

Follow the Money

Data Signal Trouble for Economy

Andrew Ackerman and Luca Di Leo (The Wall St. Journal)

Inflation slams consumers as US economy falters

Veronica Smith (AFP)

U.S. bond yields plunge as economy fears mount

Karen Brettell (Reuters)

Stocks Tumble On Worries About Weak Global Economy, US Job

Market And Inflation Marla Diamond (AP)

Anyway you think about it, the economy is in the toilet. In August, Standard and Poor's downgraded America's credit rating from AAA to AA+, the stock market tanked and bond yields plummeted. The unemployment rate still hovers around 9 percent and my bank card screams in agony every time I fill up my gas tank.

The current economic situation is grim for everyone, but the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community is likely to feel the impact of the current economic situation even more deeply for a number of reasons. First, economic woes have a tendency to increase the public's willingness to discriminate. Given our lack of employment protection, we are simply more vulnerable when it comes time to lay off staff. Second, we are disproportionately represented in the therapeutic and arts related occupations. These fields often face budget cuts first. Third, many of us own businesses that cater to or at least that benefit greatly from patronage from the gay community. In a world ruled by financial anxiety, going "out" feels like a luxury we can ill afford, especially when we can eat and drink at home. And things like dental care, eye care, therapy and massage may feel like luxuries we can put off until the economy perks up.

It's easy to fall prey to fear as our stock portfolios dip, our retirement accounts shrink and and/or our credit card debt grows. We may even to slide into panic, despair, and despondency because we refuse to accept reality as it is and cling to our ideas about how things should be. But what if we chose to look at the current economic downturn as an opportunity rather than as a nuisance? Crisis can be a valuable time. Osho, an Indian mystic, points out that when there is no crisis -- when everything is going along as planned -- life becomes stagnant. It is impossible to change yourself when the status quo has you tightly in its grip. But nothing is static when

everything is in chaos. In such a moment, you are free. The current economic crisis gives us an opportunity to be transformed.

In practical terms this means you have the opportunity to look at your life, especially as it relates to money and your deepest longings. First and foremost, are you happy? If not, what would make you truly happy? If your first response is something like, "a Volvo c70" or "a pair of Diesel jeans and a butt to make them sizzle" you're probably not quite getting the "truly" part of the question. Dig deeper. How do you think that Volvo c70 (or Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet) would make you feel? What personal and interpersonal perks would it give you? (Ditto on the Diesels and the butt.) What is it that you really need? Acceptance? Love? Intimacy? Freedom? Spontaneity? Celebration of Life? Self expression? In other words, what are you trying to buy?

And what if what you are trying to buy can't be bought but has to come from within? How you spend your money is a pretty good barometer of what you think you need. The faltering economy invites you to look at how you spend your money and assess whether or not your spending patterns are truly helping you get your needs met. The only way to know this is to look at how you spend your money. Are you spending a lot of money on "image"? Are you spending your money on dreams of how this new shirt and pair of jeans will make you feel? Is a significant portion of your paycheck going towards drinks or other mind altering chemicals? If so, what are you escaping from or to? Are you spending a fortune on convenience, depleting your checking account one bottle of water or cup of coffee at a time? What would happen if you got a couple of those trendy BPA free bottles and filled them with filtered water or made coffee at home?

By tracking every penny you spend (or have someone else spend on your behalf) for a month, you will get an idea about your deepest longings, your unquestioned convictions, your greatest fears and your relationship to life itself. When you max out your credit card buying things you don't need because they are on sale, when you spend the majority of your paycheck at the bar or club, when you put your house at risk to buy a car you can't afford, you are acting out your deepest beliefs about abundance or scarcity, trust or doubt, worthiness or worthlessness, love or fear.

If you let go of judgment, your expenditures become a roadmap to help you explore what it is that you truly need guide you to what you need to feel whole. Look at the patterns. If you notice that you spend \$45 a week at the Starbucks around the corner from your house, dig deeper as to what that's about. Is Starbucks your defacto office? Do you have a crush on the barrista? Do you feel more glamorous drinking coffee at Starbucks than at

your kitchen table? Does the influx of people and murmur of chattering voices protect you from the haunting aloneness you feel at home? And most importantly, how is it working for you? Is it meeting your needs or does it leave you feeling incomplete, like you just had a piece of carob when you were craving chocolate covered espresso beans? If your Starbucks routine isn't meeting your needs, what might?

If you notice that most of your money is going to ways to escape – alcohol, drugs, chocolate, junk food, porn, nameless sexual encounters, use this opportunity to ask yourself what you are escaping from. Boredom? Fear? Emptiness? Resentment? Hopelessness? Self-Loathing? What would happen if you sat with the feelings you have been avoiding? If it feels like you might die, you might want to join AA (or Alanon or NA or OA) or call a therapist to help you face the overwhelming feelings.

If you are having trouble identifying what you need, take a moment to breathe. Close your eyes, tune into your body and notice where you are holding tension. Breathe into each tight spot and invite your muscles to relax, to release a little, and ask yourself, "what do I need?" If you keep doing this, your body will eventually lead you to the deeper answers. Once you know what you need, you can make changes that will allow you to get your needs met. This will also help bring you clarity so that you can act from a place of calmness rather than react from a place of fear. Ultimately, your financial statements will thank you.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . You can read her blogs at www.ReginaSewell.Wordpress.com, <http://visionscounseling.wordpress.com>, and <http://possumcrossing.wordpress.com>. Her most recent publication, "Sliding Away" can be found in **Knowing Pains: Women on Love, Sex and Work in Our 40s**, edited by Molly Rosen.*