

Coming back to a sustainable pace of life

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 20, 2010 A small catholic

PITTSBURG, Mo. -- Just as my wife and I parked the car at the end of the long gravel roadway into the [Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center](#) [1] here, Fr. Paul shouted a hello and hustled down the path for a hug.

Earlier in the year we had attended a surprise party for Paul's 80th birthday, but I still don't believe he's that old. He's physically, emotionally and spiritually in wonderful shape and quite able to live here as a hermit three weeks of each month. The fourth week he spends at [Assumption Abbey](#) [2] in Ava., Mo.

W. Paul Jones, who spent most of his career as a United Methodist clergyman teaching at [St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City](#) [3], is now a Catholic priest and Trappist monk. He continues to write books and to serve as caretaker of the small 13-acre retreat center that has been his dream.

And a lovely dream it is. In addition to the rustic but comfortable hermitage where he lives, there's a nearby converted house for retreatants and a new one-person hermitage in the woods, just up a hill from Lake Pomme de Terre. That building has electricity but no running water.

There's no set fee for any of the center's guests. You pay what you can. If that's nothing, then nothing it is.

I've just agreed -- after years of Paul asking me -- to serve on the center's board. So I wanted to spend a little time here to try to get into my Protestant mind why such retreat centers are necessary. From what are we retreating? Or, maybe: From whom?

I suspect that many Catholics -- especially those with some understanding of the monastic tradition -- may be able to answer those questions more quickly and accurately than can Protestants, though of course that's a wild generalization. The reality, however, is that nearly everyone now lives at an unsustainable pace and needs to be slowed.

Forty years ago, futurist Alvin Toffler warned us in his book [Future Shock](#) [4] that we were sprinting on a highway to incoherence. And if it was true then -- when nobody had a laptop, a cell phone or an iPad and when instant messaging meant talking to someone face-to-face -- imagine how true it must be today.

Indeed, [one recent study](#) [5] found that the average pace of life has sped up another 10 percent just since the early 1990s.

The human body can and does evolve -- but at far from warp speed. And the reality is that we're not built to live at the pace most of us now endure. At a minimum, we need ways to remind ourselves that the miracles that are our bodies and our brains must be operated at reasonable speeds.

That's at least part of what retreat centers can do for people.

For instance, Fr. Paul has e-mail through a phone line but refuses to have any Internet connection. He knows

that with his curious mind he'd spend far too much time surfing the Web and being distracted from the verities he's pledged to notice while living at the slower pace of a hermit.

When I remove myself from the pace of writing a daily blog, columns for two publications, church work, nonprofit board work, being a grandfather to six (all close by), helping my wife maintain a home and on and on, I realize that I begin to notice things. I do what my Buddhist friends tell me to do -- I become mindful. And I start to reverse the true charge I once read in a Jewish prayer book, which is that "we walk sightless among miracles."

The life I've chosen requires me to be connected fairly rapidly with the world around me, and that means cell phones and laptops, Facebook and Twitter. But time at a retreat center draws me back to a sustainable pace. And it reminds me that speed kills.

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[1] <http://www.hermitageretreats.org/>

[2] <http://www.assumptionabbey.org/>

[3] <http://spst.edu>

[4] [http://www.amazon.com/Future-Shock-Alvin-](http://www.amazon.com/Future-Shock-Alvin-Toffler/dp/0553277375/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285960702&sr=1-1)

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[5] <http://www.paceoflife.co.uk/>

[6] <http://billtammeus.typepad.com/>

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