

The Economy Is in Our Hands, We Just Don't Know It

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Wednesday, November 9, 2011 -- Peter Block

If you believe the news, the future of the economy is in the hands of President Obama, Chairman Bernanke of the Federal Reserve, Prime Minister Cameron in Britain, Italian and Greek debt, the G5, BRIC, and everyone else but us. The lead storyline is that until they do the right thing, nothing is going to get better.

If you believe the economists, the well-being of our economy is best measured by looking at the GDP (how much money changes hands), factory inventories, new housing starts, retail sales figures, capital equipment backorders, the consumer confidence index, and of course, the big one, the percentage of Americans unemployed. The expert storyline is that until these numbers go up, nothing is going to get better.

Suppose the realities are that (1) our leaders not only are not sure what the right thing is, they may not have the means available to fix things and (2) the economists are operating on a tired and faulty set of assumptions and have a hard time admitting they have been wrong for a long time.

If those are the realities, which I believe they are, then where does that leave us?

Well, if you insist on continuing to view the world as a consumer, you are in for a long, lonely, difficult winter. A consumer is one who thinks satisfaction and the good life have to be purchased, and it is up to others to be world-class suppliers. The consumer looks to leadership to improve the economy, looks to experts to measure and predict it, and waits for corporations to begin investing in people again.

There is a choice, however, and that is to view the world as Citizens. Citizens are those who know that their well-being is literally in their own hands, who look frugally at what is purchased and are willing to trust their own measures and means for everything else. A Citizen is one who sees that leaders have done all they can, and new leaders will do no better. Citizens know that expertise in measurement and prediction resides in their own experience and close to home; they understand their power grows with collective action. Unemployment statistics and the Dow Jones average are irrelevant to Citizens, even if they own stock.

If we are willing to act like Citizens to reclaim the economy and put it into our own, local hands, here is what we can do to make the economy better:

1. *Obsessively support the local economy and keep your dollars local.* Don't shop at big box stores: Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Burger King, Midas, or anything owned out of town. You do not save money at the big boxes if you add all the costs of getting there, credit, purchases you don't need and the waste of their packaging. Plus, your dollars are leaving the community and will not be invested locally. Don't buy the line that the big boxes are creating jobs, for they are really reducing jobs in what they put out of business and whom they choose as suppliers.
2. *Stop buying processed foods.* Corporations only sell food that they add value to. That is how they make their money and you are paying for their margins each time you make a purchase. If you like peanut butter and jelly, buy some peanuts and some grapes and make your own spread. Offset the cost and time of labor with the knowledge that you are eating an unadulterated product. Plus the economics are on your side. Peanuts cost \$1.49/lb vs. \$2.40/lb for peanut butter. Grapes cost \$1.99/lb vs. \$2.09/lb for supermarket jelly—the \$1.01 difference goes to the manufacturer and leaves the state. Do it yourself and \$1.01 goes in your pocket or into savings, which is a good thing. Same formula applies to all processed foods.
3. *Stop carrying any credit card debt.* If you owe money on anything other than your house or car, you are digging a hole for yourself. Interest rates on credit cards skyrocketed in the inflationary 70's and have never come down. You are adding 10-20% to the cost of goods if you run on credit. Tear up the card if you can't control this. The idea that you need credit in order to survive is an internalized myth. And most of all, do not patronize money stores that give cash advances on things like government checks and refunds. Don't buy the

myth that they are the only bank available to low-income people.

4. *Turn off the TV.* TV programs are a delivery system for consumption. Period. Even if you watch cable with no advertisements, the movies and shows themselves are selling the consumptive lifestyle, and everything people on the shows wear, ride, and use are product placements paid for by consumer- and industrial-products corporations. Every lawyer, doctor, and self-help show is a pitch for the notion that the help you need can be purchased from the right professional. With our TVs dark, we will learn once again to entertain ourselves. Maybe talk to neighbors, walk, read. Watching *Sesame Street* might be okay.
5. *Find out what neighbors know how to do.* Someone nearby can provide a substitute for the things you have been buying. Our neighbors have gifts and skills and passions we are unaware of. There are barter opportunities all around. Avoid garage sales. They simply rearrange the debris of consumerism. If you are young and have energy, start a Time Bank account as described in Edgar Cahn's book [*No More Throw-Away People*](#).
6. *Tear up your resume.* Local jobs don't require a resume. The jobs that do are very scarce. Figure out what you are good at and find a few people who will pay you something for it. We are all going to have to piece together fragments of work that can constitute a living. This is one thing we need a community for: a local network of relationships that keeps our dollars in local, neighborly circulation.

The point is to view these steps as a positive strategy to improve the economy. To put yourself in charge of this economy instead of waiting and hoping. These kinds of actions acknowledge the new economic reality and have many fringe benefits: self-sufficiency, finding a place where you belong, and feeling freer and (maybe) more alive. Another benefit is that if you involve your children in this effort, they can now feel needed and useful again. Especially teenagers.

If you want to learn more about new economic thinking, there are two more books you can learn from. Wendell Berry's [*What Matters*](#) outlines in flowing prose how the loss of local communities' productive capacity has cost us our land and our sense of meaning. He speaks of rural life, but just substitute "neighborhood" when he says "rural" to see how the message applies to us all. The other book is Mark Anielski's [*The Economics of Happiness*](#). He is a renegade economist who demonstrates that by changing how we measure our well-being, we open up space for creating richer lives

and stronger communities.

These books of Cahn, Berry, and Anielski are written for lay people, and give a hint at the real long-term answers to recessions and the pain of economic cycles that the world is now confronting.

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Comments

Submitted by Zoe (not verified) on Sun, 11/09/2014 - 06:10

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[Thanks for great and](#)

Thanks for great and inspiring article! I think that weak and lazy people want to believe that nothing depends on them, that they can blame the President, the government and bad economy. But strong people believe that everything depends on them. People build the economy and directly impact economic processes. We should rely more on ourselves and work harder instead of proceed [borrowing funds](#). Debt has become a significant part of the American economy and it's no good. Consumer debt is also growing because people rely on credit products too much instead of living below their means.

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