

Wilderness of uncertainty: Forgotten virtues to relearn

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

Theologian N. T. Wright says that even when you are in the Promised Land you are never far from the wilderness. I'm not the only preacher who has pondered how our nation has gone so quickly from the promised land of abundance to a wilderness of economic uncertainty. This recession is a new place for most of us. We had come to assume uninterrupted economic growth and the safety and stability of our investments and of the institutions we treasure and support—churches, seminaries, colleges, hospitals.

I do not believe that God is in the business of correcting a misdirected global economy. But because I am a Christian, I do believe that God comes into the wilderness, and because of that I believe there are always redemptive outcomes and things to learn. No good, of course, comes from losing your home, your job, your health insurance. But God can make something good happen in the midst of bad circumstances. Maybe what this crisis can teach us is the relative value of things, the true value of what you treasure most.

A member of my congregation sent me two articles on the economy recently. One was tongue-in-cheek, "20 Things that Won't Survive the Crisis"—funny in a painful way. What won't survive: "your 401(k)," for instance. And the Hummer. "The Chinese will probably buy Hummers and make a fortune selling them as mobile homes."

The other piece was "13 Unexpected Consequences of the Financial Crisis," one of which is that our children will learn from our Depression-era parents, not from us, to be savers. It reminded me that I grew up in a happy, modest home which by the standards to which I have become accustomed was poor, but we didn't know it. It reminded me that my father, who became an adult in the Depression, never owned a credit card and never understood the logic of paying interest to fill your tank with gas.

The late Tim Russert, host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, wrote a delightful book about his father, *Big Russ and Me*. His father was a modest man who worked hard and raised his family in a blue-collar neighborhood of South Buffalo and was always admired and respected by his many friends. Big Russ loved cars, but he drove used cars and said that someday he'd like to own a new Cadillac. Tim used to say that someday he'd buy his dad a brand new Cadillac.

Before his father's 75th birthday, Russert, now very successful, called his dad and said, "OK, I'm finally in a position to buy you a new car. When I come home for Thanksgiving we'll pick it up." He sent his father catalogs for Cadillac, Mercedes and Lexus cars: "You can have any car you want, with options."

When he came home for the holiday, Russert and his father drove to pick up the new car his father had chosen—a black Ford Crown Victoria. "Dad—it's a cop car."

On the drive home Tim had to ask: "When I was a kid you always said you wanted a Cadillac. Why the Ford?" His father's answer: "Do I think it's a better car? No. But if I came home with a fancy Cadillac, do you know what people would say?" 'What happened to Tim [Sr.]? He's got too big for us. His kid makes it big and now he's driving a Cadillac.' No, I can't do that. This is what I want. This is who I am."

If there is anything redemptive about this crisis, it is the possibility it offers to learn again the virtues we may have forgotten—modesty, frugality, responsibility, community—and to learn again who we are.