

In search of peace on earth

By Ruth Ostrow

"MUMMY, I don't want my hair washed," whinges my daughter, clinging to my arm and tugging at me in desperation. It is hair night, and this is the ritual that always precedes the splashing and crying and howling that renders me exhausted.

It is also the night that Alaskan adventurer Robert Bogucki has just been found wandering in the Great Sandy Desert. His gaunt face, sun-parched but luminous, peers out at me from the 6.30 news.

"Before I started, I didn't really know what I was looking for," he says into the probing cameras. "I just wanted to spend a while on my own, nobody else around, and make peace with God, I guess."

"Mummy, please ... no ... no ... not tonight," pleads my child. But I'm not present. My mind is occupied with a beautiful quote I recently read from Steven Foster's book *Vision Quest*: "I went into the desert alone, not knowing why, searching for something I had lost, or could find."

"I was not seeking to die, but to reap the fruit of death, to re-enter the womb of things, the matrix of unknowing, and to be born anew."

"But mummy mummy mummymummy. I don't want to have my hair washed ... please, mummy, please, mummy." I am worn down. No desert could be as draining as the demands of a child.

And suddenly I am hit with a wave of feeling that makes me quiver; as if everything in my whole being at that moment is yearning to be Bogucki, emerging from the vast nothingness.

I am experiencing Bogucki Envy -- pining to go wandering off into the great wilderness away from hair-wash night, and groceries, bills and all the people and possessions that hang like heavy chattels around our necks. Making precious time to look for meaning, to talk to God, to make peace with all those haunting mistakes.

I'm convinced I'm not the only one having this fantasy. I believe Bogucki Envy is the secret malaise of the 90s. For if the 80s were about the quest for money, riches and earthly delights, the desire -- as we hurtle towards 2000 -- is escape. To throw off the shackles of mundane concerns and go walkabout into a world devoid of complexities, devoid of material possessions, flush with meaning.

"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," is how poet T.S. Eliot laments urban existence in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Butt ends, coffee cups -- or lamb chops with three veg -- quantify our lives. "I have seen the eternal Footman," says Eliot in a metaphor that draws on his fear of mortality, "and in short, I was afraid."

As I stare into Bogucki's eyes, I am afraid. Afraid of letting life pass me by. Afraid of the routine that has so grabbed me, that to even think of going walkabout to the milk bar would cause a fracas among my tribe -- mother-in-law, husband, child, bosses -- with their hypnotic mantras: "Where are you? Why haven't you

...? When are you going to ...?"

But most of all I'm afraid that I will never ever roam barefoot through dusty sand dunes, totally alone with the sound of my heartbeat and the wind, in the wilderness of my soul.

I believe that in the West we are suffering an unconscious desperation to go feral. To let go. To set our trees alight like the Aborigines have done since time began and wander off into the vast unknown, protected by nothing more than a simple loin cloth and the great Snake spirit.

We've grown fat on money, food and possessions. But still we remain empty. The proliferation in the US of a ritual called vision questing is testimony to this hunger for escape. About a decade ago, leaders such as Foster, whose powerful words I quoted earlier, began ushering middle-class urbanites into the wilderness in search of a spiritual connection. Now the practice is big bucks in the US, with large corporations sending employees out to find their souls. Here, too, the trend is growing.

Rob Young of the Adelaide-based Australian Vision Quest, takes people into the Flinders Ranges for nine days for the handsome sum of \$800. Three of these days are spent totally alone, fasting. Sydney's Maggie MacKenzie runs the Women's Wilderness Vision Quest, which she describes as "a rite of passage, a cleansing for people who have outgrown something in their lives".

Both believe the need for going walkabout has intensified as the overload of external stimuli and materialism has taken us away from the natural and spiritual world. "We are craving quiet," MacKenzie says.

Meanwhile, recent books such as *Medicine Woman* by Lynn V. Andrews and *Mutant Message Down Under* by Marlo Morgan, which tell of people's shamanic journeys into the wilderness with indigenous guides, are on the top-seller lists around the world, providing vicarious escape for those trapped at home. Trapped like me on hair-wash night. "Mummy, mummy, pleeeeeease," continues the cry in the distance, like a tragic Euripidean prayer to the uncaring gods.

Perhaps getting lost like Bogucki is the only way. "I took a wrong turn on the way to the milk bar," I'd tell camera crews as I stumbled out of the desert in a daze. Meanwhile viewers at home, cleaning up the dishes from dinner, would look deep into my eyes and shudder with a familiar pang. The unmistakable pang of Bogucki Envy.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

It was ironic your hereafter piece coincided with reports that 35,000 were feared dead in Turkey. As a Catholic male, I find some solace in the possibility that each individual may experience an afterlife. But I do wonder what happens when whole cities are wiped out. Is there a run on heaven? How do the spiritual guides cope? Though it saddens me to say so, I sometimes fear the sceptics may be right.
W.J. Smith, Brisbane

Dear Ruth,

Of course we don't just go to the worms! I work as a professional psychic and am often asked to put people in touch with dead loved ones. I have learned that love is the bridge. Any time you need to talk to those who have died, send some love and they will respond.

R. Wade, via e-mail

Dear Ruth,

I grew up with a Jewish mother and a Christian father. I was taught to have an open mind and choose my own path. As a result, I've studied various religions and am yet to become a practising anything. I recently visited a Buddhist temple. A profound sense of peace came over me. I realised I am not searching for a god. I am searching to understand myself.

Rebecca Thomas, via e-mail

Dear Ruth,

Like you, I have felt the need to follow my inner calling back to spiritual beliefs. For some time now I have been struggling to find my higher purpose. I once read a wonderful affirmation: "Everything speaks to me when I am open and receptive", which I now must be.

Kath Fox, Brisbane, via e-mail.

Dear Ruth,

Buddha did not mince his words. "Only fools fear death ... To temples and mountain shrines they flee, in fear!"

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