

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
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“Paint Business Woes”
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I visited home the other weekend. My brother turned sixty and there was a party. His daughter recently was married in a private family wedding out in California. So she came east to show off her new husband. It was a combined affair. The party gave a chance to visit my father and mother, which I, negligent son, fail to do often enough.

Dad opened up. Despite the fun party, it turned sad. After 80 years, my father, brother, and sisters are experiencing tough times at our family paint business with homeowners postponing hiring painting contractors, less construction these days.

My parents are at the finger-cramping age when they've had my sister replace the child proof caps on their medicine bottles. 11 bottles sit in the basket on the kitchen table. Mom and Dad are puzzled by the disappearance (the looting?) of their affluence. Strident voices on TV assigning blame have become magnets to the needles of their apprehension and unspoken anger.

What went wrong with the economy? Why did their investments evaporate into the clouds only to rain into someone else's pocket? The ready cash in the wallet isn't there the way it used to be. It used to be Dad would show affection by chasing me around the lawn to stick a \$20 bill in my pocket. Now he doesn't have \$20 in his.

We tried to console. There is a mighty difference between failure due to your fault and failure due to circumstances beyond your control. Sometimes you cause it. Sometimes the bird just poops on you.

Either way, both lead to the same result. They should be at the pinnacle, basking in the sunny rewards of decades of hard work, admiring the spectacular landscape of satisfying success. Instead, they sadly represent the shrinking of America's middle class.

If my recent cross-country tour of America has made me anything, it is depressed. Given the dying towns and the boarded up shops I saw while on the road, our small town has it very good. For a small town, we're fortunate because we still have a middle class. We're the exception. Dad worries whether they can float the business through winter.

It isn't fair.

We've heard platitudes about failure. I even believe most of them.

How it is healthy to fail. For a football team or golf team, there's nothing worse than winning all the time. It becomes a curse and you actually can feel relieved when you

finally lose a game. How failure is the nursemaid to fame. How if it doesn't kill you it makes you stronger.

Yet, is it fair that at 85 years old my father – still working 10 hour days, 6 days a week, as he has for 60 years -- should think of himself as a failure? Sixty years of labor's sweat have gone into the business.

You can end up blaming more than solving. You can get bitter.

You may be familiar with Murphy's Law: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Well, there's a follow-up to Murphy's Law called Flanagan's Principle. Flanagan adds: Murphy was an optimist.

Take a look around here. We've had a taste of it. Much of my life's work hasn't turned out exactly where I, when young and untested, imagined it would be. Where's the fame? Where's the sanctuary bursting with ardent listeners? Where's the professorship? Where's that wallet thick with ready cash? There's enough failure to go around. You can only learn from it and move on.

Are we learning from disappointment? It is partly why we in town and church, in worship and commerce, keep exploring which changes we must implement.

The reality is that doing nothing is a change of a kind; being stagnant is change of a bad kind. I'd rather choose the kind of change while we can. Changing for the better is wisest while you are in good shape and still can.

I am trying to choose my change. If I expect other to, I better be first in line. I have of late learnt that I have gotten too comfortable. I'm stuck in my successful rut. Tenure has made me lazy. Realizing this is painful. Reinventing myself is uncomfortable. This is hard trying to learn how to improve what I've been doing for years. Maybe I also need to revisit how I define what it means to be successful. Maybe you first have to be satisfied in your own skin that you did you best, regardless the result.