

A word in in your ear

By Ruth Ostrow

Mantra: A powerful word or phrase with deep spiritual significance chanted over and over until it permeates every cell of one's being.

I RING my mother. I'm excited. A new project has landed on my desk. A wonderful opportunity to do something I've always wanted to do. As I sit on the line I can hear it coming. I am hoping against hope it will not, but I know she is going to say it. It's her Mother Mantra. The things mothers say again and again to instil into us their version of the world.

"Hello mum. I got the assignment. I'm so thrilled." My mouth starts pushing words out in anticipation: "Ruth ... don't ... get ... your ... hopes ... up."

"That's wonderful," she says, "But Ruth, don't get your hopes up."

"Mum," I say for the hundredth time. "Why are you so scared of your loved one's getting their hopes up? What is the worst thing that can happen? We fall down? We skin our knees?"

"I'm just trying to protect you against disappointment," she says defensively. It's no use arguing with mothers about their Mother Mantras. Because these mantras were passed down from generation to generation. It's in the mother's milk. It has taken over the mother's entire body and soul. She is helpless to stop chanting the mantra even in the face of logic.

Kimberly O'Sullivan, the lesbian heroine of my recent column, heard the usual Mother Mantra from her mum after the story appeared.

"Mum. Did you read the paper? I have met a man. I am getting married." Without missing a beat her mother chanted: "But dear, you know with you things never last."

Another friend's mother has an even more disheartening mantra, spoken with a tired tone: "Jennifer, dear. No one's interested." Even during childbirth, with Jenny screaming in agony, her mother sighed in irritation: "Jennifer, dear. Please! No one's interested." Which is a version of my grandmother's favourite: "Pull yourself together!"

I suppose what Jennifer's mother means is: "No one is interested in me." I know that Kimberly's mum lived a life racked by loss, hence the belief "things never last".

And my own mum's early life was about thwarted dreams and disappointments. As a child growing up in war-torn London, hiding in bomb shelters in terror, and finally being wrenched from her family, the mantra "Don't get your hopes up" would have summed it all up.

Mum's other favourite is: "Be careful." This is the classic Jewish Mother Mantra, said so slowly and painfully as to signify cosmic disaster. As in: "Mum, I'm going to see that musical tonight." Face wrenched in anxiety, shoulders crunched over, deep breath in, the Mother moans: "Be c-a-r-e-f-u-!" No use asking of what. Of

everything, of course: bombs, kidnapers, car accidents, food poisoning.

Mothers spend their lives in fear. And fathers do too. If Mother Mantras are about helping their kids survive in the world, Father Mantras reflect concerns about money, achievement and self-worth.

Growing up in an immigrant household I heard from my dad: "Life's difficult." Thankfully, the underlying message was: "Give it a go anyway."

But a close friend's father intoned with a shrug: "What can you do?", reflecting feelings of powerlessness and defeat. It's not surprising my friend has become a bit of a victim.

We do absorb the mantras. Like religious chants they get into our blood. Into our life philosophy. Think of anyone you know and behind their actions you will find a family creed that will sum them up. "You can never trust anyone"; "Keep yourself nice"; "Just get on with it"; "Life's unfair".

A friend told me his Greek grandmother used to say, without humour: "Don't worry. Everything will turn out bad." She would say: "Hope for the best but prepare for the worst." By 50 she had already bought funeral shoes to wear inside her coffin.

According to London-based therapist and mantra-buster Ron Tanner, we generally choose one parent to emulate and it's their mantra we adopt. For instance, I totally rebelled against "Don't get your hopes up" in favour of "Life's difficult". And my life has been full of difficult risks, difficult decisions and difficult people. But it has been stimulating.

Tanner, who is visiting Australia, says people like me turn up on his door when life gets "too difficult". He then helps them unravel the mystery of why. If someone arrives with a string of broken relationships, he asks: "Which of your parents believes: 'We are always alone' or 'Love never lasts'?"

"I don't do deep analysis," he says. "I simply spend a session or two showing people their programming and giving them their choices. You can't change a mantra that has been put in your head and your mother's mother's head over aeons. It's there forever, like railway lines etched into the subconscious.

"But I can show people where life will lead if they follow these tracks. And how they can jump trains and end up at a different destination."

Hindus, Jews, Christians alike believe that in the beginning there was the word, the word was God, and the word had the power to create.

Having spent two hours with Tanner on his last trip to Australia, I get up every morning with new words: "Life is simple." I still enjoy the same risks and challenges but I suffer a lot less now that I've changed trains.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

We should be careful about our spiritual questing. A line from a Sting song goes: "The search for perfection is all very well, but to look for Heaven is to live here in Hell."

Ross Howat, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

A note on your psychic column. Roald Dahl once said that those who don't believe in magic find none. Keep searching.

Kali Harvey, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

What a self-centred, snivelling creature you are! Stop contemplating your own navel and learn to love and be grateful for what you have.

J.A. Anderson, Frankston, Victoria

Dear Ruth,

Let us not abandon the Old Testament. It is not religion that causes death and destruction but what people make of it! Henk Hout, Sydney

Dear Ruth,

Rabbi Gutnick's letter (Review, September 18-19) claiming: "Without the guidance of a god, one human being's version of a kind, compassionate act may not be another's", seems to suggest the dilemma of moral diversity exists in Buddhism but not in Judaism.

If so, I refer him to A Companion to Ethics, edited by Peter Singer, which outlines diametrically opposed Jewish positions towards abortion. This simply highlights the age-old problem that if there is such a thing as a divine position on ethics, the divinity's human mouthpieces speak with many tongues. The choice still lies with the thoughtful individual human being.

Don Doherty, Alexandra Headland, Queensland.

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