

## Unsung heroes' purrfect ways

By Ruth Ostrow

WHEN I was a little girl, the neighbour gave me a kitten. I fell deeply in love with that creature -- the first great love affair of my life. My mother didn't want to keep it, but my cries were intense and insistent. And so eventually she agreed.

School was hard in those days. I was not a popular girl. I was a rather shy child with an immigrant name.

"Ostrich ... ostrich," the kids used to taunt. But I got through the long hours with the thought of rushing home to my kitten whom I had unimaginatively called Kitty.

Kitty grew older and I grew happier, more relaxed, I began concentrating better at school, felt more in control.

Each morning I left with a slight anxiety about leaving my baby behind, but each afternoon I would come home and there she was. For a time the world around felt safe and benevolent.

One day I came home and Kitty was not there.

"She's run away," my mother said. It was not till much later in life I would discover that Mum had given Kitty away because she'd been fighting with our old family cat, Julie.

Thinking she was shielding me from pain, I was left scouring the streets instead wondering how that animal could have so deeply betrayed me, run away -- to whom, with whom, and why? Wasn't I enough, wasn't my love enough to protect her and make her happy? Or did she get lost?

I remember the sense of fear and uncertainty that began to penetrate my being, and I remember forming a view of the world -- those stories we all make up to explain existence which eventually form the basis of our personality. Mine was about abandonment and loss. "It's not safe to love," became my mantra.

I tell this story because I had dinner with a writer last week who told me how much she admired my bravery. "You take bold risks, you stand up to people, you speak on TV and air your views in public. I don't have that kind of courage."

After digesting her words and having a think about things, I told her these things were not brave because I had no fear of them. Public speaking, and fighting for things I believed in, was second nature.

"We are only brave when we force ourselves to overcome our deepest fears," I said.

The really brave thing I do each day is far less romantic or dramatic. It is opening the backdoor to let my cat out.

I adore that animal, and I've groomed him to be an indoor cat. But I can't leave him inside all the time, and each time I set him free, I feel my whole body shudder with the memory of a beloved pet I never saw again. I am similarly haunted by stories I hear of husbands, children, and friends who never come back.

Like a silly woman, I talk to my cat every morning, telling him how much I care. And as I watch him bound off, as I watch my daughter get on to her school bus, I feel like an unsung hero.

"It's not safe to love, but I do so anyway," is my reconstructed mantra.

And I got to thinking about how much we underestimate the private heroism we all show in so many ways each day. A person with an exhibitionist nature isn't brave for performing, any more than an academically-inclined person is super brave for putting out a controversial paper -- despite how it appears to us.

But if an introverted academic goes to a party in honour of a friend, there is real bravery involved. Shy people don't acknowledge how brave they're being when they venture into social situations. We don't acknowledge the courage of a mother who leaves her child at school in the care of strangers each day, or a father who allows his daughter out in a car on her first date.

We don't praise ourselves for the bravery of loving unconditionally, of visiting a friend in hospital amidst the smell of death and decay, of rescuing that ugly spider in a glass jar rather than squashing it, or even of battling those awful, intolerable supermarket queues in order to feed the family -- the simple heroic deeds we do to keep things nice for the kids, for our friends, for the sake of what's right.

The writer in this story is a single mother. I know the great bravery it took for her to leave her marriage and start over again. And no, she will probably never appear on television with ease. But why does she see herself as less brave than I?

It's not healthy to compare ourselves to others and come out feeling wimpy. Far healthier to be proud of ourselves and view our courageous achievements with respect. Let's not lament those fears we haven't yet conquered, rather celebrate those we have -- as I do every time I watch my cat disappear into the lush green foliage of my mind.

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