

Breaking it Down: America was poised for a burnout

"I'm honestly glad for the break," said one restaurant owner when I recently interviewed him about the effects of social distancing on his business. "I've been going full-out for so long, having a forced vacation is kind of nice." Even if it's the universe forcing it on you? "I'm sure I'll feel different soon, but for a few days, yes."

"I'm relieved to not have to go out, honestly," another recent interviewee, who suffers from social anxiety. "I needed a break."

Although the changes the coronavirus may wreak on society, the economy and just plain old reality can definitely be stressful, it is possible that many Americans are embracing quarantine and self-quarantine because they just needed a break.

Americans are known for a work ethic that far exceeds most other developed nations. We work more days a year. We have institutionalized expectations of two weeks of vacation a year, compared to six in most European countries. We put in more hours per week. If you have a hobby and you live in any other given Western country, you pursue it for fun and gratification, spend some money on it and perhaps share it with your friends. If you have a hobby and live in the US, people have almost certainly suggested you monetize it - on the side, or as a future career (kudos if you've resisted that pressure). "Ooh, those things you make are awesome, you should sell them on eBay!"

As a nation, far too many of us were waiting for a chance to take a breather. No one wants an indefinite breather, of course, but a little quarantine may be good for our collective soul and reveal just how burned out the current economic system - now due for a serious overhaul of undetermined proportions anyway - has made all of us. The wealth gap isn't something most of us have much time to really consider, because we've all been kept too busy working. A communal stop could be the sort of thoughtful pause we need; and the wide-ranging anticipated negative side effects, especially for the poorest in our society, might combine to incite a reconsideration of the lifestyle we have collectively adopted over the last couple of generations.

"I finally got to spend some time with my kids." "I had a basement full of fun projects I just got to dig into for the first time in years." These comments and others show that there was an imbalance waiting to be corrected, and maybe the force of necessity, like a bloodless societal revolution, will prove the instigation for a reconsideration of our core values and life choices as an economic society.