

## **Imperfect world, happy balance**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

I RECEIVED a letter this week from a woman called Louise. I shall not reveal her surname out of courtesy.

"Dear Ms Ostrow, I have been seething about your article (November 8) and I decided to write to you and tell you how much it annoyed me. It is the sort of claptrap that one could write if one was living comfortably in the idyllic location of the north coast of NSW, employed, married, in good health and with a healthy child.

"It might be considerably harder to write if one was living in poverty, starving, subject to torture or restriction of freedom. To say that all life experiences both good and bad are sacred is complete rubbish. Look outside your comfortable cocoon and wake up to how absolutely horrible life can possibly be."

Dear Louise, I grew up in a world that would make your hair stand on end. Several of my friends' parents had numbers tattooed on their arms from Auschwitz and other concentration camps. My girlfriend's mother and her unborn baby had been used in Nazi medical experiments. As a child, I already knew things no one should know.

I knew the word "lost" before I knew the word "found". Not as in lost weight or lost a bracelet. Rather: "She lost four brothers when the Nazis marched in to Warsaw." "He lost his three children and wife in the Buchenwald death camp." Whole universes had vanished for the European immigrants who came through our front door, tragic, impossibly brave human beings with their richness, sorrow, heroic attempts at happiness.

I married a man who was one of these. My husband who is with me in this idyllic world you refer to spent his childhood in a deportation camp waiting with Holocaust survivors to be accepted into Australia.

His entire family had been sent to Auschwitz. My mother-in-law's five sisters and their children were dragged away screaming in the middle of the night to be gassed, just because they were Jews.

Yet many survivors went on to be brave and positive. Positive enough to make new lives in Australia, have children, whole new families. Yes, they break down sometimes. Their dreams are riddled with nightmares, some are in and out of mental hospitals. I've watched the suffering of those who can never forget.

But this is what they taught me: to savour the moment, happy or sad, and find meaning in the compassionate deeds of others and in humanity's brave efforts to imbue life -- however difficult, dangerous or heartbreaking it becomes -- with joy.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor E. Frankl, who suffered unspeakable horror in the Nazi death camps, revealed in his masterpiece *Man's Search for Meaning* that finding a deeper sense of sacredness in life -- no matter what the conditions -- was the main factor that kept people alive in the camps. Perhaps you should read his work.

My best girlfriend Vanessa Gorman, who lives up here in idyllic paradise and who lost a baby, speaks of suffering thus:

"Quite soon after Layla died I went for a walk down a country lane near my house and I asked the forces of nature, God, to give me some sign that this had happened for a reason.

"In that state of heightened sensitivity, I began to see the beauty of what was around me: the afternoon light dancing on the edges of silver gum leaves, the million shades of green in the foliage, the exquisite delicacy of the currawong's call. And from a place so broken open, the magnificence of that afternoon entered me and filled me with itself until I was only crying at the extraordinary beauty of it all."

Another woman from here, Mary O'Brien, says: "In the last two months of my partner's life, when the cancer had spread throughout his body and he knew he was facing death, an amazing thing happened. He became really present and a great energetic vitality entered him and he was filled with gratitude and love of life. A few days before he died, even when he couldn't roll over in bed, he said: 'I never knew life could be so good.'"

Like my mother-in-law and the many real-life heroes I know, I feel blessed and in a state of perpetual grace, not because only good things happen but because all things happen, and we are breathing. Sad things happen, and there are accidents and evil people and suffering. These are our teachers and these are the realities of the world that have to be embraced for good or bad, for better or worse, in sickness and in health -- the sacred marriage vows between man and his imperfect universe.

Louise, people who are optimistic or positive are not shallow, naive and unripened as you suggest. Nor is it for you to damn people's heroic attempts to find meaning -- up a mountain, in retreat if needs be, in duty, in sex, or in the arms of God. Our lives are fragile. And sacred. May we all find meaning and peace wherever, however we can.

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