

Get in training for love

By Ruth Ostrow

A WHILE ago I was at a personal development workshop where the facilitator did something extremely challenging. He divided us into two groups, each group comprised of men and women. He made members of the first group sit in a circle cross-legged. Then he made the second group form a circle in the middle of our circle, also cross-legged, but facing us.

In summary, we were all sitting across from a perfect stranger, on pillows, staring into each other's eyes -- which was confronting enough. But then he asked us to do something that had us trembling in trepidation: "Shut your eyes and imagine a person you love. Remember the feeling, where it is situated in your body, how it affects you, then open your eyes and try to conjure this feeling up in order to help you fall in love with the person in front of you.

"It doesn't matter what gender your partner for this exercise is. This is not limited to romantic love, but can be about the love a mother feels for her child; or the bonds of deepest friendship. Just let loving feelings rise up in your body and gaze at the person opposite you from this place of heartfelt tenderness."

We followed the instructions, although the exercise made us feel quite awkward. "Now take this feeling, which doesn't belong to the person in front of you, and project it on to them by finding something to justify your love. Look at the colour of their skin, the shape of their eyes, feel into their energy, their essence," he said.

"Look at the little boy or girl behind the facade, wounded, fragile. Notice the smile, the vulnerability, or something of beauty that attracts you, or make up some story that helps you. This rationalising is what we do when we're falling in love, which triggers the chemical reaction we experience as love."

Then he asked us to do something even more confronting. "Now make your partner feel love for you. You can whisper things, or stay silent, do it with a gentle, respectful touch or a gaze." The results were startling, revolutionary for me. I was able to have a profoundly loving experience with a total stranger, and she seemed to have the same intense emotional bond with me.

There we all sat, a little teary, very spaced-out, but in a calm state of bliss, before the direction came for the inner circle to move along one -- like an emotional barn dance.

Each experience was slightly different, some more emotional, some more sensuous, but all safe and heart-warming. By the end of the exercise we were all super-sensitive beings, full of compassion, kindness and awe. It was almost a religious experience.

And of course, that was the point our facilitator was trying to make. That we, as humans, are able to love other humans very deeply, if we are only prepared to give up our prejudices, our sexual projections, our neediness, our mind-chatter, our narrow conditioning, and be open to the energy of people around us. And that this capacity for love puts us in touch with universal love, or God.

Which is at the basis of all religious teachings. In Buddhism, for instance, we are one energy. There is really no separation between any of us. Our souls are like slivers of light that emanate from the source. The spiritual argument goes that by reconnecting with this sameness, we can tolerate the "uniqueness" of each other -- our quirkiness, annoying habits, differences -- far better than if we see ourselves as separate, although, sadly, separateness and competition are the foundation stones of this consumer society.

Anyway, the point of this column is that over the weekend I had a very powerful experience, which emulated the workshop. I was part of an attempt to enter The Guinness Book of Records for the world's largest hug.

The last time this was attempted was in the US. The record to break was set by 2903 staff and students in schools in Rocori, Minnesota, on October 16, 2001. This time the experiment was held in a little town in the northern rivers region of NSW, called Mullumbimby, which has a population of 3000.

We all formed a circle around town, and everyone just reached out and hugged each other for 10 seconds. But after the recorded hug stopped, people just kept hugging, loving each other, walking around, hugging strangers like some hilarious 1970s love-in, but beautiful none the less.

The energy was powerful, embracing, intoxicating and utterly contagious -- as it was in the workshop.

We didn't quite break the record. But we proved my facilitator right. Love starts with impersonal love, not by personalising it to people who suit our likes, dislikes, conditionings and experiences.

It is "love itself" that can soften the human heart. And we can tap into it just by training our minds to go there. It's great to pretend that you love everyone you meet, just for one day, and see what can be created.

Yes, it's a wacky experiment, but well worth trying.

www.ruthostrow.com

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