

## Death, the permanent reminder

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW months ago I received an unexpected call. It was from a cousin who happened to be passing through Byron Bay on her way to a wedding. I was surprised to hear from her. I had loved this cousin very dearly when growing up. She was a few years older than me and I wanted to be just like her. I remember sharing with her many secret, special things. But the years had come between us. She went on to get married and have children. I became consumed with career, then family.

It was part of that sad, bittersweet phenomenon. We just don't have room in our closets for all our beloved things. We don't have time and room in our lives for all the beloved people we have collected along the way. And so my darling cousin, like so many friends, fell by the wayside of my life. And I by hers.

Then suddenly there she was. It was late afternoon.

"I just felt I wanted to connect with you," she said breathlessly into the phone. "But I haven't got much time. I have to be at a friend's place at 5pm, and another friend's at 6pm, but I'm free this evening."

It conflicted with my plans. "I'm going out tonight. I am free right now. It's so ridiculous. We have to catch up!" "OK," she said, "Let's meet for half an hour. It's worth it." And over she came.

It was a loving reunion. Although we had seen each other in passing over the years, at weddings, bar mitzvahs and funerals, this was our first real time alone together. We held each other and complimented each other and did a very quick run-through of our lives. And gave each other advice on children and men, as if it were only yesterday we were close.

Then she had to leave. We stood at the door hugging. And made promises. There was still so much to tell each other, still so much to say. "Next time I'm in Sydney I'll come over." "Please, yes." And she was gone in a puff of smoke.

My family called this morning to tell me she had died of a heart attack. She was young and beautiful and full of plans. And she had died anyway. So many thoughts plague me as I try to make sense of it all. But the one that haunts me most is this: "What did I have to do that night that was so very important that I didn't have time to love?"

I can't remember what it was. Perhaps a concert, perhaps other friends, perhaps I had to go late-night shopping. My mind is blank. I just know that it's a condition that afflicts us all -- this inability to accept the grand impermanence of life. How different would my response have been to her invitation if I had known it was going to be the last time we saw each other?

I would have cleared the evening, brought out the old photos and red wine, we would have reminisced about our childhoods and crazy families. How much love would have passed there in that room? And yet we live -- all of us -- with this illusion of time, so much time to do and say all the things we want to.

Humans are the only species that live with full awareness of their own mortality. And yet we have a mechanism that seems to short-circuit this awareness. Which

is partly good. It helps us live on a dot, spinning in the middle of a vast universe, without being crippled by terror. And it's bad because the delusion makes us treat life as if it were a dress rehearsal. As if we will come back and do 30 better, do 40 better, next time around.

And we treat those we love with the same smug hubris. Of course we will see our husband again tonight so the fight can be resolved then, the girlfriend can be called next time we're in town. Too busy to call mum; too self-absorbed to tell dad we love him; too angry at John for not doing his homework to give him that hug.

The day Princess Diana died, the days after September 11 and Bali, we were all hit by the precarious, fragile quality of existence. Yet while I grieve tonight, I know I will again begin to fret about deadlines, and that my daughter ate that chocolate I was saving, and I'll distract myself with minutiae that raises my blood pressure and consumes my soul.

If I knew it were my last day would I live it this way? If I knew it were your last day would I treat you this way?

My cousin was very interested in Buddhism. I am writing this in honour of her beliefs. She would be proud to see these questions asked, even if there are no answers. Can we learn to live life as if death were close by? For Buddhists have a saying: "Keep death as a friend, always sitting on your shoulder."

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