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Prudence and Green - a wholesome and timely marriage?

Globally it's been quite an eventful few months, and as I write we are about to get swept up in the crescendo of our personal and professional commitments of the holiday season. No doubt many people will be looking forward to the break with mixed feelings. Although it may bring an opportunity to relax at some point, there may also be some apprehension about what 2009 may bring economically.

We have yet to see what reality emerges in the aftermath of the Government's use of public funds to rescue failing financial institutions and plans to spend our way out of recession. We can't predict the outcomes as yet. But what got us here? Perhaps decades of imprudent decisions by many (in all walks of life, including our good selves) have caught up with us. Not really so surprising. Growing credit card debt has been a recurring theme in the news for some years - as has the dizzying upwards spiral of mortgage debt and house prices. Some sages did question the sustainability of this rise...but did anyone really want to believe that it would end?

We seem to have collective cultural amnesia regarding the lessons of previous generations, and indeed previous civilisations. Yet such "readjustments" and "discontinuities" are scattered throughout history (see Nassim Nicholas Taleb's "The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable"). They are predictable in the sense that they will happen - but unpredictable in that we don't know exactly when. Typically signs were there to be seen, but people tended not to, or chose not to. Such events mark a tipping point where, after some uncomfortable chaos and paying of prices, there is a return to some semblance of a more manageable equilibrium.

Parts of the reason that economic readjustments are necessary may well lie in the expectation creep that seems to take place from one generation to the next: our parents' luxuries became our necessities; our luxuries become our children's necessities. For economies in decline (as arguably ours is in the West), who can deny that it is precarious for their peoples to live beyond one's means? Nevertheless, we have done so. In our generation, prudence, it would seem, had

become a rather unsexy concept. The systems thinkers out there would probably say that our society's growing impropriety, in parallel with lower margins and subsequent dwindling of real economic reserves (masked by the availability of credit) all conspired to create an inevitable crisis that now requires an adjustment both of attitude and behaviour if the system is to avoid implosion and self-destruction.

No doubt these dynamics have been fuelled by forces as basic as our desire to conform to social norms. In a media rich promotion-intense world it's hard to resist doing so. Some would say that greed was present too. Perhaps greed is just another word for a kind of need. A self-worth need that chases the false promise of "things" - when the real gold is in relationships - quality relationships with oneself, and with others.

No doubt there are many societal and cultural explanations for this misguided focus and for the stretching of our concept of real needs. Well the elastic is snapping back - at least for now. And perhaps with it we have a chance to re-evaluate. Surely that is a good thing. It occurs to me that even a simple tightening of belts brings a new integrity to society's intent to become more "green". And an opportunity for all of us to rethink what is truly essential to our wellbeing and effectiveness at a personal, organisational and community level. Here's to embracing that opportunity, and to exploring more where the gold truly lies.

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