

Blown away by gale forces

By Ruth Ostrow

THE rain starts falling. The wind rises. We are at a small gathering to bid a friend farewell, and from on top of a hill where he lives, we can see a monstrous black sky surging towards us.

"Gonna be a bad one," someone says. My daughter goes white and clutches my arm with her small hand. It's been "a bad one" all week as far as I am concerned. I'm in a mood as black as the storm.

Premenstrual, sleep deprived. The past few days have been an ordeal as I've struggled to function, having nursed a sick child through mountains of mucus. She's been too ill to sleep in her own bed, and I've been kept awake most nights listening to the wheezing, snorting, coughing and moaning coming from the tiny body next to me.

Colds are a bad thing. Lack of sleep is a bad thing. And storms are plain old frightening. My mood deepens, solidifies, as the icy sheets of rain come down. My daughter is sobbing, holding her ears. She was in Sydney during the infamous hailstorm a few years ago, which seems to have terrified her for life.

"I hate this storm," she whimpers to my girlfriend who is standing nearby. My friend puts her arms around my daughter and speaks softly to her.

"Often what we think is so bad ends up being really good. When I was little I used to lie in bed rigid with terror of what the storm would do to me. Then one day a storm blew the roof off our house in Sydney. And guess what? I was still OK, and the good thing was we got a new roof, which we needed.

"When you stop fearing storms you can see their beauty. Look at the fireworks in sky, the amazing patterns on the ground.

"Storms are wonderful," she says, leading my daughter to the window.

It's true. There's euphoria in everyone's voices as the energy hits.

"There is no good or bad in life. Both are our teachers. "The dark things propel us forward," says my friend - more to me than my child - and I'm listening to every word. Not because what she says is new. Buddhism teaches that everything that happens to us - good or bad - is perfect.

But this friend has endured real tragedy in her own life, including the attempted suicide of her son a few years ago. She once told me that the attempted suicide gave her a positive perspective on life.

"It really clarified what was important. As he lay bleeding in my arms, I knew in that moment that nothing else mattered as much as us being alive, here, now. And that whatever life brings you, you just go through it and come out the other side." The wind is howling, a lump of tree goes whooshing past as the storm picks up with cyclonic force. Definitely a bad thing.

The situation feels increasingly apocalyptic, despite the conversation. By this stage I'm praying.

"See - good things come of bad. Your mother has found God!" she laughs to my daughter.

Bang. The electricity is out. Suddenly hail starts pounding the roof. "Oh no," I moan under my breath.

We all have a primal fear that we'll be annihilated by the storms of life. But usually we're not. And when reflecting on the painful or bad things we've had to endure from a vantage point in the future, we can often look back on our wounds, our losses, our defeats, and see the gift the universe gave us by moving us on towards something more meaningful, appropriate, necessary to our personal growth.

I often look back on the wonderful lessons I've learned through pain. Our worst experiences can be the sand in the oyster that creates the pearl. So-called "bad" relationships can clear away debris in the human heart, clarifying what we really want or deserve. Just as rainstorms clear away the dust and nourish the earth. My daughter is intrigued by my girlfriend, who laughs gleefully with each crack of lightning. She has never thought of storms as wonderful. "Something good will come of this, you'll see," my friend tells her.

Finally all is calm, the rain is trickling down the awnings, the guests retreat to their cars for the journey home. On the way down the hill we are stopped by a felled tree blocking the road. The party guests, most of us in a convoy, jump out of our cars and pull the tree aside. Suddenly there is another crack of lightning. I realise I've left my daughter in the car - alone.

I race over, expecting to find her cowering in terror. She looks calm. "Did you move the tree?" she asks, nonchalant, like someone who was never scared of storms. "Yes," I say. "It's moved." She smiles even as a peal of thunder hits overhead - the same girl who for years crawled under tables during the lightest rain.

And I can now see what a truly good evening it has been.

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