

Sobbing with laughter, crying in delight

By Ruth Ostrow

WE are driving back from Sydney after burying my father-in-law. We are sombre, contemplating many things. My daughter is in the back. She is eight. We have not immunised her from the facts of death. We took her with us to India, to the burning ghats where bodies are cremated on the banks of the sacred Ganges river. But this was her first funeral, and the questions are coming thick and fast.

"Mummy, Daddy, why do they bury people here and in India they burn them?" "Well dear, that is part of the Western tradition ..." "Mummy, Daddy, where do we go when we die?" "Well, darling, we go back to God ..." "What if you don't believe in God?" "Well, your energy goes back to nature, to the earth and sky and wind." "Mummy, Daddy, why do people die?" "Well, to give other people a chance to be born and have their turn ..." "And Mummy, Daddy ..." she said in the same voice, the same intensity, not missing a beat: "Why does chewing gum stick to everything, but not your teeth?" Suddenly we were laughing so hard we had to pull the car over, in deference to a child's-eye view of life and death. In fact, we laughed a lot this trip. Laughed amid all the sadness in the nursing home, laughed at the poignancy of discovering that some of the oldies from the home came on the bus to the funeral just to have an outing.

Yet we felt riddled with guilt for laughing so much, despite the relief it gave us.

Talking with a friend who'd lost a baby, on our return, was insightful. She said that she too laughed a lot during her worst time of grief. "There were all sorts of emotions coming up and not all of them bad," she said.

Film-maker Vanessa Gorman, whose documentary *Losing Layla* was shown all over the world, talked to me about the exaltation of grief. The rich tapestry of grief -- the joy, beauty and humour amid the sadness. "When we are in times of deep love or pain, something opens up in us.

"In the months after Layla's death, I felt a strange exaltation. It was alarming at first, hard to let in during the worst pain of my life. I can't describe it. I could barely comprehend it. But one hour I would be sobbing so much that my heart would break and the next choking on this exaltation that was rising through my body.

"Deep grief rips open the heart, rips us open to new levels of ourselves. There is an agony in grief, but what people don't talk about is that there is also an ecstasy. Terrible loss is often met with great outpourings of love from people around and we feel deeply connected with others -- like after the Bali bombings. In grief we are suddenly brought closer to the pulsing of humanity -- the pain, but also the humour of being alive. We are connected to the terrible, eternal impermanence of all things, but also to that same eternal force that is God." She said that sitting with her mother and sisters on the bed those days after Layla died showed her an intimacy that was very precious. "We were all feeling great loss but our feelings were so heightened and intense that I remember hysterically laughing together at the hospital food, at something someone said. Anything would set us off." Grief guru and Sydney's Bereavement CARE Centre head Mal McKissock had made a similar point during an interview last year. He said people should not feel guilty about allowing in laughter and joy during grief. There are

feel-good hormones present in tears and certainly we release opiates during laughter. Emotions are nature's way of helping us cope.

I believe the sense of exaltation also comes from a deeper awareness of our bodies and our surrounds during times of grief, which may be partly chemical. At my father-in-law's funeral, I was acutely aware of my breathing, which felt exhilarating.

Gorman says: "Quite soon after Layla died, I went for a walk down a country lane near my house and I asked the forces of nature, God, to give me some sign that this had happened for a reason.

"In that state of heightened sensitivity, I began to see the beauty of what was around me: the afternoon light dancing on the edges of silver gum leaves; the million shades of green in the foliage; the exquisite delicacy of the currawong's call. And from a place so broken open, the magnificence of that afternoon entered me and filled me with itself until I was only crying at the extraordinary beauty of it all." We shouldn't fear grief. It seems that we will be comforted by nature in our sorrow. For sorrow is the natural order of things. And accepting its reality can also make each moment we are not suffering richer and more meaningful.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 22 MAR 2003