

The Gift of Giving
By Anne MacCormack

Living during the Great Depression, to put it mildly, wasn't easy. Almost all who lived through that period were affected to some degree—the poor lost what little they had, middle-income families became the poor, and even many of the well-to-do lost their complete fortunes.....my husband lived in a chicken coop in Freehold with his parents and two brothers for two years. Times were extremely tough for some, and money was tight for everyone. People learned how to make do and live on much less than was required, and children learned not to complain and did without their heart's desires. Food was not the problem, but lack of money to purchase the food was, and so some children went to bed hungry. Any kind of luxury would have been out of the question, and many of the things that our children enjoy today and take for granted also were not an option.

I was a very fortunate kid because while my family would never be considered wealthy by any stretch of imagination, we were better off than many other families because my dad had a job. That was a huge advantage, and he was more able to provide the essential needs of our family than were many of our neighbors who had little in the way of material possessions. Even though I never felt terribly deprived, in my young heart of hearts I was aware of the times and I knew not to ask for anything and relied heavily on hope which occasionally became a reality, but often remained a fantasy. But I was a happy kid, and so were my friends, some of whom were totally unaware that they were poor. God has a way of shielding his children from hardships through His teaching and His love for us. Wasting not, resourcefulness, creativity, sharing, appreciation, and being content with less are valuable attributes for a lifetime and precious gifts from God.

My father had a very limited formal education, but he was very smart—street smart and industrious and became a skilled blue-collar worker—an operating engineer for a large heavy construction company. And he was kind. Having a very generous nature, he took great pleasure in helping those in need in small ways; and most of the time, he did it secretly. We lived in a small apartment—I did not have a bedroom, but slept on the pull-out sofa in the living room. A family of four who lived in our building was evicted

from their apartment because the father had lost his job and was no longer able to pay the rent. We didn't know them very well at the time, but Dad invited them to move in with us and helped them pack up all their worldly possessions, and jam them into our small living space. They stayed with us for several months until they were back on their feet. The pure logic of something like that would be unthinkable today, but it's true, it happened, it worked, and we were all better for the experience. While our four parents were probably quite uncomfortable in such cramped quarters, I thought the arrangement was fantastic and remember fondly what fun I had living with them and their two daughters. Our two families became lifelong friends.

Every Friday was pay day , and I sat on the stoop of our apartment house anxiously waiting for Dad to arrive home from work with the little brown envelope that contained his salary in cash. After supper, we would gather in the living room to watch him open the envelope. I honestly don't remember how much money was in it, but I know it was far less than \$100. Dad would carefully remove the cash from the envelope and divide it up for various expenses for my mother to manage--some went in his pocket, and I would get a quarter for being good and helping my mother with chores. (That quarter provided 10 cents for two-way bus transportation to the movies, 10 cents for the movie itself, and 5 cents for candy.....what a haul! I usually made a few dimes every week for going to the local A&P for people in the building, and that got me through for some penny candy and some ice cream) Occasionally when Dad earned a little extra overtime pay, he would allow me to count the bills and the coins in the envelope. My eyes glistened as I spotted a couple of 20's and my heart thumped with the thought that I might get a little extra allowance. A few times, I got lucky, but it was not a given, and I knew it.

After the pay-outs, Dad would go to his desk and take out two five-dollar bills from his pay. He carefully addressed two envelopes to two different families who were experiencing difficulties, inserted a five dollar bill in each, stamped and sealed them, and then gave them to me to mail. I loved having some part in this mystery giving as no note or identification was ever included, and this ritual went on week after week. One of the

recipients, I still remember, was a young widow struggling to raise her two little daughters. Five dollars seems like nothing today, but then a loaf of bread was about 8 cents and a quart of milk was about 20 cents; so it probably was a God-send to her, and she never knew or met the giver.

Yes, the Depression was truly a challenging decade, but it was a wonderful time too—a time when folks cared for each other and shared what they had ...and it was a time for building character. Children are never too young to learn the value of giving; and when I think of my father, I think of his example of giving which cannot be measured in dollars but only from the heart. I also think of Matthew 25:40 that says, “***The king will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’***”