

Maddog Unleashed

Kicked to the Curb: So Long, Wall Street, And Hello, Skid Row

All signs point to an economic slump that will be nasty, brutish—and long. —Nobel laureate Paul Krugman's Oct. 16 column in *The New York Times*



BY PATRICK O'GRADY

How about that October surprise? A couple more months like that one and I'll jump right out of my office window. It's a ground-floor window overlooking a hedge, but what the hell, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. The shrubbery will just have to take its beating along with the rest of us.

Like so many others, we saw our nest egg cracked, scrambled and devoured last month as Wall Street abruptly devolved into Skid Row, albeit with a sharper class of panhandlers. When or if we'll rebound, I don't know. The O'Grady males' idiocy in financial matters is legendary, and this apple fell particularly close to the tree.

What I do know is that we both still have jobs—well, Shannon does, anyway, with health insurance, sick leave, paid vacation, retirement benefits—the whole enchilada. I have work, which is not quite the same but still a cut above rooting through Dumpsters looking for toothsome tidbits. I also know that I can't start collecting full Social Security benefits until 2020.

So, after toting up the damage to our portfolio, which now looks more like a ragged sock stuffed with Icelandic krónur, we started ticking off the things we could do without if necessary to keep dog food off the menu in our dotage. The list was neither exhaustive nor reassuring.

A Place for My Stuff. We live fairly simply, all things considered. We have one of those zero-down mortgages you've heard so much about, but on a tiny house in a cheap market at a reasonable fixed interest rate, and we've never even come close to missing a payment.

We have car payments, too. Shannon's 2002 Outback will be paid off next month, but we're only two years into a high-interest loan on my '05 Forester. I don't drive much, and could get by with my rattletrap '83 Toyota truck—which was bought with cash and costs \$26 a year to plate—so we've talked about selling my car to get out from under the hefty monthly payment, insurance and license fees.

But after that, what? We have a credit card, but we keep it on a short leash, paying off the balance every month. We go out to eat maybe twice a month, even less often to see a movie. There's the wine bill, which is not insubstantial, but a man can't quit drinking in the face of a crisis like this. It smacks of cowardice.

And Less Stuff in the Place. Lacking any big ideas, we're implementing some little ones. We're upgrading the insulation in the attic, using compact fluorescent light bulbs and keeping the thermostat at 68 in the daytime. A rooftop solar unit helps.

I suffer from gadget lust, but have regretfully put an iPhone purchase on hold. I'm making fewer visits to the chiropractor, buying more groceries from King Soopers than Whole Foods, and cooking meals that guarantee leftovers, which discourages us from going out to lunch.

And even though gas prices have plummeted, down nearly half a buck in just a few weeks, I use my Vespa or a bicycle for as many short hops as practicable. Bicycling is really more about maintaining sanity than saving money, but hey—any excuse for a ride on a brisk autumn afternoon, eh?

What are you doing, as individuals and businesspeople, to cut costs, get credit and otherwise patch the holes in your financial security blankets? Drop me a note at ogrady@maddogmedia.com. Who knows? Maybe there's a column in it for me—and some ideas for you.