

Hello, you must be going

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was one of those awkward situations. We had invited guests over for the afternoon. My fantasy was a lovely time spent talking, laughing, swimming and eating.

My fantasy was that after two, maybe three, hours they would yawn, stretch their arms and say: "Mmmm, think we'd better be off." At which point my husband and I would thank them so much for coming, wave goodbye and get on with preparing the evening meal, bathing our little one and curling up with a schlock video.

But that was wishful thinking. As expected, they did stand up and stretch their arms. They did say: "We'd better leave." They even shuffled a few personal possessions about as we nodded in approval at their imminent departure. But nothing happened. Somehow, despite all the standing and shuffling and nodding, they got themselves into a new discussion about leaving: what they had to do that night, which reminded them of a story ... and they sat down again, comfortably grinding their bums into our cushions.

I glanced at my husband, who glanced back in terror. For there's nothing as scary as being held hostage in your own home by visitors who won't leave. I opened my eyes at him to denote: "Find an escape hatch."

"We also have lots of things to do this evening," he finally hinted, listing a few. Our guests nodded and said with great gusto: "Well, we'd better leave you then" - and proceeded to stay. And stay.

"Breathe deeply, these are your dear friends," I kept telling myself as my body language went into repulse mode - arms folded, eyes averted, head swivelled behind me like a scene from *The Exorcist*. To no avail.

Finally, in desperation, we ended up in the car, driving around the block for 10 minutes ("Oh God! We forgot Uncle Ben's farewell party!") to get rid of them.

For any of my friends who may think this is about them, rest assured, it probably is - or was - at some stage or another. Because it was us, too. We've overstayed our welcome. Recently we travelled for two hours to see friends and, as the sky darkened, we couldn't vibe in to whether we were supposed to leave or stay.

We accepted their dinner invitation because we didn't want to offend. In retrospect, they simply didn't know how to get rid of us given we had driven all that way, and when we suggested we leave, they looked even more awkward. Some people just don't like to be rude.

So what are the signs that the party is over and what is etiquette in terms of getting rid of guests?

How do we, ourselves, know when we've pushed limits too far - not just during home visits but on the phone, during business meetings, when dining out or simply chatting in the street?

The fact is, we don't. And the only policy, according to a busy friend who entertains a lot, is honesty. "I always declare my hand up-front. I say at the onset: 'We're not psychic. Tell us when to leave.' Or conversely: 'We're tired tonight, so we'll be kicking you out in about two hours,' which is really offensive to some people."

But he says that by encouraging and setting clear boundaries, he's being authentic. "Honesty can be quite humorous and it paves the way for a glance at the watch without making people feel they've overstayed their welcome. Frankly, people prefer the surprise at the beginning to the humiliation of perceived rejection."

Which opens up a deeper, broader issue: shouldn't we always be speaking authentically with friends? There is so much bullshit uttered in the name of friendship.

"We must have coffee some time" is the worst because people who really want to have coffee with you simply do. I hate the "kiss, kiss" in the street. I hate all the lies we tell friends in order to get out of a commitment.

Most of all I hate the stuff that comes out of neglect, like: "Sorry I haven't rung for sooo long, but we do have a special connection!" To which I recently replied: "No, we don't. We're just acquaintances. So either put in more effort or call a spade a spade," as my girlfriend fell backwards.

But it comes back to my original point: Speaking our truth can help others speak theirs. When truth is allowed to be spoken, no one feels taken advantage of, rejected, humiliated. No one is forced to be psychic. Best no one loses control of their own home.

Authentic is my new favourite buzz word. I say it over and over as we drive around in circles praying that our dear guests have finally gone.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 31 MAR 2001