

Money and Meaning

It's all interwoven with the story of family.



by Sylvia Lafair

THINK ABOUT THE WORD *money*. Do you experience tightness in your gut worrying about cash flow, or notice a smile on your lips, knowing assets are safe, or feel the beginning of a nasty headache around recent losses?

These times demand a deeper look at the place money occupies in your life. From Bernard Madoff's corruption to the indulgence of AIG executive bonuses, from extreme unemployment to excessive homelessness—these financial issues require thoughtful exploration. You can't lead a family or team effectively without considering your deep-seated personal beliefs and attitudes concerning money and its meaning.

Two powerful forces shape your money perspectives: your family, connected through genetics; and your work, connected through economics. You bring what you learn at the family dining table with you to the office conference table. Seeing that proverbial glass half full or half empty was locked into your nervous systems in early childhood. From family, you learned about three economic roads: one encourages *positive entitlement*, indicating that you deserve and are privileged; a second fosters *negative entitlement*, showing that you are meant to be submissive and never question; and a third sets the stage for *destructive entitlement* where, having been ignored or discounted, it is acceptable to take in any way possible.

Money and its meaning are complex. Partly rational, mostly emotional, *the relationship with money is woven with the story of family.* You take your family stories to work with you. The economic family at work is fraught with traps until you observe, understand, and transform past hidden influences that skew decision-making. Leaders become judging or approving parents, colleagues are siblings you both outperform and feel their envy or the other way round. Direct reports are "kids" over whom you can show your power.

Think about your family. What were the boundaries around receiving an allowance? When all the kids in the neighborhood were getting the expen-

sive sneakers or jeans what about you? How did money get saved or spent? How were gifts for holidays and birthdays handled? What were the criteria for being considered poor or rich?

In families, money is both an overt and a covert way to give and take power. It is a way to show concern and caring. It is a teaching tool that can assist innovation and creativity or dull the senses. It is a way to make up for pain and shame. It is a way to remain stuck in repeating the patterns of the past. Your relationship with money is the same at work, no matter how sophisticated the business plan.

We need to look back at the Great Depression to learn how people were impacted. On October 24, 1929, when the Stock Market crashed, the bottom of



an eroded society collapsed. Prices were so low that crops rotted in the fields. Dust storms ensued. Drought was merciless. At the peak, one in four Americans was unemployed. There were no federal unemployment compensation or food relief programs. Some 250,000 teenagers were homeless. Over 80,000 college students dropped out. Farms were abandoned, homes foreclosed. There was no safeguard of insurance for most. Soup kitchens served everyone. Sadly, we see some of these situations today.

In a capitalist culture, poverty is seen as a sign of personal failure. How the families of the Depression handled this decade is alive today. We are working long and hard. Yet, when we look at all the empty structures with for-sale signs, the *memories of the past* become the *realities of the present*. Are we in the midst of pattern repetition—or is there another way to realign our priorities and create more meaning for ourselves and families?

It starts with each of us looking inside ourselves at our own fears causing a desire to hoard, possibly bend the rules, or turn away from colleagues in distress. It is time to look again at what "enough is enough" means and the differences between scarcity, sufficiency, abundance, and excess.

Take Charles for example. When, as the CEO of a software company, he had to lay off several employees and went into a tailspin of scarcity thinking. He would not listen to any suggestions that involved risk. He put a freeze on all purchases. Charles was personally in a safe economic situation yet the cacophony of roller-coaster emotions inhibited his ability to function at work.

He was willing to dig into his family history to explore the roots of his concerns. His parents, now elderly, still oversaw a thriving restaurant and would always freeze enough food each week to "stave off potential hunger—just in case". He found this ridiculous and embarrassing. Charles' dad had been one of those 250,000 youngsters fending alone. The fear of not having and the obsession with storing food now made sense. Charles began to connect the dots of how the *Great Depression* had helped cause his emotional depression. He felt a new sense of compassion toward his parents and a deeper understanding of his two sons. Both had MBA's and always talked about "making it big". He spoke with them about their need to see success solely through the lens of money for security.

At work Charles channeled his fears into leading meetings with a focus on innovation that included risk-taking. He now understood the anxiety that had taken him into a downward spiral. He lifted the ban on buying and decided to *trust* rather than *control* those he put in positions of responsibility. This took daily vigilance since older fear patterns are strong in times of stress and change.

By exploring your relationship with money, you see more clearly into all relationships. Delve into the meaning you have put on money. Talk about the disappointments, failures, excesses, and deceptions in your history and transform them into new ways of behaving. As you discover the meaning of money in your life, you can "buy in" to new ways of defining yourself rather than "sell out" to old ways. The decisions you make can be personally and professionally fulfilling and life-enhancing. **PE**

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ACTION: Explore your relationship with money.