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“Toward Freedom” is an Everything-Voluntary.com series sharing personal stories about the journey toward freedom. Archived stories can be found [here](#). Submit your story to the editor.

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Geneva is a small town in the Finger Lakes region of western New York State. I was born and raised there in a family that was Irish in extraction, Catholic in religion, entrepreneurs by occupation, and thoroughly Democrat in politics. I now realize that by the time I left Geneva for college I was already a libertarian, a fact I credit to my family, especially my mother and father.

Looking back, I was interested in politics at an early age, and libertarian-leaning from nearly the beginning. What is surprising to me, in retrospect, was that everyone wasn't a libertarian. This was the period of the Vietnam War, Nixon's War on Drugs, wage and price controls, Watergate, stagflation, and in New York—big spending Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Nothing was going right in this country and nobody could cover up that fact.

One of my first political memories was watching the Democratic National Convention on the television at my grandparents' house. Hubert Humphrey was the nominee, and was roundly endorsed by my extended family. I vividly remember asking what the difference was between the Democrats and Republicans. My uncle Tim told me that Republicans supported big business and the Democrats were the party of the “little guy.” This description was followed by the unexpected question: What party did I support?

I'm sure they expected me to answer “Democrat.”

Standing on the proverbial hotspot, but firmly behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, I proclaimed that I didn't support either party. After all, why support big business over small

business or the little guy over the big guy? I asked if I could be a Democrat-Republican or a Republican-Democrat, to which one of my uncles responded that the Democratic-Republicans won the presidency in 1800, but was no longer active.

I responded that I would not be able to vote for some time and that I was confident that the Democratic-Republicans would someday make a comeback.

Very little did I know that Hubert Humphrey's opponent would set in motion policies that would make that comeback possible within four years' time in the form of the Libertarian Party, and that I would come to embrace the principles of the Libertarian Party and the old Democratic-Republican Party of Thomas Jefferson.

As the first grandchild on both sides of my family, I was surrounded by a virtual army of aunts and uncles. I credit my family, especially my mother and father, for helping me and allowing me to become what I am today. Naturally, that honor may have been viewed by some as a dubious distinction in the era when being a libertarian, especially a libertarian politician, was a sign of being a radical and a quack, but no one tried to stop me.

My mother was very influential in my life. She was not overly protective, encouraged me to try new things, and believed in self-responsibility, not rigid, arbitrary rules. She emphasized incentives, persuasion, and thinking about how your actions impacted others, rather than punishment. Her influence was at the ethical, moral, and esthetic levels, not the political.

She never tired of telling the story of her fighting city hall over a traffic violation charge. She was told not to do so, that it was not that important, and that she would surely lose anyway. However, she spent a great deal of time and money fighting the charge. She hired a lawyer, took off time from work, and in the end lost the case and was given a more severe penalty than had she not contested the charge.

You could tell that this still "burned" her many years after the fact, but also that she was very proud for having defended herself and fought city hall with everything at her disposal. The point of her story was that, when confronted with such choices, we should always do what we think is "right." We should not take the easy way out or do the "smart" thing—especially in matters of justice and personal reputation. She remarked that your time and money come and go, but the things you are proud of, or embarrassed about, will stay with you for the rest of your life.

I think that this perspective is what underlies libertarianism: do what is right, rather than what is "smart" or personally advantageous in political and social matters. Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives—socialists of various flavors—always do the smart thing and all have groups they are defending. All of their actions are in the "national interest," but they never do what is right. In fact, by their nature, ideology, and "interests," they are consigned to do what is wrong. Virtually everything they do is wrong, both from a

moral and ethical point of view and also from a practical and common sense (what I now would call “economic”) perspective.

Obviously, all these statist think their views are moral and practical and that their policies are of absolute necessity, but upon mild reflection or historical examination, their wishful thinking vanishes. Does welfare help the poor? Does government stimulate the economy? Does war create peace? Is justice something created by government? I have spent my entire adult life examining such questions and have yet to find just one good example that would answer any of these questions in the affirmative.

I strongly believe that this simple libertarian perspective of mine was reinforced by my Catholic education; an education that was insisted upon by my mother. The Catholic Church is an ancient, massive, hierarchical organization with lots of rules and ceremonies, but at its core is the role of conscience and of the individual who must choose between right and wrong. People listen to the pope, but they don’t necessarily comply with his dictates. Catholics will listen to their bishops, but don’t necessarily follow their orders (especially nowadays!). Catholics are supposed to do what they think is right. You should help the deserving poor and not harm others. Anything else is fair game. Everything is not morally black and white, but you pay for your mistakes. If your actions come into conflict with some official church dogma—no problem—just keep track of those “official” sins, along with your real sins (i.e., those that actually bother your conscience, like stealing and lying) and tell them to the priest in confession.

My experience is that adding the official sins to the real ones did little or nothing to increase your punishment. In fact, it was called penance, not punishment. Official sins need not be calculated exactly and are easy to estimate from month to month. Following all the official rules is also perfectly fine.

My father provided me with a completely different set of lessons. He was a practical man and ultra-frugal, having grown up during the Great Depression and World War II in a broken family. He was a good analyst of government stupidity and I owe a good deal of my understanding of the state to him.

I went to work with my father at an early age, and this is where I learned many valuable lessons. For example, I once commented favorably on the looks of a short section of road that connected the residential part of town, up on the hill, curved down to the shoreline of the lake, and then off to the next town, effectively bypassing the downtown business district. I was surprised with my father’s reply. He said that it was nothing but a Federal “urban renewal” project. It had bulldozed all the shoreline businesses, was hurting downtown firms, undermining something called the tax base, and it would eventually kill the city.

Wow! I could not believe that one little road, less than a mile long could cause all that destruction, but that is exactly what happened, just the way he said it would. Urban renewal turned out to be nothing more than a stimulant for “urban blight” and suburban sprawl. I still, to this day, consider that pretty perceptive analysis for someone trained as a pharmacist, not an urban planner.

By the age of ten or eleven I could do practically every job in the store, including selling everything from cigarettes to narcotics, cashing out the cash registers, restocking shelves, taking inventory, cleaning everything, and even filling prescriptions. The only thing I couldn't do was type up the labels and take prescriptions from the customers. This was my father's domain. He would take the prescription from the customer, read it, puzzle over it, and then announce when it would be ready. In a few cases it could be ready “in just a minute,” but most often it could not be ready for two hours or “later this afternoon,” or even “not until tomorrow.”

This always puzzled me because, although I could not read the doctor's prescriptions to save my life and could not pronounce the names of most drugs, I could “fix” or fill the prescription in a matter of two minutes and my father could do it even faster. I suppose this stalling improved safety, but I bet it also had something to do with legitimizing professional licensing of pharmacists. (He always checked and rechecked everything I did dealing with medications, and this would be retested when we took inventory or reordered drugs so that we would know if even one pill was missing, all without the help of computers. He was even able to identify employee-pharmacists who stole pills from the inventory.)

The most basic and important lesson I learned while growing up in the store was that you must cheat on your taxes to succeed or even survive in business, and that most everyone who could, did so. It all began when I realized that we treated the “front” cash register different from the “back” cash register. After a little persistent questioning, my father said that we paid taxes on one, but not necessarily the other. He explained that if we paid taxes on every dollar of sales, we would barely break even, and that if we went out of business both we and our customers would be worse off. The meaning of this was clear to me and I understood its implications. This was not stealing. It was our money and if we gave it to the government they would just go and build more urban renewal. Getting “let in on” the family business made my job even more enjoyable, and I would regularly divert sales to the tax-free register.

As I learned more about the operation, it seemed like everything we did violated some government rule or other, but none of the regulations—from recycling prescription bottles to the location and storage of the cocaine—made sense. We never got caught and never got sued. I never heard a customer complain and we had plenty of happy long-term customers of all races and creeds. (We lived in the most “multicultural and ethnically

diverse” society that anyone could ever imagine; everyone told ethnic jokes about each other, and everyone seemed to get along fine with each other.)

Federal regulators bothered my father the most, and they would cause him to swear and use the Lord’s name in vain. Even little things, like the requirement to use childproof bottles, got him worked up. The day we were ordered to do so, I didn’t see the problem and thought it might be a good idea, until he explained that childproof bottles were unnecessary and made it difficult for his elderly customers. I had two younger brothers, but “did we need childproof bottles in our house?” It dawned on me that I had never seen a prescription bottle anywhere in the house, despite the fact that we got sick and took pills like everyone else. Parents must hide the pills so that little kids can’t get to them. His point was now clear to me, but he continued to talk to me about it for the rest of the day, as well as with many of his customers—with everyone getting worked up about the childproof bottles as a result.

The maddest I ever saw him was over new federal rules about Medicaid and Medicare. One day he stormed out of his office and announced that “we were getting screwed.” It seems that our “reimbursement” was getting cut and that the chains would be able to cheat, but that independents, like us, would get forced out. Moments later I was told that I could not go into pharmacy and would have to choose a new career. As someone who spent most of my free time playing with toy soldiers or riding my bike, I was unaware that I had chosen a career. One thing was clear: Medicaid was a bad thing.

One “political” memory I have from the store happened one Saturday when I went to work with Dad. My first customer picked up something red next to my cash register to purchase it. It was a bumper sticker—“ANOTHER TAX PAYER IN THE RED.” We didn’t sell bumper stickers and it didn’t have a price on it, so I asked my Dad how much it cost. He yelled back, “One dollar,” and added, “no tax!” He later explained that City Hall already took more from us than they deserved, that it wasted tons of money, and any further tax increase would kill the city. He was correct, once again. Over the last thirty years the city has lost business and population, and many of its buildings have decayed—often going unused for years at a time.

For me, the fight against taxes was a fun thing. I relished selling those bumper stickers and used some of my pay to buy one for my bike. Long before Geneva, New York had gone to economic hell, I knew that government was a bad thing and that taxes were destructive. I also realized at an early age that fighting taxes and fighting city hall was the correct and moral thing to do, and that it could also be fun and exciting.

Alas, my city did die economically, just as my father predicted. The store was closed and Dad took a job with a chain drug store. Now forced to pay taxes on my wages, I largely spent my high school years resisting three government prohibitions against me.

As high school graduation approached, I became increasingly interested in politics and public policy, and was very frustrated with the state of the world. Jack Kemp's congressional office was next door to one of my family's homesteads, so I became familiar with his politics and encouraged by his libertarian rhetoric, especially his desire to cut taxes. I had never heard of Austrian economics, classical liberalism, or libertarianism, but I knew that Kemp sounded like he was on the right track. In registering to vote that year, I became the first person on either side of my family to vote Republican.

Fortunately for me, my family didn't care enough about politics to worry over my choice of political parties—boy, was I fortunate! Unfortunately for Kemp and the Republicans, I did care deeply about politics. Republican words rarely turned into libertarian actions or votes in Congress (I still had never heard the word “libertarian”), so I soon renounced my alignment with the Republican Party. I set off to college on a journey that would take me from being a homegrown libertarian to becoming a professional libertarian and life-long advocate of the individual's will over the power of the state.