

Nurturing a sense of validation

By Ruth Ostrow

RECENTLY I bought a new car, a four-wheel drive. Since moving to the country I've become aware of the need for extra power to navigate the peaks and troughs of rural life.

The day I picked it up, I drove into town to collect my child from school. Suddenly the streets were filled with noise and commotion. People were honking at me, waving, and when I finally pulled over, people came running over.

"Hey! A new car. Wow. How much did you pay for it? Love the colour," said one shop owner, leaving his counter, while an acquaintance driving by stopped especially. "I see you bought a real car. You need it here. That old city car of yours was looking a bit shaky on the hills," she said.

Another friend screeched to a halt and pulled out her camera. Her passenger carried his surfboard across the road and strung it over my roof-rack as I was made to pose with the car in a host of macho positions, while more onlookers laughed and called me a "country girl at last".

"You looked very confident driving it," yelled a passer-by, someone I didn't even know. I felt like a million dollars. A star. A celebrity. My true 15 minutes of glory. Years of fame from working in media and radio could not replace the way it suddenly felt to be part of a community, and the recognition that was emanating from these people in the street.

And it occurred to me that so many of us spend our lives trying desperately to find acknowledgment. For our achievements but also just because we exist. Having broken free from the umbilical cord, we seek the same sort of quality love our mother gave us when we took our first step, when we did our first drawing. That approval we glimpsed in her eyes.

Alas the only way to get meaningful acknowledgment in modern society is to be the best, prettiest, fastest kid on the block.

In this climate of loneliness and indifference, it's no wonder we often find athletes who've grown desperate and lost sight of the pleasure of the game, stooping to extreme measures to win that kind of universal, maternal gaze we award our sports heroes.

Meanwhile many of us can't even find recognition or validation in our relationships. We all start off having celebrity status with our mates before the corrosive element of time sets in. Grunts replace pet names. Irritation replaces support, particularly in long-term marriages.

And yet here it is. On these simple streets. The essence of validation.

But it isn't just for me. Recently a friend had her long hair cut short. It was the drama on everyone's lips as people argued whether it was better short or long. When another friend's child died, the whole town rallied to her aid, placing themselves on a daily food roster, checking in with each other about what she needed, as the vigil went on.

Tragedy, trivia, all relevant in the soap opera of life. In a country town, on a warm, sunny day, the most important thing in the world is the delicate fabric of other people's lives, the gossip, the intimacy, and the kind of recognition one could spend a lifetime yearning for.

When I worked as a finance journalist I wrote a book called *The New Boy Network*. It was a book largely looking at the psychology of success and what drove so many of our most famous businessmen past their first million, to risk all for the second million, or indeed first billion.

I interviewed many of the corporate high-flyers of the 1980s -- most from immigrant backgrounds -- and discovered a wealth of insecurity and self-worth issues beneath the surface. For instance, Sir Peter Abeles admitted to spending World War II in a chicken coop inside a German labour camp. Jewish, persecuted, he was reduced to the status of an animal before coming to Australia to put his mark on the corporate landscape through his giant transport company TNT.

Many of our wealthiest businessmen were treated with disdain when they arrived. Father of the Australian Biennale and the man behind the giant construction company Transfield, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, told me: "I felt like an outsider. You feel so isolated. You are so alone and you just want to cry." Little wonder it was our immigrants who built many of our tallest buildings.

If the mogul was initially questing for financial security, after the first million the quest became more a need for peer and establishment approval, recognition. And, as with many rock stars, movie stars and leading lights, for many it's about being relevant.

I think that communal life tends to ease this profound sense of irrelevance that we all share deep down. It's a nurturing and validating way of life tragically lost in the cities where once the church, the family, the neighbourhood, provided a sense of community.

Now religion has lost its pull. Our neighbourhoods have descended into petty bickering over much-needed space, and our nuclear families are being replaced by new and unfamiliar units.

In search of nurturing we turn to our busy friends, partners, bosses. But there is nothing sustainable. Soul food is scarce. Unfed, confused, our egos starve.

And competition is rife. At work no one ever seems to say thank you or acknowledge what we have done. There is little thanks for the mother who does tuck-shop duty, the neighbour who heads the body corporate, those who go out of their way to make our lives a little better.

There is little public recognition unless you are a sporting hero bursting on to the field amid a blaze of glory.

So people spend their lives clinging to the greasy pole, trying to get to the top. Many not doing their craft out of love, but rather a need for approval. But the sad fact is, that it all amounts to nothing anyway. Everyone is forgotten in time.

I'm lucky enough to have experienced public recognition in my lifetime. But given the choice, I prefer the parochial validation that comes from simply buying a new car. Simply existing.

Yes, living in a community means one tends to become bogged in the minutia of daily life rather than focusing on feats of great achievement. But then again, isn't the mundane at the root of real recognition? After all, the first major applause most of us can remember is the one we got as we toddled off the potty.

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