

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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SURVIVING **The Great** **FOREST FIRE**

The flames have reached the edge of our trailer park. What happens now?

By GLENN CAMPBELL

WASHINGTON — Every forest needs a forest fire occasionally. A fire clears out the dead debris and makes way for new growth. After the devastation, the forest will renew itself and grow out healthier than before.

Alas, this isn't much consolation if you're facing the fire right now. To you, this is a catastrophe, and you are only worried for your own safety and that of people you care about. No one wants to be fire fuel.

We are all facing a forest fire right now: the worldwide economic melt-down. Some of us are being hit worse than others, but nearly all of us are scared. Many of the economic and philosophical assumptions we have taken for granted all our lives have turned out to be false, and none of us knows where this is all going to lead.

Let's start with what we do know: Humanity will survive. Thirty years ago, with two superpowers aiming Weapons of Mass Destruction at each other, that wasn't so certain. A terrorist state may still set off a nuke or two and global warming may flood the coast, but the whole human race isn't in imminent peril like it once was.

You, too, will probably survive. It

may be a humbled and stripped-down you, but whenever this crisis is over, your body and mind will probably still be here, attached to Planet Earth.

But it may not be the same you. Sitting here today, you may not recognize the person who comes out on the other side. The fire may rob you of many things. For better or worse, it is going to change who you are and what you believe.

Crises and catastrophes tend to cut life down to its essentials, and the greatest service they can provide is teaching us what those essentials really are. Many of the things we thought of as necessities will turn out not to be. They are things we would probably never have given up on our own, but if the fire takes them out for us we may find that we are actually better off without them.

Do we really need a house, a car, furniture, alcohol or entertainment? It's amazing how many things you can get along without—often *improving* your quality of life in the process—but you might never have the courage to try if it isn't forced upon you.

Whatever this economic crisis turns into, it is a fair bet you will end up making compromises you never thought you would. They may be painful compromises with no apparent positive outcome, but often they will turn out for the best in the end. There may even be some compromises that feel surprisingly good afterwards and make you say, "Wow, why didn't I try that before?"

You have to look at this crisis as an opportunity. It is a chance to hone your

life into a more efficient package. Since the fire is already upon us, that's the only way you can look at it. "I'm going to use this to become a better person."

For decades, the world economy has been driven by American-style consumerism: the obsessive quest to acquire goods and obligations far beyond ones needs. It was a prison more than a paradise, and people with the means came to live in antiseptic bubbles, surrounded by their stuff but cut off from the rest of the world.

Now that the economic bubble has burst, a lot of other bubbles are going to follow. Will it be as bad as the Great Depression? Duh! Most of the planet has been living in those conditions for decades, with far more suffering souls now than there ever were back then. The only difference, post-Crash, is that larger swaths of the "developed" world will get to feel it, too.

Those who survived the Great Depression were imprinted with a frugality that usually lasted all their lives—much to the annoyance of younger generations. Turns out, this isn't such a bad trait. Sometimes, you can live life richer if you're not so rich, if you appreciate the value of what you have and don't waste it.

These days, people in developed countries don't have the same ethic. They were born to waste—money, time, resources, their future freedom.

Ah, but they'll change. You'll see. They'll change. —G.C.

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