

PIGS AND CORN AND HU



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Does hard work pay off? Do you have to assume responsibility for the bad decisions you make? Do words like supply, demand, and competition still have any meaning?

by E. James Burton

I am a child of prosperity—not that our family was rich. It was just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Born in the postwar era, I have seen some ups and some downs in the economy, but basically the way has been up. Don't get me wrong. It hasn't always been easy. Until I was nine years old, the house I lived in had only one cold water faucet in the kitchen and no other plumbing. We had a house with a path rather than a bath. Even during my teen years, I lived in some places without indoor plumbing, and I can assure you that winters in Illinois, even southern Illinois, can be brutal. But still, the economic trail for me and most of America has pretty much been up for the past 50 years.

There were lots of great lessons to be learned. My dad, who wasn't a great teacher and didn't have "a lot of truck" with "too much education," did have one lesson he wanted to be sure my brother and I learned well. So he repeated that lesson over and over. That lesson was titled "The Value of Hard Work." Reflecting back, maybe the title should have been "the value of work he did not want to do," since often it seemed that was what we did—the stuff he did not want to do. But it was often hard, and it often had significant value.

What sort of work was that? Well, in the summer it was mostly yard work. We had a big yard and not many power tools. In fact, when I first started mowing the lawn, we had a reel-type mower, for which my brother or I provided the power. You didn't want the grass to get very high, or it was tough going. The only power trimmers around were our hands to pull out weeds or maybe to squeeze some cutters. There were also large gardens to plow, plant, cultivate, and weed. Dad seemed to like working in the garden—even more so after he got a rotor tiller. But he was always willing to leave the hand weeding to "the boys."

I guess the lesson I remember best with regard to the value of hard work came when he decided to allow us the opportunity to make some "real money." He offered my brother, a neighborhood friend, and me the chance to profit directly from our work. We had just a little bit of land.

He would provide the capital if we would provide the labor. The deal was this. He would buy a sow with a litter of pigs if we would glean the corn from a farmer's field (he had arranged things with the farmer) and feed the litter. He would then sell the sow and pigs, and we would get whatever profits were left after he recaptured his capital. We didn't even have to pay rent on the land where the pig pen was. So we struck a deal.

You may not know much about gleaning a field. After the farmer has finished his harvesting, the stalks of corn are knocked down. The picker misses some of the corn, and it falls to the ground, sometimes still attached to the stalk. It takes a good bit of effort to get this corn, so many farmers simply leave it lying on the ground. Others will fence the field and turn livestock into the field to feed. Our farmer chose to leave it on the ground.

As I recall, we made the deal in November or December, when the weather in Illinois can begin to become a bit nasty. If there is much rain or snow after the harvest, the corn on the ground can become frozen to the ground. If there is a significant thaw, the field can become very muddy and hard to negotiate.

And so it was. We enjoyed both hard freezes when it was almost impossible to pick up the corn and deep thaws in which we would sink in the mud till it was over our boots. But there was a sow with pigs and the promise of a profit, so we continued.

I was the youngest and the smallest of the three entrepreneurs, so I got the best job: driving the tractor and wagon through the field. The other two followed along picking up the corn and throwing it onto the wagon. My job was not only the easiest but also the warmest, since the heat of the tractor engine made life a bit more bearable. But you can be sure my brother and our friend made sure it was not too bearable.

Ultimately, the system worked. I remember the day someone came to buy the sow and pigs and how Dad negotiated a price. And I remember the prize—the first \$100 bill I ever owned.

HUNDRED-DOLLAR BILLS



JUST ONE MAN'S OPINION

Since that was many, many years ago, and since I remember the lesson so vividly, maybe Dad was a better teacher than I thought, and maybe he valued education more than I realized—even if it wasn't the “book learning” kind of education. He certainly taught me some economics—land, labor, capital, and profit all became words that had very distinct meanings for me and my brother.

Now let me tell you just a bit about my brother. He took distributive education classes in high school and went to work immediately upon graduation. He also got married very young and began a family right away. He was a big kid as well as a great big brother and had always been the responsible type. I remember him pushing his power mower 20 or more blocks across town to mow a lawn for which he probably got \$2 or less.

He worked very hard, and he learned quickly. One job was never enough. He always needed a way to make more money, so a second or third job became the norm. He learned to cook and run a restaurant, to operate a propane gas business, to sell clothing and hard goods—just about anything that would help him make a little more money. And he learned it well.

He is the type who loves “the deal”: he can smell a deal. He can see a deal no one else sees. If there is a deal to be made, he wants to make it. If there isn't a deal to be made, he wants to know why not and then overcome the objections. He dearly loves a deal and will deal in bicycles, lawn tractors, real estate, motor homes, shotguns, or anything else one may want to buy or sell if the price is right. Believe me, if you deal with him, the definition of a right price is when he makes money.

His education is from the marketplace, and he graduated summa cum laude from the best of the best.

But here is the point (I bet you were wondering when I was going to get around to making it): the stuff our dad taught about the value of hard work and all the stuff my brother learned and applied from the marketplace seems to be gone.

The paradigm has shifted. And after a paradigm shift, the rules change. So far, no one can seem to figure out the new paradigm. We don't know what the new paradigm is, but we do know the old one doesn't work any more. And, for certain, no one seems to know what the rules are now.

Does hard work pay off? Ask the thousands who are losing their jobs and life savings after many years of hard work. Do you have to assume responsibility for the bad decisions you make? Ask the bankers and mortgage lenders who made many bad decisions but are being bailed out by the government. Do words like supply, demand, and competition still have any meaning? Ask the domestic auto companies and the unions for the current definitions of these words.

So what is the problem? Is it as simple as this—we have a crisis of confidence. We have lost confidence in our economic institutions, in our leaders, in ourselves, and in what made America great.

Where are the days of pigs and corn and hundred-dollar bills? Are they gone forever? Have we crossed the top of the economic mountain on that trail I spoke of earlier? Is the trail pretty much downhill from here? Will, for the first time in the history of America, things not be better for our children than they are for us?

Not if I can help it. Buy some pigs. Pick up some corn. Feed out the litter. Mow some yards. Get a second job. Learn to sell. Make a deal. It all worked before, and it will work again. The paradigm may have shifted. Some things may have changed. But hard work will still pay off, and good deals will still get made. And profit still is not a four-letter word.

The best days for America are still ahead.

May God bless America, and may America bless God. ■

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