

## **A single-minded pursuit of love**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

WHEN actor Barbara Feldon (of *Get Smart* fame) recently released her book *Living Alone And Loving It*, she unleashed a fanfare of curiosity here and in the US and inspired the media to ask the big question: Is it possible to be on your own and be happy?

Given the trend to solo living, with more and more people choosing not to marry or pair-bond, the rising divorce rate (half of all marriages and 80 per cent of second marriages end in divorce) and the ageing population becoming single again due to natural causes, the focus has been on whether going solo can be meaningful.

It has meant that society, weaned on the notion of romantic love as the only pathway to happy ever after, has had to seriously consider the harsh reality that perhaps in the West our one-love-cures-all mentality is outmoded.

The book certainly opened up a lot of questioning in me. Despite working as a relationships facilitator for years on radio and in print and hearing the great angst afflicting many people in long-term relationships, I have nevertheless remained an incurable romantic, committed to the notion of union.

Until I recently found myself listening to a woman talking about being single. During the conversation a light went on in my head. She was lamenting the loss of a relationship that had been extremely toxic and destructive for her.

"I don't mind being alone. But I still love John. I can't stop missing him," she moaned as a group of friends reminded her of the pain she went through. "I know he wasn't for me but he was so much fun, and we had such wonderful sex, and I loved looking after him." And suddenly I had an insight: "You're not missing John himself. You are missing those parts of yourself he let you express," I boldly announced. "You're in love with being in love." What I could see as the conversation progressed was that John was not so much the object of her love but a key opening up secret, beautiful parts of her that she couldn't access by herself.

And what she was missing was being the free-spirited child she became when she was with him, the tender girl who stroked his face, the wicked, gleeful femme fatale, full of healthy hormones that he saw. Being with John allowed her to be deeply in love with herself, or rather those yummy, sumptuous, erotic parts of herself that we all often deny in our day-to-day roles as workers, supporters, parents and pillars of society.

In other words, he was a means to an end -- the key to her own passions rather than the end in itself, as many relationships are.

And it dawned on this old romantic that maybe Feldon is right, maybe people can be happily single if we're able to find ways of unlocking those facets of self that another brings out in us.

If we could learn to outsource our various needs and expressions of self, then we wouldn't so desperately cling to the notion of perfect love and be so brutally

disappointed when our beloveds don't come up to scratch or when we find ourselves alone, as many of us invariably will over time.

Sydney-based relationships counsellor and author, Jo-Anne Baker, who has been doing her master's degree on singledom, agreed with my idea of outsourcing -- identifying what it is in a partner that elicits certain feelings and behaviours in us, then devising ways to supplement these things. "You may find girlfriends or mates to express your affection and passions with. Friends to travel with. If necessary, the old trusty vibrator as a way to pleasure yourself and put yourself in a state of bliss, or else find a lover who can bring out your erotic potential while waiting for the proverbial soulmate," says Baker.

She says social interaction is a way of finding loving validation and hearing, from a wider range of sources, the feel-good things a partner may say to you. "Often my clients use their partners to feel connected and alive rather than finding this in themselves. Relationships give us permission to be that naughty boy, to recapture our adolescent exuberance, to explore other facets of self. There's nothing wrong with this. It is inspirational.

"But it's important to remember that these traits live in us and that other people - not just one's beloved -- and other activities like travel, dancing, laughter, can also help bring these things out. We never find what we want in one partner and we end up eternally unhappy. The goal is to feel sensuous, alive and loving within oneself." And here's the great irony. Once you can outsource your needs, then you can not only be happily single but will more easily attract, or be happy in, a long-term relationship because the expectations will have lifted.

Gloria Steinem once said that women needed to become the men they wanted to marry. I think we should all become the people we want to fall in love with.

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