

Get back in the game

George Georgiou

Although I grew up in a surfing village in KZN (I'm not a Kragga Kamma Georgiou), I never learnt to surf.

It seemed a bit wild for me and the waves in St Lucia seemed angry.

Plus, young Cypriot Greeks grow up working at the family business. Surfing was the sort of nonsense one expected of the holiday makers we made our living from.

I should add that my brothers all mastered the art of surfing. Perhaps I'm just making excuses for my fear of shadows in the water.

So, it came as a shock when, in my 40's, I lost a bet. I had to learn to surf, and the minimum payment was to stand on a board and catch a wave back.

Mr. Mc took me for a couple of lessons. One especially impressed me. We met at the beach where everyone learns to surf.

I was the oldest by, well, decades. For this particular lesson we took a drive to a proper surf spot. It was low tide, which confused me. Not suitable surfing conditions. If you're not in the surfing community, that's a huge issue.

There are WhatsApp groups letting you know when surf's up. We stopped and looked at rocks. Mr Mc said, "memorise the rock layout, so you can avoid them when it's high tide again and you can't see them."

I'm a preacher, I thought, that'll preach.

We've all been though a kind of low tide. The kind that exposes what lies beneath.

People spent so much time at home they started recalculating their own identity. Conditions over the last two years haven't always been 'up', especially for mental health.

Lonely people got lonelier and angry people angrier.

Mind you, I met a couple at church last week who got married and had two kids during the pandemic! Respect.

But, for many of us, we discovered lots of rocks beneath the surface.

I started out by quite enjoying the solitude. Planted some fruit trees, did some online tutorials, made an effort at training my dogs. Did church online from my kitchen counter.

It was nice. Sundays in shorts at home. I haven't had that in 30 years!

But something sinister started to happen. It felt unsafe to have anyone around.

My opinions were being shaped by the YouTube algorithm that directed me to only see people who thought like me.

My intolerances grew. With less to celebrate, more things began to irritate. A bubble had formed. It would need to burst somehow for my sanity's sake.

By way of confession, worry was already too close a relative to me, and although I knew the holy texts on the topic, it was still a bit of an internal struggle.

No doubt this will provoke some saints to question my spirituality and for just such occasions I keep that one about the speck in your own eye handy.

I've been forced out of the bubble recently, a catch-up at a restaurant. Gym. A coffee date.

But mostly by church. Big church is back.

The auntie who insists on a hug hello, and the guy who brought me homegrown honey.

The same guy whose Facebook posts I hid ages ago because they don't fit into my new algorithm.

Bit by bit they burst the bubble - I felt the rush of fresh air. I discovered in practice the power of Psalm 68 that says God is:

"5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

6 God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land."

The church hasn't always been helpful on mental health. We've either tried to cast it out or place blame on some sin you haven't confessed.

Yet, truth be told, the person of God is much better than the people of God.

So, I salute those who've won against an unseen enemy.

I pray for those who fight their shadows daily so they can smile in the face of adversity and score each day as a win. I tip my hat at the lonely - especially on this of all days - you've got this, you're ok.

And I'll be smiling at the romantic lovers whose Valentine's Day pics will flood my timeline today, a reminder that things aren't all shadows. There's a lot more sunshine out there.

I fulfilled my bet, and even enjoyed the experience in the water. I had a longboard shaped especially for me by a guy in a garage in Summerstrand, and although I still think dark shadows in the water are sharks sharpening their teeth, I got some great waves in, and felt alive.

Get back in the game, balance your surfing between online and in life better. Mostly, give God a gap. He gets you.

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