

Joyous days, childish ways

By Ruth Ostrow

HAVING permanently relocated to the hills behind Byron Bay from Sydney, it's interesting for me to watch friends who come up here on holiday over Christmas.

They come from big cities interstate or abroad. They blow in with their watches on and mouths set, anxious to milk the most out of their holidays, see as much as possible, stay occupied -- holding maps and schedules and loads of plastic bags full of "just in case" items, as I had done for much of my life.

When they first arrive there's usually three days of restlessness, a compelling need to worry about every detail, a searching for something unspoken. Then, about the middle of the first week, there is a slow, gentle unravelling. It's the time where people start really being on holidays within themselves. It's a state I know well.

You start to fall in love with yourself. You start to notice subtle things: the texture of the wind caressing your face, the soft colour of the sky. You notice your children's drawings and how talented they are, you make love to your partner more and more as you remember how good it is to wallow in the warm embrace of love.

You allow other people to prepare food for you. You settle into being pampered. You let other people look after your children and you begin to say generous, kind things to yourself.

And you start to wonder why life isn't always like this: luxurious, spacious, with room to breathe. By the sea, or among the trees, Mother Nature holds you in her embrace. You are rocked and lulled into rest, as the first week ends.

Week two of a holiday, you feel blissfully unravelled. You can feel yourself so deeply -- your inner beauty, your talents, what is possible for you still. Often, you take risks, dancing on tables all night at the Latin Club, running on the beach, playing on waterslides, paragliding.

You start to laugh at yourself with gentle appreciation. You gaze in the mirror, as if at a beloved, and smile at how tanned and glowing your skin looks, instead of sneering at the wrinkles. You are fitter from those morning walks. Simple things please you. You stop striving, craving, aspiring. You just start to be. Not do. But simply to be.

Then the end looms near. During the last few days of a holiday, a profound sadness settles over the soul, the knowing that you are soon to be separated from yourself -- your holiday romance with yourself is coming to an end as you prepare to go back to routine, and distraction.

You promise that life won't get so hectic again, you'll make time to read and make love: a sort of personal "I promise I'll call". But you know that you'll forget about yourself and those morning beach walks and freshly squeezed juices, as you get sucked in again to the frantic movement of the treadmill, the "shoulds" and "musts" and the endless expectations that wrack your soul.

And indeed there is a separation taking place. The child inside is being shut back into his or her box as the adult part of you takes hold, packs the bags and prepares for the long journey ahead into the so-called real world.

My friends and family always begin their holidays with us in a turmoil of seeking, questing, doing. And end up in a hammock, or by the pool, staring over rolling hills, drinking and eating too much, reading and loving too much, and wondering aloud: "But can life be this relaxing, this good?"

"And do I deserve it? Can I sustain it with all my obligations and bills to pay?"

The answer is yes. I've been a big advocate in my columns of a growing movement around the world called Voluntary Simplicity. VS is about pruning back life's so-called necessities so as to preserve more of the beauty, freedom and personal space.

VS people create time and freedom for themselves by downgrading their homes; moving further out to cheaper or rural real estate rather than being upwardly mobile; going on to part-time work regimes; growing their own veggies or rearing chooks; buying second-hand cars and appliances rather than getting caught in the web of materialism and consumerism; opting for public schooling. Which adds up to more time for love, friends, beach walking and permanent holiday.

It was a path my husband and I chose after one life-altering holiday three years ago. Neither of us could bear the thought of saying goodbye to ourselves, to our creative souls, to the girl and boy who danced all night on tables. So we moved to the north coast at considerable personal sacrifice.

But watching people come here on holidays each year since our move, we can only smile at each other, knowing the decision we made was worth every cent we forfeited. And I pose the question to those people recently back from summer vacation: What is the cost to you and your family of not simplifying your life in some small way?

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