

A deep sense of belonging

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS at a workshop a number of years ago and was quite mesmerised by the facilitator. She was a regular woman, doing her best to convey her teachings to the class, but I kept getting goose pimples as she was speaking. I just knew that there was something special about her, something that would join us together in friendship.

I tried to rationalise my feelings, pondering to myself why I was so drawn to her, why I felt so affectionate and familiar with her. Did she remind me of someone? Was it what she was saying was so powerful for me?

There were no direct answers and at the end of the class I did something out of character. I went up to her and said: "My name is Ruth, and I feel we are going to be best friends."

At the time she thought I was a bit of a nut. "My workshops are full of strange people and I thought you were another one of them," she laughs today. But she says that, despite her reservations, within 10 minutes of talking to me, she too felt a strong bond. "It was tender, deep and full of affection. Like you were a blood relative or a sister," she says. And indeed we've been close ever since.

Last week I was talking about this unusual relationship with someone in an attempt to explain my theories on friendship. "I had a sense that this woman and I belonged to each other," I explained, and we began discussing the phenomenon of belonging to people.

It strikes me that there are people in the world we love deeply, intimately, often very passionately, who we don't belong to. We know that no matter how much time we spend with them, how many intimacies pass between us, whether they remain friends or become lovers, we will not belong to each other.

Then there are people who we may not even know very well, and yet for no logical reason there is a familiarity, and a sense of belonging to each other, that is so profound as to be shocking.

Which happened the first time I met my husband. I remember standing in the street chatting to him and being overcome by a feeling that I was putting my hand into an old glove. That we had been around the planet many times together.

"I'm going to marry this man," I was saying to myself in utter surprise because he didn't fit the job description I'd hatched in my mind, and we hadn't spoken many words to each other.

I just felt I was staring at a long lost friend. My intuition was telling me that he was a true soul mate. And as with my girlfriend, my feelings proved absolutely spot on.

So what is it that makes someone belong to us? Is it a familiarity born of similar cultural backgrounds? No, because there are many people with similar roots who don't belong to me. Is it similar interests? Again not so, because there are many

people I share my life with who I love deeply, but don't belong to. Do certain people remind us unconsciously of a beloved parent or sibling? This is a plausible answer.

But an interesting possibility comes from a book I read recently, *Journey of Souls* by Michael Newton (Llewellyn Publications).

Newton, a doctor of counselling and master hypnotherapist in California, regressed hundreds of patients and got them to remember past life and death experiences before putting several case studies into a book.

Though sceptics would laugh me out of town for even referring to this New Age best-seller, it's an interesting document in that it puts forward the possibility that we reincarnate over and over again with soul clusters -- or groups of 15 to 25 people -- who remain with us each lifetime.

When someone from a past life steps back into the picture, we have a strong physiological reaction, we inexplicably feel we know them, there is a profound sense of karma, connection and unconditional love, as we rediscover members of our tribe.

Buddhists and Hindus certainly believe we reincarnate. But, away from such esoteric theories, there are scientific explanations for some of our deeper feelings. For instance, when we fall in love we release feel-good chemicals such as the amphetamine PEA and later the opiate oxytocin -- nature's way to help humans bond and procreate.

Textbooks say a feature of these chemicals is a sense of a mystical or supernatural connection with the beloved. However, love hormones don't explain the way I felt about my girlfriend who is now one of my nearest and dearest.

There are no real answers to this mystery. I only know that I have a group of people who truly belong to me -- soul mates and people I have loved forever. Even after friendships and love affairs have died, they live on in the deepest parts of my being and will continue to do so in this lifetime. Or perhaps until the next life brings them back to me.

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