

Meandering along the road less travelled

By Ruth Ostrow

"AS you set out for Ithaca; hope your road is a long one; full of adventure, full of discovery," I say to a friend of mine, quoting the exquisite Greek poet C.P. Cavafy.

My friend is trying to arrange a rendezvous. With no watches or clocks for miles around and hundreds of people milling about in giant throngs, it's a big ask. We are at the Woodford Folk Festival, which is held an hour out of Brisbane each year, and it's a veritable lolly-shop of great things to do, hear and see.

"I can't tell you where I'll be when because I don't know where I'm going or what's on where," I try to explain. It's a philosophy that has always pitted me against a society that demands punctuality, clarity and achievement.

In the West we are outcome-driven, destination-driven. Not so in the times of the ancient Greeks, a civilisation that produced the impossibly beautiful *The Odyssey* by Homer, upon which the Cavafy poem is based.

In it the Greek warrior Odysseus attempts to make it back to his beloved Penelope and his treasured home of Ithaca after his heroic actions in the famous Trojan war.

In his eagerness to get back home, Odysseus travels the seas for 10 years with the protection of the goddess Athene. But his path is fraught with obstacles and distractions -- the angry god Poseidon and the fierce, one-eyed Cyclops who try to destroy him, the seductive Sirens with their sweet song who tempt him away from his quest, and the intoxicating witch Circe who captures him through her exotic magic.

Desperate to return, it slowly dawns on Odysseus that the very obstacles preventing him from arriving are his teachers -- there to help him recognise and appreciate the end point, teaching him patience, bravery and to understand love - - an idea that forms the basis of many spiritual disciplines. Cavafy writes:

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind
Arriving there is what you're destined for
But don't hurry the journey at all
Better if it lasts for years
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.
... so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean*

I try to explain to my impatient girlfriend that it's OK if we don't end up meeting, if we get waylaid, sidetracked, seduced by the enigmatic sirens' song, quivering in the endless possibilities. For Woodford -- a live-in camping village where every second marquee is a venue -- is like a Greek odyssey. A journey over a six-day period into many worlds.

There's music from all over the world in such variety and colour -- dance, song, performance -- that one can get waylaid again and again on the way to a

destination. At any one time, there's Egyptian belly-dancing in one marquee; a tango workshop in another; Colin Hay from Men at Work performing in one venue; an African band in another. Too many things happening at once to sample along the path to tie oneself down to any one commitment. Festival director Bill Hauritz, who is the mastermind behind Woodford each year, says this is his aim. "With 450 events, 20 entertainment venues and 50 food outlets and stores, I design it so that people don't ever get to where they were going, but are happy where they end up," he explains when I finally catch up with him, which predictably takes several days.

Furthermore, he encourages fabulous, crowded street events at certain times to stop goal-driven people in their tracks and make them savour the specialness of whatever they are doing, wherever they end up.

It's a message I've taken away from this year's festival. The flow is going and I am flowing, in surrender to the wonderful things being thrown in front of my path. Because in day-to-day reality we feel guilty for keeping "life" waiting, not meeting obligations, not arriving at a designated point in our lives called success, at a designated time.

I have discovered, after years of playing the outcome game, that the ancient Greeks were right -- it's the journey that counts. We benefit most if we set out heading somewhere but prepared always to leave the beaten path. If we stay flexible, chilled, open to the possibilities and the unexpected, we can turn life into a profoundly exciting adventure.

Cavafy reminds us:

*Hope your road is a long one
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony, sensual perfume of every kind ...*

I give up trying to meet my friend. But over the week our paths collide many times, unplanned, relaxed, informal, as it's meant to be. We're sailing here without a rudder, without a map, without expectation, and it feels amazing.

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