

Accept, and reach for the scars

By Ruth Ostrow

I SPENT time over the new year with a woman who'd had her breast removed due to breast cancer. Unlike many women, she elected not to have breast reconstruction surgery, opting instead to simply live with her scar. Nor is she prepared to wear any padded bra or loose-fitting tops. In fact, she arrived at a party wearing a tight top that greatly accentuated the absence of her breast.

Being an avid student of human nature, my curiosity was aroused by this unusual behaviour. I told her that I thought she was enormously brave going out in public in this unconventional way. And I asked her how it made her feel.

She threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, I am very proud of my war wound," she said. "Did you know the Amazon women used to cut off their left breast so they could hold the bow and arrow against their chestbones and fight with the strength and steadiness of men?"

"I feel like a warrior woman. This is the sacrifice I've made in my fight against cancer. And I like to show it off. So many of us feel we have to cover our scars, our war wounds, the signs of a life well lived, a life that has been marked by falls, and broken bones and broken hearts, smile lines, frown lines, the time we crashed our bicycle.

"But I think the scars we see on people are beautiful. They are our stories and our memories. They are the disaster we lived through and survived. We lived to tell another tale. And we can be more compassionate as a result of our wound. And people can approach us because we look imperfect and truthful and real. I have never understood why people need to go and get their battle scars and wrinkles lifted and tucked when it's a far braver and richer declaration to show them off."

My mouth fell open. I was truly inspired. And I thought of a beautiful woman I know with a prominent gash across her forehead. She too wears it with dignity. She could easily have a fringe, but chooses to allow the scar to speak of the accident that she had, and how destiny changed and deepened her.

I've never had the courage to ask her why but now I understand.

"When you see your scar, when you look in the mirror and really see it, you suddenly want to offer thanks to it for the lesson it has given you," the woman said. "The lesson I learned was humility -- not to take my existence for granted, not to love impatiently or without consideration for the temporary nature of existence. My scar is my teacher and I'm grateful for it."

As she spoke, I thought about the world and the scar that has been left on the New York landscape and on our souls in the wake of September 11. As we go into 2002, we in the West have been forced to understand what those in the East have always known: that life is not to be taken for granted, that our notion of safety and permanence, the longevity of our loved ones, or indeed the world as we know it, is built on shifting sands.

Indeed there has been a rush on dating agencies in New York since the bombing, with people saying they realise that life is short and they want to stop behaving as if it'll go on forever, and they want to make life rich and meaningful by experiencing love at the deepest levels before time runs out.

Like my friend's breast wound, the scar on the American landscape is a powerful symbol of our fragility and the beauty of being alive each and every second. It stands as an honouring of the sacrifice of life made and a chilling reminder the preciousness of existence for those of us left standing.

And ultimately my friend in her tight top is right. There is a profound sacredness in our scars, in the damage and sacrifice our bodies endure, which helps us to be present for other people's pain and at the same time to be fully present for our own joy.

In our lives we do earn many of the wrinkles and the imperfections that line our skins and mark our bodies, and sometimes even our diseases. We should embrace ourselves and our decisions with abundant acceptance.

So in starting the new year I think it's a powerful time in our collective histories to rise like the phoenix from the ashes of our personal and global scars.

To live not from denial or cover-up, but from passion. To remember always that we only have a temporary visa to walk on this planet. And to begin the year full of positive self-acceptance and the intention to make this year the best, most powerful, loving year. To dance as if no one is watching, to love and live this moment as if it were our last.

A happy new year to all my readers.

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