

Giving it all up – for Freedom and Fun in a Low-Overhead Lifestyle

By

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Many years ago, I found the motorcycle I'd always wanted, sitting in a "cycle" shop in Williston, ND. It was a brand new Honda Gold Wing that had not sold during the summer or fall season. This was February, winter time in North Dakota, extremely cold and definitely not a propitious time for riding a motorcycle, but a good time for bargaining. Negotiating the price was easy and fun and I bought it on the spot for the exact amount I was willing to pay. Then we negotiated for accessories including formed saddle bags, windscreen, trunk and a new style saddle seat for two. There was plenty of winter left for these items to ship and be installed, and to dream about the freedom of riding in the open come warmer weather.

The motorcycle was not, however, enough to satisfy me. Prior to the purchase of the motorcycle, I had bought two other possessions (My choice was informed by an adventurous streak I had started indulging in earnest at age 14 when I learned how to fly from my stunt pilot boss. I got my pilot's license at age 15): One was a Bonanza V-Tail high performance airplane that cruised at 175 mph with landing gear up; the other was the new ultra-light airplane with a Canard wing up front, a 36 foot main wing, two Briggs and Stratton lawn mower engines that turned one propeller and a Sears Swing Seat hanging from the main mast for me to perch on and do my pilot thing! All I needed do to make turns and maneuver up and down was to move my body in the desired direction. The top air speed in this particular plane was 30 mph.

Ultimately the motorcycle joined the airplane in a hanger at a local airport. Actually, that hanger wound up housing these plus many "toys" that had brought me some measure of joy and happiness down through the years.

As it turned out the Honda was the perfect motorcycle for going on a Sunday ride...when it wasn't raining or snowing that is, and when there was no salt on the road. It was also perfect for making a long road trip from Williston to Seattle (WA) to attend a relatives wedding. On the way to Seattle and then back home, the kids took turns riding with me, and/or driving our car. This wound up being a 3,000 mile plus adventure for all ten of us, through mountains, valleys and plains. It was a family outing that created memories that have lasted me a lifetime.

The motorcycle eventually wound up in my garage, right next to my new Cadillac and in front of the dirt bikes and snowmobiles. Actually it barely fit in beside all my other toys. Unfortunately, the ski boat and trailer had to be moved outside into the driveway, along with other cars that belonged to my kids.

Now, we've all heard the old adage that money can't buy happiness; that acquiring material possessions can't bring long-term satisfaction.

Frankly, this is nonsense...at least in my case.

Having plenty of money and lots of possessions suited me just fine.

It's unpopular to say it these days but I enjoyed owning all those things. The same goes for the camping gear, the hunting guns, and a whole host of camera paraphernalia and oil painting supplies, as well as handyman tools and appliances.

Having lots of possessions felt good. If a tool was needed, I did not bother to borrow it but instead just ran down to a local store and bought it, even if it was only meant to handle a one-time job. It was more fun loaning out items than borrowing. At least I thought so at the time. It was also better to help others and not have anyone help me. This is something that was really driven home in my life in later years.

But as it turned out, *not* having them felt even better...although my journey to this enlightened stage was not a simple one.

I actually planned on retiring before I was 50. By doing so I'd have abundant time to enjoy all my goodies. Obviously my lifestyle required a good job to make this possible, and it looked imminently doable as I had acquired 3 stores, buildings and property and would one day sell those to enjoy all that I envisioned.

As the Universe would have it though, I wound up losing it all. That's right,...buildings, businesses, property, all slipped through my fingers during a downturn in the economy and an oil boom that went bust. Everything wound up being sold off to pay off my remaining bills and debts.

With no possessions but a strong desire to start over, I mastered an entire new way of earning money. It took many months before my income was sufficient to even rent an apartment, meanwhile I slept in my auto while working on the road. It took 9 months to have enough income to live on, to help the business grow, and to move into an apartment sans furniture (which would come in due course.)

Within a couple of years life was again good and I was once more amassing possessions and enjoying a new lifestyle including living on an east coast beach. All went along splendidly for another 6 years until the rug was not only pulled out from under me, but seemingly for good! In short order I was diagnosed with ALS, given 3 years to live, abandoned by my wife, and had my business partner run off with our inventory, money and all. I was once again broke. Down and out in "Beachland." Only this time it seemed I had no reason, no cause at all for acquiring anything ever again, or to strive for the "perfect lifestyle." Life was, well, *simply over*!! That's all folks.

It was then and there I decided that dying should be done up in the mountains, not on a beach amidst a parade of people out having fun. So I made up my mind to move to the North Cascade Mountains and then set about selling the few possessions I had left to my name. Actually I put it all up at for sale in a yard sale with help from some friends -- less some essential clothing, treasured photos and just what would fit in a beat-up, rusting hulk of a car with 212,000 miles on the odometer. Even a mechanic friend laughed when he was told that the car was going to make a trip from the east coast to the Pacific Northwest. In his words, "The car won't make it out of this state let alone across the USA".

Surprisingly, even as the new owners were carting off all my things, I realized that it felt good to see it go. It was actually liberating! Driving that old car was actually fun and exciting. Even when a family from Ohio side swiped the old car adding some new dents, felt awful and wanted to pay me for the damage-- it was exhilarating to say "Hey, it's okay, no problem at all, just enjoy your day, be careful and smile lots" and then drive away in my newly "re-modeled" car.

Now I was truly traveling light in life. It's like the difference between walking briskly into the airport with a small carry-on or struggling to drag two large suitcases up to the check-in counter. You may like the stuff in the suitcases, but it sure feels good to travel without them.

At this point you are probably expecting me to say that after this "born free" revelation, I was changed forever. But that simply wasn't the case.

Like a reformed smoker or recovering alcoholic, feeling good doesn't mean that you never wish for a cigarette, a drink, or in my case, a new motorcycle or electronic gadget. My liberation from all that stuff was not without its wistful moments or lingering tugs on my heartstrings.

But I also realized that by shedding all those possessions and moving west, I was getting a lot more enjoyment for my dollar. I had only \$300 per month to live on now, quite a change from the \$15K to \$20,000 a month I'd previously enjoyed!

I no longer needed much money...and I no longer needed to work, at least for the time-being. So I had time to craft a more-active social life. That is, to make friends with good people who stick around because they liked my company, not my possessions or material assets.

And instead of spending money on toys, I was spending it on rich, new life experiences. In fact, for a small fraction of what I had been spending, I'd snagged myself an entirely revolutionary new life.

I was, in fact, immersed in a new culture with new social customs...new friends and activities, in a lifestyle that was far more rewarding than the simple accumulation of more things.

I spent a month living in a Teepee on the side of a mountain...discovered the hidden streams and quiet of the mountains...slept outdoors, used an outdoor bathroom (as in "behind yon trees and bushes"), listened to the sound of mountain streams while on the move...and sampled a variety of what the "poor folks" ate.

After moving into a small studio apartment (1 room, 1 bathroom – look Ma, no more bushes!) I had time to take up writing, and got to see even more of the world. In fact, I traveled from the mountains and ocean of Washington State to Malaysia, where a whole new array of mountains and friendly people awaited me. From there I struck out and sampled the charm and beauty of Germany, Singapore and Thailand, often traveling with just a backpack as opposed to two humongous, overstuffed suitcases. I felt really good, too.

Not surprisingly, my most rewarding experiences didn't cost a cent. Like being able to pick veggies right out of the ditches of Malaysia...while new friends caught fish as part of what became the perfect free meal including plentiful rice.

One day—years later—I realized that I wasn't tempted by possessions anymore. Adding rich experiences to my life had taken over as top priority, and was hanging in there.

In a recent article, the *New York Times* reported that, "Studies of consumption and happiness show that people are happier when they spend money on experiences rather than material objects."

I believe this because I lived it! I downsized, moved to where it costs less to live, and used what money I made on new life experiences.

And if you take a bold step in this direction, what you'll find is that these experiences will reward you with good feelings and fond memories that last far longer than possessions ever did or will. Indeed, you will form memories that last a lifetime.

So we could debate whether or not you can buy happiness with possessions...maybe you can. But I'll guarantee you that you'll find *more* happiness by investing in new life experiences.

A low-overhead lifestyle anywhere is freedom at its finest in my opinion, based as it is on hard-won experience.

Again though, the Universe had other plans for me. For one thing, my condition had been misdiagnosed and I was not going to die in 3 years time. I had multiple sclerosis (MS), not ALS. This was great, of course, because I did not want to die so young. There was just too much living yet to do! But, my money was running out even though I had been living frugally on a mere \$300 per month. I needed to go to work and make a living. New friends talked me into obtaining a real estate agent license and working at least part-time with them. Since I had learned to live on so little, I did not have to make many sales to enjoy a (*ahem*) rich life, pay for a studio apartment, and the upkeep on my old car (Which finally gave up the ghost at 260,000 miles.)

My competitive nature and lust for life found me purchasing a rundown real estate business that had only 3 listings. Soon I had that office rocking. I amassed over 140 property listings and went from the bottom of the local real estate world to being #3. Along the way I hired 4 more agents. My new found lifestyle did not change all that much, but I was feeling productive and independent again, while at the same time I was helping my agents earn a worthwhile living.

It wasn't long before the "challenge" of MS got the upper hand and eroded my ability to continue working the real estate biz. My office was merged with another while I continued to work part-time. During this transition I learned how to use a computer and how to build simple websites. While doing this it occurred to me that I should marry my newfound computer savvy with what I'd done in my "previous life," namely sell home furnishings. Except this time it would be on the Internet and not in a brick and mortar store.

That was some 12 years ago now and my on-line store has generated enough income to make it possible for me to take on a woman raising 3 children to work for me full-time, hire a part-time person, meet my needs, and help a collection of poor kids in the African nation of Uganda. I still live a simple lifestyle; own no home or buildings or property, drive a car that is 11 years old with 146,000 miles on it, though I do have furniture and lots of books, the bed I always wanted and a productive, experience-rich lifestyle.

I still dream of the "freedom" and "liberation" that came from getting rid of all my possessions, but am comfortable as is and very focused on cultivating a more rewarding spiritual life. I am, however, considering ridding myself of what possessions I have and moving to another country. And this not only so I can enjoy the joys of a minimalist lifestyle, but also so I can be with my own princess, a Ugandan lady I have been in love with for many years now. Only by continuing to live a "less is more" lifestyle predicated on spiritual growth can I leave this world one day a truly rich and satisfied man. In the meantime, I will live with a woman and two adopted children I have come to love and care for deeply, while providing them with a lifestyle and a whole host of opportunities they would have never enjoyed back in their home country. I will, in short, continue building treasures that endure; that neither rust nor thieves can touch or diminish.