

Living outside the birdcage

By Ruth Ostrow

I RECENTLY met several people who were homeless. But not homeless as in down and out on the streets, rather homeless by choice, happily homeless, free spirits who travel around the world as they wish, without messy relationships to tie them down, living out of cars or on other people's hospitality.

I met them all while doing research for my series on Voluntary Simplicity. And although they are at the extreme end of a movement dedicated to making life simpler, I've decided to interview them because I'm sure there are many readers bound by mortgages, kids, schooling, spouses or ageing parents, who are so over-committed, so overly responsible, they can only imagine what it's like to live hand-to-mouth, on the road.

For some the story will bring feelings of envy. For others it will elicit a judgment based on insecurity and fear. For me, I became curious as to why so many of us are convinced that the only way to derive happiness is by settling down, when those living without money, assets and permanency seem so much less complicated, less stressed, less anxious.

As John Harding, 57, who I recently bumped into on his way north to Queensland, told me, "My motto in life is: I don't want to worry."

"Possessions make you worry. You get caught in the trap of owning things and then you're on a treadmill. You have to worry about things getting stolen, about insurance, about things going out of date like the mobile phones and computers always on sale for \$10 in junk sales. If you need email, go to an internet cafe."

John owns "as little as possible". A car, a few items of clothing, some cameras and a few shares he once bought with some spare change.

But he could have had it all. In the 70s and 80s he was one of the country's most famous underwater photographers, founder of Fathom, the hallmark of diving magazines, and teaming up with film crews from all over the world including shark duo Ron and Valerie Taylor, to document our marine life.

"I guess I just wanted to be a free spirit. Driving was my therapy. I lived with a woman once but my flaw is that I find it difficult to be married. The point of life is to evolve. But when you are with someone, you stay locked in a timewarp," he says.

Now he drives where he wants, when he wants, camping by the sea or sleeping in caravan parks, living cheap, making a bit of money from his revolutionary films which are now in library archives, or throwing film nights at local RSLs.

He points out the advantages of his lifestyle: "You can chase the good weather. And you can chase up good friends." He stays with his mates all around the country but only for two to three days at a time, and he always cooks exotic meals for his keep.

The main disadvantage? "Your sex-life suffers. Women like to see the cave. Men can show off their talents in a house, hang the photos they've taken, express themselves in the shade of carpet or lounge suite."

But he says he feels no loneliness, no insecurity. "I have an adventurous, full life."

James Coates, 42, is another happily homeless person, staying at a friend's home while she is away.

A former Shakespearean actor, now travelling poet with a group of Persian musicians called Khirdir, he has chosen to live the life of a nomad, never staying anywhere for long, never over-staying his welcome in relationships, and just living wherever life and destiny lead him.

"I have chosen this life because my aim is to put beauty back into the world. I believe that the root of all suffering and pain is attachment. That to own nothing, to belong to no one is a state of freedom. Just look at what ownership has done to this world, the war, the fighting."

He sees responsibility as futile in an impermanent world. "I know people think that there is something psychologically wrong with that, but it's a choice I made when I was very young." With a father who was a well-known journalist, James travelled a lot as a boy, going to 10 different schools but he doubts that it caused his wanderlust.

"I have my musical instruments, I have my car. And I have trust that I will be okay. That I will end up in the right place. And it always works out. I end up living with friends, on islands, in tents. Sometimes I stay in nice hotel rooms through my work."

He says friends are often so jealous that he can cram all his worldly possessions into a tiny bag, they are motivated to toss belongings into a river or light a bonfire.

The advantages of his life? "Freedom. Once I went to India for a month and stayed three years. You don't have to answer to anybody -- where you've been, where you are going. You are free to be spontaneous, uncompromising."

The disadvantages? "None. I love living simply. I don't need a lot of money to do what I want to do. If you are not content within yourself then you are not going to be content anywhere."

"Susy" (not her real name) differs from the others in that she has three children, two of whom are now grown. But she brought them up alone, by choice, often on the move.

Selling bongo drums and jewellery, and doing cleaning work to survive, she travels about, meeting new people and "having a very interesting life".

"I love not having to do anything anybody else says. I don't mind camping out. And I like living without a man. There is too much bullshit in relationships. I am happier without it."

She says she hates the routine of nine-to-five life. But she sees her time on the road coming to an end because her youngest daughter is in need of a home.

"Soon we will have to tie ourselves down for a while. But I can cope with it because she is my only boss."

All three talk of being labelled "fearful" and "escapists". But are the rest of us not motivated by fear? Fear of being alone, of not being loved, of not having money or someone to look after us as we get older?

In their world, we who chose to steep our lives in responsibilities, are the escapists -- from the true potential of life outside the birdcage.

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