

Recession and Less Holiday Travel: the Earth and I Are Lovin' It

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
28 November 2008

Culture Change Letter #218, Nov. 30, 2008 -

At this historic juncture many of us are not only aware of financial insolvency, but geophysical limits to growth as well. It's all related. We hold that the consumer economy and its ecological support system are in such dire shape that another cycle of material opulence may not happen. We feel (and some of us even hope) we are staring into an abyss called collapse.

Corporate and government adherents cling to the "free market" and "technological ingenuity" for another round of (disparate) prosperity -- while the health of the Earth is sacrificed to keep taking the abuse we heap on her. We are asked to pretend that CO2 acidification of the seas, for example, is just some isolated news item, and, that capitalism and big government will fix everything.

Is it time to pick a side to be on? To clamor for economic relief for the status-quo system, yet claim to be concerned about our "planet in peril," is to be a politician or a corporate greenwasher. And none dare speak of overpopulation. Where does that leave the rest of us? To give up on the global corporate system and progress beyond it in a new daily routine?

More and more people are aware they're so vulnerable money-wise and in relation to climate distortion that they have to "do something." A first step in getting active is to see we've arrived at a time of opportunity and necessity: to reject the corporate message that tries to pull us down so we keep enriching the wasters of life. All the corporate money at stake along with the legal and political structure defending it are anathema to a sustainable future. But what are practical measures to take? (Culture Change has focused on this question since the Gulf War when we launched the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium.)

Recession, depression and even collapse are healthy. This sounds cruel or insensitive when hardship results. Granted, I am not one who has been laid off from his job (although it sort of happens when I must work for free). But we have to see the bright side of recession and depression no matter how we fit into the economy. There are two reasons for optimism: (1) the environment gets a break from the usual jets and car trips. (2) A collapsing economy ("a free fall in consumer spending") benefits communities by the focus on providing essential products and services through barter and cooperative projects.

Those benefits are just my left-brain intellect talking. There's more to consider on another, deeper level: it hits us daily and makes us want to go live in wilderness. I was recently at a somewhat deserted shopping mall to buy a sound-equipment adapter (yes, I know, an entropy box using electric power, plastic and metals). I had to step over crankcase-filth on the asphalt as I stepped from the parking lot to the sidewalk. Such blatant filth of the consumer economy is everywhere, but overall it's masked by pretty packaging (or the attempt). Next: in the store I was hit by corporate crap on a TV broadcasting a sit-com. The pathetic value system and empty message from the shows and advertisers, and their reach into the music that the young people buy, needs to be ended.

Even if one does not see any progress in losing one's job and scrambling to survive, change is healthy in that a critical condition is finally recognized, and then one can begin to rectify. Who can deny that overspending based on borrowing, and throwing used goods away instead of fixing them or being able to recycle or compost them, is foolish? When these practices stop, why is that bad news? What is the whole meaning of not shopping so much, and staying closer to home?

We have to distinguish between having robust economic activity that is about spending a lot of money on questionable

products and extra travel, and simply providing basic services and products.

Instead of lamenting the more frequent news of cancellations of corporate expansion projects -- and the ensuing damage to Mother Nature -- we have to celebrate this and realize dead-end jobs must be replaced, or hungry people will go on a rampage. Little is being done to deal with the causes of these problems that pose great change as well as danger for individuals. Instead there are scary and disturbing plans for crowd control.

It's great news that stores are up to 20% overstocked due to economic conditions, because people aren't buying as much unnecessary stuff. This causes retailers to cut back the work force, and manufacturers and shippers will be unable to sustain their levels of activity. Each sector's failure pulls down the rest of the corporate consumer economy. It does not mean people do not have the ability to feed and take care of themselves. It does mean we will have to relocalize and use a lot more human labor.

The number of flights taken for the Thanksgiving holiday was down by maybe a quarter. If this was related to one's losing a job, that's painful. But when we have hundreds of millions of people engaged in buying and selling products bought on credit, and the products represent huge amounts of pollution in their manufacture and electric use, and in their distribution by oil fuels, then the economy was sick to begin with. This does not mean this writer is happy about people not being able to throw a big family party, with people coming great distances, to enjoy a feast of foods grown and brought great distances as well.

While most people are worrying about just making a buck to survive, we have to look at what employment does besides offer wage slavery: Retail workers are evaluated by computers to make them work faster and faster, because "time is money." Friendliness to the customer is nice, but doesn't pay. So retail workers doing cashier jobs are motivated to avoid initiating any conversations by, say, making eye contact. If this practice somehow prevails, it's an example of divide and conquer: don't let the workers and consumers compare notes or get together. Work them like animals in stalls.

The beauty of living in close collaboration with others, in general reciprocity without exact monetary transactions, is lost to the wage slave who has no concept of freedom. But such a person is about to find out a few things, such as bartering and being resourceful with scavenged materials. Living as we do today in isolation as consumers, without tribal solidarity or village support, we are susceptible to loneliness, lack of care for our health, and we barely exchange any ideas on improving our lives through changes in habits or relationships.

For these reasons, as well as for paying for wars and more roads, we need to get together and boldly cheer "Good riddance to the conventions of working for pay and going off by oneself to TV land!" This kind of rebellion is in complete opposition to not just "conservatives" but to "liberals" and even "progressives" prescription for economic salvation, as voiced by Paul Krugman in the latest New York Review of Books (and on Truthout.org):

"What the world needs right now is a rescue operation. The global credit system is in a state of paralysis, and a global slump is building momentum as I write this. Reform of the weaknesses that made this crisis possible is essential, but it can wait a little while. First, we need to deal with the clear and present danger. To do this, policymakers around the world need to do two things: get credit flowing again and prop up spending." Mr. Krugman is so sure we can and ought to "unfreeze the credit markets" to "turn things around" so that "the real economy starts to recover."

Move over Mr. Krugman -- you and your economics not only don't have a clue, you are part of the problem.

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"What to do" by Paul Krugman, New York Review of Books, Volume 55, Number 20, Dec. 18, 2008:

nybooks.com