

Rite stuff's more rewarding than party capers

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW years ago, I gathered a group of friends together at my place to usher in the new year. I had prepared the regular New Year's Eve tokens -- plenty of alcohol, good music, good food.

Though I'd invited lots of people, I'd had the usual NYE responses: "We have two other parties to go to so we may drop in quickly but..."; "We may pop in at some stage but we don't know what else is on yet"; "I'd love to spend the night with you but I'm single, you know, and New Year's Eve is a time to really check out different parties and try to meet new guys..."

Of the 20 or so people I invited, only about eight were prepared to make a real commitment. "Yes," said one. "I spend every new year looking for something special, or someone special, or where the action is, and I always end up disappointed. So this year I'd really like to just stop, stay in one place, not battle the traffic and go through all the panic, and just welcome the new year with some lovely, close friends."

Which is why I had arranged the get-together. New Year's Eve, alongside birthdays, can be a time of desperation. You feel almost as if you have to have the time of your life, the most fun time, the best sex ever with your partner, or it'll somehow jinx the year to come.

I can't remember how many times, over the years, my very expectation has thwarted the outcome and I've ended up in some silly argument, sleeping on the opposite side of the bed -- a very bad omen, indeed.

So this particular New Year's Eve I decided on the motto: "No expectations, no disappointments."

The eight people who came to share the night with me obviously felt the same way. We put on the groovy music, danced, and hung about having a good time. But still there was a shred of malcontent hovering in the air. A sliver of restlessness. After a few drinks, we couldn't stop ourselves from wondering what else could be happening elsewhere.

Someone knew of a wild party and we all debated whether we should battle the crowd and go, another friend thought we could still catch the fireworks, and it seemed like the group was about to split up before the midnight bell.

Then suddenly a wise friend, who is a relationships counsellor, stood up and made a beautiful suggestion.

"I've had a really tough year. I feel I want to do something symbolic and meaningful to clear away the old year and to usher in the new," she said. "What I'd like us to do is a ritual." She suggested we all write our disappointments, losses and pains of the year on a piece of paper alongside the feelings and habits we wanted to "clear", then we burn the paper in an urn in the centre of the garden. Fire is a great purifier.

Next she suggested we write the things we wanted for the year to come on another piece of paper, put the wishes in the centre of a circle and surround them with flowers, fruit and offerings. Not just resolutions like losing weight or giving up chocolate, but deeper things we wanted from life, our partners, ourselves. Everyone agreed and suddenly rather than sitting around drinking and yearning to be elsewhere, we were engaged in picking flowers, making decorations, finding candles, the boys making a small, protected fire. Then we sat around together writing thoughtfully.

The burning was beautiful. We all felt cleansed, unburdened, free. Those wanting to share their tribulations did so, while the rest of us listened respectfully. The wish ceremony was even lovelier, the women sprinkling rosewater around the circle and burning incense. We sang songs, offered thanks for the blessings we'd had during the year, danced under the moon and felt very bonded for our sharing.

As the new year came in, we were reconciled with the pains and lessons of the year past and prepared for the tribulations and challenges of the year ahead. And it felt so satisfying and enriching to be among close friends, welcoming in the new year this way. There was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Since then I've tried to do something ceremonial and sacred each year to mark the ending of one natural cycle and the beginning of another.

This year will be a time to honour those lost in the Bali tragedy, to honour our losses and achievements as a nation and as a world, to honour our private griefs and blessings, acknowledge the things we need to farewell -- and to make a symbolic sacrifice on the pyre of life in order to bring closure and peace.

Then we can stand before the rising flames and state the beautiful and meaningful things we want for 2003.

Rituals, ceremonies, are important and uplifting in our lives. There is no greater way I know to begin a significant cycle of life. Happy New Year to all.

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