

'It's that simple': the real secret of voluntary poverty

Rich Heffern | Jan. 24, 2011 Eco Catholic

The real secret about voluntary poverty and simplicity is that it can be fun. A commitment to live in simple, un wasteful ways challenges us to limit our wants and to satisfy our needs through our own resourcefulness, ingenuity, and hard but satisfying work. We must dig deep, all the way down to that restless longing and yearning for the exercise of our creativity that prowls, mostly unsatisfied, within us.

Searching through thrift shops, learning to cook or bake bread from scratch, taking the bus to work, riding bicycles, planting and caring for a garden, volunteering at the local soup kitchen or recycling center, mending clothes and repairing things ourselves ? all of these activities are endless sources of entertainment and deep emotional satisfaction. They require of us humility, faith, forbearance, generosity, and imagination. In return, there is a kind of boldness, good humor, heartiness and gratitude for life that accompany embarking upon this particular adventure.

Once I took some extra time and returned from a conference 600 miles away by taking the train home instead of flying. The rail route followed the course of the Missouri River for some 150 miles outside St. Louis, and I sat back in the comfortable seat and watched the shifting afternoon light on the river. Now and then I would catch a glimpse of a great blue heron gracefully taking off through the cottonwoods or a wintering bald eagle cruising magnificently along the river bank.

As the train passed through the little river towns, the chief conductor, who apparently was a local history buff, announced the stops over the intercom then recounted some fascinating stories and lore about Jesse James and other outlaws, marauders and scalawags who had haunted these parts in the bloody Civil War days.

After darkness had fallen, a troop of giggling girl scouts came aboard on their way home from a field trip to the state capitol. When their tickets had been punched and they had settled down in their seats, one of the conductors came back to our car and planted himself in the aisle. He reached into the pockets of his uniform jacket and pulled out a worn deck of cards and some pieces of rope. He then proceeded to perform magic and card tricks for the girls.

As the miles rolled by to the tune of the rail's clickety-clack and the mournful wail of the locomotive's horn, the conductor, his face creased with smile wrinkles, kept up a running patter of silly jokes as he bedazzled the girls with his legerdemain and sleight-of-hand. He pulled silver dollars out of ears. Silk scarves vanished into thin air. Pieces of rope mysteriously reknitted themselves together. The Ace of Spades turned up in the most unlikely places. The girls were completely enchanted.

And the rest of us in the car, too, seemed full to the brim with good feelings of community. Stranger visited with stranger, pausing now and then to look up for an 'ooh' or an 'aah.' One fellow went off to the lounge car and returned with a round of hot chocolate for all. Another took photos and then collected names and email addresses promising to send copies to each of us. Everyone was under the spell of that magical Amtrak employee whose inner smiling and outgoingness of heart had spilled over contagiously until we were all smitten.

I know I would have missed all these riches if I had flown.

Simple living, it seems, is one of two ways to achieve great wealth. Annie Dillard tells us, in her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, that when she was a child she used to stash pennies along the sidewalks of her hometown. She just hid them away so that strangers would find them as they walked along. "It is dire poverty indeed," she wrote, "when a person is so malnourished they won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, then, since the world is in fact planted with pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple."

Consider this adventure of simple living. In this day of both dwindling resources and environmental awareness, it is a way to help save the Earth's resources for future generations. And, as we have seen, it is a way to harness good energies. It is also a surer way to riches than the hope of winning a lottery ticket. It is that simple.

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