

Watch salmon. Swimming upstream just makes you bait for a bear

Statistics show that the most common time for people to have heart attacks is Monday morning – that’s how stressed we are about the work that we do, is it really worth that much? I was speaking with one man, a senior executive, at a breakfast seminar and he was telling me how he had this ‘balance thing’ all sorted out. He’d bought a unit on the NSW Central Coast where he could get away for a bit of R&R every few weeks. The thing is, it turned out that he’d had the unit for a year, and he’d only been there twice because he was now working harder than ever to pay for it. So often when I speak with people and ask them what they do to achieve balance in their lives, they’ll tell me about something they’ve bought, whether it’s a holiday unit that they never use, to a car that they worry about whenever they leave it parked somewhere, or some other gadget that is going to bring them pleasure or make their lives simpler. But more often than not these purchases don’t do anything other than drain the bank balance or collect dust.

Life is actually really simple, we have just become far too clever and crammed out lives full of systems and gadgets designed to make life easier and the result is that our energy is sapped to the point where life is a struggle. It’s time we got back to what the basics are all about, to the point where we work to live, not live to work.

Life really is simple and sometimes less can be more

Australian homes today are 30% larger than they were ten years ago, yet our families are smaller. Why are we filling our lives up with stuff to try and make us happier? In his book ‘The Theory of the Leisure Class’, Thorstein Veblen says that ‘wealth has become the conventional basis of esteem. Its possession has become necessary in order to have any reputable standing in the community’. Philosopher Alain De Botton has called this ‘status anxiety’, it’s that ever-growing need to feel accepted that drives people to keep filling their lives up with ‘stuff’ in order to seem to be seen as successful. De Botton writes ‘Status anxiety is the price we pay for acknowledging a public difference between a successful and an unsuccessful life’. The other price we are paying is our health as we work harder to own more things that don’t end up bringing us the happiness that they promised and that we long for. Think about the things that you have bought recently, believing that they will bring you pleasure or make your life simpler. Have they changed your life in the way you hoped they would?

Australian families today collectively owe about \$714 billion. In June 2001, household debt represented 105% of disposable income and by June 2003 it had grown to 135%. As a nation we now spend far more than we earn. Next time you’re about to buy something to ‘cheer yourself up’ stop and think about how maybe less could be more, call someone you care about and get what you really need, some care and attention and not just another thing to clutter your life with.

Going without another gadget and reducing your living expenses, so that you can lessen the stress of having to work harder to maintain it all, might be just what the doctor ordered.