

Sheltering in place, 7,000 miles from home

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DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

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Each year, my husband and I travel to New Zealand in January, trading Northern Hemisphere winter for Southern Hemisphere summer. It started when we got together 10 years ago and he was living in New Zealand full time. He had emigrated and holds both Kiwi and American passports. Our compromise was to live on my, (now our) little farm in Northern California for nine months and spend three months at his, (now our) home in New Zealand.

When I'd fly back home to California after the three months, I'd leave behind fall and head back to spring, my favorite season. I'd jump into weeding, planting and reveling in the beauty all around me, as the earth woke up from her winter slumber. I'd also feel myself become grounded again, on my home soil, pet my sweet cats, who'd been in the care of a house-sitter and cherish

the comfort of being back in my familiar home. I also had the comfort of being in the same hemisphere, state and time zone as my children and grandchildren, not across the planet from them.

This year, as the coronavirus spread across the planet and we watched the world become unrecognizable day by day, the distance yawned between New Zealand and California. We were due to fly back on April 7, but by mid-March, began weighing the dangers of international travel. We realized that traveling back not only meant risking our own lives, but the possibility of carrying the virus back home with us.

Then our carrier canceled our flights to San Francisco and on March 26, New Zealand declared a state of emergency and Level 4 lockdown, with everyone directed to stay home for four weeks. The borders to New Zealand are closed.

We are relatively safe here. We live in a tiny village and drive 30 minutes to a nearby town for groceries. We have access to a deserted beach along the Tasman sea. Our nearest neighbors are sheep and dairy cows.

I have nothing to complain about. We are “stranded” in one of the most beautiful places in the world. And yet, in this time of crisis and worldwide trauma, I miss my home. I am a California native and yes, I am a world traveler. But as Dorothy, in the Wizard of Oz put it so well, there is no place like home.

Home is where I know where each pot and pan lives in my kitchen, where the cats sleep on the crocheted blanket on the back of the couch or crawl into my lap as I read in the evening. There’s my stash of fabric that I could be getting to, creating something fun and new, since I now have so much time. Or the boxes in the basement of old photos and things that I’ve been putting off going through. I would not have the normal excuses for putting that task off. I can see all those things in my thoughts, but I can’t reach them now.

This year, I’ll miss seeing my apple trees blossom or witnessing the miracle of the bulbs I planted last fall push their way up, their colorful faces swaying in the fresh spring breeze.

I won't be getting muddy in my garden weeding, then planting the tomatoes, squash, carrots and beans, zinnias, cosmos and sweet peas for our summer enjoyment. We are heading into fall here, not spring. The comforting routine of what I knew as my traveling life has been altered beyond recognition.

At this moment, I don't know when we will be able to come back. But this experience has given me a new perspective and appreciation for what the terms "home" and "home town" mean, as I watch from 7,000 miles away.

Stay safe, California. My heart is there with you and I'll be watching from afar.

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