

Good afternoon Bro. Spriggs,

Different times when I've liked something you've written, or posted an occasional comment, I've wondered if you remember me. Maybe you do, maybe you don't, but I wanted to send you this message anyway.

What you wrote today really hit home - I was just commenting to some colleagues the other day how I was raised poor, but didn't know it. Dad's little "turn of the (20th) century" print shop helped them be able to pay (most of) the bills realized in raising a family of five kids. But, there was always plenty of laughter, loads of prayer, more than enough food, and love to share with each other and beyond. Spiritually, that was worth more than any finances would have provided. Like many others, I've stated that I was forever spoiled for the fake, since I lived in the environment of true Christianity during my formative years, and even to the point of marriage.

In the mid-eighties, when you were president of Penn View, you came to Brushton Camp with a singing group. That quartet included two of my cousins, Ben and Andy Hardy. I was enrolled in a Master's degree program in Mathematics at SUNY Potsdam, and you spoke to me about coming to Penn View when I graduated, since you wanted to have a higher level of average qualifications among your faculty than was true at that time. It was an exciting conversation, and we planned to discuss it further when my graduation date arrived in 1988. Alas, at that point you were no longer with Penn View, and I did not feel any pull in that direction. Doors opened following my student teaching in a local school for me to assume a position there, and from 1988 to 1998 I taught high school mathematics in Brasher Falls Central School, the community where we now live. In 1998, or actually a year or so prior to that, some conditions at the district led me to look for another job, and I had always wanted to work at my alma mater in Massena. Those doors opened in 1998, and I happily joined that high school faculty. A bit larger than the Brasher district, there were more politics, and a heightened sense of unhealthy competition, and by 2001 I was a bit restless. I began to wonder if God had something different in store. In 2003, through some God-directed circumstances, I was able to secure employment at my current location of SUNY Potsdam, the college from which I had graduated.

That makes a nice story of my employment history, but on its own it is simply that. In today's world, it's not unusual to change jobs a couple of times, but I found myself wondering if I just couldn't be satisfied. Why were these first two jobs less than I had anticipated? Had I missed something with Penn View or another Bible school? Should I have stepped out on faith based on our conversation in the mid-80s, even though I didn't feel that draw? What was being worked out through this circuitous path?

In 1990, I married my sweetheart. Her family had long been connected with our church, and due to some tragic circumstances, her immediate family had begun to attend church again in the 80s. They smoked, they swore, they drank, they were in bowling leagues, they had all the typical "worldly trappings," despite being only one and two generations removed from true, godly living. But God began to faithfully work on their hearts. The father was diagnosed with cancer and passed away too young, in his fifties. Not too long after that, also at Brushton Camp, the mother and one daughter - now my wife of over 20 years - got gloriously saved.

We were married two weeks after my wife graduate from high school, so she went to college. Then, she went to graduate school, as no jobs were available right away. She finished a Master's degree in 1997, and was able to secure employment in 1998; we had been married just over eight years. In that period of time, my Dad also passed away in July of 1995. Mom died in December of 1998. My siblings and I became adult orphans.

Time flew by, as it has a way of doing. We wanted children, but never had "news" to share with others. We wondered, we prayed, but nothing changed...

In 2003, after 13 years of marriage, we decided to pursue some answers to why we remained childless. Despite our waiting and suspicions, the news that we received was still devastating. The professional opinion was that no children were in our future; adoption was presented as a possibility.

Years continued to pass by quickly, but the emotional pain made each day seem endless. Others our age not only had children, but were seeing them drive, graduate, and get married themselves. Some who bore children quite young were actually becoming grandparents. We asked God for peace as a couple, but none came. All options, whether "simple" adoption or treatment attempts, were exceptionally expensive - we're teachers, and the "richness" to which you and I have both referred was not able to pay large medical bills for optional treatments.

In 2007, we began to investigate more details. Health insurance would pay for some diagnostic costs, while we would simply bear the other expenses. Ultimately, after some expert consultation, we decided to proceed with one cycle of fertility treatments; the anticipated costs were \$30,000. We had previously bought new cars on installment plans, and we saw this as comparable. We would finance whatever part we could not pay for in advance, and perhaps be able to have a family of our own. For a combination of reasons, some within the family and some totally external, but in an identical vein, we had decided that adoption would be a secondary pursuit, subject to the outcome of this series of events.

Wendy and I also both have medical FSA plans (flexible spending account) through our respective employments, so we were maximizing the use of those, which simply allows us to pay for medical treatments with untaxed money. That would cover a little less than one quarter of the costs, and there would be some incidental savings since we wouldn't be paying tax on that income. The plan was moving forward. God had made it clear we could proceed.

Knowing you as much as I do - having read your book "Who Patched the Roof?" - I suspect you've joked with God from time to time. I have as well. My tongue-in-cheek comment while making all of the complicated arrangements for our treatment cycle, including arranging housing in New York City for two country bumpkins for over two weeks, was that I'd rather give the money away if God would just provide a miracle! I already had the miracle figured out, and it was a natural pregnancy the way it worked for "other people." He had something else in mind. (Has He ever messed with one of YOUR perfectly good plans??) :)

As an employee of NYS, our FSA was being administered through an office in Florida. Approval for payroll deductions went through offices in our state capital of Albany. I was requesting a sizable amount of deduction in the fall of 2008, since we were scheduled for a December treatment cycle. (I could only request this since I had been on an approved leave the year before, 2007-08, teaching at a neighboring university here in Potsdam, NY. That seemed "fortuitous.") On the evening of September 9, 2008, my phone rang at home. A woman named Joan was calling to verify that I wanted this substantial amount deducted from my paychecks for the fall - her apologetic explanation was that, "this money has to be used before the end of 2008, or you'll lose it." Up to that point, we were quite private with our plans, though our families knew. In fact, in the emotional state I was in, I would have expected myself to curtly brush off her inquiry. For some reason, however, I explained our circumstances briefly. I told her that we were undergoing a series of fertility treatments in December, and would be using this money to offset some of the expenses, thanking her for her concern. There was a pause. She then said,

"Aren't you a NYS employee?" My reply was, "Yes." She responded, "Don't you have the Empire Plan?" I told her I did not - when I was first hired at SUNY Potsdam, I had turned down the state health insurance because Wendy's coverage was superior, and was the plan I'd had previously. Joan then told me, "I think the Empire Plan would cover this - you should look into that. Of course, you wouldn't be able to get enrolled until after the first of the year." I used my dry mouth to thank her and hung up. Stunned, I shared this news with Wendy, and we quickly agreed that waiting another few months, if necessary, was certainly worth it if this was true. You see, we had originally been scheduled for a September 2008 series of treatments. Through some unexplained foul-up, our names did not get on the September schedule, and we were deferred until December. That was very disappointing, but it began to make sense.

I immediately contacted my human resources office. They were closed, but the next morning they replied to my email, and confirmed that what Joan had suspected was true. I called to speak to Sheila, who is in charge of benefits in our HR office. In the phone conversation, she told me that because I had been on approved leave the previous year, my enrollment could be processed immediately, and the coverage would take effect on October 3. Wow...no further delay...

Now, two things were still potential issues. When we had been researching facilities, we had chosen the Center for Reproductive Medicine and Infertility (CRMI) in NYC. The world-renowned experts on staff there gave us the best likelihood of success at our ages. This was likely the only time in life we would buy a Cadillac, to further my analogy of buying a new car. What were the chances that this facility would be approved by the NYS insurance? In further discussion with HR personnel, I was put in touch with some experts about the infertility coverage. They informed me that in addition to the usual 80/20 coverage until the yearly out of pocket limits were met, NYS also had a "Centers of Excellence" program. These were places where a number of factors of evaluation came together to ensure a quality program. At those facilities, payment was 100% for covered treatments, with no co-pays. Guess what facility was on the list? I think you got it!

The other outstanding issue was that we now no longer needed the sum of money we had set aside for our FSAs. After several phone calls - Albany, Florida, Brasher Falls, Richville (where Wendy's FSA is administered), we were able to complete the cancellation of both of those amounts, prior to any negative impact on a single payroll check.

One more thing - we still had to travel to, and stay in, New York City for nearly three weeks. That's not cheap! I did manage to find a relatively inexpensive hotel just 18 miles outside of the city; it was in NJ, and it was about \$80 per night. Hmm...\$80 x 20 = \$1600. Three weeks of groceries - a couple hundred dollars, but we'd pay that at home too. Travel - 750 miles plus several commutes into the city, including \$8 each time to cross the George Washington Bridge - probably a couple hundred dollars more. This would have all been in addition to the costs of treatments, but we hadn't really considered it!

My plan documents arrived, and I began to read them carefully. I was now worried that something would fall through the cracks, and that we'd end up with some huge bills because of a loophole or some oversight. In my reading, I paid particular attention to the Centers of Excellence materials. It seemed that everything was as I had been led to believe. "Oh wait, what's this paragraph?" If you are traveling to a Center of Excellence that is more than 100 miles from your home, the insurance will also reimburse you for travel (at the IRS medical rate), lodging, and food while there. Can I really believe this?? After years of feeling like God doesn't care, is He trying this hard to convince me otherwise?

We returned home on December 17, 2008, after successful treatments. On Christmas day 2008, Wendy had a positive pregnancy test. We were ecstatic!

On February 18, 2009, after ultrasounds in which we saw and heard a tiny baby's heartbeat, we found out that our child was no longer alive. This felt like a terrible letdown. When people speak about disappointment in God, I can relate to those feelings. Even worse was the sense that we had been teased with success, only to be dropped cold. Looking back, I think that we had already planned to financially absorb one cycle; God wanted to make sure that we knew this was only possible because of Him. In the summer of 2009, we went for a second cycle - treatments were successful, but no pregnancy resulted from that series. Discouragement deepened; Satan fought.

A little over a year ago, we went for "round 3." Again, treatments were successful, and again a pregnancy resulted. We were excited and scared. On February 18, 2010, we went to NYC for the first ultrasound of that pregnancy, exactly one year from the date of finding out our first baby was with Jesus. We saw the little kid, and a tiny flickering heartbeat, but we had been there before. We were cautious, but thankful. We wanted assurance that this would come to a good end.

For a different reason than before, days seemed to crawl by. Emotional baggage had begun to ease, but it was replaced with the stress of worry, especially if anything unexpected happened. Then, in August, when Wendy began to have "cramps," we were concerned. But, on August 9, 2010, little Mathias Joseph Straight was born into this world at 3 lbs, 9 oz. Since he was premature, he spent a little over five weeks in the hospital, and we were there with him. Wendy had already been approved to take the 2010-11 year off from teaching, so she is with him full time. I work my day job, distracted because I'm now a father, and that's beginning to sink in.

Why did I tell you all of this? I really think that you were a part of this. Maybe even your life's path, which took you away from Penn View before I had completed school, factored in. Perhaps if we had gotten in touch at that point, because you were still at PVBI, I would have ended up with a different outcome. I think (well, I'm sure, actually) that God knew where Wendy and I needed to be in order to work this all out. Yes, He could have done it through other circumstances, but doesn't this paint a beautiful picture of His love for us?

Maybe I've also sat at the sidelines and seen some of the pain you've experienced as a father, and it has given me cause to consider that being a parent isn't always about coos and giggles, but that there are likely to be some tough times. Seeing your unwavering support for your son allows me to reflect back on my own father's belief in each of his children. It reminds me that I must train up this little soul in the ways of God, support him during good and bad times, and leave the ultimate results with God, once my "control" is gone. You've never tried to remove blame for your son's choices, but the underlying love you have so obviously maintained in spite of them is a tremendous example for me and other onlookers.

I didn't intend to write this extensively when I began some hours ago. I've mixed it in with my duties at work today as time has allowed, so I hope it doesn't seem disconnected. You need not keep these details confidential, if an opportunity to share them would be helpful to another. Someday, as God allows, I hope to document the experiences and "lessons learned" a bit more completely. I've never written a book, and I'm a "math guy," but perhaps I'll be able to at some point.

God bless you, Bro. Spriggs. Thank you for your openness - by showing yourself human, you smooth the Christian path for other humans as well.

-Don