



Like so many families across America, mine has been chafing under the impact of the lingering (and lingering... and lingering...) economic recession. Making do with less has quickly and effectively become a way of life – hey, we had no choice – but the necessary attitude adjustment – *a/ways* a choice – has been a little slow to catch up.

The good news is this: We're getting there. And summer's making it easier. 'Tis the season for simple pleasures, and I'm beginning to think the simpler they get, the better.

What follows are some recently acquired, money-saving, summer-friendly strategies to help you love your life... on the cheap. You may not need them, but try them anyway. You just might like them. (And if you do, feel free to put the money you save into a college fund for my daughter.)

Rethink Happy Hour

Feeling deprived because you can't go out for Happy Hour? Lately, I've added new "happiness" to my day by unwinding after work on the back deck with my daughter. I'll have a glass (or two) of dirt-cheap chardonnay while she consumes her beloved orange Gatorade, and – here's the *really*

fun part – we spray each other with squirt bottles. By 5:30 or 6, it's usually cooling off outside, and often there's a breeze, but the squirt bottles add a zany-and-refreshing touch to the festivities. Yesterday we also added music; Amelia taught me the finer points of swing dancing (she learned at school) to "Sing, Sing, Sing," played via my smart phone, then performed some modern ballet to "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." (My kid has great taste in music.) There was no mood lighting – just the waning sun glimmering through Spanish moss. There were no cute bartenders – but my husband was on his way home. There were no "fabulous" people – just us, but we felt pretty fabulous. I've always loved going out for happy hour, but now I love staying in for it, too.

Take Mini Vacations... Without Leaving Town

Sometimes, while spinning on the hamster wheel of our workaday lives, we Lowcountry dwellers forget that we live in a vacation destination. People actually take time off from their jobs, pack up their suitcases with "resort wear," fill their cars with precious gasoline, and brave the Interstate for a day or two just to end up where we already are. You may not be able to take a real vacation this summer, but unlike many of your fellow Americans, you can access that "holiday feeling" anytime you like. Are you stressed out? Exhausted? Plagued by existential angst? Why not pack up the family and head out to Hunting Island for the afternoon? Only 20 minutes from downtown Beaufort, it's a world away from your worries and responsibilities... not to mention as beautiful a beach as you'll find anywhere on the east coast. And, as my daughter blissfully pointed out last weekend, they have nachos now.

“Skip” the Gym

No, I’m not advocating a moratorium on exercise. I’m a true believer in the wonders it works, both physical and emotional, especially when times are tough. I have a nice, cost-effective membership at the YMCA, of which I take full advantage when I can. However... now that school’s out, the Y isn’t on my daily “route,” and with gas so expensive, I’m trying to limit my trips from our Pigeon Point home to the hinterlands of Port Royal. (My husband, the Californian, chuckles when I talk like this. According to him, nothing in the Lowcountry is far away from anything else.) I still try to hit the Y at least twice a week, but I’m now supplementing my workouts there with walking, jogging, and my new favorite exercise – skipping.

Stop laughing. I’m serious. A few weeks ago, I was power-slogging through the neighborhood, when all of a sudden, some long-forgotten muscle memory overcame me, my legs took on a life of their own, and I was flat out *skipping*. Just like a child. And you know what? I *felt* like a child. I felt joyful and carefree and full of energy. An immediate, amazing mood swing! You know how the act of smiling can actually make you

feel

happy... how lifting the corners of your mouth can lift your sagging spirits? Well, skipping works like that, I think. It’s simply impossible to maintain a heavy heart while skipping. Running can be drudgery (especially in this heat), walking can be monotonous, but skipping makes you feel... buoyant. (Yes, that’s the word!) And dang, is it ever a workout. I did a little research and found that skipping burns more calories than jogging.

One caveat that’s not *really* a caveat: People do tend to look at you funny. But then they tend to smile, and then to laugh, and it’s a friendly laugh. Skipping doesn’t just breed joy... it actually spreads it. So swallow your pride and become a skipper, like me. (Incidentally, I’ve found that the more pride one can manage to swallow, the happier one is, period. Wish I’d learned that earlier.)

Reading is Fundamental. And Sometimes Even Free.

Everybody's raving about the Kindle these days – even that it saves money – and I am not against it theory. I just haven't made the investment yet. For now, I'm looking for reading materials so cheap they're actually free. And the truth is, they're easy to come by. I'm talking about the library, of course. We have a great one downtown. (For those who prefer to own their books, not just rent them, the library has even opened a Gently Used Bookstore.) The Internet is another great source of free reading – and I'm not just talking about news, reviews, commentary, and snarky blog comments. My book club's been reading the short stories of Flannery O'Connor this month, and I've accessed many of them online. In fact, an abundance of classic literature has now been uploaded to the web by one dear, industrious soul or another. Take advantage!

Fall In Love with the Farmers' Market

Yes, it's trendy. Yes, it's "green." Yes, all the cool kids are doing it. But don't let any of that stop you from jumping on the bandwagon! Farmers' Markets are not a passing fad. For many reasons that people of all political/social/economic persuasions should embrace, they are the way of the future. (They are also the way of the past, which makes them even more lovable, in my opinion.) Wonderful local produce and baked goods... fantastic prices... a chance to visit with friends and neighbors in a bucolic setting.... What's not to like? (Some of them even have live music. And puppies!) Head over to the Port Royal Farmers' Market this Saturday morning (or the market nearest you, at whatever given time, on whatever given day) and just try to come away without a huge smile on your face. I dare you.

Don't Get Bored... Get Board Games!

You know you've got 'em. When was the last time you got 'em out? Do it tonight! You won't be sorry.

Last, But Definitely Not Least

Try not to feel sorry for yourself. Despair is a clear and ever-present temptation, but do not give into it. As trite as it may sound, try counting your blessings instead. No matter how drastically your circumstances may have changed, you still live in the United States of America, home of the free and the brave, where "poverty" looks very similar to what other countries call "wealth." Even more important – try not to feel sorry for your kids. I really struggle with this one, though I'm not sure why. When was the last time you read a story, either fact or fiction, about someone whose sterling character – or blazing intellect, or unique artistic vision, or great, compassionate heart – was forged on the crucible of... a wealthy, pampered childhood? Yeah, I can't remember, either. The kids will be fine. Better than fine. Just keep loving them and giving them what they need. Most of those things they *want* aren't good for them, anyway, and will just end up under your sofa cushions in a couple of weeks.

Having said that, I do recommend springing for those squirt bottles.

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