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THE FRUGAL HOUSEKEEPER

“Lessons from cacti: How to survive the prickles of life” (How to survive during tough times)

By

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17 The visitor stepped off the airplane and gasped for air! A wave of hot dry air hit
18 him in the face and took his breath away. It was hard to believe that it could be so hot.
19 After leaving the airport the taxi took the visitor to his final destination, on the outskirts
20 of the city. On the drive from the airport, the visitor noticed that the terrain was quite
21 barren except for places that artificial irrigation was in use, those areas were lush and
22 green.

23 The landscape was very different form his home area. Hills loomed up nearby
24 that were pretty much barren of vegetation, whereas in his home area the trees and grass
25 tended to be green at this time of year. When he reached his final destination, he stepped
26 out of the taxi and gasped for air again. It was hotter here than it had been at the airport.
27 He was on the outskirts of what he would consider a desert and was to spend a week here.
28 Only after he settled into his hotel room did he notice the temperature gauge on the local
29 weather channel, 109 degrees with more days of the same forecast.

1 Once he had settled into his room he decided to take a walk around the hotel
2 resort. Different types of plants greeted him, and as he wandered through the grounds he
3 was greeted by odd shaped plants that had names engraved on a stone plaque at their
4 base. The names were somewhat foreign to him, such names as hedgehog, prickly pear,
5 fish hook barrel, Miller’s pincushion, night blooming cereus and the most imposing of all
6 the plants, the saguaro. The saguaro dwarfed the other cacti, and some loomed fifty feet
7 straight into the air. Others had arms on them, and all seemed to have blooms on the top
8 from whence birds were pecking the juice.

9 Being a person with an inquisitive nature, the visitor wondered, “How on earth do
10 plants that are so large, live in a climate that seems so inhospitable?” – at least, to this
11 visitor. He wandered further through the grounds and looked at the local hillside. The
12 saguaro looked a little like humans, in different shapes and sizes, but how on earth did
13 they survive? During the next few days he talked to people that were indigenous to the
14 area and purchased a book titled The Great Saguaro Book by Susan Hazen-Hammond.
15 From numerous discussions he discovered that one may learn lessons for life from a
16 cactus, if one can only get beyond the thorns, and that these lessons will assist one to
17 survive during tough or prickly times! These plants survive under great stress of duress,
18 day in and day out, yet in their splendor they can grow to over fifty feet high, weigh eight
19 tons and live to be well over one hundred years old.

20 Like the cacti in the desert there is no doubt that the custodial services industry
21 nationwide is going through some trying times and that we are all under a lot of stress.
22 Hardly a day goes by without one hearing of a downsizing, rightsizing or closing of
23 operations. In addition, some in-house services continue to be out-sourced at both the

1 hourly and salaried employees' levels. Front line employees are expected to clean more
2 square feet today than yesterday and managers are expected to cut costs, while increasing
3 productivity without any lapse in quality of service. In these times of stress and change
4 there is much that we can learn from the saguaro that we can apply to our individual
5 situations today, that will help us survive the prickles of life and help us to make it
6 through tough economic times.

7 The saguaro survives because it is well prepared to survive dry and severe times
8 of drought. It is a survivor. The roots of the saguaro radiate outwards from the plant as it
9 grows, and if a saguaro grows to fifty feet, the root system will radiate outwards from the
10 base of the saguaro an equivalent distance. This incredible root system acts as a net, and
11 when it rains the system can capture upwards of 200 gallons of water during one rainfall.
12 The saguaro saves for the future, much like a camel. During good times, the saguaro
13 saves so that during times of drought it can survive. *The saguaro teaches us that one*
14 *should plan for bad times, during good times.*

15 Interestingly, as the visitor walked around and inspected some saguaro he noted
16 that one needed to be careful when trying to touch the skin of the saguaro, as on each
17 ridge in the skin there were some very sharp needles. As he looked closer he noticed
18 little birds drilling in between the ridges without a care in the world, making their nests in
19 the cool interior of the saguaro. The birds, he later learned would make the nests and
20 later leave, then upon their departure other desert animals would take over the space.
21 Even though the saguaro had prickles to protect itself, it did not become so prickly that
22 birds could not live in its stems or on its top. The birds played a vital role in distributing
23 the seeds that they pecked off the flowers of the plant and distributing them to the wind.

1 A critical function, without the dispersion of seed, the saguaro would not survive. So no
2 matter whether times are good and there is plenty of water, or times are bad and there is
3 no water, the saguaro has to rely on others for its survival such as the Gila woodpecker,
4 white winged dove, gilded flicker and javelina to spread their seeds. *The lesson is that*
5 *the saguaro cannot survive without the help of others.*

6 The side of the saguaro is comprised of ridges. These ridges are very much like
7 an accordion, except that on each protruding ridge there are sharp needles. This
8 accordion-like skin provides a unique service to the saguaro. The saguaro must learn to
9 expand and contract, to be flexible, no matter what the climatic conditions might bring.
10 During times of rain, the saguaro drinks up the water through its root system and
11 expands. The accordion-like ridges expand so that the saguaro can hold more water.
12 When there is less water in the saguaro the ridges contract. If the saguaro could not flex
13 with the times, when it drank a lot of water it would burst! The saguaro teaches, through
14 its accordion-like skin that *we must be flexible and adjust to the ever-changing conditions*
15 *that life will bring us.* If we do not, we could “burst” from the stress of the times.

16 As the saguaro develops, it grows from a single-stemmed plant into one that may
17 have one or more arms. As these develop, flowers appear on the tips of the arms.
18 Therefore the chance of propagation of the species is enhanced by the saguaro having
19 many arms with many flowers. This is no mean feat, as seemingly only one seed out of a
20 thousand germinates. The saguaro cannot become complacent and rest on the fact that it
21 is the largest cactus in North America - it cannot afford to become complacent. If it
22 becomes complacent, does not grown enough arms to disseminate seeds through its
23 flowers, the saguaros will not survive. This lesson is an important one as the saguaro is

1 teaching us *to avoid complacency and to continue to grow*. The survival of the saguaro,
2 and of you and I, depends on continued growth so that we avoid becoming complacent.
3 In an article titled “Don’t get too comfy,” Robert McGarvey encourages readers to
4 “Stretch beyond your comfort zone – before turbulent times force you to.” (America
5 Way, May 15, 2002, p. 58). The saguaro has to constantly stretch itself to grow new
6 flowers and arms to survive.

7 Do all saguaros survive, certainly not! They are subject to the effects of drought,
8 cold, pestilences and diseases much as the human organism is. A saguaro often has
9 upwards of fifty holes made by the Gila woodpeckers, and oftentimes seems to have as
10 many holes as a Swiss cheese. What happens to the hundreds of gallons in the saguaro,
11 does it leak out? Does the saguaro give up just because of these difficulties? Certainly
12 not! If the skin splits from drought or the pecking of a bird, the saguaro’s natural defense
13 mechanism seals off the edges of the damaged area so that valuable sap and juices do not
14 leak out. With so many holes in it, it would seem that the saguaro would just give up, but
15 it doesn’t. Like the title of Willey Jolley’s book A Setback is a Setup for a Comeback,
16 the saguaro takes these setbacks in its stride and seeks to turn the setback of the
17 woodpeckers and other predators into setup for a comeback, for it is the same predators
18 that spread the seeds of the cactus so that saguaros will continue to thrive for all to see.
19 The saguaro teaches us *that whatever challenges may come our way, no matter how bad*
20 *things may become, the challenges of the past prepare us for the possibilities of the*
21 *future!*

22 The final lesson from the saguaro attests to its incredible tenacity in struggling to
23 survive during the good times as well as the bad. “... the average life expectancy of a

1 seedling is under six weeks, and fewer than one seedling in a hundred reaches its first
2 birthday. At this point, one million seeds have produced only fifty-one established
3 plants.” Susan Hazen-Hammond indicates that the chances of survival for the saguaro
4 are very slender. But does the saguaro give up? Does it just run into hiding, hard for
5 something that is over fifty feet to do? No, it grows more arms, more flowers, more fruit
6 and this increases the probability of survival. To survive the saguaro must work at
7 surviving, spread out its roots, grow arms and spread its seeds. Likewise, in life, growth
8 both individually and professionally does not occur without work. J. W. Marriott in his
9 book The Spirit to Serve uses a formula to illustrate the need for hard work to survive:
10 “No grunt work = no growth. No growth = no future.” In order to survive, to grow and
11 to have a future the saguaro must work at it. Likewise, *in order for individual and*
12 *personal growth to occur we must work at it.*

13 The saguaro was declared a national treasure with the opening of the Saguaro
14 National Monument in 1933. Due to that effort and the incredible survivability of the
15 saguaro, we will be able to enjoy the beauty and the lessons of the saguaro for many
16 years to come. How do the lessons of the saguaro apply to our individual and
17 professional lives on a daily basis?

18 ■ Plan during good times for bad times: From saving resources for the future to
19 educating and re-educating ourselves on a daily basis we can prepare for the
20 future. Work hard now and plan for the future and one of the best investments is
21 to educate and reeducate oneself to prepare for ever-changing employment and
22 market conditions.

- 1 ■ Develop networks of friends and professionals in the field: Take time to develop
2 personal and professional friendships that will stand the test of time. There is
3 probably nothing better than personal friendships and professional networking to
4 help one survive these trying times. Much can be learned from others. Personal
5 friendships can help you bear the burdens of life whereas professional friendships
6 can help you find the possibilities in the future.
- 7 ■ Be flexible: Our jobs are changing, computers are here to stay, robots are
8 becoming commonplace, and technological developments are increasing at a
9 faster and faster pace. It seems that as soon as we learn a program or process,
10 they change! Likewise in life and in business the only certainty is change. By
11 being flexible, like the ridges of the saguaro, we will be able to survive the
12 changes and conditions.
- 13 ■ Whatever challenges we may face are just preparing us for the possibilities of the
14 future. The key is to learn from the challenges that we go through and to apply
15 the lessons in future situations. The burdens of today can become the blessings of
16 tomorrow!
- 17 ■ For individual or personal growth to occur, we must work at it. The challenges
18 that we face may require that we apply and extend ourselves. For instance, some
19 persons may wish to get ahead or get a promotion, and may moan if they miss
20 being selected due to the fact that they do not have a professional certification or a
21 degree. Do not let this setback hold you back forever. Plan now and work now to
22 receive that professional certification or a degree. It may be a lot of work now,
23 but it will be the only way that you may be able to get ahead in the future.

1 Moaning about it will do nothing – working towards the goal and accomplishing
2 the goal will help one prepare for and survive into the future.

3 As the visitor’s stay in the desert began to wind down, he noticed that the weather
4 did not seem as hot as when he arrived, but it was. He was walking around more with
5 less effort than when he had arrived, and the scenery seemed incredibly beautiful. His
6 body was beginning to adapt to the climate and his eyes were beginning to appreciate the
7 beauty of the desert landscape. Colorful cacti abounded and the various birds sang their
8 songs from dawn to dusk. It was with sadness in his heart that he had to leave the beauty
9 of the desert behind, but the lessons of the saguaro will last a lifetime and will enable him
10 and hopefully others to survive the prickles of life and the inevitable tough times that will
11 cross our paths.

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