

If it's in the box, I'm over it

By Ruth Ostrow

"LET'S tell each other stories," I say to my little girl as we sit in the bath having bonding time. Storytelling is something I encourage to foster her imagination. "Okay, mummy," she says. "I am a lovely girl called Sally. I come from a family of princesses. We are all fat people."

"Mmmm," I say encouragingly.

"I don't have a mummy or sisters. They all got breast cancer and died," she says matter-of-factly, as I clutch my heart in horror.

"Where did you hear such things?" I ask, trying to play down my alarm. "On the TV. The TV said if you are fat you get breast cancer and die," she said cheerfully, washing her little body with soap. "Look at my tummy. It's so fat. Will I get cancer?"

"God forbid," I spit, turning red with rage. It's a battle I seem unable to win. Me in one corner, trying to encourage stories about fairies, goblins and magical worlds to feed her soul. The television in the other corner, spewing out inappropriate content, savage, too real, brutalising, in the other. Even during children's time, the stations run pointers to news reports like the one she must have caught, that are unhealthy for a child's mind.

I've moved our family to the top of a mountain to get away from too much reality. Surrounded by acres of gardens, I have indulged myself and my daughter in stories about mythical creatures, angels and love.

I so desperately want her to have what my grandfather gave me - a youth filled with dragons, castles and princesses. It was the 1960s and children were allowed to be children, fantasising, using our imaginations, playing inside trees that were really secret caves. Berries could be squashed to make magic juice, fog was a warning that dragons were coming.

And yet at barely six years of age, my child is already confronting statistics linking body weight to fatal disease. My heart is breaking.

It is breaking for myself, too. Creativity dies in the face of TV. Like the sirens in the Greek epic The Odyssey, who would lure men to their deaths by crooning in a sexy voice, TV beckons each night: "Just switch me on for 10 minutes while you're eating dinner. You need to know what's going on in the world ..."

And we gag on our meal, trying to get food down contracted throats, as we watch reports on children being murdered, women raped, bodies being dragged from earthquake sites or war zones while mothers weep - all the while trying to keep our daughter out of the room.

Then we're left riddled with such fear, pain and anxiety that there's nothing else to do but stay on to watch the panacea of schlock anti-depressants on offer, US sitcoms, old British sitcoms, lifestyle programs that tell you how to make a lolly dispenser.

Not to mention the 8.30pm movie, which will either terrify you into forgetting the news with alien abductions and vile murders or substitute for the intimate sex life you are not having - probably on account of too much TV.

The nullifying effect television has on the human heart and soul is so cliched I feel embarrassed writing about it. But in trying to nurture a young soul, I'm slowly realising the true cost of living inside the box.

When I picked up my guitar recently and tried to play a song to get the family to sing as they may have in my grandfather's day, I was greeted with a gigantic "shooosh" by husband and child, who were busily ensconced in the cartoon video Hercules. Which would have been fine had they not watched the whole thing three times already, over the weekend.

"You're retarded," I muttered to my husband, walking towards the TV to switch it off. But suddenly it winked its brilliant, colourful eye at me and I was stuck there too, like an insect on a pin, unable to drag myself away from the escapist grandeur of Hades's underworld.

So I've finally taken a stand. The electronic babysitter is going off for a week. I know the argument that says TV is educational for children. That it opens us up to reality. But it is someone else's reality happening miles away, not the reality of our lives, at that moment, with each other in that intimate, loving, perfect second of existence. A tender moment to be cherished for it will never come again.

As for education, I want my child to learn this: In occupying our souls, TV distracts us from the true preciousness of what we have in front of us, the most creative, colourful, emotionally charged and rich drama of all - the present.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 03 MAR 2001