

Love that dares speak its name

By Ruth Ostrow

THEY say true love knows no bounds and never was this more apt than in the amazing story I am about to tell. It started several years ago when I hired a personal assistant to help me research my former sex column and Triple M radio program. Kimberly O'Sullivan came with the highest recommendations. She was a qualified archivist with honours in research and a respected journalist.

But it was her personal life that interested me most. She was an icon of the gay community, editor of *Wicked Women*, the lesbian magazine, one of the founders of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras -- indeed, the original dyke-on-bike leading women at the parade.

I realised soon after she had joined me that Kimberly was one of the most colourful and courageous individuals I had met, devoting her life to helping gay people in their quest for tolerance, acceptance and love. Many a day we spent chatting about the trials and tribulations she endured as a sexual libertarian.

Intolerance often cuts both ways and what was marvellous about her was that she was completely open to me and my straight way of life.

On many occasions, I'd experienced the reverse prejudice of being straight in a gay world. At one all-girls nightclub in New York I was asked to leave because the women said they "knew" I was straight from the way I was dressed. At the Sydney Sleaze Ball one year, two women who were in the middle of a conversation with me snubbed me after another gay friend asked how my husband was.

But there was never a hint of judgment from Kimberly, who I discovered was a fighter for equality, not just for gays but for all. She once told me that she was in therapy, searching for self-acceptance, and that she'd realised the degree to which our self-hatred contributed to prejudice towards others.

Anyway, together we made a mean team. We were both committed to fighting intolerance and to helping people find self-acceptance in the volatile world of sexual identity. We would often spend days answering letters from readers and dispensing our chicken-soup philosophies. One day, Kimberly stumbled on a letter that seemed to fascinate her. It was from a biker, a regular Aussie bloke, who had unburdened himself to me about his life. Kimberly kept reading and rereading the letter. She urged me to ring him, forcing me to remind her that I only responded by mail.

"Fine. I'll call him myself," she said, with an odd expression on her face. I thought no more about the incident until, a week later, she announced that she and the biker had met for coffee. "He is a lovely, sensitive man," she said.

Something in her tone made me cock an eyebrow. But it still came as a huge shock to me when she admitted a few weeks later that she'd secretly been dating Bob. More of a surprise when, one afternoon with pink cheeks, she giggled out the details of their first sexual encounter.

"I think I have found my soul mate," she announced to me one day while we sorted the mail. "And what a strange and marvellous irony that he is a man," she

said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"But how do you now see yourself?" I asked, trying to fathom what she would be going through. "Are you now straight?"

She thought long and hard before answering. "I am a lesbian in love with a man," she said. "I am not straight because I'm attracted to women, not men. My soul mate happens to have a penis, but it is what's in his heart that I'm so in love with."

It was now time to come out. She hadn't told Bob about being a lesbian. That was her first hurdle. She shed tears of joy when, on hearing her story, he announced that he was "even more in love" with her than before.

But there were tears of sadness on the way. She had hidden Bob's existence from her lesbian room-mate and friend. Time to come out to her, too.

But a few days after her confession, Kimberly turned up for work with red eyes. That morning, her room-mate had packed up her things and, without warning, announced: "I am not living with someone who sleeps with men."

Though there were female friends who vowed their support, it was by no means unanimous. Around the inner-Sydney suburbs of Newtown, where gay women take refuge against the disapproving eyes of society, Kimberly noticed other old friends whispering and pointing at her. Many had turned frosty. Most refused to believe rumours that a lesbian icon could have so betrayed the faith.

Now she faces the biggest challenge, having publicly outed her love affair in this column. But she announced to me last week that she is marrying Bob in December, so she thought she may as well throw down the gauntlet.

"I have fought for years for sexual honesty and against hypocrisy, believing that this will make the world a more tolerant, compassionate place. I now want the same rights from my friends, in return."

But she says that, whatever the outcome, she has finally developed -- through the experience -- a great acceptance, love and tolerance of herself. And for Kimberly, that is the most valuable thing in the world.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

I enjoyed your article on the afterlife very much. As far as I can see, the issue isn't whether your mother believes in any sort of spiritual universe but whether you do. Perhaps "growth" is really growing apart from our parents.

Ron Cassano, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

I consider myself extremely fortunate, but sometimes feel guilty for having such a good life while so many suffer war and natural disaster. I've had to be quite strict with myself about all this waste of energy. I say, thank your lucky stars, and get on with it woman. You were born with these opportunities for a reason, so get off your backside and use what you have.

Ruth Williams, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

In my late 30s, I have recently become a parent and can only describe it as a

truly spiritual experience. My husband and I feel connected to the earth, to nature, and to all living things and now understand the miracle of birth. Too little is written about how profound this simple and common experience really is.
Y. Coburn, Queens Park, NSW

Dear Ruth,

The great thing about Buddhism is that it is a religion that really promotes a good belly laugh. The Dalai Lama is always chuckling like the proverbial laughing Buddha. Since beginning studies two years ago I've really enjoyed myself. How many religions can claim that?
"Smiling Susan", e-mail

Dear Ruth,

I'm an indigenous Australian. The imagery you used about death was very close to my family's beliefs and customs. When you spoke of "the whispering of trees" and "the presence of a strange black bird" you reminded me of the way I recently evoked such images to comfort my mother during a serious illness.
Barry Cooper, Hughes, ACT

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 04 SEP 1999