



AN INCREDIBLE journey

She's battled breast cancer and seen her inspirational book about loss, love and a cat called Cleo become a global hit. Here former NEXT writer Helen Brown tells how her Buddhist nun daughter has inspired a wonderful new chapter in her life

BY HELEN BROWN

Motherhood has taken me all sorts of places, from heights of ecstasy holding a brand new person damp and disgruntled in my arms, to chasms of anguish at a young son's graveside. But I never imagined that maternal devotion would lead me to the foot of more than 200 steps at a remote Buddhist monastery in Sri Lankan high country.

As our three surviving offspring nudged into adulthood, my sense of adventure had shrunk into the recliner rocker in front of *The Weakest Link*. I was content knitting baby blankets for future grandchildren.

The Third World and I had parted ways back in the 80s after one bout of food poisoning too many. Holiday destinations were now strictly limited to places that offered fluffy towels, filtered water and toilet rolls with ends folded into triangles.

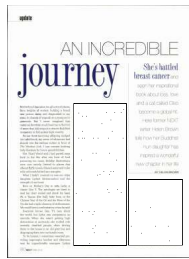
What I hadn't counted on was our older daughter Lydia's determination and the strength of our bond.

Born on Mother's Day in 1985, Lydia is classic Gen Y. The astrologist we hired to read her chart smiled and shook his head. As a Taurus (the bull) baby born in the Chinese Year of the Ox and the Hour of the Ox, she had a triple whammy of stubbornness. We would have a confrontation or two, he said.

Everyone knows Gen Y's care about the world, but Lydia was compassion on steroids. When she wasn't getting high distinctions at university, she worked with severely disabled people, often driving them to the house in an old grey bus and disgorging them into our family room.

To be honest, I sometimes resented providing impromptu lunches and afternoon teas for unpredictable strangers. Lydia's





patience and devotion to them humbled me to silence, however. Over time I began to appreciate the courage of her clients and their awe-inspiring ability to make the most of every moment. They were heroes in wheelchairs. I started looking forward to the sound of the bus grumbling down the street.

Lydia challenged me in other ways, as well. Though I wasn't religious, I'd always considered myself a bit of a spiritual person. When Lydia was small, I'd dragged her along to a few New Age dolphin callings and shamanic ceremonies. It hadn't occurred to me she might be taking all that stuff in on a serious level.

When she was 18, a Buddhist monk visited our house to give a meditation session. As he was leaving, he turned and beamed her a rock star smile and called, "Come visit me in Sri Lanka some day, Lydia." My husband Philip heard alarm bells. I told him not to be an old fogey.

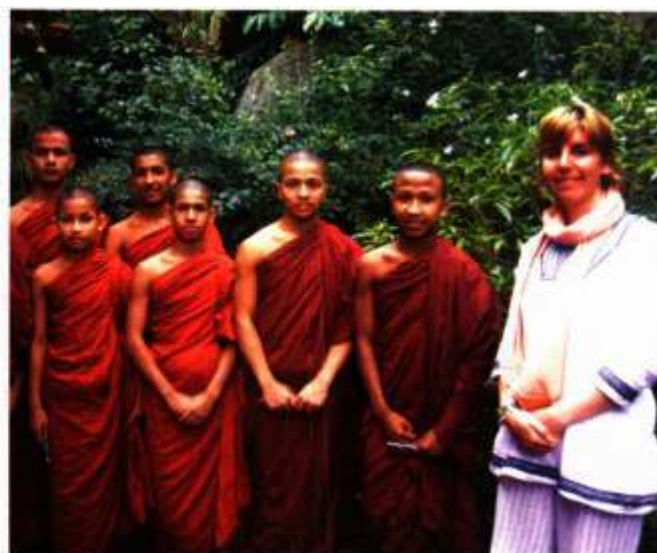
Apart from the fact she arranged the occasional Buddhist retreat, I was only vaguely aware Lydia and the monk stayed in touch. She blew her 21st birthday money on a trip to war-torn Sri Lanka to visit him. As her visits to the monastery became more frequent, Philip and I grew uneasy. Being

spiritual in a floaty 21st century way is one thing. Having a child get serious about a religion, even a 'nice' one like Buddhism, is worrying.

In the meantime, there was plenty to keep me occupied. As well as doing a regular column for my beloved NEXT magazine, I'd started writing a book about our first cat, Cleo, hoping it might sell a few thousand copies if I was lucky. My plans were blown apart when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2008. I resigned from NEXT and stopped writing the book. To my bewilderment, Lydia took off to the monastery on the eve of my mastectomy, and announced she was going to become a nun.

Tears and accusations flew, but at the time I wasn't capable of understanding the pain and confusion she was suffering. To my great delight and relief, she returned a few days after my surgery and put her nursing skills to practice. I doubt I would've been capable of providing anything like the care Lydia gave me to my own mother. Through those weeks we grew closer than ever.

At the same time, a hyperactive Siamese kitten exploded into our lives. We named him Jonah after the famous All Black. Jonah





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was always risking his life trying to run away and roam our inner-city neighbourhood. He and Lydia were similar in many ways. They were both young and beautiful – and longed to be out in the dangerous world.

Even though Jonah was a high maintenance cat, he proved to be a healer in his own right. He seemed to know when my stitches were digging into my ribs, or when I needed to lie down and rest. Better still, his swaggering ego made me laugh. Nevertheless, he had nerves of crystal. The slightest sound made him leap a metre into the air.

When I was strong again and with Jonah keeping me company, I was able to send Lydia back to Sri Lanka with an open heart. I finished the *Cleo* manuscript, which to my astonishment quickly became an international bestseller. It's now in more than 16 languages and, according to my publisher, has sold around half a million copies. A French television crew visited the house to make a documentary. Film rights were sold. Emails and invitations continue to flood

in from around the world. I still can't quite believe it.

With a good health prognosis and unexpected success, I was able to take a broader view of Lydia's spirituality. If she wanted to be a nun in Sri Lanka, I decided I might as well visit the monastery and give her my blessing.

A monastery, I might add, that has no flushing toilets, no linen – fluffy or otherwise – and a resident scorpion. Not to mention the 200 steps.

What happened at the top of the 200 steps formed part of my new book *After Cleo Came Jonah*. It's the story of what strong-minded mothers do when their daughters reflect their strength back at them, and how cats and daughters don't always come when they're called. And how there are times when a mother's heart needs to stretch wide enough to provide the last thing she wants to give – freedom.

The rewards from unravelling those apron strings are so amazing, they make the sacrifice seem minimal... well, ultimately. □

After Cleo Came Jonah by Helen Brown (Allen & Unwin, \$35) is out now. Brown will be on a nationwide book tour in late May. Check www.helenbrown.com for dates.



Lydia, Helen and Jonah.
Below left: Lydia's first day at school and, right, at the monastery.