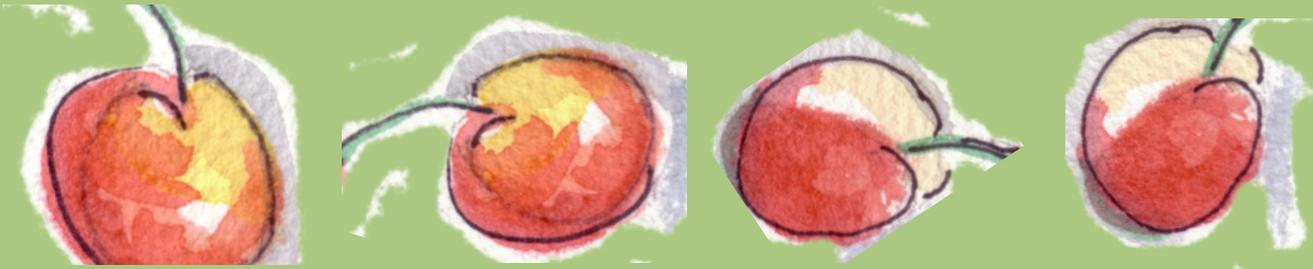


Thoughts from Beyond



Essays on the quirks of everyday living • by Paule Sheya Hewlett • www.beyondher.com •

Funny Business

I know the economy is in trouble, and I'm right there with it. I was pretty blasé about it 'til early this year when I casually opened the statements that had been accumulating under the holiday mail. I don't know whether it's better to get news like this in sharp repeated punches or, as I did, in one knockout blow.

Let's just say that after stumbling around in the ring for a while, I opted to pass out. And when I came to, my first thought was, "God, anyone who read my Christmas letter must think I'm an idiot." My second thought was, "Good, now we can get back to basics."

For years, I had been lost reading the business pages. I am the first to admit that I'm not sophisticated in high finance, nor the smartest guy in the room, but I do have a bank account and a hello kitty calculator. I have remained solvent for something like 40 years.

I come from a family where my mother kept a ledger on the sums (including college tuition) she had given to each of her children, way into our adult lives. So you must forgive me, but I'm

very old school in some ways -- I think even the most sophisticated economic theories can be boiled down to something that makes sense. Provided THEY make sense.

So when otherwise ordinary people start talking about things like derivatives and credit swaps -- and using jargon like mark-to-market --

when even my husband begins describing a price difference as a "delta," I am inclined to get suspicious.



What's with the new language barrier?

Like many other people, the real estate market struck me as the most suspicious of all. When we all heard about the HUGE money being made in the title and mortgage industries, be honest, we knew something funny was going on. Why would anyone loan money to a person when they knew couldn't pay it back?

We shook our heads and bemused the new American economy -- just as we loaded our new, unbelievably cheap, flat screen tvs into the car. Cool, right?

And as we kept stuffing our money into the stock market. From where it has virtually disappeared, thank you very much.

Well, I for one knew there would be a day of reckoning in the mortgage industry, and it seemed obvious that the piper would have to be paid. I just didn't realize I - the one with the traditional 30-year mortgage and nary a toxic asset - would be the one writing the check.

A Leather Bag on a Pleather Budget

When it all started unraveling, it did seem ridiculous that we had let ourselves go on thinking that house and stock prices would only go up. "I guess I don't understand business," I would sigh reading about CEO stock options and watching house flippers prosper on HGTV.

But, then, we like to think that there are only happy endings. It starts in elementary school, when we make sure that all the kids have trophies, even if their team came in dead last in

the league. "We just don't want anyone to feel like a loser," was how one mom put it to me. "

Uhm . . . but . . . they LOST," I once protested, using that little voice in my head. "Isn't that something we should all (including the parents) accept?"

Evidently not, living where we were at the time -- in Happy Town.

Like I said, we're starting to get the idea of losing now. It's really pretty simple: we can't live like a rich person if we're not a rich person. Just because Paris Hilton has a Louis Vuitton bag, it doesn't mean we can afford one.

I knew when I saw a toll operator take her Prada bag into the booth that things had truly gotten out of whack.

Nobody said it would be easy. And we're having a hard time adjusting to life without those trophies, even though our mail says our batting averages are way, way down.



So, yeah, it's back to basics: Anybody remember how to keep a ledger? **XOXOXO,**

Paule Sheya Hewlett is a freelance writer and artist living in Houston. Thoughts from Beyond is published at irregular intervals -- whenever life's absurdity reaches a certain level.

The Beyond Her Collection, including "Her Words" can be found @www.beyondher.com.