

A small image placeholder with the title "saving" and dimensions 179x100 pixels.

By Barbara Kiviat Sunday, Mar. 29, 2009

I'm going to walk two miles to work on Friday. I blame the recession.

Like people everywhere, I've been hit by fear. Fear that I'll lose my job. Fear that I won't be able to make my rent. Fear that my mother, who retires in June, will outlive her battered portfolio and need me to step in to help out.

So at the beginning of March, I started writing down everything I spend money on. They say one of the simplest ways to lose weight is to keep track of what you eat in a journal — seeing it there on the page underscores your piggishness. I decided to do the same thing with money, even though I've been tweaking my spending ad hoc for months. (Helpful Hint No. 1: When you try to save money by going to the supermarket instead of eating out, you probably shouldn't shop at a store called Gourmet Garage.) (See the best business deals of 2008.)

Recording my expenses in a journal, though, kicked things to a whole new level. I always thought I was fairly responsible with money. I don't have credit-card debt, I put a decent slug of my salary into my 401(k), and even though I spend a ridiculous percentage of my paycheck on housing — I do live in New York City — it's just a one-room apartment. I dropped my laptop and broke the screen a year ago; I still haven't replaced it since it still works. (Helpful Hint No. 2: ThinkPads are only slightly less rugged than soccer balls.) (See 10 things to do in New York City.)

But there's being prudent with your money, and then there's something else — something I've been noticing among my friends in recent months. One friend in Chicago sold her car and now relies on public transportation. Another has taken on freelance work for the weekends, even though she hasn't lost her job. In the interest of disclosure, we are all Of A Certain Age, and it is natural for a particular sort of gravity to kick in around the 30-year mark. (One friend recently noted that turning 31 is like being in the ocean and no longer seeing the shore. Ah, to be young!) But this, I'm pretty sure, is different. This feels like more than run-of-the-mill buckling-down.

I know it is for me. When I started cataloging my expenses at the beginning of the month, I had a fairly good handle on how much I would spend. At least I thought I did. And then, yesterday, I realized I had less than \$100 left in my budget for March. All eight days of it.

At first this seemed perfectly manageable. I have a few meals' worth of food in my cupboards, and even though I'm supposed to meet a grad-school chum for drinks Thursday night, I can keep it to one glass of wine. My big plans for the weekend are doing my taxes — fun and (let's hope) free. (See 10 valuable tips for tax season.)

Then it hit me. My 30-day pass for the subway expires on Thursday. It costs \$81 to get a new one (and will likely cost more than \$100 in a couple of months thanks to rising mass transit fares). After I add up a handful of things I know I'm going to have to spend money on in the coming days — a birthday card for my niece, a co-pay for a doctor's visit — I simply don't have the money.

Well, technically, I do. My budget is self-imposed, after all. But, like my newly carless friend, I feel strongly about the imposition. Everywhere I look, I am reminded of the bad economy. I was in the grocery store the other day (no longer Gourmet Garage), and there was an old woman working behind the counter. She must have been 75 — her hands were shaky. She shouldn't have to have a job. Will that — or a version of that — be me? Right now, I've got money for a new subway pass, that's true, but I don't want to spend it. Just because this economy hasn't come for me yet doesn't mean that it won't. (See which businesses are bucking the recession.)

So now I'm going back over my list of March spending to see where all the money went. Already, I'm wondering why I have a cell phone plan with so many minutes and

long-distance service on my home phone. I still eat out a fair amount ♦ alcohol and desserts, I am being reminded, are pricey. My biggest non-rent expense by far, though, is travel. It all seems justified ♦ twice to Pittsburgh to help my grandmother pack up her house and move; once to Miami for a good friend's 30th birthday. But it adds up.</p><p align="justify">The other day a friend who is considering moving to a cheaper apartment in a worse neighborhood to save money said she finally understands the sacrifices our parents made. That made me think about how there's a difference between giving something up (I haven't had cable TV in more than a year, but really, what am I missing?), and sacrifice. For the first time that I've noticed, my generation is becoming familiar with that second concept.</p><p align="justify">On March 8, I took a \$73 taxi home from an airport in New Jersey. The alternative was to take a shuttle to a \$15 train to the subway. It was late ♦ the train would have left New Jersey around midnight ♦ so I sprung for the cab. It didn't feel like a big deal at the time. But that was early in the month. Long before I knew that I'd be left with just \$100 and eight days to go.</p><p align="justify">I'm sure I'll be thinking about that taxi on Friday as I walk to work.</p><p align="justify">Source: <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1887670,00.html> ♦ </p>