

Sad enough to rock'n'roll

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was about a year ago. I was in Sydney. I had put money into my credit card to go shopping for winter clothes while in town: a warm coat, a jumper - the sensible things of life.

Walking down Oxford Street on the way to the sensible clothing stores, I passed the infamous shop Fetish. I decided to go inside and look at myriad bizarre, wonderful items on display. Things a sensible person would never wear, but that make the heart pound.

There were PVC body suits that encased the wearer in a black, shiny, second skin; thigh-high boots; bras made of chains; velvet corsets. My hand began fondling the sensual fabric, my mind went tripping off into the magical world of erotica.

And I walked out of the store with a bag full of fluffy, shiny, squelchy things and not a cent left in credit.

Back home my husband grew flushed in what looked like intense pleasure. "You spent what?" he shrieked to my amazement.

"But it's all so sexy. So erotic..." I pleaded.

"But how can someone have spent so much money on so little fabric? Have you gone crazy?" he said, holding some transparent thing in his hand.

Crazy. The word was echoing in my head. Yes. Crazy with grief. I had been in Sydney to visit a close girlfriend who was about to die. I had just come from Melbourne where my young cousin was dying of cancer.

And all I could think about was burying my face in warm, perfumed underwear, making love all night, wrapping my body in shiny leather and stepping out on the town. During that time leading up to and immediately following two funerals, I had never partied so hard, danced so long, nor made love so passionately and with such profound intent.

It was as if by dancing, playing, loving and letting out the wilder side of myself, I could grab life by the hands, hold on to it, and that somehow life would never slip from my grasp. That by living to the extreme, I could make up for lost time.

I also believed I was dancing on behalf of my beloved friends, lying trapped in dying bodies, encased in the smell of antiseptic, enfolded in bandages and counting the minutes. As if I owed it to them.

Underneath I felt a profound sense of unease. How could I celebrate when people were suffering? I danced and danced but they died anyway. And I would too. We'd all be gone one day. But the thought just made me go faster.

And although I eventually settled down, I've noticed that in the past few months as the world self-destructs and descends into fascism, racism, terrorism, global

conflict, as anxiety and grief well up in my heart, I'm heading for the dance floor again. And I feel guilty.

But how we deal with grief is not something to feel guilty about, according to Mal McKissock, revered grief guru and head of the internationally acclaimed Bereavement CARE Centre, based in Sydney.

At a recent lecture, McKissock explained that grief is another word for chaos and we respond to grief the same way we responded to our first crisis. That in times of high stress and emotional pain we regress to a very young age and lapse into behaviour we adopted then in order to survive. "Grief is just an exaggerated version of how you've already been," he says.

"Maybe your first crisis was when you were five years old and you used some kind of 'running-away' coping mechanism. Or you retreated into solitude, denial or riding your bicycle. Some children got angry, screamed and became hugely passionate. The point is, there is no right or wrong way to grieve."

Mal's wife, Bereavement CARE Centre co-founder Dianne McKissock, insists that people don't go "crazy" during times of grief. Most reactions are normal, healthy. It's common for people to either go off sex or have an increased libido when a family member dies.

"Those seeking pleasure often have a guilt haemorrhage afterwards. But there is nothing to feel guilty about. People in grief are just trying to feel safe."

She and Mal both abhor "grief fascists", or the "grief police" who tell people it's proper to grieve openly, talk it out, or to be silent and stoic. "People will just be however they need to be in order to find some control in all the chaos, some sense of power in the powerlessness. The best thing friends can do is not criticise or judge, and give that person time to see that they are coming from a child-like space."

Awareness will allow the bereaved to see they have options in how they face up to grief as time goes on.

The McKissocks say it is crucial that we are honoured for grieving in our own way, particularly in these difficult times when the whole world is plunged into deep sadness. Tears, laughter, distraction, silence, anger or wearing silly, sexy things are all OK. On the emotional front there is no room for bigotry.

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