

Images flicker past on television screens hundreds of times faster than things happen in real life. The human brain was not meant to process pictures at the speed computers stream electrons. Yet our culture pushes us to work harder, faster, do more, earn more, have more. We are driving ourselves to live lives as frantically meaningless as characters in commercials for throwaway luxury products.

Many of us are burning out, getting sick, feeling hollow and searching for a way to solve a deep-seated discontent with the way we live. Maybe we need to realize that we don't live in sitcoms but in real places like Red Deer, Alberta or Nelson, B.C.

Maybe we have to learn to connect personally to the plants that exhale the oxygen we breathe, to the rivers that give us water to drink, to the people we meet face-to-face, and to our own hearts that somehow seem to know where we should be going.

In his late 40s, Paul had a well paying, permanent job that enabled him and his family to buy the things they wanted and to vacation in places like Vancouver Island, Yellowstone, and Disney World. He and his wife looked forward to a comfortable retirement once their children left home. Suddenly, he burned out and was unable to work. After four years of searching, he realized he had repressed his own core values and had become several different persons – employee, husband, father – none of whom were Paul.

One of the key experiences that led to Paul's rediscovery of his identity was a retreat to a small, wild, creek valley not far from Edmonton. He listened to woodpeckers hammering, touched the lifecycle of the forest floor and gazed up at the billions of galaxies sparkling in the clear spring sky. He

learned time is more than money and realized his heart had been telling him for years to get his priorities straight.

The retreat was part of a course offered by the Fireweed Institute, an Edmonton-based non-profit educational organization. Its purpose is to help people discover how to live sustainable lives and to support them in a lifestyle our whole society will soon have to adopt before Mother Nature decides we have exploited her too much. The Fireweed Institute teaches that we humans are, down to the subatomic and spiritual levels, connected to the natural world, to all we cannot yet touch or see, and to one another.

Geena, who also took the course, says "It really feels to me like I burst through the clouds and now there's this whole new world where I am." She experienced "growth in feelings of connectedness and community ... growth in global thinking, how the pieces connect to the whole."

For Sally, "the most significant was the mind-opening thought that you can separate your work for pay from your true work ... astounding! That I can have other things that are more meaningful for me to do, that can identify who I am."

'Transforming Your Working and Living' is Fireweed's most comprehensive, holistic course. It has changed many people's lives. The institute also offers short courses and workshops on voluntary simplicity, mindful living, spirituality, consensus decision-making, tree-free papermaking, urban landscaping with native Alberta species, and organic gardening. ●

For more about the Fireweed Institute: (780)433-1830, e-mail [info@fireweedinstitute.org](mailto:info@fireweedinstitute.org), or visit <http://fireweedinstitute.org/>