

Set aside a sacred space of love

By Ruth Ostrow

RECENTLY, I received a most magical letter. It was from a man called John Hornsey and it filled me with a profound longing for my own sacred space. A space created out of beauty and imagination, an oasis in a busy, mundane, domestic existence.

Of his garden, he writes: "Dear Ruth, this morning I planted a tree for you, a foambark. It is above a dam and shaded by a clump of trees planted by my TAFE adult literature class six years ago. To the right is a eucalypt planted 15 years ago by my son ... all these trees are part of a rainforest I began over a decade ago.

"Many of the trees commemorate events. There are birthing trees (the placenta seems to be an excellent source of trace elements!); trees set over the ashes of deceased friends and bones of former pets. Trees to celebrate anniversaries. Every year a tree for grand-daughter Lily on her birthday; a clump of citrus planted by my daughter and her friends on their 30th birthdays; and more trees in memory of visitors, relatives, friends and people such as yourself whom I have never met in the flesh yet seem to know and like.

"Here I have put down deep roots and found fulfilment and expression." Hornsey, who was awarded first prize in the rainforest section of the Gold Coast City Garden Competition, says of his labour of love: "A native rainforest garden doesn't have to be large in scale. In fact much of it would fit comfortably in a suburban backyard."

The point that struck such a chord wasn't just the beauty of his sentiment in planting a tree for me, but the idea of someone creating a hallowed garden, a place of honouring memories happy and sad, a veritable photo album in the earth where one can enter and feel part of the cycle of life and death, and connect with powers beyond oneself.

Which, I think, is really important for the soul. So often in the bog of our daily routines, with children and partners running around, phones ringing and televisions blaring, there isn't anywhere to go to pray, worship, grieve or simply unwind into a more beautiful, transcendental state of mind from which to appreciate life.

Ironically, The Australian's religious affairs editor, Father James Murray, told me in a recent interview that, like Hornsey, many people are now finding the divine closer to home.

He says one survey showed the majority of people questioned admitted to praying regularly, however many of these were not attracted to structured prayers or traditional places of worship like churches anymore, seeking their own revered spaces and meditations.

Meanwhile many of my girlfriends, who have aligned themselves with the post-feminist, goddess movement, have followed the trend to set up altars in their homes.

An altar, often a simple table covered in fabric, is a small space that can be created in even the tiniest one-bedroom apartment, but it is a space nonetheless that is imbued with powerful energy and creates a calm, altered state of mind, when one is sitting in front of it.

On my altar, I have collected things that are special to me. A ring that was my late grandmother's, a necklace belonging to my late father which is charged with his energy, a four-leaf clover I found when I was a child, and other magical items from childhood and from nature.

I believe that whenever you put a collection of meaningful objects together and spark memories, it is a form of honouring.

Others have their altars in the garden, surrounded by natural things, usually wildflowers, stones and feathers. Candles and incense are often burned as a form of purification during full-moon rituals or daily meditations, and the women will often talk to the nature spirits, or devas, the way shamanic practitioners always have.

Which reminds me of another beautiful letter I got a couple of weeks ago to announce the opening of a communal sacred space in nature -- the Infants' Butterfly Garden, instigated by a woman called Stephanie Rowett in honour of children who have died.

The garden is associated with the Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth but is in a specially created section. Rowett, project manager on this collaborative project, says that during her years of work with the cemetery, many parents had confided in her that they had nowhere appropriate to grieve their lost babies and children.

The austere and dark tombstones of traditional cemeteries left them feeling sad, confused and heavy-hearted.

"I realised that there needed to be an uplifting place of beauty to honour these young souls. A space to reflect on the spirit of the child, to reflect what children are more about.

"The Infants' Butterfly Garden is filled with flowers and gentle areas from which to contemplate the cycles of life. There is a running stream, secret pathways and a meadow. It's full of colour, with sculptures like a multi-breasted woman, designed to soothe and heal. Souls are represented by riverstones with children's names engraved."

She has had quite a response already. "It has changed the whole way we see cemeteries. We can make them sacred spaces of death, joyful and beautiful areas that can express the beauty of the transition."

As well as public places, Rowett agrees we should all be looking to create sacred islands for ourselves in our private gardens or homes: "A space to perform rituals for every important passage of our lives, from the most sad to the most beautiful."

Certain people I know have created a sacred room for the honouring of their marriages and relationships. Modern practitioners of the ancient art of Tantra believe in setting up a space in the home imbued with loveliness, incense and gorgeous fabrics, that can be used as a spiritual and erotic retreat from domesticity and the children.

Whether personal or communal, inside or out, magical things do start to happen when you set aside a sacred space of love. You can get in touch with your unconscious energy, you can often be flooded with ideas, you can raise sexual energy, forge a spiritual connection.

But if all of this sounds too way-out, any space of contemplation will do -- an old rocking chair, a shed or a patch of earth by the sea. Because at the end of the day everyone needs a place for solitude, to rest and revitalise the weary soul. A space to simply be.

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