

It's hard to think of anyone who is unaffected by the current global economic downturn. Whether we have our savings in post office bonds, overseas banks, under the mattress, or perhaps none at all, we watched the credit crisis rippling over the Northern Hemisphere and felt the sickening realization of the likely impacts on our plans, hopes, budgets, and children's education. Actually, these events present us with an opportunity, and not just a threat.

South Africa is relatively well buffered from this financial instability, but in a globalised world, when the spider stumbles, the whole web is jerked and torn. The credit crisis is not some remote problem of others elsewhere. How many of us don't use credit cards or dip into our bonds on occasion?

The economic and environmental crises have the same root cause. We live beyond our means. We spend more than we earn. We eat more than we can burn off. We are used to the momentary pleasure of gluttony, and we've coped with the emptiness it leaves later by simply consuming more. We've heard from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and WWF that human society is consuming the resources of two or more planets, even while a billion people starve. The implications of this are sobering, and will impact seriously on our children.

It's not easy to swallow, but our global lifestyles are unsustainable, and environmental collapses are unavoidable without radical change. Especially if you have children, do something about it!

Most of the solution is not difficult. It's mainly about

these values on, although the West was entering a spell of unusual stability and prosperity, during which most of us were born.

'Sustainable living' is about thrift and learning to live within our, and our planet's, means. Yet this does not mean we need to be boring, dreary or humourless! We may not need to start brushing our teeth with fireplace ashes, as my mother-in-law did as a child in the 1930s (although we could – it's free, available, mineral-rich and fine-grained!). Since the 1930s, we've put men on the Moon and developed the Internet; we've written great symphonies, some lovely jazz and blues, and social-commentary rap; we've photographed mesmerizing galaxies; and uncovered the thriving biological bounty of our rainforests and ocean floors. We've decoded the human genome; and built beautiful, sporty electric cars (even in Somerset West!). Is it really beyond us to cope with 'times of less stuff'?

Of course it's not. People in a crisis can be remarkably resilient and inventive. But the economic downturn will force us to make changes – many good, some bad. Appallingly, some of the worst-case predictions by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change about our carbon emissions have already come about. This is partly due to our exploding human population – 6.72-billion of us in early January 2009 – and partly to increases in consumption by those with 'disposable incomes'.

South Africa has an almost unbearable gap between rich and poor. Our transition to a sustainable economy will require government asking the rich to self-fund some of the changes, while assisting the poor first, as they already suffer most from Climate Change. Several excellent organizations co-ordinate those already able to start helping themselves (eg www.project90x2030.org.za, www.oneworldgroup.co.za), and support rural and urban poor communities (eg www.southsouthnorth.org). The Western Cape government also has an excellent plan to ease the transition¹, which can help support the changes we all need to make to our lives. But there is a huge need for quick, practical intervention on the part of governments, NGOs, charities and churches to help people cope with climate change and economic instability. Everybody can help.

It seems tough to make the changes needed in turbulent times. Money is tight, things are uncertain – it may seem easier

to stick with inefficient but familiar practices, to put up with our old electric geyser for a few years longer. But necessity is the mother of invention, and innovation thrives when desperate measures are needed.

To avoid passing points-of-no-return, we have only about six to eight years to make sweeping changes in the way our economy works, how we get around, and how we supply ourselves with energy. Most of us are far too comfortable to want to open our eyes to this. Regardless, it is happening. We need to wake up, right now.

¹http://www.capegateway.gov.za/Text/2008/10/western_cape_climate_change_strat_final_2008.pdf, http://www.capegateway.gov.za/other/2005/10/leilah_mahomed.ppt#316,16,Actions



thrift and humility – traits not always familiar to post-war generations. My dad was a US Army engineer in World War II, rebuilding airport runways in the Pacific, while my mother helped the war effort as a phone operator. My husband's parents did much the same in the UK. All four were teenagers in the Great Depression, so frugality was a natural part of their lives. They passed

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Water Wise
Water your garden, veggies or crops after sunset when there is no wind, giving it maximum soak time!

BLUE HIGHWAY BUSINESS INDEX

100 ARTS & CRAFTS

- 101 Artists & Crafters
- 102 Galleries & Markets
- 103 Photographers & Studios

200 AUDIO VISUAL

- 201 Cells, Mobiles & Faxes
- 202 Home Theatre, Satellite & Video

300 BUSINESS

- 301 Accounting & Financial
- 302 Consulting
- 303 General Business Services
- 304 Insurance
- 305 Legal
- 306 Marketing & Promotions
- 307 Networks
- 308 Signage

400 FOOD & ENTERTAINMENT

- 401 Cinemas & Entertainment
- 402 Coffee & Tea Shops
- 403 Pubs & Taverns
- 404 Restaurants
- 405 Entertainment for Hire

500 HEALTH & HEALING

- 501 Doctors & Dentists
- 502 Gyms, Fitness & Training
- 503 Pharmacies
- 504 Physical & Energy Therapies
- 505 Psychological Counselling
- 506 Optometrists & Eyewear
- 507 Nutrition
- 508 Remedies
- 509 Salons & Spas
- 510 Skin Care

600 HOME & GARDEN

- 601 Appliances & Fireplaces
- 602 Bathrooms & Kitchens
- 603 Building, Painting & Repairs
- 604 Carpets & Flooring
- 605 Curtains & Blinds
- 606 Electrical
- 607 Furniture & Décor
- 608 Garden
- 609 Housesitting
- 610 Plumbing
- 611 Pools & Spas
- 612 Security
- 613 Tools, DIY & Handymen

700 LEISURE & SPORTS

- 701 Antiques & Collectables
- 702 Outdoor Activities
- 703 Watersports

800 MOTOR

- 801 Accessories
- 802 Boats, Canoes & Accessories
- 803 Car Wash & Service Stations
- 804 Rentals & Sales
- 805 Repairs, Services & Spares

900 PETS & LIVESTOCK

- 901 Animal Feeds
- 902 Grooming Parlours
- 903 Pet & Fish Shops
- 904 Stabling
- 905 Veterinarians

1000 PROPERTY

- 1001 Accommodation & Rentals
- 1002 Estate Agents

1100 RETAIL

- 1101 Books & Stationery
- 1102 Computers
- 1103 Fashion, Clothing & Jewellery
- 1104 Florists
- 1105 Food
- 1106 Gifts & Curios
- 1107 Hair & Beauty
- 1108 Liquor
- 1109 Music

1200 SERVICES

- 1201 Catering, Hiring & Supplies
- 1202 Cleaning Services
- 1203 Education & Tuition
- 1204 Emergency Services

1300 TRAVEL & TOURISM

- 1301 B&Bs & Self Catering
- 1302 Hotels
- 1303 Resorts & Reserves
- 1304 Tour Operators
- 1305 Travel Agents

1400 WINE

- 1401 Wine Boutiques