

Mine your personal magic

By Ruth Ostrow

JOHN'S place is rather empty. An old lounge suite in the corner without its mate. A table without chairs in the centre of the room. These are the few things salvaged from his recent separation. The casualties of emotional war.

On a recent trip to Sydney, I visit him to offer support. We sit on two remaining kitchen chairs. The cupboard is bare. I settle for a glass of wine instead.

"I can't work out what went wrong," he says, as the alcohol takes effect. Around the room are photos of his kids. I try not to look too long, try not to remind him of the sounds that would normally be filling the room at this time of night.

John is in his 40s. Professional. He began his adult life with a dream and spent two decades working towards it. Recently his wife walked out, taking the furniture, their three children and moving temporarily to their holiday house on the coast.

He is a man in shock. He never saw it coming.

It's cold in the harbourside house tonight. His wife took the heaters, too. The huge lounge room he built for his family feels like a mausoleum as our voices bounce off the lifeless walls. I take his hand in mine.

"I stopped turning her on," he says. "She said she didn't find me interesting any more." His shoulders are slumped over, his lips quivering. It's a hard thing for a man to hear. Harder to admit.

There's nothing for me to say. I allow silence to sit between us. He runs his hands through his hair. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what happened. I don't understand," he says, finally getting up and wandering about.

I'm so filled with pity my heart hurts, searching for something to say to make it better. My words are clumsy, patronising. "You are a great guy. There will be other women. She doesn't know what she's missing."

All cliches uttered repeatedly to friends going through the ugly ritual of divorce. And what can one really say anyway? In many long-term relationships, boredom is par for the course.

And suddenly in the painful silence I get a flash of intuition. A flash so bright, I feel my body perk up.

"John, what did you keep for yourself from the separation? What is the most precious, personal thing you own?"

John disappears into the bedroom and emerges with a big box and a bigger grin. "My rock collection," he beams, looking like a boy of 10. He opens the flaps and brings out the most amazing array of stones I've ever seen.

There are crystals, opals, rocks from volcanoes, rocks with veins of precious stone running through them. And each has a story. Each was collected from some wild adventure years before.

"This is from the time I travelled in the outback," he says, sitting down and telling tales around the camp fire of his mind: the time he spent in an old mining town, the months spent sleeping under the stars, floods, rescue attempts, that girl.

The rocks and their stories fill the room like big, bright canvases, resplendent with colour.

"John, this is your essence," I say to him, squeezing his hand. "And no woman or man can take it away."

Through all the years of being a good husband, good father, good provider, John had buried his rocks, his soul, under the bed. The same place that I kept my paintings, half-finished poems and guitar - symbols of my own essence, hidden from view - until my recent commitment to open the boxes of my creative soul. At any cost.

For it's the trap of every relationship. We end up domesticating and killing off the very essence of ourselves, the essence that made us attractive in the first place. Our sexy, untamed, creative sides get stifled and lost beneath layers of mundane dross. And once they are buried, we fall out of love with ourselves - usually well before our partners fall out of love with us.

"Let's put them out on display," I say, and we begin arranging the rocks into a giant circle. A sacred altar.

"I think I might travel for a while," says John thoughtfully, staring at what Native Americans would call a healing medicine wheel in the middle of his lounge. His shoulders are no longer slumped. He is handsome and bold - probably the man his wife fell in love with.

There is magic embedded in us all. But it's not for others to mine. It's for us to keep unearthing in the humdrum of daily life. For how can our partners see the preciousness we keep locked away from ourselves?

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