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Giving thanks for ... A LACKLUSTER ECONOMY?

NOT YOUR AVERAGE THANKSGIVING MESSAGE. But some people have embraced financial negatives as a challenge to cut back and discover what's really important in life.

Palm Beach County's economic boom was very, very good to Victor Perez. The Massachusetts native established himself as a personal trainer to some wealthy clients around the county, including several then-flush folks from the lucrative real estate industry.

"They could afford \$100 an hour for a trainer and not even think about it," says Perez, who, thanks to those clients, could afford to live in a gorgeous, expensive condo in downtown West Palm Beach. "They were quite well-off, and thought, 'Now I need a 3/2 with a marble floor on the 15th floor, and a trainer.' "

But when the real estate market went, so did many of the big-money clients with the disposable income. Perez, 30, found himself in sort of a reverse The Jeffersons scenario, moving on down from the deluxe apartment in the sky and back to more modest accommodations, as well as a less high-flying lifestyle.

And looking back, he says it's one of the best things that could have happened.

"I was forced to take inventory of what I really wanted to do ... I realized I was living a lifestyle that was never really me. I needed to be humble as to where I was," says Perez, who replaced his exclusive, wealthy clients and their lucrative one-on-one sessions with group boot camps and shorter, less-expensive sessions.

And more importantly, he says he replaced the faster, monied lifestyle he'd been living with a renewed connection to his spirituality, friends and family. "There's a benefit to the obstacles, because there's something on the other side."

As we head into Thanksgiving, the still-struggling economy and its effect on employment, the housing market and other facets of our lives might make it seem harder to find things to be thankful for. But Perez and others are finding that downsizing can be an upgrade in quality time with their families, new careers and new definitions in what happiness and thankfulness really means.

"It's all about perception, and how we either change or adapt how we think, or implode and create a crisis," says Martin Thompson, the director for the Institute of Mental Health at St. Mary's Medical Center. "When we focus on material things, that's where we place our value. In times of

recession, we have an opportunity to look inward. The things we focus on are really profound and really important."

Finding gratitude

There's actual science to support the glass half-full philosophy — Thompson refers to "positive psychology," as studied at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, which promotes a psychological place of happiness "by focusing on strengths as well as weaknesses, on building the best things in life as well as repairing the worst," according to the center's website.

"It's about gratitude," Thompson says. "We can get into the mode of taking things for granted. People get confused and think that happiness is the same as pleasure. How we look at things that we are grateful for puts things into perspective. We get more out of giving than from receiving."

Christopher Fleming, a partner at Strategic Realty in West Palm Beach, agrees that the economic downturn changed his perspective — in this case, on being a father.

"I didn't lose my job, my commissions were cut in half," he says. "The recession was the final straw in my marriage. I have a great ex-wife, and she's a great mother, but the truth of the matter was that the instability of real estate was not what she wanted."

But from the loss of his marriage came "a positive," even though it didn't initially seem like one. Son Tyler, now 13, goes between his parents' homes every seven days, and even though "it was strange not to have him around all the time ... it kind of made me look at what was more important. It's important to have one-on-one time at his age. I never have sitters when he's with me. We go out and do our thing, and no Xbox. The situation caused me to stop and cherish that time with him."

Fleming, 49, who lives in Lantana, says he and Tyler have even turned cost-cutting into a father-son activity. "I never knew what a coupon was," he says, laughing, "but it's a great way to get my son involved. We're not in dire straits, but it's a new world out there. We're beach people, and we can spend three or four hours there where before we might go to Disney World and spend \$1,000 for a weekend up there.

"I think that before when everyone was getting and happy, it could be about instant gratification. Now you have to work harder, and that helps build relationships."

Perez, the personal trainer, agrees. As he rebuilt his business, he reconnected with his Buddhist faith, which he says clarified his priorities and cleared the way to reconnect with his family "and with my tight circle of friends — the real ones, not on Facebook."

And having to struggle reminded him that with support, he's capable of rising to any challenge, something he's thankful for.

"If you stay stuck in the past, you're not gonna move away from what's wrong. That's what got us to this point, too many people whining and moaning," he says. "This has been a chance to remind yourself to punch yourself in the face and keep going."