

Self-recrimination should be water under the bridge

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS with a friend the other day and he was acting in a strange and irritated manner. After questioning him, he launched into a diatribe of self-recrimination.

Not being a bridge player myself, I couldn't understand the details of what he was saying, but the meaning was clear.

"I am very disappointed in myself," he said. "I've been learning bridge for years now and nothing is happening.

"I mean I can play, but there are people I played with last night, who've only just started, but who are amazing.

"It's like a special light goes on for them. For me, no matter how hard I try, no light comes on. And I keep pushing myself, believe me I do.

"I just feel so rotten about it all. My limitations are taking away some of the pleasure of the game."

As he spoke he was preparing lunch for a group of us who'd come over to his place. He had bought fresh Italian bread rolls and had neatly sliced them in half, pulled all the heavy dough out the centre, and was filling them with all sorts of gourmet accoutrements.

He was slicing tomatoes into transparent slivers, adding a special kind of fetta cheese that had been soaked in olive oil and marinated in garlic, arranging all sorts of meats, three different styles of olives, and including miniature rocket and watercress as garnish.

I watched him in admiration. He is the sort of man who always prepares everything with the flare and dignity of a professional.

Every act is a complete act, nothing slap-dash, nothing hurried, nothing without the perfect combination of perfect things, nothing presented in way that isn't aesthetic.

"Well I bet some of those bridge players would marvel at the way you prepared that lunch," I said with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

"We all have gifts at some things. There would be bridge players who are clumsy or who would weep with frustration every time they have to hammer a nail or carve bread.

"They'd be envious watching how deftly you are making sandwiches now."

He was unconvinced.

"This not a gift. This is just the proper way to make sandwiches," he grunted, finishing the plates with baby lettuce.

"Have you ever watched me make a sandwich?" I asked. I am forever battling the bread, the knife doesn't cut straight, slices go from 1cm at the top to 7cm, the tomatoes are cut in huge, ungainly lumps, and there is food everywhere when

I'm finished. No matter how hard I try to do it properly I make a big mess. All my life I've beaten up on myself for not having the talents my friend takes for granted.

I can play a mean game of chess, have always been intellectually agile at crosswords, Scrabble or any game that requires strategy, but can't assess the difference between my car and a car space, can hardly wrap a present, and can't serve food without regularly miscalculating the space between the pot and the bowl.

How I have longed to be more co-ordinated, more elegant, more organised, more aesthetic.

"It isn't a less significant achievement because YOU can do it," I said.

"It's an art form, all those things you do -- the woodwork, the way you fix things around the house, the neat and elegant co-ordination of things, your choice of clothes.

"Those of us who are spilling out from the seams watch people like you in awe."

Can it be that none of us appreciate the gifts we are given? We all seem to be hankering after things we don't do well.

It is excellent to aspire. But when we start beating up on ourselves for our flaws and the things we are not fantastic at, and don't acknowledge the real skills we do have, it becomes a sad and emotionally unhealthy situation.

I recently met a man who, despite having successfully published 10 books, felt deeply inadequate about his career.

He couldn't praise his own achievements, so busy was he focusing on what still alluded him.

I too have chided myself for the messy state of my life, hair, handbag, kitchen.

But as I mature, I'm learning the truth. The messiness of my life reflects the messiness of my mind -- a mind which is not literal and meticulous, but open, conceptual, without boundaries, a mind which allows me the freedom to think outside of the box and challenge convention.

Meanwhile, it is precisely my friend's literal brain that allows him to achieve perfection, but it may limit his thinking in certain realms.

I will continue to try to make better sandwiches, he will always aim to think in ways that give him a strategic edge.

It's not that we should stop pushing ourselves outside our comfort zones. Rather we need to accept ourselves, for better or worse.

And although it is bleedinly obvious, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of this acknowledgement: no matter how simple and irrelevant and mundane our own talents and gifts seem to us, someone like me is standing out there, marvelling at them.

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