

Economic Recovery? No Thank You.

Carolyn Baker

Some economists and a president declare that there's a glimmer of hope, a light at the end of the tunnel, and that sometime in 2010, we'll begin to see a return to normal. The stock market bounces up and down, and pundits opine that the worst is behind us. The market has remained in the 7 or 8 thousands for a couple of weeks, so perhaps they're onto something. Maybe it was all a bad dream, and the worst recession in the history of the United States is waning, and the Second Great Depression that I and so many other astute observers were forecasting will never actually manifest.

What if it's true; what if this isn't, as Richard Heinberg says, "a recession that never ends"? Do I enjoy seeing throngs of homeless people gather in tent cities, live out of their cars, or simply roam the streets and back alleys of America in search of whatever crumbs of sustenance they can obtain? Do I take some sick pleasure in skyrocketing unemployment rates or burgeoning bankruptcy filings? What if, once again, empire triumphs over adversity and reclaims the level of prosperity its citizens enjoyed in the nineties? What if the likes of Nouriel Roubini ♣, Gerald Celente ♣, and Peter Schiff ♣ are proven to be paranoid nut jobs who really need to be on antidepressants? How much egg will I end up having on my face, and will that actually confirm that Peak Oil and climate change are bogus theories that have nothing to do with economic well being?

I give little thought these days to whether I am "right" or "wrong." I stopped playing King on the Mountain in the sixth grade. I don't even like board and card games; they're too competitive for me. My resistance to the prognostication of Pollyanna economists isn't about their winning and my losing. Rather, something more fundamental — yes, cellular — occurs in my anatomy when I hear that the last two years of economic agony was merely a blip on the radar screen of the capitalist business cycle — yet another momentary whack from Adam Smith's "invisible hand."

I cringe when I hear the words "back to normal" because of what that means to me. "Normal" means hordes of Walmart shoppers stuffing cars and SUV's full of plastics from China and driving off to their suburban homes to devour or display them until the current fix wears off and their shallow, meaningless lifestyles demand yet another "mall injection." Normal means homeowners wearing several tons of house on their backs as they travel by car to jobs they despise to maintain mortgage, taxes, insurance, and upkeep. Normal means total oblivion to the polar bear whose heart exploded during the last half-mile of his frantic swim in search of any tiny chunk of ice on which

he could rest in order to regain his strength and continue his quest for food. Normal means infinite patches of sickened brown trees devastated by the mountain pine beetle in an otherwise green Colorado forest. Normal means NASCAR and another nuclear power plants coming online and oceanic dead zones the size of countries. Did you hear? We're going back to normal — to parents working 80 hours a week while their kids become junkies, bulimic, or pregnant. Normal means slamming down more McDonalds Happy Meals chased with Red Bull and Prozac. Normal means that I have nothing to do with nature, and it has nothing to do with me, and furthermore, if I have anything to do with it, I'll do with it whatever the hell I like. Normal means that my reason for being is to consume, stuff my face, watch reality TV, obsess over celebrity gossip, chatter around the water cooler about pirates and tea parties, and grab a couple of hours of Ambien-induced sleep at the end of the day if I'm lucky.

Yes, something happened on the way to the Second Great Depression that I've grown fond of. A host of books and documentaries proliferated across the world informing earthlings of their plight, and millions of them chose to awaken rather than continuing to muddle through their so-called consumer-intoxicated lives. Even in the still-good times of 2005–2006, a project called Transition Towns  was born in the heart of a young man from Kinsale, Ireland which spread to Totnes in England and then virally around the world. Blindsided by skyrocketing oil and food prices, unemployment, bankruptcies, foreclosures, and loss of healthcare, masses of middle and working class people stopped spending money, moved in with each other, discovered in the new segments of free time that opened to them new hobbies, vocations, friends, and pastimes. Others began growing gardens in their front yards and were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to raise chickens in their back yards. Yes, there were increased suicides and inexplicable outbursts of violence. Addicts and alcoholics drank and used more, and meth labs mushroomed across the heartland along with more individuals using food stamps than ever in the nation's history. Homelessness increased, leaving blight and boarded houses in its wake. Animals were abandoned, abused, and left to starve, and humans in droves postponed healthcare and surgeries they desperately needed to attend to.

I do not mean to minimize the human and ecological tragedy of the collapse of civilization, but for every reason the talking heads of CNBC argue that returning to normal is necessary and desirable, I would argue that many species, including some members of our own, are breathing easier because maniacal growth and plunder have been curtailed or permanently arrested. Nor do I mean to romanticize the adversity resulting from economic meltdown. A depression is just that — on many levels including emotional and spiritual. Moreover, whatever hardships the earth community is now enduring, all are likely to intensify in the years ahead. In fact, the current milieu is probably a cake walk compared to what the future may hold.

Yet within the present angst one finds in countless instances across America, some individuals are beginning to ask the deeper questions. No, I'm not holding my breath for any viral spread of higher consciousness, but not a few economically and emotionally battered souls are beginning to question the stories of the culture with

which they have been programmed. Hence the rage that has begun to erupt as their experiences grow increasingly incongruous with those myths. Or as John Michael Greer writes ♣, “Failure is a gift because it offers the opportunity for learning, but if the gift is too emotionally difficult to accept, the easy way out is to take refuge in rage.” If the rage remains random and results in nothing more meaningful than catharsis, a worsening economic landscape may produce a thoroughly frightening society. However, if enough openness to learning is present, a significant portion of the despair could be channeled into preparation for both further deterioration of society and the creation of vibrant local economies that offer their members the opportunity to discover their deeper humanity.

Fortunately, a growing number of folks feeling brutal repercussions from economic collapse are discovering the link between inner contentment and living with less as Zachary Shahan argues in his blog post “Personal Happiness And The Economy” ♣:

The important link is that as long as we are discontent inside, we will look outside to sooth our discontentment, and as long as we are looking outside in discontentment, we will always find and produce more discontentment.

Therefore, if we are naturally discontent, as human beings, and no matter what external coverings we put on to cover our internal calling, we cannot find that peace we are missing, then there is another purpose/reason to this life.

Certainly I’m not wildly optimistic but embrace what Shaun Chamberlain, author of “The Transition Timeline” ♣, calls dark optimism, that is, being “unashamedly positive about what kind of a world humanity could create, and unashamedly realistic about how far we are from creating it today.”

Swelling my dark optimism are countless relocalization movements around the world in which the Transition Town model or similar concepts are being implemented — communities where food security, energy descent action plans, healthcare, land use, permaculture design, community currency, and myriad models of self-sufficient sustainability are supplanting the destructive models of industrial civilization. In these venues, steady state economics ♣ is replacing the rationale of voracious expansion which has been synonymous with “progress” for at least three centuries. Some may argue that whether or not civilization collapses, these stellar projects of sustainability will endure, and so it may be. But illusions of a “return to normal” will unequivocally decelerate the rate at which they become implemented as the urgency for doing so is surpassed by addiction to the familiar.

In the recent documentary “The Great Squeeze” ♣, James Howard Kunstler speaks of Americans not having a sense of the tragic. By tragic he does not mean that everything is or should be horrible, but rather that we tend to have little sense of things having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Such is the emotional state of an infantilized society in which *happiness* and *the good life* are assumed to be permanent states of being based on the most superficial definitions of those terms. So trite as the adage may have become, it seems to keep coming back to: *Evolve or die; grow up or perish.*

But maturation cannot occur as long as infantilization persists. Thus, when I hear the inveterate infantilizers reporting that Americans will soon be able to have their cookies and milk again, I feel sorrow, and yes, fear — fear that the initiatory experiences that allow all of us to ripen toward wisdom and compassion will be lost in frantic regression to the madness of civilization. Fundamentally, I understand that I have little to fear because collapse is both well underway and irreversible. Yet, another adage reverberates in my brain — the one about a crisis being a terrible thing to waste. If you're reading these words, you probably know what that means, and like me, you've probably worked far too hard, with far too much resolve to suck the marrow out of all the converging crises at hand which makes it impossible to stomach anything resembling a "return to normal." But for me, while such banter stirs a bit of fear, it also allows me to deeply appreciate the path of transition and transformation to which I've committed myself. That path, sooner or later, no matter how manipulated are the markets, no matter how many soporifics of "hope" are fed to the masses or how many world summits or world currencies emerge — that path *will* nourish and sustain the earth community when "normal" lies at the bottom of the dustbin of history.

Carolyn Baker is an adjunct professor of history, a former psychotherapist, an author, and a student of mythology and ritual. Her website *Speaking Truth To Power* [↗](#) offers up-to-the-moment alternative reporting of U.S. and international news, articles containing information and opinion, and a venue of support and connection for awake individuals who want not only to be informed, but to organize their lives and communities in ways that most effectively assist them in navigating what current events are manifesting.