

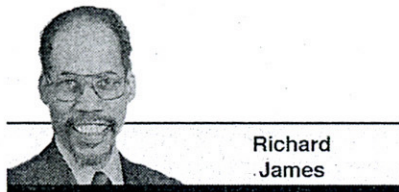
Recycling the economy will require scavenger eyes

The Junkman always wins. Remember that phrase.

A few years ago I met the Johnsons (not their real name). They were a close-knit family of hard workers. They harvested the junk and refuse from the city's trash. Every morning before sun up they would search the city's streets and alleys for the stuff that we throw away. They drove a "jalopy" pickup truck that strained when traversing small hills. It sputtered and lurched under its heavy load of broken screen doors, busted TV sets, conked out air-conditioners and non-functioning washer machines.

While part of the family was rummaging for valuable junk, the youngest boy would be diligently tinkering with previous day's haul. Machines would be broken down into their component parts based on the material. Copper wire, aluminum brackets, brass fittings all had their proper place.

The ritual occurred everyday, even on Saturday and Sunday. The crew worked nonstop until early



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evening, regardless of the weather. Snow on the ground? No problem, bust up that refrigerator. Raining? Okay, strip that wire. Sun too hot? Not really, dismantle that lawn furniture.

I had a conversation with the patriarch of the clan. His big smile revealed a missing tooth. His hands were leathery paws that were deeply scarred and blackened by oil and grease. His face always sported a scruffy gray beard and his head was nearly bald. Beaming with pride he declared, "I made sixty-five dollars today!"

"Excellent." I said.

"What do you do?" he asked. I told him that I was a graphic designer. I explained that I worked on a computer. (I didn't have the heart to tell him that I worked in an air-conditioned office and that I

earned in a few hours what he earned toiling all day long. I avoided telling him that I was still in bed at 5 am, when his workday started. And I neglected to mention that I didn't work on weekends.)

He smiled and went back to work, collecting what the world tosses away.

As the economy continues to shrink, I think about the near collapse of Bear-Stearns, the rising costs of food and fuel, home foreclosures and the glut of unsold new SUV's. I keep an eye on Dow Jones and NASDAQ, anticipating another plunge. I look for trends and read market forecasts.

Why do I read the financial sections of the newspaper? Why do I keep track of the business environment? Because that's where the next great idea will come from.

Somewhere I read in a business management brochure that a crisis is also an opportunity. Downturns in the economy are just market adjustments. Although they can be very painful, in the long run, our society is healthier and wealthier because of self-correcting market

forces.

The New York Times reported recently that due to high fuel prices, a black market for used cooking grease has been born. In the past, the vegetable oil that was used to fry your hamburger at your favorite fast food restaurant was dumped into a grease barrel near the trash bin. But now, thieves are stealing the stuff!

Yellow Grease, as it is called, is a commodity that is traded like everything else. And it can be used to make biodiesel fuel. The price of the grease has gone up from almost \$.08 per pound to \$.33 per pound. A few years ago, restaurants had to pay somebody to haul the smelly stuff away. Now, restaurants are selling it. A truckload of Yellow Grease can be worth thousands of dollars!

That got me to thinking. What if municipalities collected used cooking oil from their restaurants and recycled it for use as an alternative fuel source?

According to the NY Times article, San Francisco is doing just that. Their program is called

SFGreasecycle. The city collects used vegetable oil from its restaurants and processes it into biodiesel fuel for its fleet of trucks.

The moral of the story? New opportunities will present themselves. We just need to know where to look. What other materials can be recycled and used to help the economy and the environment? So, don't dump that used vegetable oil down the drain. Let's get a recycling center for used cooking grease.

I am sure my friend Mr. Johnson knows the concept well. He has been eking out a living for nearly fifty years. When the transmission of his pickup finally died, he got another junker and sold his old truck for scrap.

Like I said, the Junkman always wins.

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