

Reality Check

I pulled out of a gas station after spending my last thirty-five dollars cash for a partial tank of gas. My employer was already two-weeks behind on payroll and I didn't know when I'd get paid next. The recession, in its third year, was taking a toll on me and many people I knew. Looking for distraction from my worries, I clicked on national public radio and heard a spokesperson from the U.S. Senate banking committee explaining how the *core inflation rate* was lower than one might think.

"It's only 1.9% annually." He sounded downright pleased, like he was Santa Claus, just finished delivering presents for every American family.

The expert rattled on, explaining how the U.S. economy was in super-duper shape. I recalled a conversation I'd overheard that morning between two recent college grads who were both working in food service jobs because they'd not found anything higher-paying.

The clever news host, apparently one of Santa's helpers, reminded listeners that the *core inflation rate* doesn't factor in the price of food, gasoline, electricity, and natural gas. He said this with a straight face, I assume, as though the public didn't need to be reminded because it should have made perfectly good sense intuitively.

My irritation level, already elevated, went up as it always does when I sense I'm being buffaloed. Then the banking committee guy started gloating about the first quarter profits of Shell Oil and Microsoft and my tolerance threshold was transgressed.

Snap! Radio off! I popped in my Led Zeppelin's Greatest Hits CD and jacked it up loud to bring my mind back to a calmer, more rational state. Unfortunately, the Q&A conversation continued in my head.

Why are food, gasoline, electricity, and natural gas not part of the 'core inflation rate,' you ask?

Dummy, it's because food and energy costs are more volatile than other components of the economy. Why would anything 'volatile' be worth counting? No more dim-witted questions, please. Just shut up and swallow.

At the grocery store I picked up some fixings for a big dinner salad and paid for it with a credit card.

WOW, \$20? For a bag of green leaves, some sprouts, and mushrooms?

Despite my nagging frustration, I managed a slight smile at the checkout clerk who looked like she hadn't slept in a couple of days.

Perhaps she works two jobs... to make ends meet. Maybe her family has to buy food and gasoline. Duh!

As I passed through the automatic doors it occurred to me that for less than \$20 my wife and I could have gone to Subway for two foot-long tuna sandwiches, including greens and mushrooms, plus drinks, and had half leftover for lunch the next day.

It's a damn good thing that food prices aren't counted in the 'core inflation rate' cause if they were, holy smokes, inflation would be much higher and that would be bad for everyone, right? At least people who buy food.

Safely belted in with my \$20 paper bag of groceries in the passenger seat and greatly in need of a mood-change, a brilliant idea struck like lightening! I'd never really been all that pleased with my college GPA. It was a 3.2 in the end, not bad, but my father was head of the college math department, so expectations were a bit higher. Considering my downside start, it took a strong finish to bring it up to that level.

Honorable. But it doesn't accurately reflect my capabilities. Not really. Not at all, in fact. Maybe it's not too late to do something about it.

At home that evening I dug out my college transcript.

I'll just make a few adjustments, I chatted with myself. Let's see... English Literature 201... Dr. Lowenstein ... brilliant teacher, certainly knew his stuff, and what a character! But surely English Lit isn't a 'core' course for a Psychology major! And all that required reading! If I recall correctly, I had far more enticing pursuits in the fall of 1971... besides, there was a war on. I deserved the "F" I got, but hey, it was only my second quarter. I hadn't settled in.

Get the "F" out!

How about Zoology Lab? Memorizing bug names and animal parts and stuff. Useful information for everyday life? No F-ing way! Not worth counting.

That one ticked me off so much I made an "A" when I retook it the next quarter.

I'm taking that "F" off my transcript. Hand me that wide black marker, won't you please?

OK. Let's see ... minus one "F" at three credit hours, minus another "F" at one ... brings total attempted hours down to 135, divided into 445 credits ... that yields a new, improved GPA of 3.3. This is F-ing liberating!

But maybe I can do more. I'll only count hours and grades in my major, my 'core.' Let's see ... 39 divided into 147... that's a 3.77; round that up to 3.8. Now that's more like it!! My new 'core GPA' is 3.8! A record I can be really proud of!

Amazing what a little reality check can do for one's spirits.

Hum... maybe now I can graduate with honors! Where'd I put that F-ing cap and gown?



When we were kids, we played imaginary games one right after another. At the time, I thought all adults were playing reality, but now I understand better. A lot of grown-ups are big kids playing pretend.