Americans Finding Fewer Folks They Can Believe In

"But Dolly Karger, lying awake and staring at the ceiling, never again believed in anything at all."
— The Rich Boy, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

BY LEZDOUP
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Poor Dolly Karger. All it took to bring her literary affair to a close was to turn her fictional story of a woman's search for faith into a daily newspaper column.

We live in the real world, and every day, it seems, another scandal chips away at the armor holding our lives together: trust.

Corrupt corporations, predatory mortgage brokers, dirty politicians—living with such events can be overwhelming.

It's tempting to think that trust is dead as the dot-com boom, and you'll never be believing in anything again. But travel that road and you'll lose far more than your hefty 401k.

"We have to have trust," says Lance Greer, co-author of the book, "How Could You Do This to Me? Learning to Trust After Betrayal.

"It's what gives us the safety and security to deal with everyday life. It's the cornerstone of every relationship we have."

Effects Of Broken Trust

Indeed, trust gives you the gumption to crawl out of bed each morning and get on with your life. Without trust, can you imagine? Or give your 16-year-old the car keys?

When trust gets broken, it's a double-edged sword, Greer says. When you don't trust others, you become more guarded and suspicious. You stop trusting yourself and are less willing to take chances, which can make you feel more helpless and out of control.

Now, really, who wants to live like that? Not you, of course. So how do you learn to trust again?

If you're like Sergio Urquidi, 42, weekend news anchor for Univision in Miami, the process of rebuilding trust doesn't happen quickly.

Like everyone else, he's watching the stock market— and its investments—sink like a stone.

"My first reaction was anger," he says. "My second thought: If I was thinking about increasing my 401k, I'd think twice before doing it anymore. I don't trust corporations anymore."

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To regain his trust, the man will take swift and sure punishment of all the bad guys, he says. It will take a wholesale revamp of corporations, bottom to top, so that everyone knows dishonest acts will have serious consequences.

Even then, "It will be awhile until I get back on track," he says. "You suffer through it for a while. Eventually, time heals everything."

But even if the calloused cheaters clean up their act, you still must do your part.

"People are more easily betrayed when they think someone is going to put their interest first and take care of themselves," Greer says. "They get greedy or lazy and expect someone else to do all the work."

When trust is broken, it's human nature to want to retaliate in some way. But revenge isn't productive over the long term. Instead, if you confront the issue head-on, you may be able to work things out in a positive way.

If an individual has broken your trust—a friend, a co-worker, a colleague, a family member—then confronting the issue head-on can be beneficial.

"It can restore your battered self-esteem and arm you against future hurts," Greer writes in her book. "It may also be the only opportunity you have to hold the person who broke your trust accountable for his actions."

Even as you're taking steps to learn to trust again, it might help to look at what's happened in the past. Though it shouldn't diminish what's happened, it can add some healthy perspective.

Fact is, if you think things have never been this bad, it's time to get a grip. And a history book.

Today's CEOs, stock-picking money managers, hires at your expense, are this millennium's equivalent of the robber barons of the late 1800s, among them men who controlled banking and railroads and became rich in the process.

And if you think today's market is bad, you didn't live through the Great Depression before the government put in place such safety nets as Social Security and unemployment insurance.

But in addition, if people took the time to think about American culture, they would understand that despite a past marked with financial scandals and inhumane acts, we managed to buck up, regroup and trust again.

Witness this story from Bob Hogan, a professor in the College of Business Administration at Florida International University. Every semester he spends time training the service drill. "When do you trust someone?" he asks.

Have We Learned Anything?

Every day, no matter what scandal is breaking, students find plenty of people who have earned their trust. Typically, it's a family member or roommate.

And in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, Hoger heard something new. "Firemen," one student said.

"Maybe Americans have learned it's not all about them and how much they have," he says. "Maybe that's the larger good that comes out of this."

But attitudes aren't the only thing that might be changing. When things go south, politicians rail, lawsuits fly, stockholders lose money.

"The point is, when things get bad, we react," says Robert Lawry, a law professor who directs Cleveland's Center for Professional Ethics at Case Western Reserve University.

For instance, Watergate spawned a profusion of ethics classes in law school, he says.

And that was good.

Problem is, we also suffer from a short attention span, so gradually these classes fell from popularity.

"The problem with recent scandals, Lawry predicts we'll see a fresh interest in business ethics. At one university, his popular course ended up on the waiting list.

Before spring semester, the undergraduate course in business ethics at FIU was filled. Last semester, it overflowed with students. Hogan says, "Our kids are getting the message. And that's refreshing."