

We can work it out, usually

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW years ago, a work colleague of mine became embroiled in a lengthy legal dispute that cost her many sleepless nights.

Having been privy to the facts, my righteous side was convinced that it was important for her to follow the matter through the courts, in rage, in pain, financially haemorrhaging with no promise of justice, just on principle. Because you can't condone inequitable behaviour. Or can you?

I would sit for hours on the phone cheering her on. But on hearing the exhaustion in her voice, her three children screaming in the background getting less attention than they deserved, and feeling a sense of wasted life, my more balanced side often wondered if I was giving her the right advice.

Recently I was privileged enough to witness a very different approach to conflict resolution that gave me pause for thought. A woman I very much admire did something absolutely unexpected when faced with inequity.

Her situation involved a divorce. Married for many years, she was advised by her lawyer that legally she was entitled to a substantial chunk of the shared assets. The problem was that she was the one who decided to leave the marriage and her husband was furious.

He declared he was going to fight her "to the death" in court. I won't go into the details for privacy reasons, but it was clear he did have legal grounds to contest her entitlement, and that a protracted battle would ensue.

The woman knew what she'd really lose if she stayed in Sydney and went to court. "I would be drained, exhausted, filled with bitterness, waiting around for ages. I would lose precious time.

"It just isn't worth it," she told me as, incredulous and disapproving, I asked: "Are you going to just walk away?" I have always been outraged that women are often forced to walk away from their rightful dues because powerful husbands beat them down.

"No," she said. She was seeking mediation to get a quick but vastly reduced settlement. What she wanted was enough money for a down payment on an apartment, and she would borrow the rest. She was happy to take her independence and a fraction of what she was owed and move to Melbourne, where she'd been offered a good job.

"I'm not weak," she explained. "I just want to get on with my life. I also have my own strange sense of fairness. I may be entitled to half of everything, but the fact is that he was good to me, and I've hurt him, which is why he's behaving like this. I don't want to hurt him further by forcing him to sell the dream home he built, to pay me out. Plus I have a great career and can soon recoup my losses."

Of course, when the husband heard her request, he immediately agreed to mediation and a deal was soon struck. Within weeks the woman was off interstate, within a month she had found a small flat she liked. And because her heart was happy, free and in trust, and because she'd made a compassionate decision, fate smiled kindly on her.

She attracted into her life a man, charming, intelligent, and successful. They fell in love and now have a lovely child. She smiles and laughs a lot more these days. And the truth is she could still be stuck in Sydney, stressed out with ulcers or worse, in guilt, in loneliness, and in bloody battle. "I am the luckiest woman. I knew to trust my instincts," she says.

There are people who walk away from legal actions who are not so lucky. But there was something about her positive attitude, her sense of generosity and open-heartedness that seemed to draw into her life love and a sort of divine intervention.

Often I've concluded that there is cosmic comeuppance at play. Like the time I gave a friend \$200 I didn't have to help her, and the next day someone gave me a gift of their used but beautiful winter wardrobe that miraculously fit me -- worth many times that amount.

It's the weird world of karma. "As you sow, so shall you reap." But here is the lesson I've learned. Abundance often comes from a source other than the one you are giving to, or pursuing. In other words, I've found that you may put time, effort and love, into situation A, but it bounces back mysteriously from situation B or C. Particularly if you give with an open heart, not expecting anything in return. Similarly, I believe that retribution, or justice, has the same pattern. Which is what I now want to convey to anyone in a conflict situation considering taking up arms.

Perhaps the way forward is to settle, settle for less than you deserve. And allow providence, fate and the great pool of abundance to take care of the rest. Pyrrhic victories make no sense.

As my wise and trusting girlfriend pointed out before her positive approach yielded such positive fruits: "Life is too short for fighting and bitterness."

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