

Unreasonably good spirits

By Ruth Ostrow

THE English guy sitting next to me looks like he has just stepped out of a rock concert. Pierced nose, T-shirt torn off at the shoulder, those hideous clumpy shoes that look good only on neo-Nazis.

His arms are folded tightly around his chest and he is tapping his foot impatiently. "I wonder how long we have to wait," he says to me in a rough Pommy accent, the accent of a working-class boy. A lad.

I am more curious as to why he is here. We're not waiting at a soccer game or a rock concert. We're not even at a bar.

We're at the annual Inner Peace Movement's psychic fair in Sydney. And we are queuing up to have our tarot cards read by a buxom woman in black.

The hall is crammed with hopefuls like us who have come to hear about their destinies from the colourful crystal-gazers and soothsayers in tow. There are women wandering around with children clinging to their legs, probably searching for answers as to why they keep procreating. One mother nurses a newborn infant while being given "a message" from her "guardian angel".

There are two large girls eating ice-cream, asking a woman with lots of scarves and a crystal ball if Mr Right is around the corner. And there is my new friend Mark, from Leicester in England -- "Robin Hood country" -- pressed up against my leg.

Mark works in telecommunications. But he has just been told by a psychic resembling a belly dancer that he was a Spanish conquistador in a past life, which seems to have delighted him no end.

"Why are you here?" I ask in wonderment. He looks at me as if I am the mad one. "I'm here to make sense of the future and have some control over things," he says. "Why are you here?"

I'd like to tell Mark I'm here to write a story. That I'd never let myself be seduced by such silliness if not for my work. But I'd be lying.

The sad truth is, I'm one of the estimated 500,000 rational Australians who are said to frequent psychics and their various paranormal fairs and expos held around the country each year.

Like most women I know, I have an embarrassing psychic habit, endlessly scouring horoscopes in schlocky magazines and throwing money at soothsayers. In my younger days, it was my quest for love that drove me to it. Always seeking comic reassurance that I would soon be loved in the way that Mills & Boon had promised.

Nowadays it is something far more insidious that draws me in. A feeling of things not being right.

One psychic woman I went to had the answer. "Do you feel anxious and fearful?" she asked, contorting her face in agony. "Yes, yes, yes, I do. I do feel those

things."

"Are you overwhelmed with a profound omnipresent sadness?" "Yes, yes ... omnipresent sadness ... for sure!"

"It is because you were a virgin in your past life." "Oh God, no ... No!"

"And you were tossed into a volcano in Hawaii to appease the angry gods." As if the virgin part wasn't horrific enough!

Not that I've never had my psychic socks knocked off. During a recent ABC documentary I was involved in, a tarot reader was hired to tell my future. At one point she stopped talking aloud and started whispering into my ear about things so personal and accurate, I was caught on camera visibly shaking in shock.

Anyway, back to the psychic fair, and our tarot-card lady has decided to wander off and eat a banana. Pommy Mark looks like he's about to do what disappointed soccer fans do, so I move away just in case.

Kare Schubach, the fair organiser and a nurse, comes to tell me that the Inner Peace Movement teaches people about their own intuition. "We all have 40 to 90 psychic experiences each day. It's just that we don't know how to recognise them," she says.

I tell her a recent one of mine. On pondering what to get my husband for his birthday, the word briefcase popped into my head. Knowing he had a perfectly good briefcase already, I ignored the message. But it was so persistent, I found myself at David Jones buying one.

That night my husband came home in an awful mood. "My bloody briefcase! It got caught in the car door and the handle's ripped off. All my papers went flying. It's ruined," he huffed as my cheeks turned pink.

"Spirit guides," nods Kare, without missing a beat. "They talk to us all."

"But why are they so concerned with my husband's briefcase when there are people dying in Turkey? How have spirit guides got the time to hover around telling people about the minutiae of their boring lives?"

The question hangs in the air. Part of the great cosmic unfathomable. In the distance, the mumbles of soothsayers grow louder as the hall fills with more hopefuls pushing prams and munching chips, all searching for the sacred in the mundane.

I notice that Pommy Mark has finally caught the tarot lady, who has finished her banana. As she talks, he is smiling. It's the happy smile of someone who's found a little bit of magic in the monotonous slog that makes up his daily life.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

As your cousin, I read your articles with pride. But as a rabbi I was disappointed in your column (August 28), not because you are questioning your own spirituality but because you implied the things you seek are not there in your own religion. Judaism offers the same emphasis on compassion and kindness that Buddhism does. The laws between man and man are just as important as those between man and God. I agree some Jews and Christians ignore their obligation

to their fellow man while "praying" to God. But if there is a flaw, it is in how people practise Judaism, not in the religion itself. There is an inherent problem in the spiritual simplicity your generation seeks. Without the guidance of a god, one human being's version of a kind, compassionate act may not be another's, as in the case of euthanasia. Please think about it.

Rabbi Abraham Gutnick, Bondi, NSW

Dear Ruth,

Buddhism affronts logic. If being a bad human can lead to your reincarnation as an insect, then your one hope of reaching enlightenment is to be a good insect. Doesn't that sound infantile to you?

Joseph Taylor, Buronga, Victoria

Dear Ruth,

Your last two columns have reflected a common theme: tolerance. Kimberly's "coming out" is a particularly beautiful and poignant story. Regrettably, seekers of the truth find hostility and opposition from the most surprising quarters. That is why both Micah (7:6) and Matthew (10:36) said in similar words: "A man's enemies are the members of his own household." Take courage both of you. You'll need it.

Peter Hoban, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

Your column (September 4) showed it is possible to love someone no matter what their sexuality. How powerful, how beautiful to love someone for every aspect of their being.

Evelyn Tay, e-mail

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 18 SEP 1999