

Success through tiny triumphs

By Ruth Ostrow

A CLOSE friend of mine, a musician from Melbourne, now lives in Calcutta. He was visiting here recently and told me a funny story about life in India. There was a wall he used to pass on the street each morning on the way to have his breakfast. One day a picture of a Hindu deity appeared in a small frame, hanging on the wall. My friend decided it was cute and strange but thought nothing more of it.

About two weeks later, a small bench appeared underneath the picture. For no reason, a wall in the middle of a busy Calcutta street had a picture on it and a bench underneath. This remained the case for another month or so. He'd pass it every day and smile at life's mysteries.

Then one day a wooden frame was placed above the picture. A week later two large pieces of wood were placed around it so that the thing was encased in a box. This remained on the street for another week, no one noticing in the busy throng of daily life.

A few weeks later a statue of Shiva suddenly appeared on the bench, several sticks of incense and flowers scattered around. There out of the street had emerged a small temple, and a man was sitting on the sidewalk with his hand out taking donations for its upkeep.

In India it is illegal to tear down temples. In fact, temples have to be tended to. So before anyone had any idea, the fellow erected a shanty-type house next to the temple and declared himself the "keeper of the temple". In Calcutta the streets are littered with homeless people. As the keeper of a temple, this clever soul now had secured himself and his large family a place to live.

The story caused quite a stir in India, where the situation could not be remedied, but the police are now on the look-out for any stray paintings being hung on walls.

"It was advancement by incremental encroachment," said my friend, laughing joyfully. "In the West we take everything by force. We are so determined, so dogged in wanting to get something, and everyone sees us coming. In India they encroach incrementally. They move slowly and stealthily towards what they want and you never see them coming."

His story made me laugh too because I knew exactly what he meant. When in India my husband and I travelled by overnight trains, usually in a first-class carriage. I remember how we were perpetually invaded. First a hand comes under the curtain placing a pair of shoes under the seat, then an hour later a person appears bowing humbly and apologising.

"Sorry, sorry, these are my shoes," he says, climbing up on the top bunk to put his shoes on. Suddenly he is lying down and covered with a blanket.

Then when things have settled, another face will peek in. "Oh, sorry, sorry. I must speak with my uncle Ben." And within another hour the whole family of five

are sitting on the suitcase rack in your first-class carriage eating fruit and chatting loudly.

My husband and I were horrified and bemused. We never had the heart to kick them out but remained ever surprised at how, wherever we went, slowly, stealthily, people inveigled themselves into our space.

"Incremental encroachment," nodded my friend. "You see it everywhere in India. And I've decided to do more of it in my life in Australia. I've stopped acting directly; rather, I move slowly, inching forward imperceptibly, patiently, keeping my eyes only on the exact thing in front of me I want to do next.

"It's amazing what happens. You get the small triumph which fills you with joy, then you can move on to the next step. It's very Zen because you are not overwhelmed with how difficult the huge task is but rather you become absorbed with each tiny, incremental step. And suddenly you have encroached more than you ever thought possible."

I got to thinking about how we are in life, and that I know lots of incremental encroachers. At work it's often the watchful, artful types who "don't want power" who end up heading the company. And there are heaps of IEs in the realms of friendship and love.

I remembered I dated a guy years ago whose catchcry was: "I don't want a relationship" - which was good because I never liked him much. But gradually, seductively, he made his way into me, hanging his shingle on my wall, erecting a bench, then his Shiva Lingam statue.

Suddenly, I couldn't do without him. He had built his temple in my heart by stealth and though I tried, I couldn't tear it down. I bet a lot of marriages begin by incremental encroachment - a pair of shoes under the bed, then suddenly you wake up and a lover's whole family is beaming down at you.

Incremental encroachment is my favourite new concept. I'm going to do it everywhere. "Encroach and conquer!" is my new battle cry. It has a noble ring to it.

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