

Opportunity Knocks

February 16, 2021

September 2008: the Republican Convention has ended, John McCain has become the nominee of the party and he has selected Sarah Palin as his running mate. They have taken the lead in polling and are ahead in the race.

October 2008: Lehman Brothers collapses, the financial markets crash, and the entire world is rocked.

McCain makes a dramatic announcement. He will suspend his campaign and return to Washington. Barak Obama seizes the opportunity and continues to advance his message of “Hope and Change.” The two reactions could not be more different or more consequential. In November, “Hope and Change” beat “Old and Status Quo.”

Or as one Obama administration person said after the election, “Never let a crisis go to waste.”

We have been in a crisis – a worldwide pandemic – for almost a year. Many have suffered – even died. Some businesses have closed. They have been shut down and may never open again. In some cases there was no option; it was the end. Still others have suffered because they did not see the opportunity when it arose – they “went back to Washington.”

As in any crisis, some have seen the opportunity and done very well. They don't talk about it – it would be unseemly to flaunt your success while others suffer – but they saw the opportunity and acted. They invented new ways of operating and seized on new opportunities.

In life, and especially in a crisis, we must ask, “Is the glass half full, half empty – or is there a glass that is full of opportunity?” Obama saw the 2008 crisis as an opportunity, while McCain saw it as a time of fear.

On March 4th, 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt gave his first Inaugural address. The country had come through World War I, the Roaring Twenties, and then as he took office, was in the midst of the Great Depression. Hitler was coming to power in Germany and the world was in crisis. America looked to their new President for leadership. His speech that day has become one of

the most famous. He said,

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

The first part of that quote is the famous part – “the only thing we have to fear is... fear itself.” But it is the second part that has impacted me lately: “terror which paralyzes efforts to turn retreat into advance.” Roosevelt saw opportunity, not retreat. His famous speech was a call to turn from fear induced retreat to opportunity inspired advance.

I am looking at our corporate and cultural landscape and noticing that while some businesses are suffering – Hotels and airlines for example – some are thriving – shipping and in-home entertainment for example. In some cases, there is nothing you can do. The government shuts you down and you are out of business. In other cases, the demand explodes, and your customers are still waiting for packages they should have had for Christmas.

In the midst of it all the great leaders see the moment as opportunity; of stepping back and seeing curbside pick-up, the joy of a home office, or my personal favorite, zoom wine tastings. Opportunity to advance instead of retreat.

In the great depression of 1929, many people lost their jobs and suffered greatly. But in the midst of that depression, Walt Disney started his company. In 1929 Walt saw opportunity and advanced.

The pandemic has caused me to think of new ways to do our Timothy Fellows training – and we’re better for it. We are accessing content we had not thought of before and have a weekly zoom call that we would have never done before the pandemic kept us from meeting in person. We have reached out to coaches we weren’t even thinking about and rearranged some of our curriculum. There was an opportunity, and we will never be the same because of it. We advanced.

As a result of the pandemic our world has changed, and we are never going back to “normal.” There will be a “new normal,” but the world is always changing and there is always a “new normal.”

That is the way the world works. It is always moving from “normal” to “new normal.” In my lifetime I’ve seen the Viet Nam war, the riots of the 60’s, the assassination of a President, the resignation of a President, lines at gas stations in the ‘70s, the fall of the Soviet Union in the ‘80’s, 911 in 2001, the great recession of 2008 and on and on it goes. My parents and grandparents knew two World Wars and the Great Depression. In each instance there was a crisis and a resulting “new normal.” And in each instance, there was an opportunity to advance.

Perhaps we should stop using the phrase “new normal” and just refer to it as “new.” Maybe there is no “normal” there are only constant periods of change and only opportunities for "new."

The question for us is, “What kind of leader will you be in the midst of “new?”

Will you be the kind of leader who inspires others to advance in opportunity or the kind of leader who cowers out of retreat and fear?

Will you lead by running back to Washington or will you advance with hope and change?

Know Who You Are And Be It!