

Naturally, the solution is simple

By Ruth Ostrow

PART of the Voluntary Simplicity movement I've been discussing over the past weeks includes people making a seachange in order to find meaning and inner peace.

I've already profiled people in the series such as former president of the McDonald's food chain in Australia, Peter Ritchie, who are "down-shifting" or sacrificing income and promotion for more time with family and friends.

There are those who are throwing away credit cards, and members of the movement who are jumping off the treadmill and following their creative dreams, as I show in next week's column.

Then there are those moving back to the land or sea, looking for self-sufficiency, and an ecologically sustainable life, a meaningful bond with nature, and a space to savour the beauty of life.

My husband and I fall into this category, having made a decision last year to finally let go of a mortgage that was strangling us and strangling our relationship, and to opt for a simpler life.

Well before we knew that there was a quiet revolution coming out of the US called "Voluntary Simplicity" with an estimated 10 million participants, and a burgeoning Australian base, we fitted the perfect profile of those affiliated with the trend.

We were resentful that we had no time for ourselves, running several jobs in order to pay for a ridiculous mortgage, private school fees, and the huge monthly burden of our multiple and seductive credit cards.

We felt exhausted, stressed out from keeping up with the Joneses. Yet we were both so convinced it was the right way to live, we failed to see the impact that our way of life was having on our health and our happiness.

The more exhausted we became the more it began to dawn on us that we were sacrificing our present for a future that may never come. Depriving ourselves of the simplest indulgence in the present: time for a holiday, money for a night on the town, to feed a mortgage that we rationalised would create our nest egg.

As strange as it sounds, the big wake-up call for me came the day Princess Diana died. Although I had no personal feelings either way about the woman, her death pressed home to me in a most dramatic fashion the impermanence of existence. The futility of saving for a rainy day.

I sat in front of the television for eight hours solid that fatal afternoon. I just couldn't get out of my head the sudden realisation that no one is immune from death, and that we were all fluttering away the precious commodities of youth and time and love, on society's daydream.

I realised that no amount of money and glamour was worth a life not well lived. Slowly my husband began to hear what I was saying.

Finally, last year, we both gave up several of our jobs, sold our home, threw out most of our junk, and moved up north to the hinterlands overlooking Byron Bay. As writers, we were fortunate enough to have portable careers, our computers linking us into the world.

But without the gruelling expectations of city life we found peace, meaning, and time to love each other, time for our child, time to take up hobbies like cooking and guitar. It was nourishing to the soul to see my husband standing in gumboots tending his vegie garden, and my child running after the neighbour's cows.

Best of all our new lifestyle has given us time to appreciate the wonderful community of people around us. One of whom is Delicia Bone, who lives alone in her log cabin surrounded by trees, ocean, a waterfall and dramatic cliffs.

A true symbol of the Simplicity movement, she recently left the grind of city life and moved to the highest peak of a mountain range, to be self-sufficient on a solar-powered farm.

Like my husband and me, she wanted to escape the rat race but not a career she truly loved, strategic planner for a large Queensland-based information technology and telecommunications company. So she worked out a way to have both, by embracing new technology rather than shunning it.

Delicia plugs in her computer and connects to her work, solving problems, strategising and conducting conferences by modem. And on a regular basis she returns to Brisbane, stays with a friend, and spends a few weeks in the office having face-to-face meetings.

She says: "During my 12 years in the IT&T industry I have observed much greater efficiencies, but this has come at a cost, a much faster lifestyle. My personal goal was to use technology to increase the quality of my life not just the pace of it. Telecommuting was the way.

"Quality of life to me is being able to live where I want, and yet maintain my professional career and income in the city. The willingness of our management team to consider new ways of operating has enabled this. I certainly appreciate their innovative thinking."

But she's also fortunate that her role in the company is suited to being away from the office for extended periods of time.

She says: "I love the community aspects of the Byron Shire, love living near the sea, love the beauty and stillness of country life. Living in the city with the noise, pollution and traffic just does not work for me.

"We all have so much choice, but we don't always use it. I used to be very stressed, taking on more responsibility at work, working long hours, but now I've integrated my work into my broader life, and my life feels so much richer for that."

Part of the Voluntary Simplicity movement is ecological awareness. Delicia says: "I live an environmentally sustainable life here, eat my own fruit and vegies, use solar power only, have a compost toilet, so I am minimising the detrimental effect that human life can have on our planet.

"I have done this on my own as a single woman, which has not been easy, and I feel proud of this achievement.

"I love nature and want to live in such a way that the next generations will inherit a beautiful earth."

Next week, a look at the ultimate in simplicity -- those who have given it all away, literally!

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