

Laughing all the way to the last bank on earth

The greedy, corrupt and breathtakingly stupid lit the spark in the American heartland, where Wal-Mart greeters, earning minimum wage, suddenly qualified for no-money-down, \$500,000 mortgages. From there, the blaze spread to consume nearly every financial instrument in the capitalist arsenal. Now, the bonfire of the vanities is melting money markets as far away as Iceland. And the scorched earth of an abiding, global recession seems the inevitable legacy of the 21st Century's first, terrible decade.

So why, in heaven's name, are so many Atlantic Canadians still smiling? The rest of the world may burn, but our provincial governments continue to count their blessings as each inch closer to the magical kingdom of economic "self-sufficiency". Meanwhile, business owners continue to travel on trade missions to far-flung locales, looking for new partnerships, alliances and, of course, sales.

"I don't know... I feel happy," an entrepreneurial friend of mine, who had just returned from South America, insisted the other day. "It's hard to explain."

"Well," I smirked, as I pondered the impact on my bank account of the five-dollar cappuccino I'd just ordered, "why don't you give it a whirl, Mary Poppins?"

"Look, I'm no idiot," he laughed. "I read the papers. I watch CNN. I know what's happening. But, don't you agree that it's better to keep a positive attitude, especially when times are tough, than to give in to pessimism and despair?"

"Sure I do," I grinned. "Except the part about you not being an idiot."

We parted that way, trading good-natured barbs and fist-bumps. Still, I wondered whether he and others like him in this corner of the world are actually on to something. After all, who can make it through the day (especially these days) without at least one, good rationalization liberally sprinkled on his morning bowl of psychic cereal? More to the point, who can truly deny that words and faith have power, sometimes greater than that of deeds? Can you spell "Barack Obama"?

In fact, more than a little evidence suggests that optimism, in the face of calamity, is a fungible commodity and does, indeed, offer a compelling, competitive advantage to those who possess it in spades. How else would the Empire State Building have been built in the depths of the Great Depression? How, for that matter, would Maple Leaf Gardens have been financed at a time when millions of

Canadians were out of work, hungry and desperate to see something other than their own quotidian miseries?

One Bruna Martinuzzi, the president and founder of Clarion Enterprises (a British Columbia company specializing in "emotional intelligence and leadership training"), speaks directly to the point when she declares on her web site: "Optimism is an emotional competence that can help boost productivity, enhance employee morale, overcome conflict, and have a positive impact on the bottom line."

Of course, she wisely observes, "in writing about optimism, you face the danger of being seen as advocating a 'Pollyanna' or quixotic approach. The truth is, however, optimism has been proven to be a powerful tool that will pay dividends for your personal life and give you a competitive advantage professionally in your career. In *The Wisdom of the Ego*, Dr. George E. Vaillant, professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, writes about individuals who have 'both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back'."

All of which may answer the first question: Why are we, in Atlantic Canada, still smiling? Why are we so dementedly optimistic out here on the East Coast?

It's entirely possible that we laugh in the face of adversity because, for most of our history in the Great White North, we've known little else. It's also possible that since our major industries have been undermined by central Canadian brokers and financial speculators for 150 years (just like the ones who've destroyed other people's opportunities, why, just the other day), we've learned to trust no one but ourselves. And it's likely that we understand, better than anyone, what Ralph Waldo Emerson (the original down-on-his-luck easterner) meant back in 1841 when he penned the following: "A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls."

So, bring on your greedy, your corrupt and your stupid. Bring on your fire and brimstone. For we're the ones with the imbecilic smiles on our faces, and we'll be laughing all the way to the last bank on earth. Hell, maybe, we'll even start one. 



Alec Bruce

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A Revolution that's Green in More Ways than One

They're a generation of fools consumed with covering their bottom lines at the expense of their enduring interests. They're lemmings running toward a cliff, stopping only occasionally to check their hair in the windows of the businesses they've shuttered. They're venal, witless, unapologetic and, like the world they've made in their own image, demented and doomed. And they are us.

Am I being too hard on my fellow baby boomers? After all, we pioneered the peace movement, expanded women's rights and broadened fair labour practices. We also invented the personal computer, the Internet and digital telecommunications. But, despite these marvellous contributions to civilization, we remain indefatigably selfish, short-sighted and arrogant, as two wars and one global, economic meltdown amply demonstrate. And if you're not convinced, consider what a 54-year-old associate of mine declared at a recent beer-fest of greying silverbacks.

"Bruce, you complain too much and your arguments are always abstruse."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Well, you should be. Planet Earth is in pretty good shape. Poverty is down. Wealth is rising. Democracy is steadily gaining a foothold everywhere."

"No," I interrupted. "I'm sorry I don't know what 'abstruse' means."

Apparently, it means "dense" or "impenetrable", which seems kind of fitting under the circumstances.

On the other hand, there may yet be some clarity for us, our losing generation. According to *New York Times* columnist and author Thomas L. Friedman, the world is becoming "hot, flat and crowded". Hot because it's warming up. Flat, because globalization has levelled the economic playing field for millions of formerly impoverished people. And crowded, because Earth's human population is increasing at an alarming rate. "If we want to maintain our technological, economic and moral leadership," he writes. "If we want a habitable planet, rich with flora and fauna, leopards and lions, and communities that can grow in a sustainable way, things will have to change around here, and fast."

It's heartening that the warning comes from a card-carrying baby boomer. But the essence of his argument has less to do with ethics than with pragmatism. Specifically, if we can't change our rapacious nature, then perhaps we can exploit it. Perhaps, we can put our savage mentality to the service of a revolution that's green in more ways than one. In other words, maybe we can make a profit by saving the world from... well, ourselves.

In fact, many are already doing this. Europe's northern countries have embraced alternative energy technologies in a way that seems fantastical to our North American sensibilities. The Netherlands, for example, currently produces 30 per cent of its energy from wind; and they export the results of its research and development around the world. Recently, Germany, France, Holland, Belgium and the United Kingdom have approved massive spending on tidal and solar generating projects, despite the economic calamity which threatens to topple their political leaders.

Why? It's not because these jurisdictions are manifestly eco-friendly and populated with a better class of human beings.

It's because the return on investment, after many years of experimentation, has proven to be irresistible. For every energy dollar a Dutch citizen spends, he or she gets back five – two of which go into better schools, another two go into health care and social security, and one goes right back into his or her own pocket. How's that for a "fiscal stimulus"?

For us, on this side of the pond, the approach just might work. Certainly, nowhere is the field more fertile, more receptive, than in Atlantic Canada, where we're desperate to secure our competitive edge in a knowledge-hungry world.

Imagine us building wind turbines, solar arrays and tidal generators. Imagine us constructing whole new industries through which the nation retools its GDP not just now, but in the future. Through these, we

might address long-standing structural problems, such as low productivity rates, anaemic investment in research and development, and deteriorating educational standards. Through these, we might stop carpetbaggers from stealing our tax dollars as we muse on the likelihood of the federal government building our roads, installing our sewers, erecting monuments to our own history, and bailing us out like a disapproving uncle with power over a trust fund we own, but never really wanted. Through these, we might reinvent the capitalist system as a truly sustainable, money-making machine in the Atlantic provinces.

Indeed, through these efforts, we may no longer be lemmings or fools, but genuine heroes investing, like our forbears, in the future – not because it flatters us, but because it's necessary; not because we're altruistic, but because we're practical.

Still, if we're wrong and we fail again, then at least the next generation will know that we tried to turn our witless, venal, demented, and doomed souls to some, pale version of good. And we, in perdition, will take comfort in the fact that the next cohort of citizens has arrived to clean up our mess.

And that they are not us. 



Alec Bruce

Why entrepreneurs can never go back

Twenty years ago, on a late August day dripping with heat and hope, I trundled out of Toronto in a rented van stuffed with sticks of furniture, my nose pointing due east towards a land of old dreams and, if I was lucky, new opportunities.

I was born in Hog Town, but I was raised in Halifax. And to some extent I had always claimed dual citizenship with all the conflicting sensibilities that this implied: Central Canadian arrogance; Maritime pride; Ontario bluster and bravado; Nova Scotia humour and generosity. Maybe this had been the source of my nearly pathological restlessness since arriving in Toronto for a good job at the *Globe and Mail* some five years earlier. All I know is that, in 1989 and for reasons I couldn't quite articulate, my bones ached to move up the road again.

Naturally, my wife and two small daughters were sceptical. Most of my friends and colleagues were convinced that I had lost my mind. Halifax? What on earth can you do there that you can't right here in the centre of the universe? Watch whales?

They had a point. I didn't really have a plan. But I did have a notion: What if I started my own business? What if I set myself up as an incorporated entity specializing in commercial and institutional research and writing – a sort of word factory for the wealthy elite who would surely beat down my door to avail themselves of my superior skills?

My first job was an annual report for which I was paid the princely sum of \$300. My second was a brochure for the freshly minted Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. In Toronto, I had been earning more than \$50,000 a year covering some of the most challenging and exciting issues in the country. Now, I was working for chump change massaging dreck into barely readable copy for people who neither cared nor worried about my creative presumptions. I should have been miserable. Why wasn't I miserable?

Today, my wife likes to observe, not unkindly, that I am thoroughly unemployable. She's right, of course.

Whatever slavish devotion to a bi-weekly pay-pouch I once had – whatever capacity for blind fealty to a supervisor I once demonstrated – has long since vanished. The bug that bit me two decades ago has done its work magnificently well. And its venom has only strengthened over the years. I am, for better or worse, an entrepreneur.

It's nearly impossible to convey the meaning of this word to someone who isn't self-employed. Most assume that those like me are both wealthy and lazy simply because our pay stubs are private and we don't punch a clock. Many think we're only doing our shticks until something better comes along. Still others believe that small business ownership is merely a stage in the life cycle of every growth-oriented enterprise.

They're all wrong. Entrepreneurship is a state of mind, and an especially intoxicating one. Just ask anyone in Atlantic Canada who works 16 or 20 hours a day to build something that didn't exist before they imagined it. And while you're asking, inquire about the sacrifices: The lost time with family; the plays, concerts and soccer games you were too busy to attend; the weddings, the funerals, the births that your schedule did not permit.

Still, through it all, reigns the glorious feeling of freedom, independence and conviviality: The freedom to fail and learn from mistakes without having to endure the filtered, compromised opprobrium of bosses and corporate HRD professionals; the independence to transmute disappointment into success;

and the conviviality of like-minded sojourners willing to ask questions of, and provide answers to, their peers.

Atlantic Canada's small-time entrepreneurs account for 87 per cent of all businesses, and five in 10 jobs. When I left Toronto 20 years ago, I had no idea that I would ultimately contribute to these statistics. I just pointed east, found a niche, and built an enterprise.

And I'm still dripping with heat and hope for the future. 



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