

## **Beddy-byes blues: facing nemeses in the land of Nod**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

I ALWAYS find it difficult to get up in the morning. For me, it feels like I'm being wrenched from a warm womb.

The doona is wrapped around my fragile body as the cold wind blows outside the blackened window, and when the alarm bell rings it feels as though the light of a stethoscope is peering into my soul and some obstetrician is whispering: "Time to come out now."

I often don't want to come out.

I want to stay where it is safe, lost in the sleepy, dreamy land of Nod, carelessly cascading down a waterfall as I did last night, floating high above myself, or even fighting the monsters of my inner world.

But there it is, the brutal alarm clock, truly alarming, followed by a sense of overwhelming panic.

It takes me several minutes to get my head together. Several minutes to talk myself through the fear that I won't get through this challenging day of bills, and deadlines, and chores. Several minutes to tell myself that nothing terrible is going to happen and if it does, I will manage to cope gracefully and with wisdom.

The first step out of bed is always difficult as the doona falls away, a child's first step into the world. I often want to fall back into bed.

But what is it that drives me on?

Mostly, it's the simple act of getting a child's lunchbox neatly arranged -- apple, orange, cream cheese again or should I go for a tuna sandwich?

Cutting carrots, looking for a packet of sultanas. The powerful symbol of care and nurturing carries me through this first hour of rebirth.

After she is on the bus, a coffee, another coffee, before facing the diary of grown-up things. But it gets easier and easier as the day wears on.

I tell this story because I had an interesting experience at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival last week, where I was speaking.

I approached cartoonist Michael Leunig, a beloved former work colleague, to tell him about my morning experiences after hearing him talk.

In his session he spoke about the grand heroism of just getting through the day, the effort it takes to come to terms with the small dramas of everyday life.

His difficult time is the 3am to 4am wake-ups when he is often wrenched from sleep by his fears and sadnesses.

He lies in an existential funk trying to make sense of it all. The ghosts of lost friends, a sense of meaninglessness, invade him during this witchy hour.

He counts the minutes till the sunshine peeps through, finding it heroic to arise from that haunted place towards his soothing 7.30am cuppa.

A woman, on hearing me talking to Leunig, approached me later with her story.

"I open my eyes and think: I can't cope, I'm not going to get through the day," she said. The woman, a successful and exuberant character, has coped well, living through war, surviving many tragedies, and yet she is sodden with apprehension.

"I fear that I've gotten it all wrong," said a photographer listening in.

"It's this sense that I've messed everything up. I need to get up and walk in nature to make myself feel calm again."

Another observer agreed that this same sense of inadequacy plagued him, not in the morning, but late at night.

"It seems to be linked to bed," he offered by way of explanation. So here is a phenomenon much misunderstood: "bed-based fear".

For some people it happens in the morning, for some, like this man and a friend of mine who is an insomniac, it happens late at night.

For others it's the wake-in-fright from sleep that brings on what Leunig calls a sense of morbidity.

I once heard the term "night terror" to describe it, a place of battling our demons, while our heart pounds, as mine does, when the alarm wrenches me from safety.

Perhaps the fear has something to do with lying coffin-like in a dark place.

The act of sleeping or trying to sleep conjures feelings of mortality, loss of control, and vulnerability, as much as waking conjures up the metaphor of birth.

In any case, it was wonderful to hear Leunig bring our "daily heroism" out of the closet, and to discuss these day-to-day trials with such sympathy and honesty.

I've always thought that as a society we deal well with the "Big-S" sufferings: sickness, death, grief, and the major tribulations that befall us.

But we are not taught how to deal with the little sufferings we endure every day, like those that plague us as we lay in our beds or attempt to rise from them.

And while we have circles of friends and therapists to get us over the big hurdles, we don't often talk about, or seek support for the omnipresent and painful smaller ones.

To talk about our "bed-based fear" was healthy, we all felt unburdened.

And to finally start laughing about it -- as we did huddled together sharing our daily heroism -- was even better.

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