

Home is where the hearth is

By Ruth Ostrow

"YOU should never fall in love with a property," one of the richest men in Australia once told me. "Bricks and mortar should always be regarded as just an investment, to be sold at any time for the right price."

As he spoke, my mind wandered down the corridors of my family home, the one I grew up in. Bricks and mortar on the outside but inside a sacred space that housed my memories, my youth, the most significant times of my life.

Years later I would try to cling to his words when my mother announced that she was selling that house. "Home is not where we live but what we carry in our hearts," my mother tried to rationalise as her four adult children sobbed into tissues and carried on like five-year-olds. "It's too big for me to live in alone. I've got to move to something smaller and start a new life." We were all old enough to have homes of our own. But that never dulls the ache of having to let go of the only enduring remnant of one's childhood, the monument whose every room tells a story.

"You still have your memories. They can't be sold," my mother said at the time. And it was true. Even now I remember chasing my sisters down the hall, or around the garden with the gushing hose. Always chasing. Always laughing. I remember all the dogs, cats, birds and tortoises that lived and died with us over the decades.

But something has gone. Over and over again in my mind, I go back and try to remember the exact shade of the terrible, yellow carpet in my old bedroom. I try to recapture the details and smell of the family room.

It was pure 1970s chic. Elaborate wood panelling, shag-pile carpet and groovy wallpaper that swirled in so many different directions you didn't need drugs.

My father built that home. And we all loved it. He died. We all moved on. But I am haunted in my dreams by him and us and the way it was then, good and bad, in that special home that is now inhabited by strangers who have ripped up the trees my dad planted in the front yard.

And so it is with great compassion that I try to break the news to my little girl that we are selling her home. The apartment she spent her tender years in. The piece of real estate we bought several years ago when having a baby meant we needed more space.

Her face is filled with the mystery and pain I always experienced when it was time for my family to move on. "But what about my room? Are you selling that too? Can we just keep my room?" she implores with fear in her eyes, and I fight back tears.

I've never been much chop at letting go. My heart is heavy, for both of us. There is much of our energy in that home.

Her room, in particular, is filled with rich sweetness. I remember the first night she slept in a bed after we took the cot away. How we ran down the hall on hearing the thump, and her confused face beaming up at us. I became a real

mother in that home. I remember the newness. The intensity. The changes motherhood brought about in me.

"You should never fall in love with a property," say the rich, say the Buddhists, say the wise. With any property, buildings, possessions or things. But things hold our energy, our memories. And we are all so desperately in love with our memories that their fragile symbols are almost impossible to let go.

It is time to sell, to let go of the old and make way for the new. We have moved on, my husband and I, adopted a new life in a new place. But the tears are falling against my leg as our little girl buries her face in my skirt and sobs.

Does she understand? I think I always did. I remember leaving my friends from the cul-de-sac at her age, when dad became more successful. I never saw them again. I remember clearing out my nana and papa's house when it became too large for them to handle. We had lived in that house too, with my grandparents, for many years while my dad was trying to make good.

It was a magical, secret paradise, that old home. The rambling garden my grandfather mowed so we could use it as a mini golf course. The fruit trees. The day we moved them out, my little heart was breaking. In all these years I've never had the courage to drive past and see what the trendy, new owners have done to it.

I've had several homes since leaving the family home. Each one I have loved and let go in order to move on, to grow financially and emotionally. In search of more room, in search of more peace. In search of self. Because just as each home reflects who we are, it also reflects who we were, as we walk away.

And each new home is who we are going to be. Money has so little to do with it. I just read a quote by author Robert Dessaix, that people are looking for somewhere to belong to, not to own. And I understand my daughter belonged to the place we are selling.

"Aren't we ever going home?" she says, looking out at the foreign peaks and valleys of rural NSW, so far from her Sydney nest.

I put her familiar teddies and dolls around her on the floor. "We are your home, we are always with you," says Mr Blobby, and Oscar and Suzie, dancing about. And I know that the businessmen and Buddhists have got it wrong.

You can fall in love with property. Because inanimate objects -- be they teddies, trinkets from the past, or the bricks and mortar of a home -- are sacred, living things. They are familiar and safe. They are testimonies to who we are.

They are all alive with as much energy and spirit as our hearts allow them. And it is okay to grieve their passing, as one would a beloved old friend.

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