

Repairman dishes out advice on rest and refitting

By Ruth Ostrow

KEVIN, the dishwasher man, was bending down, fixing my machine -- which had gone on the blink. Of course it went on the blink just when I could least afford it: a child home from school with tonsillitis; a host of people about to lob up for Easter.

I watched him in fascination -- putting gadgets in and twiddling things and pressing bits.

"Things just die of wear and tear," he said philosophically, showing me the control panel-board on my machine, which had corroded with time.

"It has cracked, so the screws don't fit properly, and so when you press the button it doesn't activate the mother-board inside the machine," he said, taking me on a tour inside the wires and plastic bits. "It's just how it is ... pieces get worn out."

I love my dishwasher man. He is an excellent tradesman, quick, efficient, reliable. He has come to my place before to fix my washing machine, and other appliances. As he was leaving I said: "Thanks Kevin. I hope you don't ever leave this area. We all need you."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. I haven't even had time to take a holiday for years. The last time I took a break was ... ummmm," he said, scratching his head.

"That's not what I meant," I interrupted. "I think it's important we all take holidays. We need it."

But he was lost in thought and his internal beeper was already hollering for him to be at the next job, so he tore out the front door with a wave.

It made me really think a lot about holidays and why we feel guilty taking them.

If I were an engineer I'd open Kevin up and show him areas that were becoming corroded because of wear and tear. Screws that no longer fitted, parts that were rusting.

I'd show him how a new panel would make all the difference.

Ironically, that morning I'd been talking to a male friend who is caring for a person going through chemotherapy.

He was arranging for someone else to stand in for him whilst he took a short break to travel overseas.

While many would feel guilty about taking time-out, he has an enlightened view.

"What's the use of exhausting myself and getting depleted?" he said.

"I need to be refreshed and well rested to support her through the more difficult months ahead. I haven't had a break myself for over two years now, and I am feeling very run down."

Anyone who has ever looked after someone knows exactly how intelligent he is by caring for the carer.

It's well known that after a good night's sleep, or a vacation, we are far more productive than if we get too obsessed with a job and continue working at half-pace for a longer time.

I have always believed in the adage, "work smart, not hard", when we're overwhelmed with pressure.

Yet people are often too afraid to delegate, or too guilty.

Then they get exhausted, sick, or start making bad decisions.

But it isn't just work or care-giving that needs to be set aside on occasion. We also need space from our primary relationships, and the whole family scene.

With all the emotional demands upon both men and women in the modern relationship, we can become depleted, empty, impatient with the kids, and not much fun not to be around. There are times when the well just runs dry.

I'm an advocate of emotional time-out, or taking a break away from the sleeping, eating and living on top of each other that comes with family life or partnership.

It's useful to take separate holidays every now and again, or even go out regularly on our own. It can help us to appreciate what we have when we return.

I'm also a big advocate of the long-term life break, which I explore in my new book *Sacred & Naked*.

Some call it a sea change, others call it a circuit breaker, others call it a sabbatical, but there are times when we need a semi-permanent holiday from our lives and who we have become.

Often the job we're doing or the city we're living in is wearing us down. Then it's time for extended leave. When my partner and I made our escape from the chaos of pre-Olympics Sydney to Byron Bay we got involved in many new and refreshing activities, met new people, and discovered that a change is as good as a holiday.

But if longer time-out, sabbaticals or leave-without-pay are not possible, then short holidays -- even weekends away -- can make all the difference.

A few years ago, having not planned an Easter holiday, my family and a few friends decided at the last minute to jump in the car and drive. We found a camping site off the beaten track and had a ball.

Like my dishwasher man explained, without maintenance there is corrosion. And that very much applies to the human body, heart and soul.

Ruth Ostrow's book *Sacred & Naked* (Hardie Grant Publishers \$29.95) is available at all bookstores or visit www.ruthostrow.com

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