

Heroic odyssey into the tax man's heart of darkness

By Ruth Ostrow

"WHERE is it?" I scream, alarmed, panicked, flustered. Like a warrior on a journey who has suddenly realised he or she has misplaced a trusted sword.

"Where can it be?" I say tossing clothing up in the air; doonas go flying, boxes are turned over.

"Don't panic," my husband says, standing by, trying to sooth my furrowed brow. He is the warrior's trusted friend.

Mystics believe that all our trials are a symbolic hero's journey into the depths of our souls. We are forced to confront our negative emotions, grief, fear, cowardice, and fight each with a sword -- cutting away that which is putrid, lopping off metaphorical heads.

It's the journey of Odysseus the Greek warrior coming home from the Trojan War, the journey of Luke Skywalker confronting the "dark side".

And for most of us this time of year, it's the journey to confront that most challenging, terrifying beast of all: the 12-headed, pointy-teethed taxation monster. Like a warrior, I have ventured deep into the bowels of blackened Hades -- otherwise known as my spare room.

Bravely, I've attempted to find out in this brutal battle, who is with me and who is against me. Who can I count on to pull me through this fog. Two years of tax returns have to be tackled.

The search for legitimate deductions grows more elusive each year. And now, with heavy heart, I discover that I have been abandoned, deserted by hordes of foot soldiers those taxi receipts, stationery docketts, and chewed-up, screwed-up, faded bits of paper I have relied on to vindicate my position.

They have vanished, gone, absconded to the other side. I now stand confused, breathing heavily, in the spare room, a lone figure on the dark stage, tasting the sourness of defeat.

"It must be here. You can't have lost a whole box of receipts and cheque butts," my husband says.

"But I've looked in every file, every cabinet. The cleaning lady must have thrown them out," I reply.

Ah, the cleaning lady -- the nemesis in every tragic tax story, the unseen evil who is blamed for tossing out important bits of paper the country over.

"She didn't throw out a thing. She's under strict orders by you not to throw out a tissue," he says. "It's you who have misplaced them. Let's try to think of where they may be."

Clear, patient, he is like Athena the divine mentor, who helped Odysseus navigate the treacherous seas.

"I know you. Let's look in the most illogical place possible," he says without irony, as we go foraging at the top of my cupboard.

"Eureka!" I have them. And where else would one put a box of receipts, but into a bigger box underneath lots of clothes and a stack of children's toys at the back of the cupboard? I forgot I'd put them there months ago when I had guests in the spare room.

Next task on the hero's journey is locating any spare receipts from piles around the house. Slowly I pick them out, one by one, from envelopes, from inside old handbags, squished into suitcase pockets, wallets, other handbags, until hours later they are finally retrieved.

Now the real challenge. Having located the foot soldiers, they need to be harnessed. Days will now go by, me on the floor in my dressing gown, exhausted, as I narrow my eyes and try to read, order and add thousands of bits of papers, scrawny, mottled things, some barely legible.

"Sitting cramped like that is not good for your health. It cuts off circulation to your legs. Your eyes are squinting, your back is out," says my husband bringing me a cup of tea.

"Doing tax is never good for one's health," I say.

"Not the way you do it," he quips.

"Two years' of receipts dumped together in one box. Why didn't you sort things out as you went? Why didn't you take the receipts and put them into folders according to their annual quarter each time you put in your GST forms, then you could easily match them up.

"And why don't you have a system for new receipts now?"

Why? Why? Its the eternal question for the hero -- whose journey is about learning along the way.

On his or her travels the hero learns how to survive. Green, raw, untamed before his tribulations, the obstacles he encounters will teach him or her how to fight, how to yield, how to develop the survival strategies needed through life.

And now, I've finally developed mine. This was the last straw.

I'm too old to squint, to crunch over, block circulation, and do to my back and body what I've just done.

As the trial ends I emerge into the light -- all receipts added, all reconciled with the benefit of the hero's wisdom.

No more procrastination. No more leaving things till the last moment, no more messy unfinished business hidden away in boxes -- be it in matters of tax, relationships, or life in general.

As a Jedi knight might put it: "Always confront the monster when he is at your door."

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