

## The Best View

*I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees.*

*~Henry David Thoreau*

Every room was occupied. The kids were home from school, each ensconced in their room, trying to focus on their online lessons. My mother-in-law was staying for the first three weeks of our national COVID-19-induced lockdown. The dogs flopped in either the lounge or on the veranda. And my husband was working in a room in the vacant house next door, shouting over the wall if he needed anything.

For someone used to hours of peace and quiet, and the space to potter at will every morning, this was a challenge. I had no sooner cleaned all the kitchen counters and popped the stray cups in the dishwasher than another dirty dish would appear. The milk seemed to be more out of the fridge than in, snacks were in constant demand, and doors clattered and rattled.

Just as I sat down to get my own work done, someone would request help or attention. Add to that the stress and anxiety experienced every time I read the news or watched updates on TV. Coronavirus numbers were climbing; deaths were rising. The world was suffering.

I was overwhelmed. I needed to do something, go somewhere. A place with a distant horizon, a wide-open sky and a gentle breeze. My garden. My retreat. My spacious place.

I live in Durban, on the east coast of South Africa, in a home overlooking the warm Indian Ocean. Palm trees wave their branches in the salty sea air, and yellow-billed kites play in the thermals. Pods of dolphins surf the waves below, and whales breach and smack their tails with glorious delight. Little wonder that there, under the palm tree, was my favourite place to rest, recover and recharge.

It was time to head there now. I brewed a cup of strong, black coffee, aromatic and earthy, grabbed the brightly coloured cap I'd bought in Mozambique a few months earlier, and tucked a comfy cushion under my arm. I closed the back door firmly behind me and took the few steps down to the pool area of the garden. Sheltered from the wind and drenched in warm, end-of-summer sunshine, my plastic pool lounger awaited.

I stretched out on the lounger, grateful for the feeling of finally being on my own. I sipped the coffee, gazing over the rim of the cup at the ocean stretched in front of me, blue and peaceful. As I drank, savouring the bitter taste, I began to engage my other senses, taking time to tune in to the sights and sounds around me. Putting down the emptied cup, I began to deliberately notice the ebb and flow of the waves below me, observing the dark of the rocks under the surface. I watched numerous swallows rise and dip in search of food and tried to see the insects that were the object of their desire. I listened to the layers of sound—first, the loud crash and suck of the rolling breakers, then the closest of the birds until gradually I could discern the rustle of the leaves in the tree below me.

I took a deep breath in, one of those stuttering breaths taken by a child at the end of a torrent of tears. I hadn't been crying but must have been more tense and on-edge than I thought, holding my breath tight in my lungs, raising my shoulders nearly to my ears. I took another breath, less shaky this time, and felt my diaphragm stretch and suck air deep within. Exhaling slowly and steadily, my shoulders fell and softened. I settled a little more deeply into my seat.

This practice of observing the wonder of God's creation, of truly looking and noticing, has become a vital aspect of my self-care journey. In doing so, I hear again His whispers, feel His love, enjoy His presence. I am reminded that He is God, and I am not. As such, I don't need

to be weighed down with the burdens of the world. He opens the windows of my soul, and the claustrophobic stuffiness is expelled by the fresh wind of His Spirit.

I gathered my coffee cup and cushion and returned to my over-full house. But this time, as I walked through the door, it was different. Or, rather, I was. Now there was space.

—Anna Jensen—

