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# Could 'dropping out' be a solution to tough times?

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 3, 2012 NCR Today

The early strands of a trend are often hard to find, but this one just about smacked me in the face: If movie trailers and newspaper articles are any guide, people are tired of tough times and just want to hop off the whole darn carousel, quick.

A couple of days before New Year's, my kids and I went to see the film "We Bought a Zoo." [1] Fun, friendly family stuff based on a true story about a man who quits his job, moves his kids out of the city and spends all their savings when he buys a zoo. Even as I watched this, the story struck me as counterintuitive. In tough times, people are supposed to save their money and fantasize about finding a job with steady health benefits -- acting on impulse seems like a story for the boom years gone by.

Another day, different theater, an interesting movie trailer: Jennifer Aniston and Paul Rudd in a comedy called "Wanderlust." [2] Rudd plays an overworked urban lawyer who gets fired from his firm and doesn't run out in a panic to find another job -- any job -- just so he can survive. Instead, Rudd convinces his wife to hit the road with him -- and join a commune with no property, free-love and macrobiotic menus.

Both films carry the same message: Stop working within a crazy system that doesn't value who you are. Walk away from it and do something crazy just for yourself.

Now, two movies a trend do not make. But then I opened up the *New York Times* and dove into a compelling article by Pico Iyer, "The Joy of Quiet." [3] The essay was another plea to drop out, combined with Iyer's growing sense that many people were ready to do just that. He writes about expensive resorts where privileged guests pay extra to have the Internet connection removed, and of retreats that brag about being very far from the nearest cellphone tower. People who market to children tell him they believe the next big thing for kids won't be a louder gadget or more gruesome video game but, honestly, "stillness": A way for children to back away from all the noise.

It all sounded remarkable -- but, I thought, would an average person really do this? Really yearn to drop out? Or is this an indulgence cooked up by dreamers and filmmakers?

Susan Gregory Thomas tells me this is not some passing fad. Writing in the *Times*' travel section, of all places, Thomas delivers one of the most unexpected stories of religious meditation and reinvigoration I've read in a mainstream publication. [4] Called "A Quick Shot of Peace, On a Budget," Thomas describes herself as a woman on the edge, "wrung out from three years of panic attacks triggered by the specter of financial ruin."

Her solution is to seek peace of mind on the cheap. She soon finds herself at a Jesuit retreat center in rural Pennsylvania on a five-day visit for $560, including meals, and sneaks into a daily session with a Jesuit-trained spiritual director. Those daily sessions soon form the backbone of Thomas' essay, which surprisingly turns from a travel how-to article into a look at the way just a little bit of quiet -- just a short amount of dropping out -- can reconnect us with a higher power we had lost along the way.

I was on vacation myself as I read Thomas' story, sitting at my mother's breakfast table in Florida with my wife and daughters. I lifted my eyes from the newspaper, reached for the iPhone and powered the thing down. It was a Sunday. Anyone who wasn't already there with me could wait.

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