

Upside of a downturn: What we will have left when the money is gone

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

Like everyone else I know, I am feeling the pinch of a straitened economy. I eat out less often, I drive less far and I write fewer checks to my favorite charities. These are all middle-class concerns, I know (does anyone admit to being upper-middle class?), which is why I hesitate to mention them.

My small cutbacks are nothing compared to those of the woman I hear on the evening news. Fear has dried her mouth and made her words brittle. She is about to lose the first home she ever owned. While she is trying to keep up with her ballooning mortgage payments, the interest on her credit card is growing like a virus. Should she drop her health insurance or sell her car? How long can her kids go without seeing a dentist? This woman would gladly trade places with me. She would happily eat in every night of the week if that meant she and her children would not be turned out of their house.

Because her story and others like it tell the hard truths of the present economy, softer truths do not get much airtime—and yet there are other truths to tell. Earlier this summer, the hosts of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* invited listeners to comment on how they were coping with the economic downturn. How were they dealing with higher gas and food prices? Close to 150 people responded, resulting in a segment called "Voices on the Economy."

Teresa from Indiana said that after she lost both her house and her business, she sold her car and moved her family closer to her work. Now they get around by bike and bus, which allows them to live completely within their means and without credit. "It is very difficult but surprisingly pleasant," she said, reckoning that she has inadvertently become one of the "new Americans" who are learning to live on less.

Craig from Michigan said that he too gets around by bicycle these days. He also buys day-old bread and is making use of his public library. Next he plans to begin baking bread and fishing in order to supplement his food budget. "I enjoy more now

that I am forced to slow down,” he said. “I was really surprised—there was a benefit I didn’t expect.”

Karen from Washington has joined a local cooperative gleaning program. (She did not say this, but I do: see Leviticus 23:22.) She and her family get free produce from local restaurants and grocery stores every week along with some “mystery cans” that have lost their labels. “It’s really fun!” she said. “You never know what you’re going to get—and it improves our diets, because of course fruits and vegetables are expensive but also we’re forced to try new things and deal with that.”

Finally, Steve from California said that the impact of the economy on him and his wife was “probably on the low side of average.” He reckoned that being Luddites helped. Their computer is still on dial-up, they turn off the lights when they leave a room, and they watch very little television. These are the habits of a lifetime, he said, from “parents who lived through the Depression or told us if we couldn’t pay cash for it we probably could do without it.”

Even as I reminded myself that I was listening to NPR—which appeals to a fairly educated and self-aware audience—I was buoyed up by these middle-class voices on the economy. I also learned something from them about the rudiments of my Christian faith.

In the first place, these witnesses are able to articulate the good news in the bad news. I heard no fear in them. Faced with circumstances beyond their control, they found concrete ways to act for their own good and the good of their families. They decided not to remain helpless. Their new simplicity may not be voluntary, but that has not prevented them from finding the health in it. In every case, having less money is taking them into closer relationship with the things that give them life: bread, fish, community, children, exercise. They walk easier on the earth. They have lowered their “enough” thresholds. They make less sound like plenty.

In the second place, they confirm my sense that the church has nothing ultimately to fear as budgets shrink and beloved buildings go up for sale. Some of us may have to walk to different kinds of work while others learn to glean. Gone-fishing committees may replace budget and finance committees, while the Wednesday night supper group learns to cook with mystery cans. We may become the people we once set up ministries to serve, losing the income-buffered distinction between “them” and “us” that was never good for us anyway.

If the gospel is true, we have nothing ultimately to fear. Whether the present economic downturn is temporary or a sign of things to come, we have not begun to explore all the life we will have left when the money is gone.