of shoes when it was time to start school in August. All of my cousins and classmates lived like we lived. We didn't know any rich people, and we had limited exposure to life outside Wise County in the days before cable TV and the internet.

The first time that I realized I was poor occurred a couple of years later while I was in the fifth grade. I had moved over to the "big room" of the school where the fourth and fifth graders attended class. We had no cafeteria, so mom always packed our lunch in a brown paper bag. On a good day, lunch consisted of a baloney or Spam sandwich and a piece of fruit or Little Debbie's oatmeal cake. We could purchase a half pint of milk for three cents to drink with our lunch under a shade tree on the school playground. One morning, mom told me that we had nothing for lunch in the house. Her only option was to give me two of her homemade fried apple pies for lunch. Now, I loved my mom's fried apple pies, but I was embarrassed for my classmates to see that this was all I had for lunch.

Lunch time came, and I quietly moved to a remote corner of the school playground so I could eat my lunch without the laughter and ridicule of my classmates. I didn't even have the three cents for milk! I finished my apple pies as quickly as possible and moved back over toward the schoolhouse to rejoin my classmates for a quick game of tag before the bell rang. I vowed to do whatever it took to escape the multi-generational clutches of poverty.

I moved on to the Elementary School in town the following year. My struggles with poverty continued. The school was just across a short bridge from the small downtown area and a local grocery store where my mom shopped. A couple of my cousins and I came up with a simple solution to our lack of adequate food for lunch. Lunch time was one of the busiest times of the day in the store. We decided that we could casually roam the aisles of the store and quietly munch on a banana or bag or chips and hide the evidence in our pockets. We would then move toward the store counter and purchase a Baby Ruth candy bar for five cents so the store clerk wouldn't be too suspicious.

Our newly discovered life of crime went well for the first few days. One day as we approached the counter, the store manager confronted us.

"I've been watching you boys," he stated in a stern voice. "Have you been stealing food from the store?"

We shook our heads to answer 'No' because we were too scared to answer his question.

"Well, if I ever catch you, I'll turn you in to the town police," he threatened as we headed for the door.

That incident represented the end of my brief crime spree and provided one of the most important lessons in my young life. I concluded that it was better to go hungry that to steal. I carried that lesson for the rest of my life.

The school years passed quickly, and before long I was preparing to head off to college. I decided in the eighth grade that I wanted to attend Virginia Tech and become a civil engineer. There was only one problem. My family had no money available for my college expenses while still raising three children on a meager coal miner's wage. Luckily for me, I was able to receive a full academic scholarship. I became the first person in my large extended family to receive a college degree, and it profoundly changed my life. I accepted a job offer from a large Fortune 500 company upon graduation and moved with my bride to Cincinnati, Ohio and never returned to the family farm.

I spent the next couple of decades of my life in the corporate world running away from the poverty in my early life and my Appalachian culture. I lost much of my southern accent and worked hard to sound like a Midwesterner. I focused on the riches and prestige that came from "climbing the corporate ladder", often at the expense of my family. By the time that the prosperous "Dot Com" years of the 1990's had arrived, I had been promoted to Vice President in a large multi-national consulting company. We lived in a palatial home in the suburbs of Cincinnati. I drove a shiny black Cadillac Sedan Deville with gold trim and a vanity license plate with my last name. We were truly living the American dream!

Late one summer, we received a call from a couple of my high school classmates. They were planning to visit family in the area and asked if it would be okay to stop by our home for a visit. We assured them that we would love to see them and looked forward to their arrival. The day came, and we greeted them at the front door.

Gary and Nina had married during our senior year and lived their entire lives in our hometown. They stepped into the foyer as their eyes scanned the spiral staircase and twenty-foot-high ceilings of our home. They had strange, puzzled looks on their faces.

"Is this your house?" they stammered.

"Of course," my wife and I quickly responded although unsure of why they asked.

"We didn't know you lived like this," they replied while still having a shocked look on their faces.

We concluded a very enjoyable visit, and they left to make the drive back to our hometown. I am sure that it seemed a million miles away from the life we lived. After thinking about it for the next few days, I finally understood why they were so shocked. I hadn't seen them since high school, and they still thought of me as the "high school me" and not the "corporate me". To them, I was still that kid who wore hand me down clothes and never had a car, or a date, in high school.

Another key event in my "corporate life" came a few years later. I have taken a job with a startup computer technology company that was on the leading edge of the development of computerized medical records systems. I was a manager in the company, and I had made the maximum contribution to my company 401-K plan each year and used all of it to purchase company stock. I had also received several thousand shares of stock as stock options as part of my annual compensation package. I assured my wife that we would be instant millionaires when the company was acquired, as expected, by a larger company in the industry.

I was working in my home office, when one of my colleagues called with the news of the sale of the company. Unfortunately, the buyer was somewhat of a mercenary company who had used their membership on the Board of Directors to wait until the company was in dire financial straits before offering to purchase it. Instead of becoming millionaires, we barely recovered our investment, and our stock options became worthless.

My journey through life convinced me that education, both formal and learning from life's experiences, is the most important contributor to financial gain. However, incidents like these also caused me to realize that having a rich and fulfilling life had little to do with financial gain. I came to understand that the hard lessons learned while growing up poor in Appalachia had led me to appreciate the life blessings that come from having experienced poverty in my life. These blessings include self reliance, frugality, humility, integrity, and respect for other people.

We left the corporate world to return to Virginia a short time later. Although the world to which we returned was vastly different that the one that we had left in our early adult years, we didn't miss the stress from the corporate world. We eventually moved with our son, a single parent, and his son, Noah, to a scenic town in Southwest Virginia.

On a warm spring day, I waited at the end of our long driveway to meet Noah when he got off the bus from school. He was straight A student and one of the most popular members of his fourth-grade class.

"Hi Papa," Noah cheerfully greeted me as he stepped off the tall step from the bus. He called me "Papa" as opposed to "Grandpa" or "Papaw." This title was somewhat of a hybrid title that combined the roles of Dad and Papaw that I had played as his primary caregiver when he first came to live with us as a toddler. We often used the time as we casually made our way up the driveway leading to our large, two-story brick house at the top of the hill to catch up on the events of Noah's day.

"Well, Noah, how was your day at school?" I asked as we gazed off toward the surrounding hills covered with the bright purple redbuds, white and pink wild dogwood trees, and crab apple trees.

"It was fine, Papa. I got an A on my math test" he replied.

"Good job! It sounds like another chance to make the Honor Roll. It won't be long before you're in college," I commented with pride.

"I have a question for you," Noah continued. "As I was getting off the school bus today, one of my friends looked at our large brick home and asked me if we were rich. Are we rich?"

“Well, yes, Noah, I would say that we are rich, but it has nothing to do with a large house, fancy cars, or money in the bank,” I replied as Noah got a confused look on his face.

“What is rich then?” he demanded.

“Noah, real wealth is about your reputation, honesty, service to your community and your God, your legacy, and your family – especially your children and grandchildren.”

“I don’t understand,” he replied.

“Someday you will, Noah, someday you will,” I assured him as we approached the top of our driveway and our home.