

Six Rules for Weathering Financial Blowouts

by

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Like thousands of people, I have followed the escalating economic warnings with rapt attention. Can any reader not be convinced of the severity of our national financial collapse? **“Credit gets even tighter, costlier,”** shouts one headline. **“Why home values may take decades to recover”**; **“Worst economy since 1937”**; **“Manufacturing drops threaten global recession.”** I’ve never followed a story so closely, nor checked the Internet for reports so frequently.

Why am I paying attention to all this? One reason is simply because my husband and I head a small not-for-profit ministry and through decades of being donor-dollar-dependent, our gift revenues notify us instantly when the economy is in decline—or when there is an overwhelming crisis, like 9/11, for instance, when our revenues immediately sank, or when scandals about well-known television evangelists were revealed, or when Katrina-size disasters hit the border waters and devastate cities and regions. As one pundit so aptly described it, **“Uncertainty is the enemy of philanthropy.”** How well we know this.

In September of 2008, when Wall Street was begging Congress for a multibillion-dollar bailout, our gift-giving plummeted almost in direct proportion to those ubiquitous arrows on charts that monitor plunging financial markets, diving stocks and fleeing investors.

Perhaps my husband, David, and I are checking our retirement savings, our pension plans, and our mutual benefits portfolio? Well, hardly. In 1993, while leading a communications ministry that included the national radio broadcast, *The Chapel of the Air*, the

TV program *You Need to Know*, and the much-used *50-Day Spiritual Adventure* for churches, we were accused of being New Age and heretical. Obviously, we were amazed by these accusations, but nevertheless, David and I eventually faced a \$2.6-million debt caused by “uncertainty” in our general donor base.

Everything we had—our home, our life insurance, our small savings, an inheritance from a parent—was invested into the ministry in hopes of being able to stabilize ourselves financially and pay back the debt. Once, we had a listenership of hundreds of thousands, a church list of 350,000, a donor base of 35,000 and a staff of 55. Now, there are about 550 people who give to us because they believe in us, a large number of whom are watching their own retirement savings disappear. The only income we can count on is our Social Security checks and a monthly gift from a dear friend who credits David with being his spiritual mentor. For everything—food on the table, the roof over our head, clothes on our back, gas in the car—we look totally to God to supply. Like missionaries and ministers in times when there were no pensions or retirement funds, we are now facing our senior years dependent upon His sustaining provision.

The truth is, we have nothing invested in these failing markets, nothing saved in banks, no reserves of any kind—not on this earth, at least. David is 72, and I am 66. In fact, we have spent the last 15 years being rigorously tutored in God’s School of Advanced Finances. Consequently, the second reason I’m so invested in this far-reaching financial catastrophe is because of the vast wealth I do hold—the knowledge of how to survive when monies are no longer there to protect and underwrite you.

Culled from the hard-won lessons of my own life, here are six rules for weathering financial blowouts. They worked (and are still working) for us, and perhaps they will help you.

RULE #1: Remember that most distresses are never as bad as you think they are going to be (well, some are worse), and most are not what you fear.

It is uncertainty, not knowing what will happen, that exacerbates anxiety. We ask over and over: “What if we lose everything—our home, our investments, our jobs, our security?” Panic elevates when we watch people move from their houses due to foreclosures—the neighbor across the street with the little boy who was constantly hanging out with us—when we hear about whole communities wiped out by hurricanes or fires or floods—an elderly aunt who is now homeless, or when our friends confide that their stock investments have turned to junk—a pastor who uses his own depletion to personalize a Sunday sermon to ask, “Where did it all go?”

Please pay attention. I’ve been in that place of severe financial loss. *You may lose a home, you may lose a job—but you will never lose everything.* In fact, often the things that are most enduring, most precious, are what last when everything else of material value vanishes.

How frequently David and I have said to one another over the last 15 years, “Everything that is important—our marriage, our relationship with our children and our grandchildren, our faith in God—all the basic essentials for survival are in tact. In fact, we possess the very things others would pay huge sums to buy.” But in truth, none of the valuables we possess are commodities for purchase.

In the middle of uncertainty, we Christians, who say we believe in a sovereign God, need to throw away our future to Him. Every time anxiety about losing everything rises, we need to habitually pray:

“I place my life and livelihood in Your hands.

I choose to trust that You are working on my behalf.

Whatever path You appoint is the right path.

I will walk along it staying focused upon Your directions.”

During morning prayers recently, a particular refrain caught my attention. It is a psalm for days of economic peril. Refrain: “*Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our life.*”

Rule #2: Keep fear and panic from taking over.

How well I remember that wretched knot in the middle of my stomach during those years when we were fighting for our ministry’s survival. It jammed against my lungs like a sucking monster and attempted to do my breathing (and thinking) for me. Fear has a life and existence of its own: It will possess you if you give it the advantage.

Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International*, reminds us in his bestseller *The Post-American World* that disconnects often exist between global reality and newspaper proclamations: “Don’t believe everything you see on television. Our anecdotal impression turns out to be wrong. War and violence have declined dramatically over the last two decades. A team of scholars at the University of Maryland’s Center for International Development and Conflict Management traced the data carefully and came to the following conclusion: ‘The general magnitude of global warfare has decreased by over sixty percent (since the mid-1980s), falling by the end of 2004 to its lowest level since the late 1950s.’”

During frantic times, we need to remember that panic can overwhelm the geography of a newspaper page but be a tiny blip on the geography of the world's face. Since headlines are designed to attract readers and sensation is the diet that keeps viewers feeding, we must develop the habit of going to the Source of all Good News to ask, "Good Lord, what is really true?"

Hard times are when we learn whether or not we really believe what we say (and often teach others) we believe. God is good. (Really?—is He?) God is in control. (Really? How can you prove that?) God brings beauty out of ashes. (Oh, is that so? Where is the beauty in this dump heap?)

In October of 2008, when our donor revenues began to rapidly decline (and when I could not avoid the constant dire-filled financial reports), that familiar gripping knot sought to slam up behind my breastbone. But I was in prayer that morning, and I looked to the One who gives truth. *So? What has changed in these economic hard times?*, I heard in my soul. *Has God changed? Is He not still the everlasting Provider, the ever-aware God who cares, who listens and hears and understands? What has changed?*

Sometimes I need a little reminding, but this is the truth: God is good. He is in control. He brings beauty out of ashes. The world may be changing, but the essential reality holds true: He has not changed.

Refrain: *"Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our life."*

"He is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble."

Rule #3: Do the hard work of praise and thanksgiving in the middle of the collapse.

OK, we all know this is a preposterous response to life's calamities. Thank God when a child is dying? Praise God when floodwaters stand four feet high in the living room, slurping up the plaster and leaving a trail of mold and gritty decay as they recede? Thank God when the savings have been wiped out and the economy of our community is destroyed?

Yes. I'm sorry, but David and I didn't create this rule; we just practice it. "Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Philippians 4:5, RSV. Deciding to practice this seeming irrational behavior when the world is falling apart around us is a matter of obedience—nothing more or less.

Scripture is adamant about practicing the power of the positive opposite. Refuse, it teaches, the temptation to give back in negative response. Bless your enemies; pray for those who persecute you. This is the positive opposite; there is power in its use. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:7, RSV.

Practicing the positive opposite frees us from the clutches of worry, terror, confusion and woe-is-me thinking. David and I frequently say to one another, "Considering the stress we've gone through over the last 15 years, it is amazing that we are still healthy." We give thanks for that to being obedient to scriptural suggestions we didn't always rationally understand.

Refrain: *"Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our lives."*

"So we will not fear, even if the earthquakes come and the mountains fall into the sea."

Rule #4: Learn that every collapse (every single one) has an opportunity (or multiple opportunities) hidden in it.

I cannot tell you, nor will I try to convince you, what joy it is to live by faith! While writing this article, I had \$25.55 in my bank account (my Social Security check does not arrive for another two weeks) and \$4.00 in my purse. As I pointed out earlier, the Mainses are hardly dealing in high finance here. Today, David filled my gas tank and gave me half of the \$40 leftover (splitting revenues out of the little he had in his pocket). My daughter shared her family dinner, a Beef Bourguignon made with a delicious prune sauce, and I whipped together a tomato/feta cheese/basil salad from the gift of tomatoes a Covenant Group friend shared from her garden. Even when finances are short, life is good.

We took a cruise together this summer with our two eldest grandchildren—don't ask me how we expected to pay for this except that I am the daughter of an exceedingly wealthy Father. Knowing that there is a fine line between faith and presumption, David and I nevertheless decided this: We really don't have money enough to grab these moments; but then, we really don't have life enough not to grab them. There is a window of opportunity in which our grandchildren will still delight in being with us and when we will have enough strength and energy to keep up with them.

We left for France this fall with 15 pilgrims, and I am planning a microcredit-study journey to Kenya for those serious about intercultural dialogue that results in tangible solutions. (I love to travel and have discovered how to do so without money—take a group of people, add a little margin to cover the administration of a thousand niggling but crucial details, have your way paid and enjoy—mostly—delightful companionship.)

David and I have become wealthy in the knowledge of God's love and care. We rest content (most of the time) in the fact that we are children of a bountiful Heavenly Father. God holds the future (and the present) we have thrown away to Him. We have no retirement account—except the one He is preparing as a surprise for us (I can't wait!) Indeed, having gained peace in the last 15 years, we are at peace regarding the next 15.

You are only poor when you allow yourself to develop a poverty mentality. And that is the first prison into which our Enemy seeks to throw us—*You have nothing. You have nothing,* he hisses in our ear.

Aha!—there is a simple axiom for combating this foolery: Want not, whine not. God is enough: He is more than you can ever know; there is bounty in His love. Faith is a gift that makes every day an adventure. The opportunities in collapse are multiple.

Refrain: *“Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our lives.”*

“Let the oceans roll and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge.”

Rule #5: Financial blowouts can create the kind of community we have forgotten and yet long for in the deepest part of our beings.

I suspect that we Christians need to lead the way in breaking up our government dependency. We need to increase our God-given Body of Christ interdependency. We need to explode the myth that unless we have money we can't solve problems. What a deception that is! (My personal mantra learned during these years in God's School of Finance is: We don't need money. We don't need money. We only need Him, the Provider and Sustainer.)

Creativity and ingenuity are our best currencies. So, let's brainstorm together all the ways we can solve our personal, citywide, regional and national problems. We need to develop neighborhood architectures for helping one another; we need to joyfully explore the alternate barter, recycle and trade economies. I do most of my clothes-shopping at Goodwill. I bought a pair of Ralph Lauren pants (\$400 online) for \$4. I got a great black leather jacket with a furred hood for \$30. "You look terrific!" said some younger women I've mentored but hadn't seen for a year. Well, losing 22 of the 30 pounds I gained during our season of financial discontent helped, but letting my hair go white (consequently, \$22 for a haircut at the JCPenney Salon—no styling, walking out with my hair wet—instead of \$160 for cut, color, styling, blow-dry and tip) not only saves money, it honors the fact that I have achieved these older years. A Daisy Fuentes tunic and Tommy Hilfiger black jeans, \$4 apiece from Goodwill, finished the look.

Too bad the concept of community organizer came under such disapprobation in the last election, because God is the original Community Organizer. His platform always includes pulling together a group of unlikely folk who are willing to be inspired by the Holy Spirit to make amazing differences in the world. What a wonderful thing—to create neighborhoods where we actually feel free to borrow sugar, not to mention a car, where we can chat over fences, reinstitute the coffee klatch, tend to those who are feeble, and even know one another's names and what we each do in the world. Together, we can change the environment around us. Together, we can learn that the meaning of the word "stranger" is not "the neighbor I don't know who lives next door."

On one sub-zero day this winter, my African-American neighbor, new to our community, phoned. "How are you doing over there?" she asked. "Is your furnace OK? Are you warm?" I have never had another neighbor, in all the years we've lived in the Chicago-area inquire as to

our being warm! Needing one another in financial hard times, we can learn again the gift of helping one another. Last summer at Home Depot I bought some clearance table burnished brass lamps for outside our home. My daughter-in-law's father is a handyman, so he graciously came to teach me how to install the lights—he mounted one with me acting as an assistant apprentice, passing tools and carefully watching over his shoulder. I installed the remaining two without his help and proudly bragged to everyone who came in the front door, “I did it myself.”

A home-science class in high school taught me the basics of electrical circuitry, so I've always been able to install chandeliers and exchange toggle wall switches with dimmers, but the outdoor practicum last summer emboldened me to get a good how-to book and rewire lamps found in garage sales. This fall, while changing the candelabra sleeves on the two chandeliers that hang over our dining-room table, I noticed the wires were badly frayed. “I can't put these back up without rewiring them,” I said to my husband. “It's a fire-hazard.” My chandeliers hang safely now—new white candelabra sleeves and new wiring.

What else can we teach one another if we just realize we have priceless gifts to give?

Refrain: *“Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our lives.”*

“The Lord Almighty is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.”

Rule #6: No matter how financially depleted you are,

share what little you have with those who also have little.

Being without is a comparative condition. You are only impoverished if you have a poverty mentality. One week I came home disappointed. I had gladly spoken without receiving

an honorarium for a friend who is the chaplain at a retirement center. “Oh, we’ll set up a book table,” she said, thinking to compensate me in some way. So I hauled books for a table, drove 60 minutes in rush hour traffic through a snow storm on a trek that would normally take 15 minutes. I enjoyed the women, had a great conversation at the tea table, was happy to see where my friend worked, and sold four books—a total of \$70. Retirees are trying to get rid of books, not accumulate more of them.

“That’s not bad,” said my husband. He was right, of course; \$70 is \$70, but I had been hoping to make several hundred dollars so I could share half of it with a young friend whose husband had been laid off work.

And what’s to keep you from sharing what you have anyway? prodded that inner voice early the next morning. (Bank balances, even small ones, are at hazard in prayer times.) So I took the \$70, added \$30 from my checking account and mailed a \$100 check to my younger friend “for gas or for milk for the children.” And the next day, the very next day, a colleague dropped by to pick up three other books and left a check of \$25, and someone else picked up more books for \$70. And that inner word again: *So, could you not trust me to replace \$100?*

I am well aware that I am dealing in microfinance here, but it is in the minutiae of dollars that God shows His hand. Some 37 years of prayer journals, now neatly compiled in large five-inch three-ring binders is my chronicle of provision. They are the accounting ledgers into which I have recorded with exactitude the amounts I have needed and the amounts He has provided. My conclusion?—He takes care of us. He provides for what we need and for what we need to give to others in need. His nudges toward acts of mercy are not conditional—based on how much or how little we have—they are based on His expectations and our obedience.

The day after my lesson in obeying God by sending \$100 to a friend, my husband went to pick up the mail at the post office and discovered a personal gift made out to us from a donor who has supported our ministry for decades. It was a check for enough money to pay off all our debts, including the remnants of what we owed on the Alaska trip. How God must have been laughing at my hesitation to share \$100 knowing that this generous gift was in the mail. (These stories out of the record of my life do have a tendency to be absurdly funny, wonderfully so.) From that gift, David sat down and wrote the same friend a check for \$1500.

The worst thing that can happen to any of us in financial distress is that we cease to be charitable, generous people. (You thought the worst thing was receiving a pay cut.) No, no, it is that we will become miserly. It is in the giving we receive, not in the hoarding.

Refrain: *“Behold, God is our helper; it is the Lord who sustains our lives.”*

Yes, all the prognosticators tell us that terrible times are ahead. But let me proclaim to you the word messengers always announce when God is near—“Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!” God is our helper. I give personal testimony to this truth. This last year, with an economic crisis that is looming and with a donor base that is ageing, through no earnings of our own, we are suddenly debt free in the ministry and in our personal lives for the first time in 12 years.

Note: Refrain is from Psalm 54: 4 and from Psalm (?)