

Feedback that rocked my world

By Ruth Ostrow

ONE of the main reasons I write this column is to open up a dialogue about matters not generally discussed in the media, to demystify the human experience and to help explode some of the damaging myths we all live by.

Most of us have unrealistic expectations regarding happiness. We are terrified of death. We don't know how to age. We don't know how to grieve. And none of these issues is discussed openly and honestly in polite circles.

So it is always with enormous joy that I read your courageous letters each week feeding back to me your poignant and moving stories.

I would like to share a handful from the past few weeks because it is only by sharing our stories in this way that a more profound and honest view of life can emerge.

I was especially moved by the letters and e-mails I received in response to my article on film-maker Paul Tait, who went on to do wonderful deeds for other people, after the death of his daughter.

"I wanted to write and let you know how helpful I found your article 'The loss that changed the world'," wrote Holly Humphrey. "Six weeks ago today, my first child was born, Luke, a beautiful boy nearly 3kg in weight, who had, however, a serious abnormality affecting his lungs. He died the following day.

"I was very touched by Paul Tait's words spoken after the death of his daughter: 'I just found I had so much to give, to spread compassion and care.' Within days of coming home from hospital, I joined a political party, driven by the feeling that I needed to try, as people say, to make a difference in the world.

"The experience of losing my son has made me feel even more loving and compassionate towards the people in my life. Your article will be kept as a reminder to me that good things can come out of tragic events. I agree wholeheartedly with Tait that it is our attitude to life and death that's the secret to happiness."

I found this e-mail from Rod Curtis in Kosovo inspiring:

"I'm a journalist who's worked with World Vision in Kosovo and Albania since last March. Every fortnight I receive a package from Australia containing magazines, a bill or two (nice, if bizarre, reminders of home), and The Weekend Australian.

"I wanted to thank you for your continuing honesty and good heart in your column. I am seeking some goodness, perhaps a little healing, but always something positive to keep on top of all this.

"I received your piece on Paul Tait today and it was fantastic. To be honest, it's hard to believe life is perfect in Kosovo, but I wish people would try. As you showed, a positive attitude goes a long way. Spring is approaching and, in the Balkans, spring has brought little but killings and war for the past two years.

"Everyone is full of fear and anger and revenge, although deep down I believe most people just want peace. It's a starting point to forgiveness and reconciliation, at the very least.

"The column you wrote about your grandmother's songs also touched me in a special place. It reminded me of my mother sitting by my bedside when I was a boy in Bangladesh, singing what I call her 'peace songs' to me.

"Mum runs a small heroin detox in central Victoria and she, like Paul, is a great example of the power of positive thinking. She's had a tough life, and she deals with it by wrapping her arms around some of the toughest, roughest men in Melbourne. Her name's Ruth, too."

This sadly beautiful letter came from Alison Day:

"I am reading your column while watching one of my sons play school cricket and I'm fighting a losing battle against the tears.

"Your comments about the associations of events and people linked to music instantly took me back to the song I identify with my first daughter. It was Stevie Wonder's You are the Sunshine of my Life.

"She was born in 1977 and the words summed it all up. I adored her and had so much fun with her, I could not believe how lucky I was to have such a beautiful child. When I became pregnant with my second child, I could not imagine loving another child as much.

"The reason your article is so poignant is that my daughter died as a result of an accident when she was 20 months old, two weeks before my son was born.

"My son will be 21 on March 17. The celebration of his birth is always bittersweet. When Eric Clapton released his Tears in Heaven, I could not listen to it without weeping.

"The pain of such profound loss is so deep and yet so close to the surface. Music is very powerful."

Jillian Lambert-Sutton shared the heartfelt secret that she could not listen to her father's music for decades after the trauma of his death.

"I was 28 years old with three young children and a newborn baby. I was reeling with the shock of how terrible and awful his death was. I was using any energy I had available to keep the rage and pain out...

"But today, 34 years later, I took a risk. I closed the door of my private room and I listened to my father's [piano] recordings. I was risking the inevitable return of unbearable loss, pain and rage. Until today I have not been able to be alone with his music. Until today I have not allowed him to give me his gift: the joy and satisfaction of listening with my heart, mind and soul to his unique performances.

"At last, finally, I was open. I was not afraid. I listened intently; there was a communication that flowed between us after all these years of barren denial. It has taken far too long to heal the wounds, but who is to make the judgment? We are ready when we are ready."

Her poignant parting line is this: "Our emotions do not answer to the demands of mere chronological time."

To all of my readers, thank you for your honest and powerful sharing, and for the wisdom inherent in much of your writings. I await your e-mails and letters each week.

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