

A miracle in the mundane

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S late. Ten o'clock, to be exact, on a Sunday night. I had planned a beautiful evening, ringing a few friends, curling up with a good book. The sorts of nurturing things we do on Sunday night before starting again with the frenetic screechings of the week ahead.

The best-laid plans o' mice and men. I am sitting here instead, crouched in a corner, my child in front of me, picking nits out of her hair.

The school wrote to parents about an outbreak. "My child hasn't got lice," I protested all weekend. But decided to have a peek before putting her to bed, only to discover an alarming world of horror crawling about.

After washing her scalp for an hour with a lethal substance, I now must sit and pick - one by one - the hideous carcasses and their eggs out of her long, long, ever-so-long hair.

It is an excruciating task. Nauseating. Each time I find a creature, I moan, shudder. "It's OK, mummy, I'm not scared," a little voice pops out from in front of the mop I'm scouring so intently.

I get a shock, suddenly awakened from my obsessive task. "Oh darling. I'm so sorry. Are you all right, little one?"

"Yes, I am. But it frightens me when you make those noises," she says.

I breathe out with a long sigh. I've been so concerned with the killing of the nits that I've neglected the little human being who has been dragged from room to room, stripped, scrubbed, squealed at and roughed about.

And over the next long hour we have a lovely conversation, she with her back to me, head bent forward in great discomfort, me craning over her with squinting eyes and a comb. She tells me about things she's never expressed before. Her fears, her friendships, her view of the world.

Trapped here, having to spend hours at the job, I'm not able to just dismiss her childish dramas, listening intently instead to who did what to whom and somehow getting to know her soul in the process and the workings of her tiny mind, as the nits fill the tissue and my head fills with her.

And it really occurs to me that we spend so much of our time avoiding the mundane tasks of life, or resenting them, when by just surrendering to the experience we can create something very sacred. Something precious, enriching, particularly when we are doing them with people close.

There is a real honouring in these mundane acts because chores slow us down. Stop us. Ground us in reality.

And they force us to be truly present for those we are doing them for and with. Not just a little bit present, while rushing between appointments, or rushing to

something else - or, as social commentator Hugh Mackay recently termed in a column, indulging in the clever form of escapism called "busyness", where we insulate ourselves from personal relationships by busily doing too many things. When we slow down, we can offer our loved ones and friends the gift of time, and the gift of true listening.

With our minds relaxed, and our bodies surrendered, as they are during repetitive activities like pruning the garden, washing dishes, hanging out washing, we can really hear what is being said, not what we think is being said. And in our calm, receptive state we can digest content without the animated verbal sparring of coffee-shop talk where we wait for cues to get our own stories out.

In fact, trapped in the kitchen, hands in sink, or tea-towel in hand, I've heard some of the most amazing confessions and stories from friends and family - at least they sound amazing in contrast to the monotonous task at hand. At any rate, they bring everyone closer as a result.

Cooking, too, with intimates and peeling vegetables or chopping things, can be fertile ground for bonding. And even the nastiest chore - being the family taxi driver - can be transformed into useful time to help children dredge up stuff they need to express.

Certainly being a captive audience is the deepest form of honouring we can offer children. So many adults I know felt loved as children only because they were their parents' children, not because of the individuals they were. And having a parent listen fully - even just because we are picking out nits or peeling vegies - is great validation for a child.

I believe that if we mindfully come to our mundane chores with a determination to enjoy the opportunity and deepen our relationships rather than wishing we were anywhere else, then we'll get far more than a handful of dead nits from the experience.

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