

Christie Gorsline shoved self-doubt overboard and scribbled in journals for seven years while sailing the Pacific Ocean. She floated ashore and embarked on a 14,000 mile motorcycle adventure through Europe, eventually setting-up camp in the mountains of Idaho. A freelance writer, Christie teaches skiing, takes piano lessons, and organizes a popular annual writer's conference on the shores of Payette Lake.

## Loosening the knot

Moving aboard a small sailboat meant leaving behind the accumulation of stuff that had clung to me over the years. I scrutinized every vase and jar, knick-knack and what-not for future importance in my life and thought, "does this item have meaning for me?" The bits and pieces that failed the test, I labeled \$5.00 or 50 cents because a 37-foot sailboat is small for full time living.

Parting with my belongings was a bit like walking on ice. One by one, household treasures marched down the driveway. With each dollar that went into my pocket, the future seemed increasingly precarious and uncertain.

I am not a woman who likes the sharp, jagged edges of change. I prefer that things run smoothly, down the middle of the road. This is where I feel safest. But as I approached my fiftieth birthday, my daughters had gone to college and it was time to make a change.

In a similar place in life, some women choose to sell their home and buy a condo. They want to paint, take up the harmonica or learn to roll perfect pastry. But I wanted to write, learn a foreign language, and visit the Galapagos, New Zealand and Ireland.

With that in mind, the first project was to sell my land based belongings. Once I began that process I realized that my relationship to 'things' was changing. When I was young, I didn't care what bauble was on the coffee table and sighed impatiently outside the gift shops while my parents fussed over buying a lavender hurricane lamp or a brass lantern. They debated exactly where the treasure would reside, on which table it would be enthroned, prior to every purchase.

But when I was slightly less young and on my own, my 'stuff' became a great deal more important to me. Maybe this was because I had earned the money to buy each newly important 'thing,' or because it defined the adult I was becoming. I happily acquired furniture to fill larger homes and fancier stuff to cover the table tops. The addition of children added an entirely new world of shopping opportunities: from cribs and strollers to prom dresses and letterman jackets. There was always more to buy.

In middle age my priorities were shifting. I didn't want to be a slave to dusting. I wanted to live differently, with fewer possessions. And that's what the big yard sale was for. I was in the process of de-nesting: losing the excess baggage. Regardless of the nostalgia for a collection of old '78's or a once prized golf trophy, I was ready to move on.

The experience reminded me a bit of my divorce so many years ago when wedding gifts, treasures and belongings simply walked out the door and into the moving van with my first husband. He took what he wanted, a small truck load, and left me with the echoing space, dents in the carpet, and two babies. Then, as now, it was things, or the lack of them, that defined a major change in my life.

The lesson came back to me as I arranged my treasures on tables in the garage. Change can be seen as an opportunity or a disaster; it can be seized joyfully or not. That is a choice. Two decades ago, when I suddenly had less furniture, my little girls gained the space to ride their tricycles in the living room. Since that experience with disconnecting from my belongings had turned out to be positive, I faced this mid-life challenge with equal optimism.

My piano headed down the driveway on a trolley. I turned to sell something less meaningful so that I wouldn't think about the magnitude of the increasing emptiness surrounding me. The series of sales consumed five Saturdays and a lifetime of treasures. I was left with a pocketful of cash, some empty card tables and a nearly empty house, which was also sold.

The spaces echoed. But I was free to embrace my new life full of possibility, with no stuff in my way. I was definitely headed in a new direction.

Living aboard Nanook, 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 got a Ham radio license.

With an anti-climatic toot of the horn we left our home marina, waving to friends on the dock until they disappeared from view. We stowed the dock lines and left the United States, headed south and west, toward Mexico. We were going to sail around the world.

Our suburban lifestyle had involved a cycle of work and spend that kept us on the capitalistic treadmill. Stepping off the corporate pedals created a shift. Now we intended to live by wind power and our wits. 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. I communicated via Ham radio with other boats and occasionally to a shore based message relay volunteer. I learned to use electricity conservatively because Nanook's supply came from batteries that stayed charged through the solar panels or running the engine. When the wind blew from the right direction it meant a comfortable point of sail and a break from the diesel engine. Mail was forwarded in bundles every couple of months. We didn't even have pressure water or refrigeration. And once we made the adjustment we didn't miss them.

Landlubbers are incredulous that a person can live, and quite nicely, without such modern conveniences. I kept eggs in their boxes in the hammock with the breads. Simply turning the egg carton over every few days rotates the air pocket in each egg and reduces spoiling. In our years on board Nanook I only tossed a few bad eggs into the sea. Cabbage keeps well un-refrigerated if the leaves are torn instead of cut with a knife. Jam and mayonnaise don't need refrigeration as long as the spoon is clean with each insertion. And cheddar cheese preserves itself nicely in a container full of olive oil. Since I had no way to store leftovers, when we caught a large fish we invited everyone within radio range to dine in our cockpit.

The boat's 'head' was so tiny that a cotton-braided placemat served as wall-to-wall carpeting. We flushed the toilet with a long handle reminiscent of a casino slot machine. To keep the plumbing hoses clear, I poured vinegar into the bowl to dissolve the salt build-up that turns the insides of the hoses to cement.

At sea we were entertained by dancing dolphins in the daytime and an umbrella of stars overhead at night. I took great delight in simple things that I had taken for granted or ignored on land.

While underway we showered on the bow, pouring a bucket of salt water over our heads. I knew in my land life that a bar of gold Dial soap would repel deer from my garden, but living on a boat I needed new knowledge. I learned that 'Joy' liquid dish soap is a cruisers delight because it lathers in cold salt water.

At anchor, I indulged in the luxury of gently lowering myself into the ocean for a bath, followed by a fresh water solar shower. I wrote in my journal: *"Rolling waves lift me up for a view of the beach and drop me back into my private trough. Soap bubbles refract into little rainbows around me. I'm a child again and I splash with pleasure."*

We slept quite comfortably for our seven live aboard years in the boat's 'V' berth with our toes snuggled together but our shoulders far apart. We attached custom made canvas storage panels to both sides of the sleeping berths. I designed them with large pockets so they held Kleenex boxes, journals and pens, magazines and other treasures.

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 time-out slowly shifted the way I view myself and the way I relate to those around me.

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 familiar habits but not necessarily my only choice.

The more villages I explored the more I wanted to see. I embraced the joy of making new friends who were equally unhurried: sharing books, unbridled time and tall tales. I learned to cook using the unfamiliar ingredients I could buy in foreign markets. The more the corners of my mind were pried loose by new possibilities, the more I yearned to explore. I learned that “home” is a concept not a street address.

Through the experience of immersing myself in new geographies, I changed. I’m gaining a glimmer of understanding 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 my wanderings I’m becoming a writer, taking piano lessons, and learning snatches of foreign languages. I’m less afraid to fail. I am more forgiving of myself and of others.

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 living with fewer belongings and suburban conveniences, I bumped into the realization that something in me had loosened, the way a knot loosens. Over the years, without noticing it, I'd subscribed to the notion that a crowded 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.