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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Vive la Dépression!

By ROGER COHEN

What is it with plumbers, anyway?

Before Joe the Plumber, the latest celebrity of the U.S. presidential campaign, we had the Polish plumber, star of the 2005 French referendum that sent a much-heralded European Union constitution into the toilet.

Jozef the Plumber — actually he never got a name — was the mythical Polish worker who was going to exploit European integration by moving to France and stealing jobs. Mais non! The French nixed that by a 55 percent majority.

I'm not sure what effect Joe Wurzelbacher of Holland, Ohio, is going to have on the American vote, but one thing's now certain: you don't need a plumber's license to gain national fame.

In time, sociology departments at the Sorbonne and Stanford will complete studies on this Gallo-American plumbing thing. Meanwhile, it's clearly time for everyone to start searching for his inner plumber.

Mine is repressed. But a faint gurgling from deep in my psyche tells me that with making money from pieces of paper now out of fashion, and making money from doing things (like fixing a pipe) enjoying a comeback, the plumbing vogue reflects a move back to basics.

A relief from sophistication is overdue. Derivatives and credit-default swaps are a downer.

So I've decided to look forward to the Depression.

You might actually be able to go to a New York dinner party and not have someone tell you how much her property has gone up in value. Blackberry fever, another obstacle to enjoying a meal, should subside.

Interesting tidbits, like how to use a teabag a second time, or where to buy a cheap safe, or how to raise chickens in the bedroom, will be all the rage.

Courtesy could even make a comeback as we discover the shared humanity of standing in food lines: nobody will take up three seats on the subway anymore. A new "homeless look" will gain traction. With time on their hands, people may return to reading newspapers. There'll be more room on planes and fewer snooty looks from Platinum frequent-flyers as you board them.

Let's face it, nightmares — war, totalitarianism, even vanishing 401(k)'s — are a tonic for conversation.

When Communism fell in Europe, hundreds of millions of people loved the liberty but lamented the demise

of interesting discourse. Deciding between a vacation in Marbella or Marrakesh, or how to take your mojito, doesn't quite do it when resistance or silence before the K.G.B. has been the choice over cabbage soup.

Wit loves hardship. We'll have more laughs, more good music, and less of Sarah Palin's "verbage" — but don't get me started. Peggy Noonan said it all on Palin in The Wall Street Journal: "She doesn't think aloud. She just ... says things."

Speaking out is the American way — even if some Republicans think words are suspect because they just might lead to eloquence.

In the U.S.S.R. — and remember state monopoly capitalism of the kind Henry Paulson now favors is Marx's last stage on the road to the workers' paradise — people joked about the difference between the American and Soviet Constitutions.

Answer: both guarantee freedom of speech, but the U.S. constitution also guarantees freedom after speech.

Or it used to before Dick Cheney re-jigged it for the post-9/11 age. But I digress.

I asked an actor friend, Jy Murphy, about possible upsides to a Depression. He sent me this:

"People can stop worrying about their portfolios, and spend more time starving with their families. It's bound to put a dent in the national obesity rate. More people will use mass transportation, like railroad freight cars. We'll have authentic stories of hardship to guilt-trip our spoiled grandchildren. And once the Depression is over, we'll be ready to win a world war again!"

Yep, there's a lot to be said for plumbing the depths.

Which brings us back to Joe the Plumber. John McCain thought Joe had something to teach Barack Obama. But I think his lesson was directed at the Republican ticket. The faux-plumber has already held a press conference, more than Palin has done in the seven weeks since she was nominated.

"I'm kind of like Britney Spears having a headache," Bald Joe said, a possible allusion to the moment she got her head shaved. "Everyone wants to know about it."

Can you blame them? With the Bonfire-of-the-Vanities end to the Bush administration, the travails of an Ohio plumber are a fine distraction, even if Joe's really no Britney look-alike.

My suggestion is that Joe and Jozef meet for a Paris presser after the election. That would be a nice way of flushing away differences and getting the next presidency going in a spirit of rediscovered cooperation between Depression-hit allies.

Then they can co-author a book: "Plumb Deep, Fly High."

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