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Good advice—neither sought nor heeded

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Parents give advice to children.

This annoying habit seems to be part of our hard-wired, evolutionary duty to show our young the dos and don'ts of getting on in the world as best we know them.

Humans, of course, are the only species whose children routinely reject parental advice.

We are, as well, the only species who live to understand the mistake of not listening to experience. (I would not have written that sentence at 16.)

I've been thinking about two observations my mother, Rena, recorded in my tape deck.

First, she said that I "should always have something to fall back on."

Apparently, she had deduced when I was quite young that my likely falling position would always be backward.

I don't think she saw in my cards that I would be falling into the lap of an obscenely wealthy wife.

For those reasons, she encouraged me to acquire a foolproof skill or trade that would always be a source of modest-but-reliable income when all other ventures failed, which, apparently, she had good reason to expect.

This was sound advice. And had I any talent for or interest in learning something perpetually useful like plumbing I would now be sitting pretty, counting my fortune in expensive wrenches and copper elbows.

My parents started married life in 1944 with absolutely nothing. When Rena died 28 years later, the two of them had sweated out a little to "fall back on," but it wasn't enough to handle much of a fall.

My mother never felt safe going through life with nothing to fall back on. Nor do I.

Do you feel safe?

Realizing that I would never gain any practical competence, Rena suggested that I “could always fall back on” a law degree.

Taking his cue from her, my father campaigned for me to become a lawyer—any kind of lawyer, all of whom, I think, ran together in his mind. In his experience, lawyers no matter how dense, inept, compromised or crooked always made a nice living. The good ones did even better.

Since I was argumentative and opinionated, law must have seemed like the best choice from a set of unappealing alternatives.

This effort went so far as to have me apply to Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College, which offered a six-year undergraduate and law degree instead of the customary seven. Bob felt I needed something to fall back on PDQ.

As a college senior, I interviewed at a couple of law schools. But a three-year prison sentence seemed a high price to pay for being able to fall back into something that didn’t seem like much fun when you landed in it for the rest of your life.

Bad decision. A 21-year-old male with an independent streak is dangerous to himself as well as others.

I might have done better to have waived college in favor of charm school. Had I done well in manners and grooming, I would have improved my chances with the two gold-lapped girls who crossed my early path.

Rena’s second piece of advice like the first came from being a child of immigrants and growing up during the Great Depression.

It was this: “Get an education, because they can never take that away from you.”

It was never clear which “they” might be out there scheming to take everything away from me. Or why “they” were targeting the likes

of me, considering I had nothing to take and would probably have given it away if asked.

Once I had a college credential -- which she didn't have, because there had been no money to pay for it -- she figured I'd have a small prayer, at least, of climbing out of all future financial craters using my head instead of my feet.

This is no simple feat, I should add.

By "they," she probably meant the large, opaque, economic forces that could be counted on to generate busts, panics and crashes. She may have also been including circumstances that made it harder for struggling people to survive.

These "theys" were real to her, though never named.

In the early 30s, Rena saw our financial system turn wealthy Americans into breadline paupers, alongside paupers from all other classes. In the 40s, she saw European refugees and war-ravaged civilians lose everything—property, profession, income, legal rights and respect.

In a world of cotton, she had come to realize that you could never know when the next boll weevil might show up and wipe you clean out.

Life for her was never far from survival. There would never be enough money to make her feel protected.

Rena understood that the only safety net under the three of us was just a tightrope.

It became apparent as I got older that while "they" could not take away whatever formal education I had piled up, it wasn't that hard to make it not count for very much.

Today, for example, 50 percent of all college and university teachers are non-salaried, "contingent faculty," that is, part-time, adjuncts in non-tenure tracks.

Adjuncts often have a Ph.D. They may be teaching a full course load. An adjunct-taught, three-credit course typically pays \$2,000-\$3,000. That's four courses for \$8,000 to \$12,000 a semester.

Their education hasn't been "taken away." It's just been reassigned a lower financial value.

Technological change can quickly make knowledge stale or, worse, irrelevant. Airline pilots may find themselves permanently unemployed if pilotless flying takes over. What happens to dentists when a mouthwash is invented that prevents cavities?

Both education and special skills need to be continually updated, otherwise they get lost in the shuffle of change.

People who are blacklisted out of their professions retain their educations but are prevented from employing them.

I'm not sure that education alone guarantees survival in the face of hostile change.

I think, rather, it's the ability to adapt what you have to what is currently demanded that keeps individuals one step away from being ground to bits. I don't think the ability to adapt is more prevalent among Ph.D.s than any other group. Probably less.

To the extent that education helps adaptation, Mom was right. To the extent, that it locks you in place with an increasingly unmarketable skill, it's an anchor around your neck.

I laughed when I heard myself repeating Rena's words to my daughter, Molly, years ago. Is there no escape from the tapes?

Consider law school, I said (because she has that kind of mind and can always use a law degree as a platform for something else) or give some thought to an MBA. They can't take those degrees away from you, and you can always fall back on them.

She followed my advice as much as I followed Rena's.

Generally speaking, I think kids who accept parental advice have an advantage over those who don't. Not all parental advice is sound and forward-thinking. But, to the extent that it distills experience in common situations, it's usually a good starting point.

After all, parents have the one advantage that's denied their kids—we've seen more variations of how things work.

It's especially galling to realize that you've come to this conclusion because you ignored the advice of your own parents.

Writing or plumbing—not even close.

