

Love has endings, not failures

By Ruth Ostrow

I TURNED on the television the other night to see an extraordinary show. The ABC's Catalyst was documenting the life of Australia's Malcolm Simons, an internationally recognised immunologist.

Simons, a true eccentric, mad-professor type, spent 30 years of his life hunting for new and better ways to diagnose disease. Due to his ceaseless and obsessive efforts he uncovered the secrets of Junk DNA and in the process inflamed one of the greatest controversies of the modern time -- the control and ownership of our genetic material.

I was loving the documentary, which showed this larger-than-life character telling tales of his explorations, and the problems that followed in the wake of his ground-breaking discovery, when the narrator said something that disturbed me.

A woman named Ann Abrahmsen had just appeared on screen, talking warmly but truthfully about life with Simons, which she described as like living on the edge of a whirlwind: "Mal's got an amazing free-ranging brain that just loves everything. But the rest of us are not living there. It's a wonderful place to visit. It was great fun."

Then the narrator explained: "Ann is the most recent of Malcolm's five ex-wives, and the mother of the youngest of his six children. He's never been short of love but success in his personal life has been as hard to achieve as success in his intellectual one."

Meanwhile, footage showed Mal with his children, all laughing, eating, holding hands and dancing about, and suddenly I asked aloud: "Why? Why do they imply that he is not successful in his personal life? Having had five women adore him over a long life and six children obviously enamoured with him seems hugely successful to me."

I felt troubled that such powerful subliminal messages still permeate our society in the new millennium. That emotional success is still associated with one, maybe two, long-term relationships or marriages. As I watched him, I could only think what a charismatic character he must have been to have won so many hearts and how predictable that someone with all that passionate energy, and who thinks outside the box, would have multiple partners.

It's surprising to me, truly, that our model for success in matters of the heart still remains narrow and biblical. Perhaps even Simons himself held this view of his personal life. I came across this very vantage point while reading the sequel to Susan Mitchell's famous book Tall Poppies, titled Splitting the World Open: Taller Poppies and Me.

In the book, personality Maggie Tabberer reflects on her life and talks about her relationships. "I love men ... I like being around them. I think they are good animals." She goes on to say: "Anyway, I am the last person in the world you should ask to analyse men because obviously I don't know much about them. I'm not bloody good at choosing them."

Having read her story of gorgeous relationships, lovers, affairs, a couple of marriages -- one producing two daughters, one lasting 29 years and clearly full of

tenderness -- and a 10-year relationship with her last partner in which she claims to have been excruciatingly happy for five years, it sounded like a very successful innings to me. She sounded very competent at choosing men.

Relationships end, people get bored, play up, grow disgruntled, needs change, life doesn't stay the same. There is no guarantee of Happy Ever After with one person, forever. And it is okay. There's nothing shameful, wrong or failed about it. It was simply a relationship that lasted that particular length of time, for this or that purpose.

Around the world people are exploring new ways of being in partnerships, as we live longer and our needs change -- experimenting with open marriages, mixed and blended families, serial monogamy or, as the English study into modern relationships, *The Demos Report*, suggested a few years ago, experimenting with marriage contracts made for five-to-10 year periods with renegotiable options.

Like Simons did with DNA, we have to start thinking outside the box in matters of love. And the first step is to learn to eradicate the guilt associated with outmoded myths and to stop beating up on ourselves.

Therapy rooms are full of people feeling dreadful shame about their "failed" relationships, rather than paying homage to the half-full glass -- that it lasted an amazing decade, a successful two or four years, full of intensity, passion, pain, children, sex, love and lots of important lessons. It is a triumph in today's troubled and stress-filled world to master the compromise necessary to be with another human being for any length of time.

We don't say we have a failed car when it finally gives up the ghost, or a failed carton of milk when it passes its use-by date. We don't say someone had a failed life because they died. And equally, there are no failures in love, only endings. Some bitter endings, some sweet, and all -- one way or another -- ultimately inevitable.

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