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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: The Depression Diet

Warning: If you think this is something about trials, hit the delete key. It has nothing to do with trials.

Right now the well is dry on trials, but as a blogger, I feel the urge to write even if not about trials. So here goes.

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I have been blessed by three wonderful daughters, Julie, Nancy, and Jill. As a father I was obliged to teach them things not covered by their mother. One of the lessons they remember is about the "depression diet".

There the three of them sat, perched like pigeons on a power line facing into the wind at the kitchen counter. Munching away with the evening "news" running in the background as I walked in from work.

It was during hard times in the mid 70s. Jobs were hard to find and people were losing them regardless of their walk in life. The piece on TV as I unloaded my stuff was about people like me standing in soup lines. The piece prompted me to ask all three of them and no one in particular "What do you think would happen here if I lost my job"?

I wondered if any of them knew how food got to the table. I was not impressed with the answers.

Julie posited that we would go to the A&P for more food. Nancy had little to add and Jill was content simply with a nod of agreement.

I pressed to make the image of soup lines and unemployment more vivid and personal, but the answers and proposed "solutions" got no better. "My God", I thought, "They really do think money grows on trees" (in spite of constant reminders from me to the contrary). What is a poor Father to do? Surely I cannot let them go into life with such thoughts in their heads!

That evening, as we talked, I announced that we were going to undertake a family experiment (A confession: I did not have IRB approval nor did I bother to obtain signed consents). "We are going on a depression diet for 28 days, starting next week". (The delay was to allow supplies in the pantry and refrigerator to be depleted.) We would have \$30 dollars per week for food. The five of us (plus Cheb, our dog – named after the Russian Mathematician, Pafnuty Lvovich Chebyshev) would live on \$30 a week!

There was the usual grumbling but I pressed on with the "protocol". "No school lunches and no snacking at neighbors after school".

Not to be out done, Julie asked "What about you Dad when you go out of town? What are you going to eat?". I said the same applies to me. "No eating out".

As it turned out, that rule for me required some adroit maneuvering and "excuse" making. There was, as I recall, a two day meeting during the "experiment" – a meeting complete with luncheons and an evening banquet. I remember sitting in my room eating a sandwich in lieu of being at the evening banquet.

The brunt of the load fell on my wife as shopper and cook. She had the job of staying in budget and "menu" planning. She had to keep track of the cost of items as she shopped so as to not go over \$30. If she went over she had to take things out of the cart until she was within budget.

The experiment provided invaluable lessons. One was that \$30 per week was not enough for my wife to take advantage of store specials. Normally, she would stock-up on staples that were on "sale". That was not possible on the depression diet because buying extra would have depleted the budget. Hence, she was reduced to what could be afforded and to ignoring specials, even if they would have saved money down the road.

A second lesson was that we had to make drastic changes in our diet. We had to switch from foods high in proteins, like meats, to macaroni and cheese. Macaroni and cheese was all we had many a night.

You also learned what it meant to walk away from the table hungry. We went to bed hungry a lot of nights, especially those nights with soup for supper.

My recall is that we all suffered the experiment with resignation and grace. I do not recall a lot of complaints, in spite of the hunger and frustration of shopping.

We stuck to the diet to the end and ended up better off for the experience.

One thing is certain, I got better answers to the question of what would happen if I lost my job after the experiment!