I know, I know, but this is a different spring. 

Not quite the “winter of our discontent” but a time of great concern about the economy and the value of our futures (I have determined, without assistance from any financial planners, that I will be able to comfortably retire at the age of 84).

On Saturday, April 18, joined by a couple of friends who trekked over from Hilton Head, we spent three perfect-spring-weather hours at the wonderful Port Royal Soft Shell Crab Festival. Only my respect for the far-too-large number of our neighbors who are having real difficulty during this economic crisis, kept me from headlining this article “Crowd of 10,000 Declares Recession is Over.”

But that’s what it looked like: Throngs of happy people, buying $20 and $40 worth of tickets at a time and lining up, sometimes 50 and 60 yards deep for these crunchy-moist crustacean wonders; or the best darned Polish sausage with onions and peppers on fresh, bready, corn meal-dusted rolls anyone’s had in a long time; or the countless variety of scrumptious cupcakes (one iteration shaped like crabs with red licorice legs) , brownies, beigies and chocolate, orange and vanilla flavored, color-speckled frosted phantasmagoria of fun hand and home-made by the wonderful women of the United Methodist Church on Lady’s Island. I’m not ready to convert, but as I said to one of the ladies; “this is a part of God’s work I really like.”

Are there rays of hope, this spring, for a turnaround? The pundits will give you a thousand answers. Let me see if I can add some clarity, instead of more confusion. I work for a living, still, and I am lucky to do so with more than 70 owners of small businesses from Charleston all the way to Savannah. Collectively, they represent over $500 million in annual sales, and volume like that probably produces a payroll to employees (yours and my friends and neighbors in the Lowcountry) of as much as $200 million.

Many of these companies have had to cut back hours or staff or both. Many of them are in the architectural, engineering, surveying, contracting, sub-contracting, home building trades and, we all know, these are sectors that are first, tremendously important to our region and second, sectors that have been hard hit by the economy.

In some ways, we all seem powerless; circumstances are overwhelming. Banks are bailed out by our tax dollars but are not lending the money. So boomers can’t sell their homes in Pittsburgh and move here. Developers have resources but are too frightened to move forward. Lots of cash is sitting on the sidelines, but that same fear pervades. Paradoxically, it’s the Federal Government that gave them the bailout dollars and then it’s Federal Inspectors who are telling many banks they cannot lend the money!!! Go figure.

So, what’s an ordinary person to do? A few suggestions: Show the same confidence those 10,000 people exuded in Port Royal. Go out for one more meal a week.

Buy a few shares in American companies you know will be here in 10 and 15 years. The stock market is still not reflecting what you and I believe. It is swaying in the breezes of institutional uncertainty and automated trading that reacts to uncertainty.

If you own a business here and are not a member of your local chamber, join this week. Don’t judge Chambers by how many clients they send you. Join Chambers to make them stronger and help them be the voice of business and local strength.

At work, whether you are a key executive or are at the bottom of the food chain, be creative. Think strategically. What is it you can do to be sure yours is the company that will remain standing when this mess is over? Sell like you-know-what.

All of this plays into what is called consumer confidence, and,consumer confidence is the bellwether that makes money flow and employment increase and value of houses go up and turns downturns into upticks.

Hope does spring eternal. This Spring, we have to do more than hope.