

## Homecomings in present tense

By Ruth Ostrow

"BE here now. The past does not exist. The future will take care of itself," says the guru on my video screen. He is one of the new breed of holy men packaged up by mass media to appeal to the Western mind.

I am thinking of his big face, squished tightly into frame, speaking small, but powerful words, as I tremble and pack and get ready to face one of the major trials of the past year: Going Home.

It's Christmas time already. Another year has passed since I made the last pilgrimage and I have promised my mother and family that I'd be home for a visit. But as I collect the airline tickets from my desk, and zip up the bags, I feel uneasy.

It's not that I don't miss my family dreadfully. I do. I want to see them, be with them, and share life's many pains and glories with them. That we are separated is one of the greatest sadnesses of my life. But I find it so much easier when they come to me. One at a time.

It is the same for so many of us at this time of year. Going home is difficult because it's so laden with who we used to be, how we used to be. Before we changed into who we now are.

When we are together with our family en masse it is so hard to shake off collective judgments and expectations from the past that are now redundant. Traversing the old streets where we went to school, visiting certain suburbs, only makes matters worse. It's impossible to be yourself while you're having imaginary conversations with ghosts.

"The past is no longer relevant. If we carry it into the present, we lose the moment," the guru tells the gaping disciples at his feet. Which is fine on an ashram, but how many of them can put his words into practice when they come face to face with life's greatest challenge: The Family?

A girlfriend of mine, a practising healer and teacher, went home to her parents last Christmas. She had been living in another city for the past 15 years and in that time had married, raised a boy who was now five, and gotten divorced. She had avoided returning to her home town, always preferring to see her parents on her own turf, until last year when circumstances forced her to make the pilgrimage.

My girlfriend's mother put her up in her old bedroom with the pink lambs on the walls. She slept in her old single bed with the fluffy, pink doona, while her son slept on a mattress on the floor.

During the night mother was awakened by the sound of running water, and lots of whispering. She came in to the laundry to find her daughter - my girlfriend - standing there, gripping sheets while her little son was gripping her leg.

"Wet the bed," my friend looked guilty at her mother.

"He'll grow out of it," said the mother.

"No mum," said my friend, blushing. "It was me!"

"I hadn't wet the bed in 35 years. Suddenly back in that old room, I had regressed to age four and was back in old patterns," she said to me over coffee, as I relayed my own stories of going home.

The funniest was a few years ago. Although I was successfully running a home and a busy career, to my family I was still Ruthie with all the connotations that implied.

"Don't put the kettle on without water in, you'll burn the house down," my grandmother told me. "Be careful slamming the door, you'll shut your fingers in," she had said while I closed the door to her bedroom. "Don't drop the dishes," an aunt had warned as I cleaned the table. "Don't spill juice on yourself," said my mother, putting a napkin under my orange juice.

It was on that visit that I ended up on crutches.

While emptying the dishwasher, I had dropped a glass on my foot which promptly broke and sliced into the tendon of my big toe. It is true that we become what people expect us to be.

But it isn't just going home that causes disruptions to the fragile identities we have forged. It's inviting home over.

A friend's family visited over Easter, and he said it was a veritable Woody Allen film as sisters started with the: "You were always ..." and his brother got into the: "You were never very good at ..."

"Be Here Now!" I repeat the mantra in the cab ride from the airport, clutching my husband and child to remind myself of who I now am as we pass streets of old boyfriends, former girlfriends, work colleagues and family members now gone. As tears, fears and love flood my heart, I suddenly notice myself tearing at the side of my fingernails, something I did as a child.

"Stop it," I hear mum saying as the skin starts to hurt.

"My God, I'm regressing already," I tell my husband.

"Which is the whole problem," he says dropping his bombshell. "When you are around your family, you regress before they start treating you as anything. You make a funny little voice. You bow your head. You look sulky and vulnerable," he smiles. "Not the woman I know.

"And then you wonder why they treat you like the girl you were back then.

"It's you. You give your power away before they even open their mouths."

And the penny starts to drop. We are the ones who drag ourselves back to the past.

Being here now is not about expecting our families to see the new us - rather just being the new us, over and over and over until there is no room for any other interpretation. Believing it of ourselves. Not falling back into old patterns and blaming those we love.

But more importantly it's about us seeing them as new too. Not living in our own preconceived ideas of who our mothers, fathers, friends or siblings are, or were in the past. Letting go of our own typecasting and judgments so that they too can come out of the cage.

As I walk up the driveway to my home, I'm filled with an open heart. And I know that if I can manage to stay in the present, this will be a true homecoming - in every sense of the word.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 23 DEC 2000