

Rituals can be so rewarding

By Ruth Ostrow

A FRIEND staggered into the room the other day exhausted from what he described as "a wild night out". "We had a bucks' night," he said, looking bleary-eyed. I smiled and nodded, imagining the usual: too much alcohol, a cocktail of lethal substances, strippers throwing undies at leering blokes.

"No," he said, reading my grin. "Quite the contrary. A group of men drove into the wilderness, climbed a mountain, pitched tent and lit a huge fire. Then we shared stories and performed a ceremony in honour of our friend's rite of passage."

I got goose bumps as he went into detail, because I found the story so moving, beautiful and befitting the sacredness of the vows the groom was about to make. And it got me thinking how much like lemmings most of us are in Western society. So devoid of imagination and ceremony. So unable to grasp the sacredness of many of the important pilgrimages we make on the journey of life.

Either we celebrate significant events like marriages, births, deaths, 21st birthdays, baptisms or holy days by mouthing conventional prayers handed to us by religious leaders, or we act out our own modern-day rituals, which usually entail too much money spent and a mighty hangover the next day.

But this is all changing, according to civil celebrant Damien Peile, who runs Hayes-Peile & Associates in Melbourne with his wife, Irene. Theirs is a company devoted to helping people through the transitional periods.

He says more and more people are using their own spiritual instincts to turn special events into rituals of beauty and meaning. "I have officiated at many ceremonies, not just marriages and funerals. One of the increasingly common transitions people are celebrating is that of becoming an "ex" of some sort.

"Many people don't just want to cut their former partner out of their lives and be nasty. They want to celebrate the joy and good times that came before. They want to make a positive vow of thanks to the past so they can move forward and embrace the future. Many people facing divorce can't just cut away years of emotion, passion and caring.

"Some 'ex' ceremonies aren't relationships-based. For instance, I'm a former Catholic priest. My wife is an ex-nun. I wanted a ceremony to symbolise my move away from the church towards my new role in life as a civil celebrant."

Peile says the coming-out ceremonies he has officiated at have been very moving. "These are where gay men or women decide to be free of the past and acknowledge their true essence. In a recent ceremony, friends got together on the beach to watch the sun rise, marking the dawning of new life."

He says more and more people are putting home-grown rituals into their lives at key points, and -- like the mountain climbers at the bucks' night -- are creating new and meaningful ways to do this. "This is happening when people leave

homes or jobs, or move to a new place. They don't want the major changes in their lives to be overlooked."

I told him about a friend who bought a piece of land. On the day she was to take possession, a neighbour came to her. "I have lived in these hills all my life. I would like to make a ceremony for you where we introduce you to the land and ask the land to allow you to be custodian, and ask it to look after you in return."

My friend was deeply moved, and with this woman, a stranger, performed a beautiful ceremony, candles burning, holding their hands full of earth up to the sky. "It felt amazing," said my friend. "It made the whole thing special."

Similar rituals can be performed in the suburbs. When we couldn't sell a house a few years ago, we lit candles and thanked the house for the years we had lived there and asked to be released. Call it a psychological completion rather than anything more mystical, but the place was sold shortly afterwards.

I've heard of menstruation rites for young girls; coming-of-age ceremonies for boys; birthing ways to prepare an impending mother for her journey into childbirth; and a story from a reader who plants a tree in the garden for each significant event in his family's life, so that their garden has become a place of remembering.

Without spending huge sums of money, our most memorable passages can be acknowledged. Peile says: "One of the saddest things about being human in this computer age is that everything has a sense of urgency, of quickness. People don't take time to savour the moment, the seagulls on the beach, the cycles of nature, to open their hearts.

"There are lessons we've learned, gifts received. We need to stop and offer gratitude for where we are, before moving on."

He says even getting up and saying a morning prayer or a poem is acting with spiritual consciousness. "We simply need to take the time to welcome divinity into our lives," he says. An important reminder to us all.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 21 SEP 2002