

You can't take it with you

By Ruth Ostrow

"LIFE is short," my mother moans into the phone in her most austere voice. "You can't keep working day and night. You have to take some time out to smell the roses." She is doing her best to get my husband and I to take a few days off. To blow a few hundred dollars on nothing but self-indulgent pleasure at a luxury hotel.

"I'll come to Sydney and babysit. All you'll have to do is pack a bag and go," she says while I ruminate on the other end of the phone. "What sort of Buddhist are you? Grab the moment. Spend your money. Enjoy yourself!" she says to her exhausted daughter, knowing her adversary is lurking nearby.

In fact, he is standing right beside me, listening.

"Tell your mother we can't afford it right now. Money doesn't grow on trees," says my pragmatic husband, who is always saving for a rainy day.

"Tell him that rainy day may never come," says my mother, knowing exactly what my husband is like. "There is no such thing as tomorrow. We only have today and you both desperately need to get away and relax."

My mother had a philosophy of "invest in yourself" well before it became trendy. A woman who enjoys any money she earns to the fullest, she is surprised by people who use it exclusively to pay bills, educate children and pay off mortgages, only to find themselves unhappy, run down and divorced for their efforts.

"Balance. You have to find some balance," she says, repeating her favourite word. "Save by all means, but remember you can't take it with you."

I get off the phone in a quandary. Two competing money personalities are at war inside me. My mother represents the one who adores the good life and never presumes the future will come. My husband is my inner-security blanket. An immigrant, he represents the part of me born into an immigrant family, fearful of being poor, believing that education and property are the two investments that will always protect you and your kids in times of adversity. And that adversity always comes.

It's hard to find a sense of balance between the two. The harder you work, the more you need to replenish yourself, but if you blow \$400 on a weekend away you are just going to have to run harder to make it up.

Sitting the next day with a close friend, the answer comes. She tells me about a 21-year-old male friend of hers who recently locked himself out of his apartment. In an effort to get in, he climbed on to the overhanging balcony and fell off. It wasn't a bad fall but he was severely brain damaged.

"Life is so precious," she says, as I commit to not take mine for granted. The following Saturday morning, we're jumping on a massive bed in Sydney's Inter-Continental hotel. Up and down, up and down, enjoying the wicked sense of liberation.

My hair is flying madly around. My heart is racing. I feel like a gleeful child, more gleeful for the fact that I don't have to make the bed when I'm finished. Finally exhausted, we plonk down amid the fluffy pillows and huge, fabulous doona, and succumb to the box of fine chocolates that has been flirting with us from on top of the mini bar.

In a space of 24 hours we celebrate life. Room service, more chocolates, bubble bath, B-grade horror movies galore, more chocolates, sex, more chocolates.

"I forgot how much fun you can have in hotel rooms," my husband sighs. "You've forgotten how much fun spending money is," I laugh back, and we make a pact to indulge ourselves every few months. To invest in our bodies as well as our souls, for no reason. Just because pleasure is good for the soul.

We are not the only ones to come to this conclusion. Peter Hook, a general manager at Accor, the largest hotel group in the world comprising Novotel, Mercure and Sofitel hotels, recently told me there is a new trend to self-indulgence among urban couples such as ourselves.

He says that on any weekend, the majority of people staying at any of his Australian city-based hotels -- couples or singles -- live within a 15km radius.

They come to take advantage of packages like the Seven Deadly Sins, where they can buy Sloth with room service and in-house movies, or Gluttony with as much food as can be eaten, or Lust with oysters, strawberries and adult movies on the menu.

And with Internet auction sites now selling off cheap, vacant rooms, Hook predicts that hotel stays will soon replace the traditional "dinner and movie" as the Saturday night treat. "As the new millennium approaches, people are wanting to let off steam and to really spoil themselves," he says.

And so they should. We do live in a pleasure-negative society where we feel guilty for pampering ourselves or spending money on pleasure.

But as my husband and I reach for the exorbitant bill we've racked up after two days of slothful, greedy, lustful behaviour, my mother's words flash into my brain: "You're a long time dead!" And as we all know, mother is always right.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

My wife ran off with a penniless sculptor, insisting at the time that she was doing me a favour. Thereafter, I went from one little love affair to the next. Now, at 53, I find myself wondering how to replace the past -- the happy, young wife and babies, the excitement of the wild, young lover when your shattered life needed it most. I think I've found the answer. I'm building a catamaran!

Richard Michaels

North Stradbroke Island, Queensland

Dear Ruth,

Regarding the letter to you from "name withheld" in Beerwah, Queensland (Review, October 30-31). Perhaps the reason the locals don't like southerners is that once an area up here becomes trendy, it drives prices through the roof. The result is that locals who don't already own property end up being unable to afford to buy any.

Darryl

Townsville, Queensland

Dear Ruth,

I used to think the burning times were over but articles such as "From coven to couch" (Review, October 30-31) are a depressing reminder of what spiritual intolerance is really about. Witches and other pagans have been treated awfully in the past, all because we have dared to access divinity as individuals rather than handing over responsibility to a powerful male-dominated church.

Trish Dunstan

Western Australia, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

Your story (Review, November 6-7) was one of the most moving pieces I have read. But although I concur with Rachael Falk when she says, "Death can offer so much to the living", I don't believe that one can gain anything from the death of a child.

Neil Dyson, e-mail

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