

Vulnerability in the balance

By Ruth Ostrow

A ROUGH patch happened a few weeks ago. Three crises came at the same time: the need to suddenly move house; illness in the family which required constant travel; and an important work deadline that couldn't be put off.

I coped by switching into efficient, "kick-arse" mode in order to get my issues sorted. I felt I couldn't afford to talk to friends during this period. Largely because if I did, I'd start moaning which would weaken my resolve to keep going, and I'd fall into the sort of lethargic self-pity that packing boxes can engender.

One friend really got on my case. "I know you have some heavy pressures at the moment, but I'm sick of calling you and being told you have no time to talk to me," she said.

And it dawned on me. When trouble hits, many of us go into a sort of shut-down, efficient, self-sufficient, get-the-problem-sorted mode. The softer, gentler emotions of vulnerability and fragility get shelved in favour of the more aggressive traits of organising, supervising, crisis management.

On the other hand, an acquaintance was having a tough time recently and rang all her friends. "I'm not coping at the moment. I really need help," she told us and we happily and lovingly chipped in. Not only was her workload made lighter by her admission, but friendships were strengthened as we all felt we could contribute to bettering her life.

So why are so many people frightened of asking for help and showing their vulnerability during times of crisis or pressure? Is it that they feel they'd get bogged in the messy feelings, or is it more to do with not wanting to be seen as fragile?

This is indeed a society that values the tough, no-nonsense approach to life. Winners are carved in the strongman guise. When US President George Bush shed a tear during the September 11 crisis last year, he was severely criticised by the American media for showing weakness.

Interestingly, as part of the recent Byron Bay Writers Festival, I was asked to interview Ita Buttrose. A big proponent of the no-nonsense school, she says in her recent biography: "I rarely tell people how I feel. I cope with major catastrophes, usually by myself."

During some of the most exhausting times of her life, marital breakdown, job losses, she marched on like a trooper. "Some days I could hardly get myself out of bed. I felt so tired, so depressed ... But I kept going," she says of the time following the folding of her Ita magazine. "Never expect people to feel sorry for you."

But when the issue of femininity and leadership came up, I offered my opinion that her stoic approach seemed very masculine -- or rather it emulated the big-boys-don't-cry approach to problem solving that males and young boys in our society had been forced to adopt.

And that with women of our generations growing up with mainly masculine role-models because there were so few women judges, doctors, bank managers working as authority figures, we too have learned to cope, lead, and work, in a manner that negates expressions of vulnerability and nurturing.

Though Ita did not concede my point, I admit that I'm certainly one to hide my neediness when under pressure. The job gets done, but at great cost to myself and my relationships,

The Chinese have a solution to this modus operandi, referring in their ancient writings to the masculine and feminine aspects of being -- the Yin and Yang energies in all living things: the sun and moon, hot and cold, day and night.

Masculine does not relate to men, rather it is the masculine force in the universe -- that of creating, achieving, cutting through. It's the potent, positive force of the sun.

Intuition, emotional depth, compassion, co-operation, are in the feminine principals of the universe -- the reflective time of winter, the fecund time of germination, the beauty and mystery of the night.

The Chinese believe that real strength is about unifying the masculine and feminine powers within us all in order to create balance, harmony and flow. That in order for there to be healthy peace of mind, men must embrace the feminine, as females must embrace the masculine within.

In practical terms, this translates to both men and women calling on masculine traits to get the job done -- being direct, efficient and potent. But also to include feminine energy by asking for help, creating goodwill, and allowing for a bit of gentle nurturing, to others and from others, through the tough times.

My own story ends with a balancing of Yin and Yang. After my girlfriend's insightful words, I rang my friends. They came and helped me pack boxes. We talked, shared intimacies, and the job was done quicker and better.

Our world is out of balance. Masculine energy remains unchecked. If we start putting the balance of vulnerability, kindness and feminine traits back into our own personal lives, they'll eventually spill out to the workforce and hopefully into the world at large.

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