

Pick role models to fit the role

By Ruth Ostrow

A WHILE ago, I was having a conversation with a woman who claimed to have a poor relationship with her children. "The point is," she said, "I really have trouble mothering. I am able to do things in the work force that defy description, I'm so organised, efficient and confident. But when it comes to making decisions around the kids, I can't find a way to make them do what I want, I can't seem to get organised."

It's a dilemma I've heard many times over the years from women of her generation who came of age during a time when authority figures were mainly men -- male lawyers, doctors, clergymen, TV announcers. As a result, many girls unconsciously modelled themselves on their successful fathers rather than emulating their house-bound and often unfulfilled mothers, thus leaving themselves without a strong, nurturing, feminine inner-wisdom to draw on when they finally had children of their own.

I found the conversation interesting not just in what it confirmed about gender confusion in modern women but also because it begs a deeper question that's been on my mind for a while, one that is relevant to both men and women. What do you do when the role models you modelled yourself on as a young person no longer work for you?

I'm reading an interesting book at the moment, *Necessary Losses* by Judith Viorst. This book, which was on the New York bestseller list for ages, talks about how we choose parental role models when we are young and instinctively assimilate the qualities of these models into our identities.

But what happens when our role models are inadequate in helping us function in the real world? What happens when we grow out of negative patterns and associations we picked up from our flawed, very human, parental role models -- fathers who were capable but emotionally absent, mothers who were hugely nurturing but perhaps deeply unhappy?

How do we break away from those influences that stalk our unconscious minds and silently pull the marionette strings of our souls?

"Choose another role model," is the answer I gave the woman. "One who is more suited to who you really are now." But it's not so easy. Formerly, people would hero-worship a plethora of film stars and authority figures. But today many of our movie stars are hollow mouthpieces and our authority figures often prove too fallible or corrupt.

The recent Goddess movement has been a creative attempt by feminist thinkers to redress the issue of inadequate female role models by referring modern women to the icons of antiquity who possess both nurturing femininity and also courage, strength and power such as Aphrodite, Diana, the Indian goddess Kali.

I have found my own solution to this problem. Not in the stars or the heavens but somewhere closer to home: in my friendships. It may sound strange to many but, when I am looking to reinvent parts of myself, I find role models among my intimates.

When I was recently trying to deepen my relationship with my daughter, I chose a girlfriend I admire who does a great job with her children without being a martyr or sacrificing other important areas of her life. She exemplified all the traits I wanted to incorporate into myself, particularly a grounded earthy energy. I observed her, emulated some of her habits, and channelled her gentle but balanced ways whenever I felt myself slipping.

In another instance, I was finding myself becoming reclusive during a recent rough patch, a habit I picked up as a child. Instead of withdrawing, I chose to hang around with a very outgoing friend who reintroduced me to the world and taught me how to find support outside of myself. It was difficult but rewarding. Similarly, I've been observing happily married friends in a bid to learn new partnering skills.

People are embarrassed to hero-worship their friends. But it is a wonderful thing to do. For men as well as women. In fact, the men's movement is built on the concept of men mentoring men -- trying to help each other discover a masculine identity outside of the absent, workaholic fathers or high-testosterone dads of the past. I've been told that the greatest learning for men comes from bonding with buddies on weekend retreats or in sharing circles.

Of course, our close friends are as flawed as our parents were, and as we are. But they don't have to be perfect. Because our personalities are fully formed, we only need to mirror certain facets of their behaviour, in the areas that we are weakest, in order to bring a healthy balance back into our lives.

We need role models and mentors many times through our lives -- ironically to relearn how to be our real selves. Therapists are excellent healers if you can afford one. But I found my greatest teachers and seers in the men and women I love. And I honour the sacred role they play in my life, constantly offering me the opportunity to reshape my world.

www.ruthostrow.com

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 17 MAY 2003