

## By Ruth Ostrow

At a dinner party with friends the other night, the conversation bemoaned all the dreadful ills that have befallen the world recently. Then someone cheerfully said: "Hey, guys, what's your favourite horror at the moment? The one that keeps you awake at night?"

Animated and enthused we began, half-parody, half-serious. Mine was bird flu. As a self-confessed hypochondriac who travels to Asia several times a year, it tops my "fave horror" list. Three people nominated terrorism. A girlfriend said she was deeply disturbed by the recent landslide in Guatemala that had killed 1400 and can't stop thinking about being buried alive under mud; another was fearful of a typhoon or tsunami hitting the Australian coastline.

My partner had a cheery one. He was terrified by a recent news story. Jumping up to get the paper, he read: "A man has confessed to fantasising about removing and eating the body parts of 64 toddlers, girls, and women whose names and addresses he kept on a list in his Adelaide home ... " "Noice, very noice," someone said in a Kath & Kim voice. "All the pedophiles and predators in the world keep me awake at night. I worry about my children," he added, as we stumbled on with our horror fest, clapping at each offering, laughing guiltily in acknowledgement of just how scary things have become.

It was a gruesome game, but we felt so much better afterwards. The reason was twofold. To name a fear is half the battle. To put it on the table and to share it is an enormous catharsis. But more significantly, it gave us cause to laugh at things that are just too terrible, too surreal even to contemplate. We all need permission to break taboos and laugh in the face of the huge psychic burden we are carrying at present.

Just days before catching my plane to Melbourne, a video was released to the media naming Melbourne as the next terror target. The American newsreader didn't even know where it was. I kept saying, "Mel ... boooooorn," as he had done, and let myself laugh in sheer disbelief that alongside New York and London my humble home town had earned the status of international terrorism hotspot.

Humour is a very important release valve. Laughter contains opiates that keep us calm. Gallows humour is the great legacy that we have earned as Aussie battlers, and for sanity's sake it's time to ignore political correctness and let it flow.

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