

Of mice, and men with poison

By Ruth Ostrow

"COME sit over here and talk to me," I say, sitting on the floor, smiling sweetly. I feel so stupid, I'm cringing inside. "Please don't be afraid. I have something very important to tell you," I say in a deep and sincere voice. "Something that could affect your life.

"If you don't leave soon you will be killed. Murdered," I say, looking earnest, heartbroken, genuinely remorseful.

But I'm clearly getting nowhere. The mouse sniffs at me, and sensing danger runs off. It isn't interested in my words of wisdom or my moral dilemma.

We are in the midst of a mouse plague. There is rodent poo everywhere. Country mice plagues make city invasions seem laughable. But as a Buddhist neophyte I am forbidden from killing any living creature.

It is the Buddhist way, to respect all things. To understand and appreciate life from other creatures' perspectives. The mice are not invading our space, rather we have made a home in the middle of theirs. And we have brought in lovely, tasty food morsels to fill their tummies. In other words, they are doing nothing wrong. They certainly don't deserve to die.

"Talk to them," says one of my teachers. "Find the head mouse and explain to him what is going on for you. Ask nicely if the family will leave," he says without a twitch of irony, without a hint of amusement.

"You will be amazed at what happens." Yes, I think to myself, very amazed.

"It really does work," a Buddhist friend reassures me, having just returned from a five-day meditation intensive. "There were mice in the kitchen and each day the students would ask them to go away to avoid harm. In the end, most of them left. Truly."

Truly? I go home and ring the exterminator. "Is there a way of getting rid of them without killing them?" I ask.

"No. Here are your options. You can give them poison. You can kill them in a trap that snaps down over their spines. Or you can use a sticky pad that they get stuck on. Then you throw them to the wild cats."

I feel ill. I can't do it. It isn't because I'm afraid of bad karma. I can see they move in families. There are little ones, mothers, fathers. Why should one species on the planet be superior to others? I rationalise as I sweep the little mouse poos from my kitchen bench, gagging and trying not to vomit.

"Perhaps we can live together," I say to my husband, who breaks into laughter and starts singing songs of peace from the 1960s, waving his arms over his head like some blissed-out hippie. "Get real. They multiply. They carry disease."

"But they are bush mice. It isn't like they're in garbage cans, or out on the pavement like in town. They've been in nature," I plead as he scoffs and huffs.

"I'm calling the exterminator if you don't," he says, showing me a packet of lollies my daughter had in her lunch box that had obviously been mauled by mice. "She could have eaten these and they are riddled with germs," he says.

Which is why I'm sitting on the floor trying to appeal to the good sense of a creature whose brain is clearly bigger than my own. To no avail. I decide to make a general announcement.

"Okay, guys. Here is the news. Unless you're out of here by 7am, my husband is going to exterminate you. You have precisely one night to evacuate. Do you hear me? Get out for your own good. Save your children," I say, feeling like an imperialist invader, and wondering whether mice understand big words like "exterminate" and "evacuate".

I go to bed that night feeling very unsettled. One Buddhist teacher told me that in the case of mosquitos or creatures that attack you, you have the right to defend yourself. As long as you speak to the creature and tell him to leave you alone, there comes a point where it is his karmic problem if he doesn't listen.

But another teacher told me the parable of the man who let a starving tiger bite off his arm, so the beast could live. This story symbolises the essence of compassion.

By morning the dilemma is no longer mine. My husband has brought poison pellets and put them along the kitchen shelves and in corners.

"You won't be able to tolerate the snap of the traps. This will be easier for you," he says, and I nod sadly. But that night I'm tormented by squeaks and squeals. I feel horrible. Someone told me that poison corrodes the stomach and the mice die an agonising death.

"You're imagining it all," says my husband, happily watching TV as I wrestle with whether I am culpable of murder if someone else pulls the trigger. Is the person who lets evil happen any less evil than the perpetrator? Possibly more, in the case of the average person who allows it because of their indifference and complacency.

By day two there are definitely fewer mice. Which, I admit, brings my appetite back. For days the poo on the benches had put me off my food.

That night I cook us a wonderful meal on a clean bench. I cut shallots, vegetables, beans, add lentils and make a fabulous Indian dish, fragrant and spicy. Exotic yet subtle. The smells are exquisite. It takes me ages.

Just when it's ready to be served, I notice something very green in the stew. It isn't a bean. It's too bright. I pull it out. It is a pellet of poison. It has obviously been blown off the shelf by the wind and right into my cooking pot.

My husband, daughter and I glare into the pot, wondering how much damage one melted poison pellet can do to three people, as hunger triumphs over logic.

But in the end, salivating and sad, we all file into the garden to bury the stew deep beneath the earth.

Back inside I immediately put on gloves and throw all the poison pellets into the bin. "Enough!" I say to my husband.

"Enough of what?" he asks, scratching his head.

I don't know. I don't know what that karmic message was about. Or what the answer is to our nauseating mice plague. I can't solve the vexing, philosophical issue of killing in self-defence. But I do know one thing. When we poison nature we poison ourselves.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 01 JUL 2000