

‘My 17-year vow of silence freed me’



Environmentalist John Francis, who did not speak from 1973 to 1990, will share the lessons he learnt at the Singapore Mindfulness Conference



Venessa Lee

Observing a vow of silence for 17 years enabled environmentalist John Francis to make peace with himself.

Besides not speaking between 1973 and 1990, the 74-year-old American also did not take motor transport for 22 years, from 1972 to 1994.

The decision to walk almost everywhere was a protest against pollution after a collision of two oil tankers in San Francisco Bay in 1971 left a massive oil spill.

Although he joined volunteers to clean the beach and rescue sea birds drenched in petroleum, Dr Francis says he felt partly responsible. He was then driving a Toyota Land Cruiser in California, where he used to live.

Shortly afterwards, in part because he got into arguments about his decision not to drive, he took a vow of silence on his 27th birthday. During those years, he trekked and sailed around North and South America while earning a Bachelor of Science degree, as well as a master's degree and a doctorate in environmental studies. He completed his studies by communicating through pantomime, acting and writing notes. He has also trekked in places like the Netherlands and Hangzhou in China.

He supported himself doing ad-hoc work, such as building boats and playing his banjo at clubs, or with scholarship stipends.

For a year, he worked with the United States Coast Guard, assisting in writing regulations after the historic Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989.

Dr Francis, nicknamed the Planet-walker, wants to share the lessons

he learnt at the Singapore Mindfulness Conference, where he will be speaking live online this weekend.

Organised by Brahm Centre and the National University of Singapore, the theme of the conference, which includes webinars, workshops and mindfulness practice sessions, is Enhancing Resilience And Performance.

Dr Francis visited Singapore a few years ago to give a talk at Stamford American International School.

"During the journey that I went on, I was listening and not talking, listening to nature and to other people. I was looking for my authentic self. Discovering the person that I was meant rediscovering my childhood self, the inner child that we all have within us. It was a serendipitous discovery," says Dr Francis in an exclusive video interview with *The Straits Times* from his home in New Jersey.

Although his decisions affected important relationships – his girlfriend at the time eventually left him – he found that silence was "very freeing". Meanwhile, not using motor vehicles began to feel like "a prison".

As a young man in his 20s, he recalls that he thought he "knew everything" and had trouble listening.

In conversation, he kept thinking how he would say things better than the other person and kept wanting to chime in with his own observations. This impulse faded after he stopped driving and started walking everywhere.

He would often walk with his banjo in hand, which he still plays when speaking at seminars.

In those days, when asked to play, he would be tempted to lie that he had an album out. He has long stopped such showboating.

Being "on the outside of the culture" through those years of silence helped him to accept who he was, and to reject the "lie" he was living, he says. "There was a time when I didn't like who I was."

As a child, he remembers he did not like being black.

When he was growing up in Philadelphia, he saw signs in sleek restaurants welcoming only white people; a placard for "coloured" people indicated alternative dining, such as a shack selling hot dogs. He was about six years old when a



American John Francis (above) did not take motor transport from 1972 to 1994 and, as a young man (left), walked almost everywhere as a protest against pollution after a collision of two oil tankers in San Francisco Bay in 1971 left a massive oil spill. PHOTOS: JOHN FRANCIS

young neighbour, standing next to her mother, said she could not play with him because he was "coloured".

His parents tried from the beginning to persuade him against his quest. They were afraid he would be attacked or even killed as a black man walking alone and mute in the streets and wilderness of the US.

Sometime in the 1970s, Dr Francis faced the threat they had feared.

When he was trekking in the Californian mountains, an off-duty sheriff demanded to know what he was doing and pointed a gun at his head.

"I was in such an altered state, after a few years of not speaking and wanting to listen to everyone. The racism was kind of the story, but what I saw was life and death. I recognised death as someone very familiar. The first thing I thought was that I hadn't done any painting that day, which I usually did," he says.

Another illuminating moment came when he realised that environmental consciousness is not only about pollution, but also the interconnectedness of people.

The Black Lives Matter movement, economic inequality, systematic oppression of any kind, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate

change, for example, are all interlinked issues requiring painful conversations and genuine cooperation.

Solving environmental and other problems depends on how people treat one another, he says.

"No matter what we are doing, if we are not kind to one another, any solutions would lack the power they could possibly have, unless we are working together with compassion," says Dr Francis, who has written two books and is writing a third on the history of kindness.

Communicating with sign language, miming and sometimes using a notebook, he used to review and renew his vow of silence on his birthday every year.

On the 10th anniversary of his pledge, he shocked his parents with a phone call, though his mother – not recognising his voice – thought he was a prankster at first.

Even when teaching for several months while pursuing his post-graduate studies, he did not speak, though he set questions and quizzes and encouraged his students' discussions.

On Earth Day in April 1990, he broke his vow for good.

"I wanted to remind myself that I

wanted to speak about the environment," says Dr Francis, who is the founder of Planetwalk, a non-profit environmental awareness organisation, and a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador.

His mother cried "hallelujah" at his first words to an assembled crowd: "Thank you for being here."

His father urged him to start driving again.

Dr Francis, now a visiting associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, still opens many of his speeches with the same words.

He met his psychotherapist wife, with whom he has two teenage sons, after he started speaking again.

Once, while visiting the head of a prison in Venezuela, Dr Francis found himself thinking obsessively about how he would escape.

"It dawned on me that I was in a prison of my own making," he says. He reflected that even if he did not use motor vehicles, the food he ate and the clothes on his back were not all locally sourced.

Not driving did not mean he was "more pure" than others in trying to live sustainably. This thought ended 22 years of walking.

In taking roads less travelled, Dr Francis has been shrugged off as a lunatic.

"I think whenever someone is presenting something new or different, there's going to be people saying: 'You're crazy.' How can you love people who call you crazy? I can love these people because they help me define who I am," he says.

"If you don't know who you are, you are subject to them. You realise this is who you are, and that realisation is what I want for everyone."

venessal@sph.com.sg

BOOK IT / SINGAPORE MINDFULNESS CONFERENCE: ENHANCING RESILIENCE AND PERFORMANCE

WHERE: Zoom
WHEN: Saturday and Sunday, various times
ADMISSION: The main conference is free
INFO: Register at brahmcentre.com/smc2020