

Third Quarter 2017

Economic and Market Commentary

By Ray L. Lent, Founder, The Putney Financial Group; Chairman, Portsmouth Financial Services

Now is not the time to burden you with commentary on the shifting minds of fiscal and monetary policy. No mumbo jumbo about statistical data, jobs, reports or CPI. No clever observations about upcoming elections, Congressional votes or budget deficits. Now is the time for the simple recognition that all of us, friends, neighbors and fellow Californians, have lately found ourselves dealing with a natural disaster of monumental proportion. The Northern California fires have taken countless lives, devastated major communities and left a wake of destruction in their path that's hard to comprehend.

These past seven days, my staff and I have tried to help out wherever we could. That help has included looking for temporary housing, both for people and pets, sending out funds from clients' portfolios, providing duplicate documents and just being there in any way we could. We knew our job was just beginning in helping those who were so cruelly affected by the fires, and our commitment to be there for you has only grown stronger.

Through the tragedy and loss resulting from these fires, the sacrifice, bravery and unselfish devotion of our first responders reminds us all of the very best of the human spirit.

The brilliant management theorist Peter Drucker once wrote that the society of organizations works like an orchestra. "Each institution has to do its own work the way each instrument in an orchestra plays its own part. But there is also the score, the community. And only if each individual instrument contributes to the score is there music."

When I became a wealth manager so many years ago, an early mentor reminded me that my career path was all about "promises made, promises kept," an ethos that has always been at the core of The Putney Financial Group's stated purpose. For more than eight years, my dear friend and colleague Joe Niederkorn and I taught one of the most popular adult education courses in finance and retirement planning in Sonoma State University's history.

During those eight years, we taught more than 3,000 students and developed scores of friendships and client relationships with people from Mendocino, Napa, and Sonoma counties. We recognize, during this time of tragedy, the importance of playing Putney's small part to the very best of our abilities.

This commentary will be shorter than most. Rest assured that we will continue to stay focused on the task entrusted to us during this perilous time. The growth and preservation of capital within reasonable risk parameters continues to be our objective, which we believe is both attainable and realistic given some of the macroeconomic fundamentals. That's not to say that there won't be setbacks along the way, but fundamentally speaking, we believe the glass to be at least half full. With that said, allow me to share with you a brief narrative. Call this a "personal story."

The Early Years

My family and I did not move to Manhattan until I was eight. After World War II, my Dad came home, got married and sold surplus military equipment to developers and contractors who were in need of heavy, earth-moving equipment at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. By the time I came along, my grandfather, "the Colonel" (he was a real army colonel, not a Kentucky colonel) had convinced my Dad to get into the family business of property management. You see, after the War, there was a terrible housing shortage stateside. There were millions of veterans coming home looking to start a family and own their own home. Now the Colonel wore a lot of hats—businessman, military officer, historian and trained engineer.

The Village

My grandfather wound up landing a job to develop a post-war housing complex on Adams Street in Brooklyn, New York, called Concord Village. Concord Village was revolutionary in its time with more than a thousand units of housing in seven high-rise buildings in historic Brooklyn Heights, New York. The project was years in development, years in construction, but when it opened, it was wildly received by some and despised by others for its mass. Just across the East River, minutes from Manhattan by public transportation, it had parks, shopping and schools. It had just about everything. Everything but a general manager to look after the running of the 1022 units of housing. That's where my Dad came in.

We moved into 225 Adams Street when I was quite small. We settled in from the suburbs of Long Island and started enjoying life in "the Village" soon after our arrival.

The Heights

"But Patty's only seen the sights a girl can see from Brooklyn Heights, what a crazy pair, but they're cousins, identical cousins..." These were the opening lines to the 1960s television show, "The Patty Duke Show." Patty lived at 8 Remsen Street, a few minutes' walk from my family's home on Adams Street named for John Adams, second U.S. President.

Boy, That Woman Could Walk

Tall and stately, with an athlete's body, my Mother, Pearl (you can tell I didn't take after her), loved to walk. She felt it was free, great exercise and "you'll always learn something if you keep your eyes open." And walk we did.

Before the Dutch moved into Brooklyn in the mid-1600s, the native Lenape Indians referred to the land as “Ihpetonga” (high sandy bank). With fertile soil and abundant water, farms flourished, and early ferry service developed across the East River to Manhattan. By the time the Revolutionary War came, Brooklyn Heights was a well-fortified, continental army stronghold.

As Washington’s troops were beaten back across Long Island, they eventually retreated to “the Heights” and miraculously escaped across the River to Manhattan to avoid annihilation.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Robert Fulton of Fulton’s Folly fame, started regular steamboat service that crossed the East River to Manhattan. Brooklyn prospered, and “the Heights” was its crown jewel neighborhood. Pearl would love to walk its narrow streets with young Raymond in hand, passing row after row of beautiful pre-Civil War brownstones along the tree-lined streets.

One of our favorite routes would take us down Middagh Street. I loved this walk because there would always be these very cool guys working around the old building in the middle of the block. Without fail, they’d invite us in for lemonade on a summer day and hot chocolate in the winter. They were the firemen of Engine Company 205.

My Heroes

Strong and kind, nurturing and knowledgeable, they always had time to teach young Raymond a thing or two. Do you know the difference between a fire engine and a fire truck? No, they are not the same. A fire engine has hoses, a water tank, a pump and is typically the first vehicle to arrive at a fire. A fire truck is a support vehicle. It carries ladders, firefighters, rescue gear and tools. No water, no hoses.

Yes, back when I would get the run of the engine company firehouse, they still had Dalmatians. Although they no longer served their original function of directing the horses pulling the steam-pumped fire engines through crowded city streets, they were no less adored by the firemen.

Perhaps my favorite activity when visiting my friends at Engine Company 205 was getting to feed the fish in their saltwater aquarium. I learned that it is easy for aquarium fishes’ immune system to wear down. So, add some garlic and vitamins to their food. Never feed a saltwater fish freshwater fish food because they’ll die. And never, ever put more than one angelfish in the same tank because they are no angels. One will eat the other.

Every now and then the bell would go off in the firehouse, and Pearl and I learned to get out of the way fast. It seemed as if they were out of there in a matter of seconds.

Fast Forward

After a few years, the visits stopped. My family and I moved to Manhattan, and my magical visits to the firehouse dimmed in my memory. About four or five years ago, however, I went back to walk the streets of “the Heights” out of sheer nostalgia since I hadn’t been there in many, many years. Concord Village was a bit worn but still dignified with its well-kept parks and playgrounds. Brooklyn Heights had become a bastion for privileged young families, people who worked in the City and wanted to come home to some trees in the evening.

As I started to retrace the steps of my childhood, I eventually found my way to Middagh Street. When I got to the firehouse of Engine Company 205 and Hook and Ladder 118, I found the station closed and decommissioned. The massive wooden doors were padlocked shut and a bright mural was painted over them. In the mural, there were eight stars shining in a dark sky over the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, with the Brooklyn Bridge in the foreground and the American flag smartly blowing in the wind.

Later I learned that the mural was painted by firefighter Frank Visco, and Kye and Kia Carbone, to honor the eight fallen comrades who were killed in the line of duty on 9/11.

Let Me Bring It Home

A quote I have long held dear to my heart is that of cultural anthropologist Jane Howard. I’m sure that at one point or another I’ve shared it with you, but as my mother Pearl would frequently say, “Some things bear repeating.”

*“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family.
Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”*

We are proud to be part of yours.

Best Regards,

Ray Lent
RLL/dot
Enclosures

Post Script: Please join me in wishing Putney alumnus Todd Hurlbut the very best of luck as he embarks on his new career path. This past quarter, Todd has gone to work for a hedge fund, his longtime secret desire. His quiet manner and self-effacing humor will certainly be missed.