

Chains of freedom clashing

By Ruth Ostrow

I REMEMBER a dear friend's words. "People can't cope with too much freedom. Every time they have some, they go and create commitment and responsibility for themselves because they don't know how to be free."

This he told me when I was contemplating having another child. I had finally got my daughter off to school, had pruned down my work commitments enough to have time to myself and was wandering around with a surfeit of free time on my hands.

Lurking in the wings was a gaggle of unborn responsibilities. I could have taken on another work commitment, could have started a business that I was contemplating and, of course, could easily have created a new life with all the exhaustive love and attention that growing a human being requires.

Instead, I took heed of his words and remained unchained long enough to realise that it actually felt good. After all the conditioning of my childhood, the fear of under-achieving and the sense of profound uselessness, just "hanging out" felt marvellous.

There was an enormous cost: things I had to do without financially, the endless, endless grief of not having another child, and there was a huge dent in my life where my ego used to be. But a deep sense of peace and control began to descend over my life. And has remained there ever since.

And as I hung out on the weekend with a group of wonderful friends, just drinking, laughing, eating too much, staying up all night and having a second adolescence - my daughter away at a friend's place - I wondered why it took so long for me to allow "enough" to be "enough", and to finally embrace true freedom of the soul.

And I decided to call friend, internationally respected author and relationships counsellor Jo-Anne Baker to glean her ideas on why so many people were stuck on treadmills of wanting and needing and yearning, instead of stopping still to enjoy the possibilities of life.

She said that it all harked back to conditioning and a youth played out forever answering to authority figures.

"Because of how we are socialised, we spend the rest of our lives carrying around this internal parent who is always forcing us to comply with social standards. "I've got many clients at the moment who are battling with adolescent children at the same time they're dealing with freedom issues within themselves. It's interesting to observe them giving themselves the same restrictive messages they give their kids who want to stay out late, and wear what they want, and do what they want.

"Not so long ago these same parents were saying: 'I can't wait to grow up so I can travel the world and have wild parties.' But many of them left home and walked straight into responsibility and heavy commitments, and have no time,

energy or desire to play. And so the vicious circle is perpetuated from parent to child."

Baker, whose latest book *Men Who Ride the Sexual Frontier*, has just been published in the UK and is soon to be released here by HarperCollins, says: "Most people are never taught to relax into life. They have profound shame when enjoying themselves and letting go."

I told her my Italian friend's theory about people not being able to cope with too much freedom. Which is why he believes Europeans regularly vote in fascist regimes.

Baker disagrees. "It's not that people are afraid of freedom, either personally or politically. It's just that they don't understand it. Most people never see it in their own homes.

"We don't grow up with role models for having fun or being too free. Pleasure makes us feel guilty. We don't believe we deserve it. Or it brings up feelings of fear: 'I better not get used to this because I'll lose it soon.'

"It also brings up feelings of worthlessness: 'I'm not a good enough mother'; 'I should have more kids'; 'I'm a failure unless I earn more money or reach that career goal.' And we often live among people who externalise the critical parent, who are going to disapprove and keep us in shame and guilt."

She says that there are brief windows of opportunity where adults can choose personal freedom over another entrapment, but they have to be brave enough to deal with the consequences - which I know at first-hand can be very difficult.

A reader sent me a great and relevant quote: "Power is not the ability to get someone else to do what you want them to do. It is the ability to get yourself to do what you want to do!"

Which I think sums up the essence of true freedom.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in *The Weekend Australian* SAT 14 JUL 2001