

Steering True

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Ukulele: check. Soft toys: check. Reading material: check. Schedule – out the window: check. Anxiety...sigh...check.

Life on the road, even for a limited time, was a dream come true. We'd been planning our long service leave trip across the top of Australia since the kids were young, and the intermittent processes of preparation served to steadily fuel the passion for such an extended trip. The ultimate plan had whispered to us through the years and now finally its voice was loud and present. We were ready. The exhilaration was unmatched, but the dreaded companion that had come to haunt me over the years would not be left behind.

Our kids were aged 10,12 and 14, the perfect ages to take in the adventure that lay ahead. We set off in our old, brown 80's pop-top caravan to head through every state, with primary plans of free camping, desert tracks and isolated bush. It would turn out to be over 20,000 kms with over 5,000 of those on dirt roads.

I was prayerful as we left, not only for travelling mercies, but in thankfulness: for my family, my extremely capable husband David, God's beauty in creation and the opportunity to see this amazing country.

The feeling of quiet excitement, like an inflated balloon bobbing in the breeze, hovered tenuously above the threat that coiled closer and closer, ready to strike and pop it, and end its wild dance.

Anxiety.

It was an enemy that had subtly worked its way into my inner circle. I had opened the door at times. Often unaware, I let it overstay and it took full advantage, growing and claiming ownership of my body, thoughts and emotions. This trip was fertile ground for its eruption, with new experiences and unknowns around every corner.

As I prayed through the different scenarios that would arise, aware of my tight chest and racing thoughts, God's grace allowed one thought to dominate them all: 'Goodness and mercy.' Surely goodness and mercy were the prevailing blessings, following me all the way. The words were playing on repeat in my mind, even as I came up against situations that threatened to deflate my paper-thin balloon.

The first crack in the surface came when our caravan suspension broke on the Oodnadatta Track in 40° C heat. The claws of anxiety slashed viciously and a wave of panic

erupted like fault lines in fragile ground. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no help in sight. Yet the quiet whisper from the distance continued...

‘Goodness and mercy...’

We managed to limp to Coward Springs where my resourceful husband was able to ‘tie’ the van together with the original telegraph wire that had been spread across the country 100 years ago, and the kids plucked a tune on the ukulele aptly titled ‘Oodnadatta Track’. Little delights like these were fighting a tug-of-war in my embattled mind. We dawdled the next 1,000 kilometres to Alice Springs where we were able to get some welding done and be ready for the ruddy Tanami Track. All the while, my teeth were gritted in desperate prayer, trying to manage anxiety-driven headaches and stomach cramps as my enemy continued to flash its sharp talons at my sensitive joy, threatening to tear it apart.

‘Goodness and mercy...’

‘Goodness and mercy...’

As we hit the unfamiliar realm of croc country, every time the kids poked their toes in some water, anxiety would seize my soul, emphatically insisting it alone deserved my focus. Sometimes it was hard to enjoy the beauty and blessing that surrounded.

At one point we found we had naively been waist-deep, fishing in a shore break at Broome that was known for both salties AND sharks, and at Derby, I swore I saw ripples under the water that were speedily making their way towards us before we decided to get off the low-lying jetty.

“Goodness and mercy...”

From slippery roads to the unknowns of croc country, to dubious river crossings, despite the pleasures in every day, anxiety always wanted to take the lead. The crux came for me in Lawn Hill National Park Qld, where the fast flowing, narrow causeway we were to tackle the next day robbed me of both peace and sleep. I was sure we would slip over the edge. Were there still crocs in this area? What if we couldn’t get the kids out of the sinking car? I had never been so stressed in my life and even as I prayed, my body only heard the shouts of anxiety and responded in waves of churning sickness and throbbing dread. To make matters worse, the ranger happened along, nonchalantly proclaiming ‘Yes! Cars DO go over the causeway all the time!’ It was enough for the ever-present enemy to deal the death blow. Even David told the kids to take off their seatbelts and wind their windows down – prepared for the worst-case scenario.

My mind was reeling but I somehow managed to precariously cross the tumultuous stream and stood waiting on the other side to video the scene, all the while acting as though I

was not about to go into heart failure. I stood waiting, and desperately praying, 'God, no matter what happens, I know you're good.'

As David edged forward my prayers turned to guttural pleas: 'Oh GOD! Oh GOD!' as the caravan wheel slipped off the causeway. That moment felt like an eternity as I waited for the rest of the van to follow and pull the car with it. The crumbling inside my soul engulfed me as I held my breath and felt the tears rise. My family inside the car were oblivious as, in reality, it only took a second for David's careful steering to pull it back onto the concrete and then they were across and pulling up next to me with water dripping all around the van.

'Goodness and mercy...'

'Goodness and mercy...'

I was in speechless shock as we drove on. I looked back at the kids. They sat with smiles and chattered to each other, flicking through books and activities that were part of their occupation for the trip. They were oblivious to the monster that had been tormenting me. The back seat was clear, there was no suffocating haunting, nothing to squash their joy or steal their excitement.

I turned back to the road. The red sandy, sunburnt country, rocky outcrops and glowing flora, drew me back...

'Goodness and mercy...'

I breathed in deeply as I looked at David navigating the current sand and ruts, and suddenly the realisation hit me. How it was that those children could have such an attitude; how they could sit back and enjoy the whole adventure, even with the same circumstances and possibilities I was facing.

They trusted the driver.

They knew *he* knew where he was going and how to get there. They knew that he knew how to drive – that he was the best one to be at the wheel. They knew there was no cause for worry, as long as their dad was driving. *He* was in control and they could just sit back and enjoy the ride. Sure, there'd be danger at times, sure there were potholes and ruts, but he'd give them instructions when needed. He'd tell them to hold on and he'd bring them through.

I turned my inward eyes towards *my* driver as I glanced in awe at the wide-open expanse of outback Australia and the clear vaulted sky above. Suddenly anxiety tucked its tail between its legs in defeat and fled in terror.

The words of truth echoed in my mind: The Lord is my Shepherd...I lack nothing...He leads me beside still waters...He restores my soul...I will fear no evil for your rod and staff comfort me...My cup overflows.

My cup was overflowing.

What a blessing it was to take that trip, travel sandy tracks, swim in ancient gorges and jump from cool waterfalls in the tropical heat. Camping under the stars and living with no schedule, all of this was incredible. But for all of God's glory and beauty He shared, it was one glance at my children that taught me what child-like trust looked like.

I returned from that trip with a new understanding. Things happen to people all the time: good, bad, big and small. It is the nature of life. It is inevitable. As the bumper sticker says, 'Stuff happens!' One thing through all of this is certain, if the Lord is my shepherd, then He is out in front and leads me through it all. There is nothing else I need. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

My struggle with anxiety sometimes rears up and tries to claim my peace, but I am learning to turn my head back towards my driver. He knows the roads, He knows the ruts, and He alone knows how to steer through it all.