

Grief, suffering rejuvenate us

By Ruth Ostrow

DURING the past four years I've lost four very close friends to cancer and disease. Devastated by each loss, mourning for the young children they left behind but also fearing for my own child, my challenge has been finding a way of reframing the reality of death into something positive.

What I found was that the experience of losing peers very much forces me to deal with my own mortality, which, according to wise souls, is a valuable thing. Awareness of our extinction, according to the writer/philosopher Alain de Botton, guarantees our appreciation of our being alive. The ancient Greeks used to carry a skeleton on a stretcher between guests at parties to remind revellers of the impermanence of all things, believing that awareness of death intensifies the beauty of the moment.

If nothing else, death reinforces our sense of gratitude for our own lives -- but most certainly for those people we love and hold dear.

It is in this vein that I decided to put together my most recent book *The Gift*, looking at all the things that happen to us and reframing them in beauty. Every emotion or trait is a gift, even those we're taught to reject as wrong or sinful. Everything that happens to us in our day-to-day life is sacred, even those experiences we consider challenging or painful -- if we can only open our eyes and recognise the treasures buried in the everyday and let our foibles, mistakes and difficulties heal and transform us.

A child home with the flu may seem like a hassle for busy parents, yet it can be a rich and valuable bonding time; a broken washing machine can lead us down to the local laundromat where we forge an invaluable career contact.

Difficult bosses, neighbours or lovers can prove to be our greatest godsend, and lead us to achieving something wonderful we may not have attempted were we not motivated by the fire of our passions.

And our passions are important.

Take anger for instance. Anger has had a lot of bad press, yet it's the gift of setting boundaries. Over my life I've learnt that anger is an exquisite barometer for what's gone wrong, where people have overstepped my limits, or where injustice is occurring. It's a perfect example of the adage ``where there's smoke, there's fire''.

The raw emotion itself is powerful and clarifying as long as we choose to express it with care, not violence. It's the warrior's sword that can cut away the putrefied and unhealthy.

Mistakes, too, are a blessing in disguise.

In mythology each hero faces a time when he or she makes a terrible blunder which changes the course of destiny.

So, too, in real life.

We err, we trip up, we kick ourselves for our stupidity, disbelieving that time and experience have not prepared us better.

However, the blunder, being either a personality flaw or a fatal decision, is often the point of intense insight and transformation for the hero, as it is for us in our daily lives. Our mistakes are our greatest teachers. It is because of them, not despite them, that we go on to create new possibilities.

Meanwhile, rather than cursing our badly behaved lovers we can grow to see those partners who hurt us as our true angels -- our nemesis or sacred enemy, holding up a mirror for us.

Same with the irritating person. Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo tells the story of a French nun who went to live in a convent, but who hated another nun who kept making clicking noises with her tongue.

The sound was so insistent that the French nun believed she couldn't cope. But instead of clobbering the clicker on the head with a brick the nun befriended the woman and grew to understand her. As a result she cared more about the woman, and the annoyance bothered her less and less.

She learned tolerance, conflict resolution and acceptance -- as we can learn from noisy neighbours, bossy bosses and frustrating partners.

Jealousy is my favourite reframe. It's like doing exercise: uncomfortable while it's happening, bliss afterwards. Despite the pain it causes, jealousy enlivens. When used with caution and care, it can be a powerful, invigorating aphrodisiac for a tired sex life.

The whole notion of Eros is linked to unrequited love. In the early days of love the body generates hormones to help us pair-bond. Over time these wear off and boredom sets in as we take each other for granted. Jealousy brings back the insecurity, and in that delicate place, lust is reborn.

In this society we're encouraged to pop pills as a way of treating normal painful or dark emotions, which in turn blocks the natural flow of life-force. When we kill the passion we often kill the essence of our creative souls.

In the natural world there are dark times -- winters, storms, earthquakes. These are the times that cleanse the earth, rejuvenate the seeds, and create mountains.

So too with our lives.

The Gift is available at all leading bookstores (Hardie Grant, \$19.95)

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