

Martyrdom who needs it?

By Ruth Ostrow

We function better when we have time for ourselves

A FRIEND recently complained to a group of us about her children. "They want so much of me. They're always in front of me, asking, crying, needing. I was with my little girl all day, then a girlfriend came over and was happy to put her to bed. 'No, I want mummy to put me to bed,' was what she said and then began crying for me.

"I could have screamed. I just felt so angry at her. Why can't she let someone else put her to bed? Why does she want my attention every second of every moment?

"Then there are the other two who call every time I get on the phone, and my partner who is as demanding as them, always wanting me and needing me to do things for him. Why can't he be more self-sufficient? Why am I always the one left carrying all the responsibility for everybody?" she said, head in her trembling hands.

I knew the answer because I'd heard the story so many times before, from so many different people, male and female, about family commitments and work obligations, during my years as a relationships writer.

"They call you because you are there. If you weren't there all of the time, then they couldn't demand of you.

"You are so busy doing for everyone else, you don't seem to find time to give to yourself, and because you don't give to yourself and really indulge your own needs, you resent everyone else's needs," I explained, repeating what many therapists had told my radio listeners and readers over the years.

Here is a truism that most people can't hear: It's impossible to want to meet other people's needs if you are strict on yourself and won't meet your own needs. The truth is that we function better when we have time for ourselves, time out to be naughty and free. Time to be good to ourselves. And that's what Christmas time brings up for many people who secretly resent the season of demand-giving to others.

Most of us have spent a great deal of time, effort and money servicing other people's needs all year. Then Christmas comes along and the endless days of shopping for obligatory gifts, the stream of family gatherings that must be attended and the constant demands of holidaying children exacerbate the sense of martyrdom people feel.

"I need a holiday," people sigh, but they are on holidays and they still feel drained and tired because there are still so many other people to look after. This is the way we are conditioned in our society. The highest value is placed on giving to the family, the children, the company, friends. But there are no brownie points awarded for giving to ourselves.

Most people I know hold back allowing themselves luxuries like that spa bath in the middle of the afternoon, because there are children to take to piano classes. Or they refuse to take that holiday alone with their partner and end up going where the children would have a great time.

Which is fine but there has to be balance. Like friends who are taking the children away for two weeks, then spending the last week of their holiday alone on a tropical island together while the children are being looked after by relatives. Even reading this will provoke indignation or guilt in some people who don't feel they deserve to indulge themselves and who use this internal sense of unworthiness to avoid finding ways to do it. But without giving themselves a break, they are only going to be resentful and intolerant of those around them.

And there is usually a grandmother who'll have the children, a friend who'll pick a child up, a colleague who can be delegated to, a way of finding a few extra dollars for that desired object.

I often quote an Eastern adage: "As I receive pleasure, so too does the world receive pleasure through me." I have written about the concept before, and this time of year is the right time to bring it up.

It is the notion that when we fulfil ourselves, we spill over like filled wine glasses and can really give quality time to others. It's the notion of the godliness inside us all. The body is the temple of the soul and our soul is the work of God. To look after ourselves, indulge ourselves, spoil ourselves is part of the divine plan. It's not being selfish, but self-full.

Then when our partners or children assert their needs, we feel abundant and ready to provide, rather than wondering why our little girl wants mummy to put her to bed.

It's hard to retrain family members to stop draining us if we refuse to stop doing it to ourselves, being there for every whim then resenting the really important needs because we're feeling sacrificial.

So with New Year's resolutions coming up, I believe making time and space for oneself is a really important vow. We do no one any favours by denying our own needs.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 29 DEC 2001