

A Consumption Confession (During Recession)

I am concerned about the economy. I keep wondering what I can do to make the economy better. It is one thing to vote for progressive candidates, and support social programs. It is another to help the economy by making purchases which help businesses grow. I realize I am not doing my share to support my neighborhood storekeepers, the backbone of the economy. Among the more important small businesses are the bars and coffee shops, and I patronize neither. I am not a drinker, but I do like a beer now and then. However, I do my drinking at home, or I might have a beer with a meal when we go out to a restaurant. And I must admit, we don't go out to eat as often as we should. Not only do I not patronize the bars and coffee shops; I do not provide much business to our neighborhood restaurants.

Regarding coffee: We are surrounded by Dunkin Donuts and Starbucks coffee shops, but I almost never go there. I have a cup of coffee at breakfast, at home, and maybe a cup of coffee at the end of a meal at a restaurant, and that's it. It never occurs to me to have a latte (whatever that is). I am not sure *when* people drop into a Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks. For breakfast? Late morning? For lunch? Mid afternoon? Late afternoon? I have the impression that young people go to Starbucks for an overpriced cup of coffee, and spend hours there working on their computer.

Lots of people go out for breakfast, and go to a bar after work, but not me. When I was working, I had breakfast at home, and I went home after work. What a dull life! (I did go out to lunch.) If more people were like me, the neighborhood diner (or Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks) and the neighborhood bar would go out of business, and the recession would be worse. Certainly, if people drank more—coffee and alcohol--and ate out more, it would aid the economy.

When on vacation in the summer, we would have drinks in the afternoon, along with cheese and crackers. I enjoy a gin or vodka tonic. The truth is, I have trouble telling the difference between gin and vodka, and I almost always bought the least expensive bottle. I was never one to try to impress people by purchasing the most expensive booze, though I was persuaded that good, single malt Scotch is better than cheap, non single malt Scotch. (But I don't drink Scotch. We have it for guests, and Fran prefers it.) The Scotch comes out in the winter, when I will take an occasional drink of bourbon or Canadian, in connection with our celebration of the various winter holidays, Chanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and my birthday.

I am getting off the topic, but not completely. How do we support the economy? By buying things. Alcoholic beverages are an important commodity. I am not helping the economy when I only buy a few bottles of moderately priced wine from time to time, and a 12 pack of whatever domestic beer is on sale. No liquor store can stay in business with customers like me. There is no neighborhood bar that knows my name.

When times were good, my predilection to save money, to find bargains, did not hurt the economy. I read Consumer Reports. I was an opponent of conspicuous consumption. I was critical of built-in obsolescence. I talked about the good old days when things were made to last. I wore my clothes until they could be worn no longer. I was ashamed to give them to Good Will. But in my favor, I should point out that I always bought union made clothes. Today, it is almost impossible to find union made garments.

At a restaurant, and at home, I ate everything on my plate, and I was horrified to see people throw away uneaten food.. When we dined out, and there was something left over on my plate, I would have it wrapped up and saved for the next day. I am pleased that there is no longer any pretense, calling it a “doggy bag.” But it does mean that buying less food results in less income for the storekeeper.

Since I wrote the above, in a light-hearted way, the Occupy Wall Street movement began. It is telling America that 1% of the country controls over 40% of the wealth. The richest 400 Americans have more wealth than half of all Americans combined (156 million). And the Republican Congress is fighting to prevent the richest 1% from paying more taxes. It occurred to me that if some of the wealth that is concentrated in the 1%, was spread around—maybe to 5% or 10% of the 99%-- the new-found wealth in the hands of a larger proportion of the population would enrich the economy. If low income people had a few more bucks, I am sure they would spend it on necessities. The recession would be over, people would have jobs, and instead of closing, or laying off people, our neighborhood stores would be expanding and hiring. It seems so simple. Paul Krugman knows this. Why don't the Republicans?

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