

Maybe it's time to get off the economic thrill ride, after all.

This is quite a ride, isn't it?

The ride being the retro-1930s, what-the-bleep-is-coming-next economic roller coaster we're on. It's a mysterious thrill ride, though, one that has small hills going up, and Mount Fuji-sized, G-force-to-pin-your-face-back cliffs going down. There's a lot more down than up these days.

Which is to say that some of us are getting to live through our very own Depression. We'll no longer need to listen to old folks tell us about how tough it was.

It's not really a second Great Depression, some say; maybe it's only a recession, and maybe not even that, or so those who hope to calm us down tell us. But if you've lost your job, or know someone who has; or your investments have lost a quarter or half their value; or you are, for the first time since you were in your twenties, having to think about whether to fill up the car with gas or buy groceries – you just might be experiencing your own Depression.

Feel-good axioms aside, money governs a good deal of what we do, or don't do. A look inside your refrigerator can bear that out. ("Lentils instead of salmon *again?*") Or, if you're up the scale and you can bear it, you can peek at your mutual fund or stock portfolio or pension. It's a bear market, and in most cases, the reading isn't pleasurable. Numbers, unlike some of the wonder boys who got lap dances while Wall Street crumbled, don't lie.

One approach to take in a column like this is to make light of it. Sorry, wrong column. I offer no humorous spin on economic challenges, or difficulties, or miseries, as some pundits have done – bless their ironic muses.

What I offer instead is the brief story of my log home.



It doesn't exist. But it almost did, years ago, right before the first oil shortage, when energy was pretty cheap and you could fill up a grocery cart without breaking into a cold sweat. The war in Vietnam was recently over, and disco was just about to hit. It was an era when Wall Street traders and heads of big banks made about the same as doctors earned (that is to say, a good buck but not more than the GNP of some countries). Presidents of large companies earned five or 10 times what their employees took home, not today's average of roughly 350 times. In a nutshell, it wasn't exactly communism in pre-Gordon Gekko America – lots of folks still could get rich by their own sweat – but it wasn't a three-decade, long-running reality show called *Greed Gone Wild*, either.

Now, about that log home. I had a small piece of land, and the plans for the log home, which I was going to build myself, with a little help from my friends. I had my eye on a wood stove that would easily heat the whole place, which, at just over 800 square feet, wouldn't be hard.

My friend Jim had some land with plenty of old, fallen trees that I could chop up and haul away for fuel. The walls would be so thick they'd need no insulation. In the winter, the humidifier was to be a pot of water on the wood stove. In the summer, I'd open the windows for cross-breezes. The land had blueberry bushes galore, and a large sunny spot for the garden I'd plant. Everything about the place was to be, in the vernacular of today, "green."



Yet I didn't think of it as green. I thought of it, in my young adulthood, as a sensible, Thoreau-like way to live. Solar energy had been around since ancient times, and it seemed nothing if not logical; and I'd never even heard of Al Gore.

Things happened. I almost built it, but I didn't. I changed course, and got on the thrill ride instead. Plastic cards in my wallet replaced kindling in a wood stove. Dinner at a restaurant cost as much as a week's worth of groceries. If I'd have had that garden and tended it the way I planned, maybe I'd have supplied restaurants that use local produce today. Eventually, I all but forgot about the log home.

What happened? The '80s happened. The '90s happened. The 21st century happened. And I rode that ride. Now, I think about if I'd built that log home and tilled that soil. It seems, in retrospect, like such a solid idea.

I told you this column wouldn't be funny. But that's not entirely true, because the funny thing is, that log home, the wood stove and the garden seem like a better idea now than even back then, whether in reality or as metaphor. They seem just like the right approach 'long about now. Because when it comes to that ride I was on – and from what I hear, I wasn't alone – as B.B. King would say, the thrill is gone. ■

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