

A Time To Think, A Time To Take Action

By DANIEL RUTH The Tampa Tribune, Daniel Ruth's column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

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It was about two years ago when Patrice Koerper started having what might be best described as her Peggy Lee "is that all there is?" moment.

Fifty-one at the time, a single mother with two grown sons, Koerper, a public relations executive with the Hillsborough County library system, began to think: "What would happen if I stopped filling my day with stuff and filled them with thoughts?"

And so she thought and thought and thought. And it was - wonderful.

Koerper thought during a retreat at a Benedictine abbey. She thought while gazing out across the Grand Canyon.

With no children to raise and no grandchildren in the immediate offing, she realized: "Nobody needs me for a while."

Then she thought about a long ago suppressed ambition - before marriage, before children, before her days were filled with stuff. She thought about the Peace Corps.

This fall, Koerper will leave Tampa for her Peace Corps posting in Macedonia. Her job, helping the government decentralize, will allow her to put her master's degree in management to use.

Face To Face

More importantly, the two-year stint volunteering for her country fulfills the realization that "the higher up you go, the further away you get from the people you most want to help," Koerper mused. "The Peace Corps allows you to touch the face of the people you're helping."

You could also make a case Koerper is joining one of the few government agencies that actually works. Since the Peace Corps' inception in 1961, more than 182,000 Americans have volunteered to serve 138 nations around the globe.

It took Koerper roughly six months from the time she applied to be vetted, accepted and handed her assignment.

"You give yourself over to the process," Koerper laughed, adding that where the agency sent her was the least stressful part of the experience.

"After all, once you make the decision to leave your family, your friends, your home, what difference does it make where they send you?"

Bit Of Envy

Indeed, among her family and friends, Koerper's decision to join the Peace Corps has been met with universal support and, yes, a bit of envy, too.

"It's the best decision I've ever made for myself," Koerper said. "The only person who objected was my accountant."

Koerper took issue with the notion that volunteering to go to a developing country to live, put delicately, in modest circumstances, is an act of idealism.

"I see it as humanism, not idealism," Koerper insisted. "It's the stuff you do every day. It sounds corny, but I don't think I'm giving anything up.

"I'm going to meet a lot of people and maybe change the world - by simply opening a door."

Patriotism comes in many forms - on patrol in Fallujah, Iraq, defending American interests in the diplomatic salons of the world, climbing aboard the space shuttle.

And there is this: 45 years ago, John Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Patrice Koerper has answered that challenge - for her country and for herself.