

Here is a Guest Commentary column which Janet wrote for the Opinion Pages of the Pasadena Star News. I think you will find this piece both poignant and disturbing.

## **Ebb and flow of economy hard to sustain**

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The last time I saw Alan, he was on the phone with a prospective employer. His voice was tentative, low. "I have 22 years experience," he said. In the silence I watched a wave of hope shift him forward. "Really?" his voice rose, "You do?" In the next silence he sank back into his chair. "Entry level. I see." He paused. "Can I send you my resume?"

Ebb and flow: It describes the economy and our own lives as well as the waves in the ocean.

Like a wave gathering momentum, an agrarian population reaches its peak. Farmland is sold for factories, towns grow into cities, manufacturing predominates, wages rise. The wave crests. Farmland is sold for suburbs and high rise office buildings. Service industries predominate. Because wages in the service sector are generally higher than in manufacturing, factory workers demand more pay.

Far out in the ocean, other waves are already rolling toward shore. Inevitably the first wave breaks. Factory owners move their factories to agrarian economics, where labor is cheaper. Workers in service industries -- from medicine to fast food -- are too busy serving each other to realize that they are exporting their incomes to buy manufactured goods. Unemployment and welfare become the ultimate service industries.

The wave engulfs even those who thought they were a safe distance from the ocean. The survivors learn to keep their heads above water as they feel the ground slip from under their feet.

Alan was caught in the undertow. I used to see him hunched over the latest job listings and ask how he was. "I'm under a lot of stress," he'd say, but he'd smile. A large, gentle man, he did volunteer work and spent hours talking to anyone who asked him for advice. We respected him, but that didn't help him find work.

Like waves in the ocean, we are all part of the ebb and flow of the economy. As consumers, we want to buy low, even when that means buying imports which reduce the need for factory workers in this country. As employees, we want to sell high, although most of our services are impossible to export. As investors, we want to do both.

When the economy ebbs, companies jettison their employees to lower costs. The stock market jumps and investors profit. But employees are consumers, and throwing them into poverty is bad for business.

Financial experts report: The economy is flowing. Even the president said so in his State of the Union Address. Some experts have called for higher interest rates to slow it down and some, tax breaks to speed it up. The rest of us try to reconcile their statistics with what we see around us; merchants complaining of poor sales, a teetering stock market, continuing unemployment for those seeking a living wage, and news reports threatening deflation.

There's no escaping the irony, especially when an economy needs constant forward motion just to keep from falling back. Sooner or later, something has to give.

Like Alan, who had a fatal heart attack four weeks ago.

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