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After the collapse: Tech insights provide the way forward

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It should be obvious that we are undergoing wrenching, fundamental changes. The consumerist, suburban society we've known for the past 50 years is dead. We are at an inflection point. Will we withdraw into ourselves and exacerbate a deep depression? Or will we infuse society and the economy with the technology paradigms that should mark Western society in the 21st century?

So my wife received an email from a friend linking to this video, "The Soul of Money." Supposedly you should feel more hopeful about the economic disaster after watching this. It didn't work for us. Here's the gist of author Lynne Twist's argument:

We're living at a time of enormous excess that has created financial structures and systems that are inappropriate and completely unsustainable. And now they're falling apart. We'll know that, at the end of this, we're all going to be better for it, because we're going to be in a truthful, more accurate, more integrous (appropriate) relationship with our self, with money and with the resources on this planet.

Well, of course, you should instantly run screaming from anyone who seriously (oh, so seriously) uses the word "integrous." But consider the key words here: sustainability, resources. To Swift this is the time, right now, when humanity itself will perish - or save itself. And it's up to you to get with the program.

This is a time that I think history will look back on and say: "These are the people, this is the generation of humankind, that made the changes that went through a transformation that made the future of life possible. These are the people who had the courage to make profound changes in the way they were thinking—as well as in the way that they were behaving—that gave the future to life itself."

It's pretty gooey stuff, but you don't have to squint too hard between the lines to get the idea: The end of consumerism, of wasting money on tech gadgets, the return of sustainability. The vision that Swift and many people I know here in western Sonoma (Calif.) County have is one of drawing in, of making your own goods, growing your own food if possible, spending little, working within your community.

That all sounds good, huh? Local, sustainable, community. But as I thought about it and listened to various pundits and economists in the media, I've come to the opposite conclusion. This is a conservative, selfish and protectionist point of view. I've spent time in Africa and I've seen subsistence farming. The line between sustainability and subsistence may prove to be very thin.

One thing Swift is right about. This is an inflection point, a time when the model of the world will fundamentally change. People **will** look back and say, what did people do in the 'teens that formed

our world? I was listening on NPR to Richard Florida, author of *Who's Your City?*, explaining that the last time the world fundamentally changed was the Great Depression. In the 1920s, a quarter of the economy was farming. After World War II, we were a nation of workers, not farmers, and increasingly professionals. Before the Depression, America was made of cities and farms. Post-War America was suburban and consumerist.

There has been a dramatic meltdown of the system we have built for the last 50 years. The banking industry is looking like it will be nationalized, if we follow Alan Greenspan's prescription. As FDR before him, Obama will try lots of big programs, but he may not go far enough. When we eventually emerge, the world will be fundamentally changed. The question is: what is the way forward? It's not Swift's sustainability; that's the decade-long Depression.

We won't continue suburban consumerism as we've known it, either. Florida's point about the housing plan is that preserving home ownership is fundamentally 20th century. In his vision of the creative class, people move about frequently; they take new jobs in new places, so they don't need to own homes. They need to rent in creative cities and they need to be able to quickly find new places in new cities. Perhaps a company owns rentals across the county and facilitates quick and easy moves.

That got me thinking: What does the post-Recession look like? The model comes from technology: networked, decentralized, interchangeable. Florida's idea is that you would swap apartments as you move about. Major cities already have car sharing programs. In the globally warmed era, there's new interest in mass transit. All this should sound familiar to technological ears.

This is what the tech world has been inventing for decades. Open source. Cloud computing. Virtualization. Hell, time-sharing mainframes. We don't buy CDs, we listen to it streaming. We don't buy videos, we Netflix them. We share our media; we share our computing cycles; we share our ideas. Ownership is out. Efficient sharing of resources is in.

There are downsides to this. This world is marked by interchangeability. To borrow a meme from the Net, people, businesses and technologies that aren't working will be routed around. Obsolescence happens at every faster rate.

So what does a viable future look like? It's not about turning away from technology: it's about infusing every aspect of the economy with the precepts of technology.

As a lawyer and technology writer, Richard Koman brings a unique perspective to the blog's intersection of law, government and technology. See his full profile and disclosure of his industry affiliations.

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