

Call me cosmic any day

By Ruth Ostrow

MY mother is exasperated again. "The bloody worms get you. That's what happens when you die," she spits into the phone on hearing that I am about to attend yet another workshop on spiritual matters.

I've just lost a loved one to cancer. Like a child, I am in some dazed state, searching for someone who can tell me where she's really gone. Going to see rabbis, gurus, reduced to the vulnerability and intellect of a five-year-old whose dog has just died.

"You'll grow up one day," sighs my mother sarcastically. "There is nothing after life, dear. Nothing. Just accept it. No one has ever come back to prove otherwise," she says, citing Houdini. My mother has been around long enough to remember the great magician's pledge to return.

The journalist in me knows my mother is right. But there's something far stronger in my soul that believes in magical possibilities. It is the child.

When I was little, my grandfather used to tuck me in at night and tell me about the goblins and fairies who lived in the garden under our house. About angels and witches and strange, powerful beings. I was the oldest kid in my school to still believe in the tooth fairy.

For almost half my life, magic was a reality. And now, when I so desperately need to believe in it, sceptics want to take that hope away.

At night, in the darkness, I swear I see a sliver of light, perhaps a soul coming to say goodbye. In the days after my beloved aunt's death, I feel strange energies around me. I dream of dead relatives who come to me with messages. "She's okay. She's with us. You will see her again one day." I wake up with my cheeks stained with tears.

I hear words in the whispering of trees, signs in the way a spate of leaves arrange themselves on the ground. A message in the presence of a strange black bird that has mysteriously perched on my window sill.

"You are having a breakdown, dear," says my mother. "Grown-up people don't believe in this sort of nonsense," she says in her stiff-upper-lip British way. But my mother is so wrong. At the recent Metaphysical Mastery conference I find 8000 people just like me, gathered at the Entertainment Centre in Sydney, having paid up to \$500 a head to believe in "this sort of nonsense".

Visiting members of New Age royalty -- Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer, an austere-looking Deepak Chopra -- confirm what people sitting in the audience have come to hear: that magic does exist. That the soul never dies.

"Aaaaaah" is the sound of relief that breaks free from the audience at the first hint of an afterlife. It's worth every cent to be told by those knowledgeable and revered that we don't get sucked into a black void after all.

At Body, Mind & Soul festivals held around the world each year, millions of seekers cram their spiritual show bags with pamphlets on talking with angels and

discovering your spiritual guide.

Meanwhile, Hollywood is growing fat on afterlife movies such as Ghosts, Heaven Can Wait, and Truly Madly Deeply. I have to wait two weeks to get a copy of the Robin Williams video What Dreams May Come, a schmalzy tear-jerker about a man reunited with his dead children in heaven.

"Codswallop. Wishful thinking," is my mother's reaction to my latest foray into Buddhism and its notion of reincarnation. But there are huge numbers of us craving wishful thoughts as millennium anxiety comes to a head. Books professing to prove we have past lives, such as Journey of Souls by Michael Newton, are walking off the shelves around the world.

And while the adage warns "Life is not a dress rehearsal", with cash-rich baby-boomers hitting middle age there are big bucks to be made by spin doctors crying out: "Tricked you! You do get another go. You get to be 20 again and not fritter it away on over-commitment."

No wonder Buddhism is thriving in the western world: evolve all the way to Nirvana, just amblin' along the cosmic road, a spiritual Easy Rider with countless lifetimes stretched lazily out in front of you. Have kids, a mortgage and create good karma this lifetime, be a famous opera singer the next. For a generation weaned on free choice, it's perfect.

For me, still thirtysomething, I'm not yet dealing with my own mortality, rather attempting to deal with the loss of people dear. My beloved father who died too young, now my aunt. I am soggy with grief. Young JFK is dead. No one is safe. Nothing is permanent. Reality is a fearful, scary place.

I don't know if there really are fairies and gnomes at the bottom of my garden. I don't know if I should be spending up big on New Age rhetoric. I don't know where my aunt, my father or those poor souls washed away in Switzerland have really gone.

But faced with the prospect of my mother's prognosis -- "worms" -- well, call me a child, a sucker, a disgrace to my profession, but I'll stretch my imagination and wallet in the direction of magical possibilities any day.

Chat about mind, body and soul with Ruth Ostrow on the Internet tonight at 7pm. Visit the community section of our Web site at <http://www.news.com.au>

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

In last week's feature (Review, August14-15), you wrote about people who are in good relationships but are desperate to have more. Spare a thought for someone like me. I am about to turn 42 and have never even done the deed. It's not the lack of sexual activity that upsets me but the loneliness of never being held or touched. These couples should be grateful they have someone to hold, even if it isn't perfect.

I. Csaszar, Greensborough, Victoria.

Dear Ruth,

Re: Spicing up marriage. Readers of your feature may like to consider the sentiments of a short poem I wrote: "We ache to be touched; to allow our flesh to feel; the complete surrender; of sensual pleasure; and tantalising vulnerability; opening up a part of us; that never gets released; with every day lovers; with

whom; we have forgotten; how to be kind." Perhaps the answer lies within, not without.

Lorna Patten, Cammeray, NSW.

Dear Ruth,

I am one of those unhappily married people whose heart and body have slowly shrivelled and died. Even though God graced me with five marvellous children, now that they are older I feel so lonely that I spend many nights in my room, crying. To be in a loveless relationship is the loneliest place in the world.

"Sad Wife", e-mail.

Dear Ruth,

I've enjoyed your writing for years and am thrilled to hear you've rejoined The Australian. Like many men in my age group -- late 40s -- I've recently embarked on a journey of self-discovery and, after a lifetime of computer programming, have found great meaning working as a reiki healer. I look forward to reading your insights into our search for essence.

B. Delavere, Lane Cove, NSW.

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