

DROPPING OUT

In the prime of our lives and careers my husband and I voluntarily made a radical change. We bought a 37' sailboat and equipped her to sail around the world. Instead of continuing to work at jobs that had grown tedious and unfulfilling Rick and I stepped off the corporate treadmill.

With both our girls in college we wanted to abandon suburbia and live differently. We chose a lifestyle based on travel and adventure. We knew that we could, and quite probably should, continue to work full time until a more traditional retirement age. Since childhood we had been programmed by American tradition and habit to work long hours in order to earn as much as possible so that we could buy increasingly larger homes and newer cars. Instead, we determined that our contract with America had been fulfilled.

We quite easily reached the decision to leave the workday routine, but the choice to do it by sail wasn't automatic. En-route to the decision to go sailing we discarded countless versions of traveling full time. I just couldn't picture packing a duffle bag and wandering the world by train. I couldn't envision getting off an airplane in a foreign country and looking for an apartment. But the idea of going by boat meant I'd be taking a version of home with me. That made sense.

Friends and co-workers reacted with horror and envy. We planned to "live everyone's dream" and yet, they were appalled that we would simply 'quit.' The process of selling our home, quitting our jobs and simply leaving on an adventure was a big step. Of course, a decision that major is simple only in retrospect.

Our progression from suburban commuter to corporate defector took on a life of it's own. Since we didn't own a sailboat, and scarcely knew the basics of sailing, we joined a sailing club and began weekend chartering. We learned how to sail as we explored. We took boating classes that included navigation, weather and safety.

At our first "Basics of Boating" course the instructor asked the students to introduce themselves, their boats, and their experience. Each boater described his vessel, from 20 to 40 foot sail and powerboats, and how many years they'd been boating. When it was our turn, we eagerly announced, "We don't have a boat yet but we're going to buy

one and sail around the world.” Laughter erupted from the room full of knowledgeable boaters. We were confident, but apparently naïve.

We toured boat shows and talked to boat brokers. Asking questions, walking miles of docks and looking at boats, we gained some knowledge of what kind of sailboats were suitable for offshore, ‘blue water’ cruising. Ultimately, we purchased a 1979, 37’ Crealock, Pacific Seacraft, cutter design. We thought she was elegant below decks and sturdy enough to go where we planned. She had a tiller instead of a wheel, green canvas instead of the standard blue, and her name was Nanook, the Inuit Indian word for polar bear. All of that appealed to us and suddenly she was ours.

Moving aboard a small sailboat meant leaving behind the accumulation of stuff that had clung to us over the years. I disposed of former treasures at a series of yard sales and rented a storage unit for the bits of furniture, ski equipment, winter clothes and memorabilia that we would use to jump start our lives when we stopped wandering.

I enrolled in classes called “medicine at sea,” and “the offshore cook.” We took part in a weekend seminar demonstrating “rescue at sea” techniques. I took scuba diving classes and Ham radio license exams. We sold our home in the suburbs, quit our jobs and closed the bank account. It took six years from the time we decided to ‘live differently’ until we were ready to go.

Our suburban lifestyle had involved a cycle of work and spend that kept us on the capitalistic treadmill. But stepping off the corporate pedals created a shift. Now we intended to live by wind power and our wits. We stowed the dock lines and left the United States, headed south and west, toward Mexico. We were going to sail around the world.

One morning, after a few days of offshore sailing, Rick was sitting quietly in the cabin with his coffee cup in one hand and a pencil in the other, fully engrossed in a yellow legal pad on the table. When I asked what he was doing, he looked up as if I’d broken a spell.

“Planning my sales meeting,” he chuckled.

I replied, “Well, look in the mirror, because that’s all that’s left of your sales team.”

Rick knew that most of the tasks he was listing, such as, “check the clasp on the port cockpit locker, find a better place to store the storm drogue, test the spinnaker, and pour vinegar in the head,” were things he would do himself. But the habit of running a weekly sales meeting was going to take time to abate. As our time at sea lengthened, Rick began to accept that he wasn’t on vacation, that this was permanent, at least for now. Our retreat from life as we had known it was a gradual thing and the transition had begun.

Part of the shift was realizing that what had been important in our land based life was irrelevant on board a small sailboat in the middle of the ocean. Daily mail, telephones, cars and televisions didn’t exist. The things that we had thought were necessities had become obsolete. Now we communicated via Ham radio with other boats and occasionally to a shore based message relay volunteer. We learned to use electricity conservatively because our supply came from batteries that stayed charged because we had solar panels and ran the engine. Our mail was forwarded in bundles to a Mexican post office every couple of months, marked “lista de correos.” The Mexican Post Office complied by holding the bundle for our arrival and listing our name on the post office wall, indicating that mail was waiting. We didn’t even have pressure water or refrigeration. And once we made the adjustment we didn’t miss them.

Our values changed. At sea we were entertained by dancing dolphins in the daytime and an umbrella of stars overhead at night. We took great delight in simple things that we had taken for granted or ignored on land. When the wind blew from the right direction it meant a comfortable point of sail and a break from the diesel engine. I learned to cook using the unfamiliar ingredients I could buy in foreign markets. Catching a dorado meant not having canned stew for dinner. Anchoring in the arms of a comfortable bay, we could bathe in the sea, take a fresh water solar shower and it all felt more joyous than the best bubble bath and massage. We embraced the joy of making new friends who were equally unhurried: sharing books, unbridled time and tall tales.

The grace I found in my travels took my life in new directions. I woke up to the concept that there are lots of beautiful ways to spend a day. The ways that I knew were simply that. The comfortable patterns I had established for managing a day were simply familiar habits and not necessarily my only choice. Now, the more villages I explored

the more I wanted to see. The more the corners of my mind were pried loose by new possibilities of ways to shape a life, the more I yearned to explore. I learned that “home” is a concept not a street address. Like a turtle, I learned to be at home wherever I was.

I changed in small increments over the years of our travels. And like a jeweler reshaping a precious piece of metal by hundreds of small taps with a forging hammer, the events of our eight-year time-out slowly shifted the way I view myself and the way I relate to those around me.

Through the experience of immersing myself in new geographies I became a new person. I am more forgiving of myself and of others. I’m gaining a glimmer of understanding of foreign cultures and what it means to think very differently from American cultural priorities. I no longer presume that the American way of being is more right than another. Americans work long hours and take short vacations. We buy big cars and new furniture. We buy so much that we need to rent storage space for all the extra ‘stuff.’ We buy frozen food and unripe vegetables because efficiency is our mantra. We believe that those who are on time are better people than those who are late. These are American ways of being. Traveling slowly taught me that there are other lovely ways to live.

As a result of our wanderings I’m becoming a writer, taking piano lessons and learning snatches of foreign languages. I’m no longer afraid to fail. I embarked on my intentionally homeless path to see if I had the skills – and the nerve – to make a radical change. I wanted to breathe the essence of each culture I visited, to participate in it. I didn’t want my life to whip past me at 60 miles per hour and in the end realize that I’d missed the view.

In the process of slowing down I bumped into a new thought. I had the realization that something in me had loosened, the way a knot loosens, and I allowed myself the freedom to just ‘be.’ Over the years, without noticing it, I’d subscribed to the notion that a busy life was the same thing as a satisfying life. Now I’m discovering the difference. I am becoming the person I want to spend the rest of my life being.

A feeling of delight

With utter astonishment
I watch the moon
struggle through the cloudy sky.
I have no agenda
and fall in step
with the rhythm of the day.

I feel the air and
taste the breeze.
Like a bright yellow kite
I soar.
I am part of
wind, water and sky.