

Leave it to the soul creator

By Ruth Ostrow

I WATCHED a drama on television the other night that made a huge impact on me. It was only a silly, sci-fi thriller but the message was extremely powerful. The central character was a young man from a wealthy family, who was behaving very badly.

As the program progressed, the man's behaviour became more and more sadistic and self-aggrandising, to the horror of his parents, business partners and friends, who walked around talking among themselves that Bobby used to be so sweet, so nice.

Eventually he murdered his father, who was standing in his way of promotion, then a host of other people. Which is the basic plot of many whodunits. Good son gone bad, driven mad by wild ambition.

But this show had a twist. We cut to an earlier scene of a car accident. The good son is lying dead by the side of the road, mother sobbing, father saying to the doctor: "Freeze him."

As the unlikely plot would have it, the boy is put in a cryogenic chamber for a few days, until the wealthy father can purchase some experimental, life-restoring drug.

We then see the boy being brought back to life. But a close-up of his eyes shows there is something very wrong. There is a deadness. A sort of empty stare that the camera keeps homing in on through each act of cruelty.

The final scene is the mother sobbing to the doctor. "His soul must have left when he died, and not come back. The body is there but the boy I love is gone. He is heartless, soulless," she cries, determined to terminate the physical body of her son before he commits more atrocities.

Being a sci-fi freak, I've seen many similar programs but something stayed with me from this episode because this week I was also watching part of a documentary on cloning, and one of the scientists was saying: "Man has become God!"

(Someone forgot to tell him that God created out of love and compassion, not greed and expediency.)

The truth is we don't know what we are creating when we mess with DNA, with cryogenics, with powerful life-creating forces. We are in a realm that is beyond our comprehension and, as the sci-fi show pointed out, we're overlooking the human soul in all of this.

I remember studying science at school with a couple of really funky American teachers who, despite their impeccable science backgrounds, didn't adhere to the belief that the brain was master of our bodies. We had some pretty profound conversations over lunch about the very real possibility of a soul driving the engine that comprised our brain.

Which forms the basis of all religious beliefs. In fundamentalist religions, the soul is an intelligent force, part of God. In many Eastern healing systems like Chi Kung, reiki and yoga, it is simply an energy source that batteries us, but it emanates from the deep wisdom of the natural world, from whence we came and will return.

At any rate, if there is something mysterious at the engine, then scientists can't blithely presume that man can create it.

Nor can they arrogantly ignore its significance.

As a former psychology student, I'm not saying that there isn't good cause to question the existence of a soul. It is well known that if a certain part of the cerebral cortex is damaged, then people lose the capacity to love, to empathise with others, in short they change dramatically.

And where is our higher self when there is dementia or memory loss? Or during the violent reactions that can occur when certain hormones and chemicals in the body are stimulated or suppressed?

But spiritualists would argue that such facts don't negate the existence of a soul and that some things happen for a greater good. Or as one deeply religious friend puts it: "A broken CD player doesn't mean there isn't still exquisite music on the disc."

Of course all this is conjecture. But even the brilliant scientist Albert Einstein believed in God, which presupposes the existence of a soul.

In any case, I do often ponder the inherent wisdom of messing with the natural world. We seem to forget that the cycles of life and death are natural. We panic, mourn and try so desperately to eradicate any signs of our mortality, but at what cost, and how far is too far when it comes to progress?

We are already being punished by nature for feeding cows to cows - mad cow disease. What are we unleashing through genetic engineering and cloning? And ultimately, is there any soul in it, or will these designer-made beings end up like the cryogenic superstar of my sci-fi thriller - the walking dead?

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