

Mother love, the finest cure

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S always a shock to the system flying home to Melbourne in autumn. One minute you're up the north coast of NSW, all toasty sunshine and radiant skies, the next you feel a chilly air hit your face, the sky is grey with dampness, a howling wind swirls around Tullamarine. I always forget to bring a coat, it seems so impossible to pack one when you're wearing a T-shirt. And I always end up with a sniffly nose.

This year it's worse. The sniffles have turned chesty. Within a few hours of arriving, I'm stuck in bed under two doonas.

At first I feel upset, cheated. All the friends I want to see, all the places I want to visit, a mere dream. I might as well have not come. But as I grow weaker I surrender. I give up that antsy feeling in my body -- that I'm not where I should be. By day two this has turned into a quiet acceptance. By that evening I'm as happy as a human being could be.

Because there is nothing on earth as wonderful as having flu in your mother's house. Particularly if you have a Jewish mother. "Would you like chicken soup for lunch or should I make you vegetable soup today?" "Oh, the vegetable, thanks." "Another tea?" "Yes, please." "I've brought you vitamin C with echinacea," says my mum, a closet Jewish doctor. "Tea-tree is good for gargling. Here's a hot-water bottle," she says spraying eucalyptus in the room.

"Another doona?" "Oh, yes please." She wheels in the television. I have five pillows under me. "Another pillow?" "Oh, yes please," I say holding the remote control. Downstairs, in another part of the world, my child is being fed, entertained, cared for with kid gloves by my beautiful sisters. I blow my runny nose into a specially scented tissue and eat another Easter egg that Mum has brought me -- even though she advises that lactose isn't good for colds.

"Spoil yourself," she says, as I turn on the cable music channel and prepare to read my fourth book in three days.

I'm studying Jungian symbolism, ancient mythology and its application to personal growth. Ironically, one book I finish while sick in bed is called *Leaving My Father's House*, edited by analyst Marion Woodman. It's about the necessity for a woman to leave her parents' home and go on a journey towards selfhood. Woven around an ancient myth, female writers examine the life of *Allerleirauh* who, having left the opulence and comfort of her home, has to live in the wilderness like an animal and endure great hardship as a servant before meeting her king. The symbolic lesson is that only after she has found her true, inner feminine and masculine strength is she ready to join with her equal.

The symbolism is repeated in several of the books I read. In *Descent to the Goddess* (by Sylvia Brinton Perera) the beautiful goddess Inanna leaves home and bravely ventures into the dark underworld to face annihilation and death before emerging scarred but made whole from her battle. Joseph Campbell, in his book *Myths to Live By*, refers to Odysseus, who has to face monsters and the lonely sea before returning home, having matured through his noble quest. Many mythological heroes and heroines must go alone into the world to battle demons of the psyche, solitude and the raging seas of the soul to actualise,

individuate, develop healthy egos and unleash the creative talent that is often stymied by parents who may seek to keep us in their image.

I read and read as my mum brings me soup. As I totter downstairs in her fluffy slippers, I hardly remember how to walk. Yet I have wandered far in my life. I left "my father's house" at 18 and roamed the world wielding a sword, finally settling in Byron Bay. I grew whole. I developed the heroine's fierce independence. But oh, how I miss this. The warmth and love, the nurturing and extended family. Leaving was a choice that was inevitable for me 20 years ago as a young writer -- and is now irreversible.

In a perfect world, Odysseus comes home to Ithaca -- for there is journey and return, independence and intimacy, selfhood and mother. For me, like many of us, there is no balance, only the continued journey alone in a world where heroines have to take out their own garbage.

"Just one day more," I tell myself, changing my flight until finally I push it forward a week. Responsibility be damned!

"I am sick," I declare, pulling the doona over my head and calling for a Mumma who's still young and healthy enough to mother.

Mumma comes in with warm soup. Mumma stands at the door telling me to have a shower. "Don't forget the light," she reminds me, kissing my forehead. I shut my weary eyes. Just for today I will let the heroes and heroines battle without me. Just for today, I have come home to rest.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 03 MAY 2003