

## Lessons from babes up in arms

By Ruth Ostrow

"SHE just doesn't love me any more," my little girl is crying. It's the third time in a week I've had to hear these words. I feel her pain. It's the confusion of watching a close friendship disintegrating and not understanding why.

In sorrow I offer a hundred different theories, trying to explain away the hurting as rivulets fall from her eyes. My own heart is breaking. If I could tell her why this has happened, I would. If I could explain to myself why friendships end, I would. "But we were so close. Now she doesn't want to play with me any more. She has a new friend."

I sit biting my lip. "There are friends for seasons, reasons and those you take to your death bed," someone once told me. "Not all friendships last forever. Some people come into our lives for a short time, teach us something and then leave," I say, feeling the strings of my own heart pulling for the friends gone who I still mourn, for the people who left without me understanding why.

"We have to thank these people for the beauty they gave us and try not to be angry or feel bad about ourselves," I say, trying to put things as simply as I can. It's an odd thing, friendship. There are many people we have to let go of along the way to make way for the new. Time pressures, lifestyle changes, don't allow us to keep all those we love through life.

But then there are those friends we should have held on to. Those who went prematurely because we mistakenly didn't honour them enough. Those we were too stubborn or ego-driven to hear. The friendships we regret losing. And how do we know the difference?

In desperation I ring the girl's mother. She's in the same position. At night her daughter cries too, Every weekend since these girls were little, they've been together -- soul sisters.

We parents decide to hold a gathering to see if we can solve the mystery of love. And if they've grown apart, then let them leave with caring and honesty, so they don't carry the sting of rejection into adulthood as we have.

We sit around a circle and watch the mystery unfold -- the adults as nervous as the girls, for we too are wounded children still clinging to the bitter-sweetness of having loved and lost.

"You've stopped wanting to be my friend," my daughter says, "You won't let me play with your dolls," says her friend. "That's because you say I'm too much of a girlie girl," says my child. "That's because you say I'm too much of a tomboy," grizzles her friend.

In the nakedness of the interchange the truth becomes visible. The things we once really admired about another become "too" as we withdraw from love.

Boyfriends who were once "exciting" become "too" exciting, and thus are labelled reckless and irresponsible. Women who were grounded become "too" grounded, now seeming pedantic and obsessive. Friends who were joyous become too loud, while the gentle ones become wimpy.

"You adored each other once. You loved wrestling and climbing trees. What changes?" I ask the heavens, thinking of the love affairs, friendships and marriages that one day have a heart attack and can't be resuscitated: those that weren't meant to die young. Those that could have -- should have -- been saved.

"If she becomes too much of a tomboy she'll want friends more like herself and she'll drop me," my daughter blurts out. And I suddenly understand: she is riddled with fear.

They say there are two mother emotions: love and fear. All others come from these. Passion and forgiveness are born of love. Anger, prejudice and the insecurity my daughter feels, come from fear.

When we are in fear we forget love: self-love, and love of "the other". We forget the essence and beauty of a person that draws us close. We become judgmental and narrow, contracting against possible rejection or loss -- loss of love, loss of our identity, loss of power -- instead of expanding into acceptance of another's personal freedom. And fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"But I do want to be with you," my child's friend protests. "I just thought you didn't care."

I stand up and bring the two girls close. Tears well up as love floods back, stronger than pride, stronger than fear. In the nervous giggling, kissing and gentleness, there is a remembering of how much love has always been, and will continue to be, despite differences, changes and challenges.

It isn't so easy for us grown-ups in matters of love. Our hearts are older but no wiser. They are more leathery from years of pain. We close our hearts. We obliterate good memories to protect ourselves from hurt and loss. And we lose more than we need to as a result.

My child is my greatest teacher. In her innocence I find the way forward. It's the simpleness and sweetness of remaining open -- always -- to love.

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