

Lessons late in the learning

By RUTH OSTROW

THE letter arrived on my desk when I was still living in Sydney a few years ago. It was from a woman calling herself Shivam Rachana. She said she liked my articles and wanted to tell me about the work she'd been doing in the field of spiritual midwifery.

The letter was not different from the regular mail I get each week from people telling me about their work, beliefs or practices.

It began with a little explanation of spiritual midwifery - where women are reclaiming birth away from doctors and finding more natural ways of bringing beings into the world - and went on to talk about the letter's author.

Which is where I went into shock. "Ruth you may remember me as Miss O. I was your Grade 1 teacher in Melbourne over 30 years ago."

The fact was I did remember her. Clearly. As if it were yesterday. She was an extraordinary young woman, tall, beautiful with long, blonde hair. In a tiny school where the children were mainly from European immigrant stock and if you made 1.5m you were a giant, fair Miss O stood out like a rose among the cauliflowers. I remember my father - who was never very fond of school activities - insisting on attending every parent-teacher meeting.

I was in love with her too. She was sweet. She had luminous eyes. She taught me the ABC for which I am eternally grateful.

So when I got the letter I wanted to write back immediately. To inquire of the life journey that took her from pre-school teacher in a little Melbourne school, to internationally acclaimed healer and spiritualist. I wanted to ask her what she thought of my grammar. I wanted to ask her so many things, I lost the letter.

But deep down I knew why I'd misplaced it. I've never been able to handle the past. I find it a haunting cloud. Though I have been invited to each of my school reunions, I can't seem to find the strength to go. To look back through a window that holds such faded, old images. To look into faces that don't belong in the present. Like stepping into an episode of Star Trek and being beamed into a strange reality that only exists in another dimension.

Therapists call rejection of the past "fear". Zen Buddhists call it "enlightenment". Somewhere between the two lies the truth.

Anyway, letter lost, problem solved. On with my life I went. But you can't cheat fate. A couple of weeks ago, an email arrived from a woman called Suzanne promoting a women's desert trek.

I don't know why I phoned her because I never respond personally to work emails, but Suzanne told me that a woman called Rachana was leading the trek and she would be in Byron Bay this week talking about her latest book *Lotus Birth* (Greenwood Press).

The time had come to greet the past. I drove gingerly to the book launch marvelling at the serendipity of life. With me was my daughter; now in Grade 1. Exactly the age I was when Miss O taught me.

Miss O was not the tall woman I remembered. But she was still luminous. "We should keep the placenta after birth, it is there to nourish our child," she was saying, referring to the concept of Lotus birth.

"By cutting this spiritual cord at birth, we are interfering with nature's plans. Our children come into the world disorientated, confused, full of fight-or-flight hormones rather than the gentle hormone of love, oxytocin, that the placenta feeds us with until it's ready to come away naturally."

I watched her for a long time, before finding the courage to go to her.

"Ruth Ostrow ... I recognise you!" she said, as tears filled our eyes and two souls reconnected.

As I reached my arms around her, I remembered myself then. The past came flooding back. Wave after wave of remembrance of things cut away. Beautiful things, valuable things, memories like dried roses - a potpourri of sadness and sweetness.

The nourishing placenta I had cut away to avoid pain.

In her embrace, I saw my dad's face, my old homes, my nanna, all gone. Too many tears. Too many lost things. And yet they are the love that sustains my soul now. The found things.

Our life teachers come in many forms. And here was another lesson. The past is our present. It forms the foundation of our truth. There are no faded images or long-gone realities. We are who we are, because of who we were. Easier to cut off an arm than to disown the past.

Miss O had come back to teach me this.

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