

Universal truths of motherhood

By Ruth Ostrow

“IS there a God?” rings in the air as a room full of people sit in stunned silence. On stage are some of the most brilliant thinkers of our era, about to address the topic which is no less awesome than “The Origins of Life: Where Did the Universe Come From?”

Among them is Paul Davies, physicist, cosmologist, peer of Stephen Hawking, author of brilliant papers and 25 books on modern science, feted and hailed all over the world, who goes regularly to the Vatican to inform the Pope about present thinking in science.

Davies looks pensive. “The universe started with the big bang,” he says, explaining why this is fact. “The really big question, as I see it, is what are the origins of life? In my opinion ...”

“Mummy, mummy,” comes a voice from behind the hessian tent wall. We are at the Byron Bay Writers Festival and this year a plethora of distinguished minds have come to address us: Malcolm Fraser, philosopher Peter Singer, playwright David Williamson. As a journalist, I am extremely excited to be there. But there is another Ruth Ostrow. The Mother.

“Mummy!” “Shhhhhh. I am about to hear the origins of the universe. Go play over there.”

“But mummy, I need money to buy a Tutti Frutti. Cathy and Jan's mums gave them some money.” “How much do you need?” I whisper angrily, shuffling in my bag as things drop and coins fall out. “Shhhhhh!” echoes around me. “Sorry. Here take this \$10 note. Buy whatever you want but don't bother me again,” I say, breathing out.

She slips away. Ten dollars for the price of the ultimate wisdom. I settle in. “And so outer space is as good a theory as any.” I catch the tail end of Davies' speech. “Outer space? What?” I lean desperately to the person next to me. “Does he believe humans come from outer space?” “No,” whispers the person next to me. “It's far more complex than that. I'll explain at the end.” “Shhhhhh,” echoes the crowd around me.

The others on stage -- an Oxford scholar and a prominent geneticist -- debate the origins of life for a few moments. The topic changes to God. The existence of a benevolent being, a personal being, who watches over us. Davies starts to address the probability of such an entity to explain existence. “God is as good an explanation as any, however, I think ...”

“Mummy, mummy.” “What?” “They don't have any more Tutti Fruttis left and I need more money.” “I gave you \$10.” “I know but I bought Jan and Cathy cakes and now I need some more for a drink.”

Shuffle, shuffle. “Shhhhhh!” “Here take this and go away!” “But I'm cold.” “Here's your jacket,” I say, pushing it past the woman next to me, who is rolling her eyes, and the man next to her, who is shushing. “Now go away!”

"So that is my view on God." Oh God, oh God, who doesn't exist. If You did I wouldn't have missed Davies' once-in-a-lifetime speculating on Your existence to hear instead about Tutti Fruttis. I am plunged into an existential crisis.

Next we walk over to hear Singer's keynote address. I have waited the whole festival for this: Ethics without the species boundary. Singer is going to talk about his views on animal rights and euthanasia. Views so controversial that he has been hailed and harangued all over the world and almost driven out of Princeton University, where he is professor of bioethics.

"You will be quiet, darling?" "Yes." I've brought drawing pencils, paper. It's only half an hour. "If you are quiet, I'll give you anything you want. Anything. OK?" "Yes, mumma." She sits quietly beside me and starts to draw.

"What defines a living being?" the man described as the most influential living philosopher is asking.

"Mummy, I need to do a wee." "What?" "I need to do a wee," she says, screwing her face up and rocking on her hand. The toilets are a good distance away. It is dark and she'd get lost without me. If I go, I'll miss half of the lecture. "Hold it in, baby. Please try."

I tune in again. "All beings have rights. The infirm, elderly, children, animals." Her face is scrunched up. She is rocking. Now I'm having an existential crisis and an ethical dilemma. Being a parent will do that to you every day. What to do -- listen to the most important ethicist of our time or stand at a toilet door listening to wee-wees?

I make a moral decision. To honour her rights. I will be Mother first. But as I stand up to leave, a miracle happens. "Actually, I don't need to go any more," she says. I collapse with joy into the chair. Singer gets deeply into the topic. His talk is challenging, riveting. I am breathless with every precious word. And I think to myself: "Never mind what Paul Davies thinks. There is a God, after all."

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