

Poetry for a restless soul

By Ruth Ostrow

*You said: I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead*
--The City by C.P Cavafy, in Collected Poems (The Hogarth Press, London, 1984)

I PACK my life into the car. My hopes and dreams, my boxes and papers, my husband and child, and head north.

We are having what is commonly known as a sea change. We're moving to where the grass is green and the sea is clear. Moving to where the sun is always shining. Moving in some dream-like state; propelled forward by the need for change, growth, beauty.

*Maybe we are deluded. Maybe we are right.
Wherever I turn, wherever I look,
I see the black ruins of my life, here,
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed
them totally.*

I have done it often. Packed up and moved on. Never knowing whether I was running away "from" something, or running "towards" something better. One is a sentiment so bold and noble. The other, a bitter cop-out.

It is the eternal question for the restless: Is change a step towards growth or a regressive step into escapism?

From Melbourne to Sydney. From Sydney to Tel Aviv. From Tel Aviv to Sydney. From Sydney to New York to Jerusalem to London and back. I have truly lived around. Searching. Always searching for something indefinable.

It stopped for a while. I've spent 10 years in one city. Made a life, a home, a marriage, a baby. But something is not right in the raging bustle and panic of pre-Olympic Sydney. Something is missing. It's a quality of life. Peace of mind. The sort of communal living, caring, simplicity and slowness of time captured by the ABC drama, SeaChange.

The roads are clogged with cars and smog. There are more people per square metre than ever before. On the beaches you have to stab to get a patch of sand. The smell and noise and congestion of the city is so chronic that rage not blood pulses through the veins.

So we are heading north, into the hinterland of NSW, to a farm overlooking the sea. But my favourite poet's words are ringing in my head. In the second stanza he answers his disgruntled friend:

*You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.
This city will always pursue you*

Cavafy clearly believes you can move but you always take yourself along; that there is no holiday from self. The act of moving -- whether it be from a place or

from a relationship -- is an act of gross delusion. You can only find redemption by staying still and working things out.

*Don't hope for things elsewhere:
there's no ship for you, there's no road.
Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.*

I'm haunted by his words. Have always been. I know happiness is a state of mind. My Buddhist teacher tells me so. The riches of the world are buried in the hands of those who can appreciate the moment -- wherever they are. Whomever they are with.

Buddhists pray for difficulty so that they can practise the hard-learned discipline of happiness. Like oysters with a grain of sand, they welcome the aggravation and discomfort of life because it helps them create a pearl.

The art of living well thus becomes one's capacity to create peace from chaos, beauty from ugliness, joy from pain.

*Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.*

I do believe Cavafy's profound wisdom. But I believe something else too. There is no shame in needing to calm down the external world so one has more time for the internal one; to contemplate what has gone wrong, recreate what has gone right, give oneself a fighting chance.

I am a baby Buddhist. Not yet able to rely on my mind to give me the clarity and peace needed to live well in the lonely frenzy that has become modern living.

Caught in traffic jams, working to the clock, hung up and strung out by the hideous, mandatory jail sentence called a mortgage, is there a person out there who doesn't wonder what they are working towards? And if there is ever going to be any peace in it?

Buddhist monks go into retreat to train their minds. To find inner peace so they can emulate it. Nurtured by the silence, the sense of community, the island in the chaos, they find the tools they need to help deal with the outside world. The challenge, according to the marvellous book *A Path With Heart* by Jack Kornfield, is bringing this wisdom back into the real world, as he found when he tried to make the transition from the mountain back to Manhattan.

But it's not wrong to seek a gentler option. A softer, more nurturing environment. A sea change.

One of my readers suggested that I'm having a premature midlife crisis. I don't think it's that personal.

The NSW Government's North Coast draft Urban Planning Strategy forecast an 80 per cent increase in regional population over the next 25 years, and that growth would come at an annual average twice that of Sydney's.

Data from the 1996 national Census reveals the fastest-growing parts of the nation are located on the coast, a few hours' drive from our capital cities.

Meanwhile a study by Morgan and Banks found that 66 per cent of males aged 45 and over were likely to become SeaChangers, leaving the city to escape the daily routine of city life.

The late American futurist Robert Theobald told me before he died that the future of the world involved people searching for communities of like-minded souls. Tired of the isolation and terror of being crammed together in a sardine-can full of strangers. Sacrificing financial success for abundance of a more fulfilling kind.

In the car, Cavafy's words ring out: *This city will always pursue you ... You'll walk the same streets ... Don't hope for things elsewhere ...*

They ring out until I arrive at my new home, perched on a hill, surrounded by 6ha of trees, and ocean.

The silence is profound. In its strange sound I hear the truth, my truth. You can always hope for better. Because sometimes, less is more.

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