



# OCEANS *BETWEEN* Us

*by Jenni Cockerham*

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# The Foreword

*by Courtney Koctar*



I was on my way home from Uganda, a trip I went on to complete an adoption of a little boy. Then I got there and that didn't happen. For a lot of reasons it couldn't happen anymore. And so as quickly as I arrived I left. Devastated and heartbroken and mad as all get out. I flew from Uganda to Brussels where this man, think big and burly grandpa from New York who I'm pretty sure was in the mob, sat down at my gate and starting talking to me. He told me his mom had died, that was why he had been in Brussels. She was in the middle of a pretty standard surgery and died suddenly on the table. He showed me pictures of her and told me stories about her. I told him what had happened in Uganda. I showed him pictures and I told him stories. We laughed and we cried as we waited for our plane. He gave me a hug as we boarded and asked if I was going to be okay. We got on the plane and flew the nine hours back to America. He checked on me occasionally throughout the flight. Just making sure I was still hanging in there. We landed, went through customs, and went our separate ways. That was it.

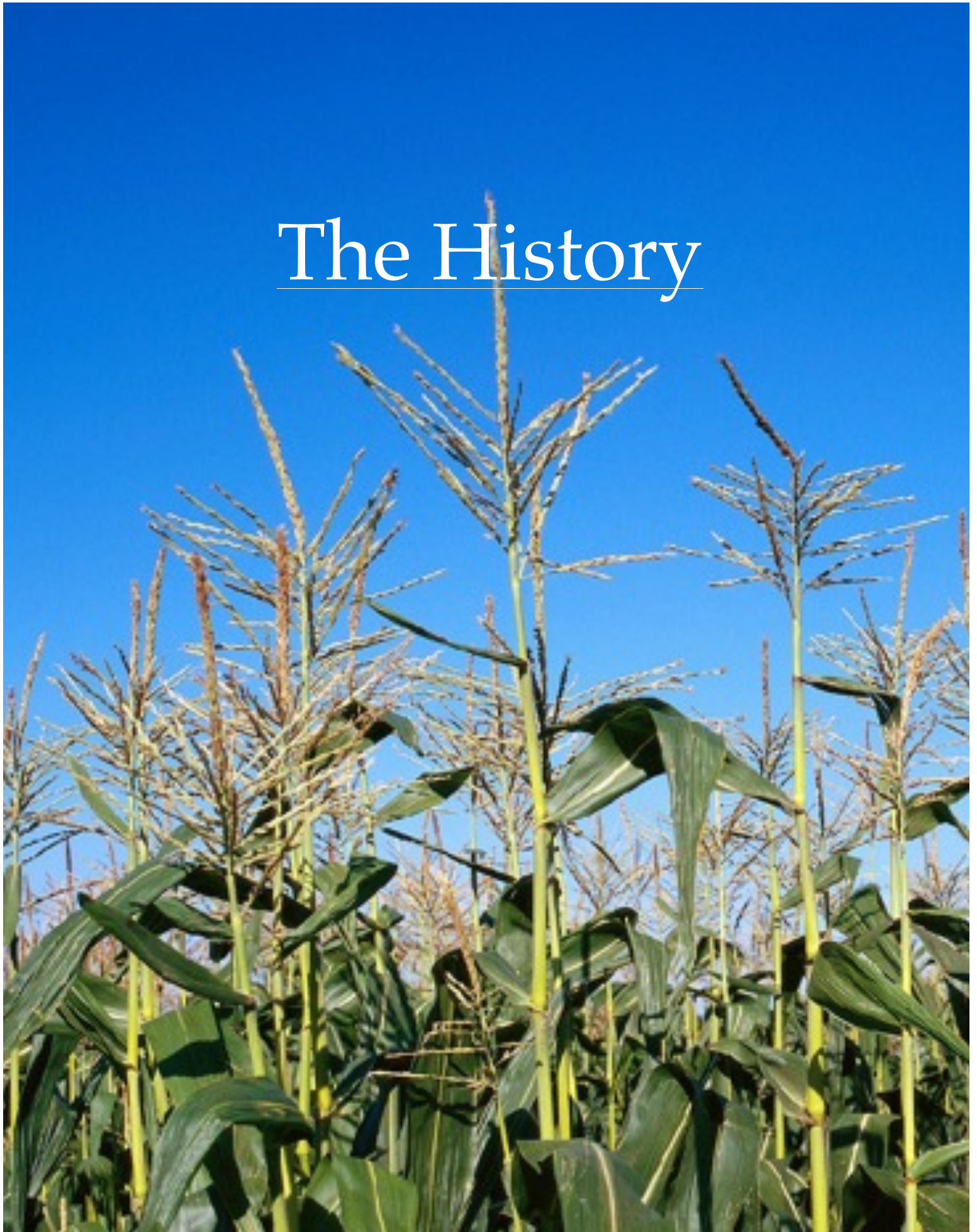
There were a handful of people praying specifically for my flight home. I am fully convinced that man was an answered prayer. The seat beside me at our gate was the only one empty for a specific reason. I needed somebody in that moment who got it. Someone who understood loss and grief, someone who understood laughter in the midst of the hard, someone who understood that listening is far better than any words you ever have to say. Someone who could genuinely say to me: You're going to be okay. Not right now and probably not for a very long time. But eventually, you will be okay.

And so I want you to know you are welcome here; the grieving,

the hurt, the devastated, and the heartbroken. You are welcome here; the ones questioning God and faith. You are welcome here; the ones sitting in the darkness not sure if you have the strength to climb your way back into the light. You are welcome here and you're going to be okay. Not right now and probably not for a very long time. But eventually, you will be okay.



# The History



I grew up landlocked amid the cornfields of Indiana, but my introduction to the ocean came as a young girl, as my grandparents lived near the coast of North Carolina. Immediately, I fell in love with the intoxicating sounds of the wind and the waves; the never-ending exploration for sand dollars, sea gulls, and sandcastles; and the enticing flavors of fried shrimp and flounder—a taste like no seafood I had experienced in the Midwest. Therefore, as we prepared to make our yearly pilgrimage, my restlessness intensified until the day we arrived at the Water.

I have had many spiritual awakenings in this beloved place. I remember in my late 20's wrangling 17 high school girls and renting a massive oceanfront beach home over spring break. It was my hope to give these girls an option more memorable and safe than the one their friends had chosen. While their friends chose a week filled with the beach, booze, boys and break-ups (an often tragic and reckless, but acceptable, rite of passage some say), I wanted to introduce them to my shore-lined spiritual home. I, too, had known the days of boys and booze. (I now affectionately refer to those days as *the stupid days*.) The stupid days were filled with grasping and reaching and longing and seeking...only to wake up disappointed and alone. They were hazy, hollow days. Although, I vaguely remember the things I did in those days, somehow I can never forget. I think I did the stupid things on the stupid days because they made me feel grown up, independent, and as though I had some semblance of control over my life.

One of the days within my stupid days, a friend invited me to spend the week at the beach. She was a good friend who did stupid stuff too, but ironically, we didn't do the stupid things together. We ac-

tually would do other things like talk about God, family, and our futures. I liked her and those talks and said yes.

The week with my friend at the beach channeled me back to the place of my inner child. The week intended for sunbathing and trashy teen magazines, surprisingly turned in to a time of transformation--a pinpoint on my spiritual map and a time of awakening. The friend and I did not hold hands, sing "Kumbaya", or have deep discussions questioning our existence or the meaning of life. The time and space, the walks, and the waves reminded me of a Life much bigger than my own. It reminded me of a childhood place filled with innocence, whimsy and joy. The consistency of the foam making its way to the shore whispered a message of consistent Love. The ocean brought back memories of a child doing cartwheels in the sand. I was once again a child wearing a white sun hat digging for sand crabs with her toes. I remembered and wanted the little girl's life full of whimsy. I was tired of the struggling and striving after the stupid life of the grown-up I was attempting to become.

I told those 17 high school friends who went with me to the beach that the stupid stuff was just that: stupid. I desperately wanted them to know there was more to life than the boys, the drinking, the drama, and the disappointment. Somehow, taking my friends to the place where I felt the closest to God seemed fitting. It allowed my words to be drowned by the waves, where the majesty and natural beauty of the beach could speak for Himself.

While living in Uganda (and boy is that another story for another time), we experienced the loss of 2 precious children. I don't need to tell



you the details, and I am okay with your mind wandering because loss...is loss...is loss. No matter whether they were my biological children, children I was caring for in a hospital, children I worked with in an orphanage, or children I adopted...**we lost them**. And loss is devastating. *Some people never recover from loss*. Loss can make us bitter and stupid.

When the clock told us it was time to leave Uganda, we realized our home and cars in America had been sold. We were officially homeless. The best part about being homeless is having friends who own beach houses! Specifically, beach houses that are not being rented in the spring!

Grieving and wrecked, I returned to my happy place, trying to find the little girl with unbridled whimsy and faith. Though living less stupid than I was in my stupid days--I am still searching. I am looking for the spiritual footing that has been swept out from under me. My trust with God feels broken, and His goodness most certainly doubted. I need Nature to speak healing over my wounds and this setting to provide salve for my pain.

One might think the sheer magnitude of the ocean would cause me to lose sight of self; the grand backdrop might cause me to feel worthless, willing the waves to swallow me whole. Instead, I immediately align myself with nature. I see myself in the trees, the sea glass, the sand. I find solidarity with the wounded animals. I desire to discover the secret of the playfulness of the dolphins. Yes, in this place I am deeply aware of my humanity, yet, I am not consumed by it.

As a young girl approaches her father to ask for *another* bedtime story; knowing it is late, but hopeful his fondness for her will triumph-- I find my questions tumble out unedited. **In this place it feels safe to question the Creator.** How is it I see before me a masterpiece, a beautiful symphony of wind, water, and wildlife moving together in harmony? How can the beauty co-exist on the same planet as the devastation, destruction and pain I have watched the world endure? Where is the Ocean-Maker, the One who invites the sun to shine each day? Will He not make it right? Is He afraid to meddle?

What if, in their grief, the waves refused to march to the shore today? Or the dolphins swam low unwilling to porpoise, unwilling to face what was just above the surface? Or the sun stayed behind the clouds hiding her face from the world, unwilling to shine her rays upon the ravage devastation she sees below? Should not the entire planet reflect the grotesque reality of our world and her suffering?

Yet on this random Wednesday, on a random balcony overlooking the Atlantic, there is abundant sun, the dolphins continue their dance, and the roar of the waves fills my ears. When does one stop to say, "Enough!?" There is too much beauty—have you not seen the pain? *Should not the Voice who spoke it in to existence, the Voice that calmed the wind and the waves, be an advocate for the littlest voice who is hurting and cannot speak?*

# The Invitation



Little ones, wounded ones, searching and stumbling ones, let us seek truth together. No matter your world, or your wound, there is place on this planet for your questions, concerns, and cries.

During this time, and in this place, I have poured over dozens of books and listened to wise sages tell me deep truths about suffering. I have pounded the pavement, feet running and fists shaking at the Ocean-Maker. I may never understand it all...but returning to my spiritual oasis was the starting point for finding healing in my heart.

We all get stuck from time to time. We all get stupid from time to time. We all lose our footing from time to time. We doubt, we disbelieve, and for those who haven't, you will.

No matter whether you are weathering a tempest, or know another who is, I hope this little book puts just the right pinpoint on your spiritual map. I hope it adds to the collection of healing elements you are amassing.

Nature speaks, and we would be wise to listen. The subtle messages are whispers of love and leading. I like the length of this piece. In one short and swallow-able sitting, we can taste and see that He is, in fact, *good*. You are invited to open the door of your heart a tiny crack to explore His beauty in the pain.

My loss literally has left oceans between us. Oceans between the little ones I love and me. It has also brought about bitterness and left a rift in my relationship with God. A rift so wide, it, too, feels like there are oceans between us. My heart and mind are certain this God exists.

Therefore, my option is to stay mad or get stupid. Neither one feel like the right fit. So I have decided to lean in to the questions, sit in the suffering, and seek out the Truth in my most happy place.

I hope you will join me...because life is too short to live mad or stupid.





# The Sea Glass

A friend of mine turned me on to the collection of sea glass. For those who don't know, sea glass is not organic, it is trash. Sea glass is the litter left behind, then drug out to the ocean by the wind and waves, only to surface again busted and broken in to somewhat smaller pieces.

When discovered on the beach days, weeks, months, or years later, this glass has miraculously become quite lovely. It has lost its jagged edges. It is frosty and softer in appearance. One can tell the original state from which it has come; yet, it is...in a sense...new.

I remember the moment I knew I needed to be new. I was at a camp, and the speaker had lined up a group of role-playing high school students. We had been following their stories all week. They were a bit stereotypical: the pothead, the player, the jock, the reserved bookworm, the cheerleader, the Bible brainiac, and so on. He then brought out a man and asked him to pretend to be God. On stage, he asked the audience to arrange the teens in a straight line from closest to farthest from God. Being a bit of a good girl myself, at least in my early years of adolescence, I began the process of ordering the group from **bad to worse**. (Because I mean, no one really likes a Bible-beating know it all.) But either way, I had the line up in my head. Then, the speaker did something I will never forget. He turned the teens the audience had placed in a consecutive line from "bad to good" in to a semi-circle facing God. Simultaneously, he placed each teen equidistant from God. *And there it was...a visual picture of my pretending...exposed.* I was no better than anyone on that stage or in this world I inhabit. I am busted, I am broken, and I am selfish. I hurt others in the same way they hurt me.

That night, alone in my bed, my eyes filled with tears, and I felt the weight of my hypocritical self standing upon my chest. It was on that day I realized I, too, needed to be new. I also knew it was something I could not do on my own. I needed a heart transplant in the spiritual sense.

It is no wonder I identify so deeply with the sea glass I collect. I am full of jagged edges, yet, God is softening me, making me lovely, and making me more loveable. Through my life, I have endured hardship and have been tossed by the waves of despair. The sea glass I find has also endured much to become the beautiful gem it is today.

While walking along the shores of this place, in this time of deep grief, I am longing for a message of hope, a message of love. Trying to make sense of my life while asking the unanswerable questions. God seems silent, but the Sea Glass speaks. Her transparency allows the sun to create a shine unlike any shell on the sand. I am drawn to her...I lean in...I listen. She tells me a story of significance. She tells me of the time she was thrown out, ugly, unwanted. She tells of shattered dreams and a fragmented life. She tells me of her hope being lost. She tells me of the hardship she endured while at sea. She tells me she wanted to be buried at the bottom of the ocean; begging for the tossing and turning and churning to end. She tells me I am not alone. She tells me I am seen, and that some day...*some day*...I will emerge, not tossed away trash...but His treasure.

*"For if a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether —  
the past is finished and gone,  
everything has become fresh and new."*

2 Corinthians 5:16-17 J.B. Phillips



# The Loon



There is a loon. I watched him fly in and land on the sand. Upon landing I noticed both legs were sprawled awkwardly behind his body. He didn't move. Something was wrong...he was sick, injured, perhaps even dying. Strangely, over the past few weeks, I have seen several of the same type of bird, same leg issue, beached, appearing to be very lucid, but unable to move.

Last night as I walked past the loon, I was approached by a concerned couple. They explained "someone" had been alerted. Not just one call they explained, there were 5 total calls placed on behalf of the bird. *Nice, I thought, someone locally who helps with wildlife can care for the bird.* Mid-conversation with the couple, two official looking men approached. Too official for a bird welfare check; the men wore badges, black boots, handcuffs, and carried guns on their hips. *Police officers? For a bird rescue?*

My mind raced. I was quickly embarrassed to be associated with the scene. The official looking men were polite but obviously annoyed. *Please God do not let them count me as one of the 5 concerned citizens calling...about a bird.* Maybe if the bird was aggressive and had pecked and bloodied a small child in the process; a phone call to the police would have seemed appropriate. But not concerning this docile, almost domesticated bird?

Let me pause. Animal lovers keep reading. There is more in this for you. My son is an animal whisperer, so I get it. Had he known, he would have probably slept on the beach beside the bird to ensure his safety. In Africa we had a pet rooster gifted to us for the sole purpose of making him Thursday night's dinner; but instead, endured his 4am



wake up calls to spare his life. We like birds, but there *are* more significant problems on the planet. Because those predicaments are lingering fresh in my mind, I need us to gain a tad bit of perspective.

America, how I love and loath thee. My precious concerned citizens...the bird is sick, injured, or is possibly dying. However, animals beach themselves...with a purpose. I know we have all seen *Dolphin Tale* and want to do our part, but sometimes we just need to leave the poor animal alone and allow him to die.

Not in America. The bird flies on to shore, then bystanders believing the animal is too close to the water and might be swept to sea, *move the animal* farther up toward land. (This actually happened to the above mentioned loon.) The officer explained it was a felony to move the bird; but the perpetrators were long gone before the police arrived.

Do you know the 911 call response time in Uganda is several HOURS to NEVER? But here we are calling the police about a beached bird. Bless.

I do love America's appreciation for the sanctity of life. We value and do our best to protect life at all costs. The fight for animals and people is inspiring. However, and please forgive me in advance, but there is a line, and I think calling the *police* about a loon has crossed it.

The police are there to protect us from the bad guys, not check on the status of a beached bird. As to be expected, the officers could do absolutely nothing for the bird. They explained it was likely the bird would die in the night...but they didn't really know because they don't

typically deal with birds. We all went to bed. Early the next morning I looked out to find a very live and lucid loon. Interesting. He somehow had magically moved far closer to the water than the location he had been deposited by the meddling humans the night before.

Seconds later, the unthinkable happened. The loon, not using its legs, began a baby sea turtle flipper (but with feathers) belly crawl to the water's edge. Much heavier than a turtle, and having no use of his legs for assistance, this crawl could also be described as an awkward hop. I sat up, squinted, attempting a closer look. I became mesmerized by what I was witnessing. The bird, after several more seconds, gathered the strength, and did about three scoot/hops and then plopped down again.

Minutes ticked by, I watched the bird and found myself audibly willing him into the water. In the distance, I saw a couple approaching with their bouncing border collie. I wished them away. The bird grew still. Out came the cell phone. *For the love of humanity! Please leave the bird alone. He's got this.* The couple having done their due diligence, leaves, and I see the loon's eyes turn toward the waves. Three more painstakingly slow scoots. The white foam inched its way forward grazing the base of the bird's feathers. Seemingly invigorated, he forced out another four to five hops. Eventually, effortlessly, the waves lifted him up and began to pull the bird out to sea. The loon immediately sparked to life. He began diving under the crests of the waves, swimming farther into the deep waters. What on land had looked like a sick or injured loon now appeared a perfectly healthy waterfowl. Minutes ticked by as I watched him dive, splash and play.

The night before I was so bothered by the scene and the people and the phone calls; I decided to google info on loons. Where was

google when all the people were calling the police? Loons are considered floaters, meaning they fly and float on water, but their legs don't work on land. (Hence, the weird sprawled leg look.) I found out the birds will often beach themselves if injured, but also do this if simply in need of rest. *The worst thing a person can do is move an injured loon because they will have that much farther to hop, crawl, or scoot, when ready to return to the ocean.*

I am as much of a sucker for a save the whales story as the next person, but during this reflective time, I was reminded of my own life. I considered my injury, my pain, and my need for rest. As a culture we don't tolerate pain very well. We want to numb or fix it. We might even want to put pain out of it's misery, so to speak. (Also a suggestion made to the officer the night before concerning the "suffering" bird.) Sometimes, we have to let pain do its work. We don't need to mess with it, we don't need to move it, we don't need to call someone about it, we need to leave it and let it work itself out.

I am so very grateful for a society who appreciates the sanctity of life, but we often go so far to the extreme. We remove all of nature's systems for coping, fixing, healing, or growing stronger from our circumstances. In an attempt to eliminate pain, do we rush the five stages of grief? Or do we avoid certain stages all together?

The process of grief and loss of our children has been excruciating at times. The response from friends and family has been extremely kind and compassionate. Having said this, I see time and time again—in our genuine care and concern--we want to fix and end all pain. By doing this, we end the process. Here's the thing: I really needed to be angry.

Very angry. I needed to cuss and doubt and give God the middle finger. (Okay maybe I didn't *need* to do that—but I believe I am healthier and more honest for having done it.) I needed to weep and cry deep heavy sobs because the story, our story, ended sadly. Unfortunately for our family, the story, did not end immediately--there were layers to the grief and different added incidents adding insult to injury. This would often trigger or restart the grieving process. At the time, in Africa, there was little help. The 911 call response, so to speak, was delayed.

But I believe I am better for it. What if I had been drug so far from the water's edge that when I was ready to re-engage the water, I did not have the strength or ability to get myself close enough to the shore to do what I was made to do? What if, like the loon, there had been discussion of whisking me away in a box to be further poked and prodded? (Only to discover I simply was in need of time, a safe landing spot--to recover and then freedom to drag *myself* back out to sea?) I wonder if at times, in an attempt to help, more harm is actually done?

We do this to ourselves--it's not just others insistent upon our pain free life or a quick move through the grieving process. Humans like to avoid pain and so we numb it. We drink too much, shop too much, exercise too much, and work too much--anything to avoid engaging the pain before us. I know because I have done it. But here, in my happy place, all other voices are quieted (including the voices in my head). Nature speaks loudest, *I know the pain process is necessary for me to emerge on the other side a more whole version of myself*. I know, instinctively, (just as the loon knew), if I can be patient, wait out this process, wrestle, or rest in the midst of the pain; I will find the strength to make my way to the waves and engage again.

*Let perseverance **finish** its work  
so that you may be mature and complete,  
not lacking anything.  
James 1:4 NIV*



# The Shark's Tooth



Day in and day out for the last month, I have combed the beach looking for sea glass and other hidden treasures. My favorite discovery during this time of shells, sea glass and searching was the day I found a shark's tooth. My boys had been especially eager to find a shark's tooth on the shore. There was even discussion if they found a dead shark on the shore if it would be inhumane to use pliers to pry the remaining teeth out. My clever boys are so resourceful?! Personally searching solely for sparkly things, I knew what a tooth looked like, but it was not on my radar. The day I glanced down and saw this treasure was a day worth remembering. I could not wipe the smile off my face, thrilled knowing how happy it would make my boys!

When my grief started to settle in thick and make herself comfortable, I felt a loneliness in my relationship with God. And it lingered. I would read in the Bible about folks crying out to God for relief or guidance or help. I would mimic those cries and steal their words. If they were "one's after God's own heart" it seemed appropriate to borrow their words when mine felt like they were hitting the ceiling.

During this time I was unintentionally discouraged by another believer who explained in her 40+ years of walking with God, when she sincerely sought Him, when she was grieving, or hurting, or needing intimacy and comfort...He was always there...she never felt He was far away. *Never? As in ever? You have got to be kidding me?* Discouragement settled in and troubling questions began to gnaw at my soul. Where does that leave me? What have I done wrong? Why is there so much silence? If the thing I longed for most in my relationship with God was intimacy, and the only thing I was getting was an eerily quiet response...where was I to go? What was I to conclude?

The past nine months have been the hardest in the 30 (some) years I have lived on the planet. I am quite aware that others have had *far* worse months than mine. I know I haven't cornered the market on pain. But one of the most challenging things to do during this time of suffering and sorrow was show up to attempt some semblance of quiet moments with God. It was not hard because I didn't need Him, it was hard because I needed Him and He was heavily silent. I am not the only one I know who has felt ignored by God, specifically during a time of great need.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this:

*"But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. And after that silence." \**

The daily walks on the beach mirror my spiritual life. It is mysterious how you may walk the same three mile stretch and one day stumble upon a sunken treasure. And the very next day and for weeks on end, you find nothing. The barren beach reflects your barren heart. Yet, it takes one small slice of sea glass and I am right there at it again the next day, scavenging, hungry to find the next shimmery segment—and so on and so on.

My boys were so thrilled with the shark's tooth; they took it to the aquarium for a more expert opinion. As an avid shark week watcher, or any other shark special for that matter, I am pretty obsessed with these creatures, in a terrified and dreadful way. I could only imagine

this tooth came from a very large fish. Our family was shocked to learn this tooth either came from the mouth of a great white or possibly even a megalodon; these ginormous versions of shark are extinct! Unbeknownst to us, the tooth had been fossilized, and appeared to her untrained eye, *quite* old. Stop the madness. Daily I walked, never attempting to find anything but sea glass, but somehow stumbled on a shark tooth treasure!

What was the lesson learned in response to this discovery? We often believe we are searching for something extremely specific—but the One whom you seek may have an utterly different treasure for you to find. The treasure isn't part of your plan...but it is something better than the pounds of shimmery sea glass you discovered on your own.

What if I had given up the search? What if the cold silence became unendurable and I simply lost hope? Today is the day I stop believing...today I conclude there simply is no more treasure to be found. Does my decision to stop searching make it any less true that treasure can and will be found from the sea? No, in fact the waves will continue to dig and bury and unearth and then deliver treasure. It will happen whether I walk the shores and find it or not. My decision to give up, though justified or understood by many, would be the greatest mistake of my life. I would have missed out on so many hidden treasures and loads of lovely sea glass...never mind stumbling upon my sons' fossilized shark tooth!

I do not have the answers to speak to the confusion behind the silence. I am just on the other side of that wall and am betting it will take significant time and reflection to peel back the layers of pain, as well as

the protection provided by God despite His apparent lack of care. Miraculously, over time, the heaviness lifted, and His silence broke.

As one who has experienced the dark and seemingly endless silence; as well as one who has had the gates of heaven flung open and God's grace poured out like a faucet...My encouragement is to keep going. Keep searching. You may walk for hours only to come home empty-handed without a single shell to show for your efforts. At other times you won't be able to hold the bounty brought forth from the sea. Keep searching. Keep showing up. The treasures do surface and are worth the wait.

*If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.*  
*Jeremiah 29:13 NLT*

*\*A Grief Observed*



# The Dolphins



What is it about dolphins? People pay loads of cash to be given a chance to be in the water with these playful animals for a few short minutes. (I am one of those people.) *Oh, Mr. Dolphin Trainer, I can't bring my camera? How much for this photo? A million dollars? Okay...cause I swam with a DOLPHIN and would like something to show for it!?!*

Why are these creatures so beloved? What is it about their little lives that evoke such strong emotion? People may not love dolphins, but I have never met a person who sees a pod in the distance shout, "Ew...I hate dolphins!"

Dolphins' physical countenance radiates joy—upon close inspection their mouth almost turns upward in a smile. Dolphins are like big water dogs. They are playful and engaging. I was able to encounter a dolphin up close in an ocean swim...remember the one where my camera was confined to a locker and I was extorted an exorbitant amount of money for my photos? (Not bitter I promise.) On that swim, I found a piece of seaweed and threw it for a nearby dolphin. He retrieved the seaweed and then opened his mouth allowing me to remove the seaweed from his teeth and start the game of fetch again.

Upon arrival here at Atlantic beach, we noticed a small pod of dolphins splashing, swimming, and entertaining the people on shore. The water just past the breakers was somewhat serene, which provided a delightful playground for the babies to not only porpoise to breathe—but also to jump out of the water and slap their tails. Meanwhile some of the larger dolphins actually favored the waves for their play. The adult dolphin would swim inside the wave and would ride it just ahead of the curl, enjoying the most powerful part of the wave until it

crashed. I watched the same dolphin surf 20 different waves finding the curl in each one.

Nature has spoken to me over and over again during this time of rest and reflection. One particular morning I surveyed the water and found two dolphins; a mother and calf rising to the surface. The baby slapped her tale and splashed. Time stood still. The mother dolphin surfaced and sprayed a stream of water from her blowhole. In that moment, I heard a whisper, *"You gotta come up--you can't stay down."*

I am a huge believer in the importance of feeling the feelings. Throughout our lives we are conditioned to do the opposite. As a small child we were told not to cry. As a teen we were expected to mask and hide our true emotions. As an adult this is only exacerbated. In times of grief and pain, as adults, we have options. Unfortunately, the options rarely include feeling the feelings. We are able to work, shop, run, and self-medicate the feelings straight in to oblivion. This is not healthy—but it is what we do as an attempt to stay to close the surface.

There is another approach. It includes staying in the depths...for a week, a month, for however long it takes to feel the feelings until they are all felt out. This might include but is not limited to wearing black to church (a real thing my friend did to express her disappointment with God and her suffering circumstances). Reading really great authors who have swallowed the bitter pill of pain and lived to write about it. Another option might be writing, keeping a journal, scribbles on a legal pad, or sketching...somehow taking what is within and getting it out. Music can also allow your feelings to flow. Often the words of an artist

who has traveled a similar road can express what you believe in your head but cannot fully connect to your heart.

Taking a time out can also give you time and space to feel the feelings. During your time out choose a day (or several) and get away from your responsibilities in order to reflect, journal, pray and feel the feelings. Disclaimer: This will *always* occur at an inopportune time for everyone around you. This is one of the reasons why people stuff their feelings by working, shopping, or self-medicating, because it is more convenient for others.

I am a big fan of feeling the feelings and believe it is the healthiest way to survive grief and pain. My adorable aunt says in her strong southern drawl, “**It’s okay** (to cry, yell--in essence *feel*) **there’s more room on the outside.**” So whether you write, or draw, or tell another about the feelings— do not allow them to stay captured within...there *is* much more room on the outside.

If you are in the midst of a storm, my strongest suggestion is feel the feelings. Linger in the depths. Don’t rush the opportunity to stay below the surface. Be angry. Be sad. Absorb, endure, wrestle, and then figure out your new normal of life in response to all you have experienced.

There will come a day when you sense it is time to resurface. You will have experienced all there is to experience in the deep, dark depths and it is now time to come up for air. This was the message I received from God via the dolphins, “You gotta come up, you can’t stay down.”

You were not meant to be a bottom dweller. You were meant to ride the waves, jump, splash, and play.

If you have endured hardship and were brave enough to decide to feel the feelings to their fullest...well done. It is as if I can hear the loving Father whisper, "Your willingness to resurface brings hope to others. You are not meant to lurk in the dark. My design was to exhibit my healing in you. When you surface, I show my playful personality. When you come up I will demonstrate my strength, speed, and power. You are meant to bring joy to others...but you cannot do that while living forever in the dark depths, *you have to come up.*"

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.  
He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.  
When they are troubled,  
we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.  
For the more we suffer for Christ,  
the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.  
2 Corinthians 1:3-5 NLT*



# The Trees



There is something mysterious about many of the trees growing off the coast of North Carolina. At first glance they appear mutated or as if something out of a science fiction novel. After further inspection, the trees appear to have at some point, grown sideways. Though a tree may have deep roots and may be strong enough to endure hurricane force winds, her leaves and branches pull her sideways and she is forever marked by the event. In other places, a tree may grow sideways due to erosion, at which point the waves have beaten against the landscape so heavily that the tree simply *loses her footing*. Whether it is high winds or intense erosion, one finds trees scattered throughout the coasts of North America growing sideways and then realigning themselves towards the sun.

I identify with the sideways trees. I have been beaten with hurricane force winds by the storms of life. My roots have remained somewhat strong and allowed me to stay anchored—though I most certainly have lost my spiritual footing. I show signs of a sideways faith and have only recently begun to look heavenward.

I believe I would benefit from sitting down to coffee with the trees. I would very much like a cup a joe with a tree whose trunk tells her tale of hardship, who has weathered the most intense storm. I would have a few questions to ask.

Did you think yourself a goner?

Did you wonder if the wind and waves would eventually take over and you would become another casualty to the cruel wreckage of the storm?

When it was all over and you realized that many of those around you were uprooted or left dangling about to die—did you lose hope? Were you angry?

When the storm was over and everything was eerily silent and you were all alone, did you wonder which way was up and which direction you *ought* to grow?

I have seen soldiers of war come home with less limbs than they started with before the battle. They wear the wounds of their life *on the outside*. The rest of the world works to keep our trauma contained. Few know the full extent to which the storms of life have hit. We even mask our pain and hide our history. Do we do this in hopes to forget? Do we do this to pretend we are okay, even when we are not? Do we do this to avoid having to relive our story by retelling it? War vets and the coastal trees have no other option. They are forever marked by the storms they have endured, and I find a majestic resilience in their spirit.

I take courage from a tree's wayward trunk; admitting at one point in her life, things were not okay. And yet...it didn't wipe her out. She is still alive and has a unique beauty despite her pain. She is a survivor in the most pure sense.

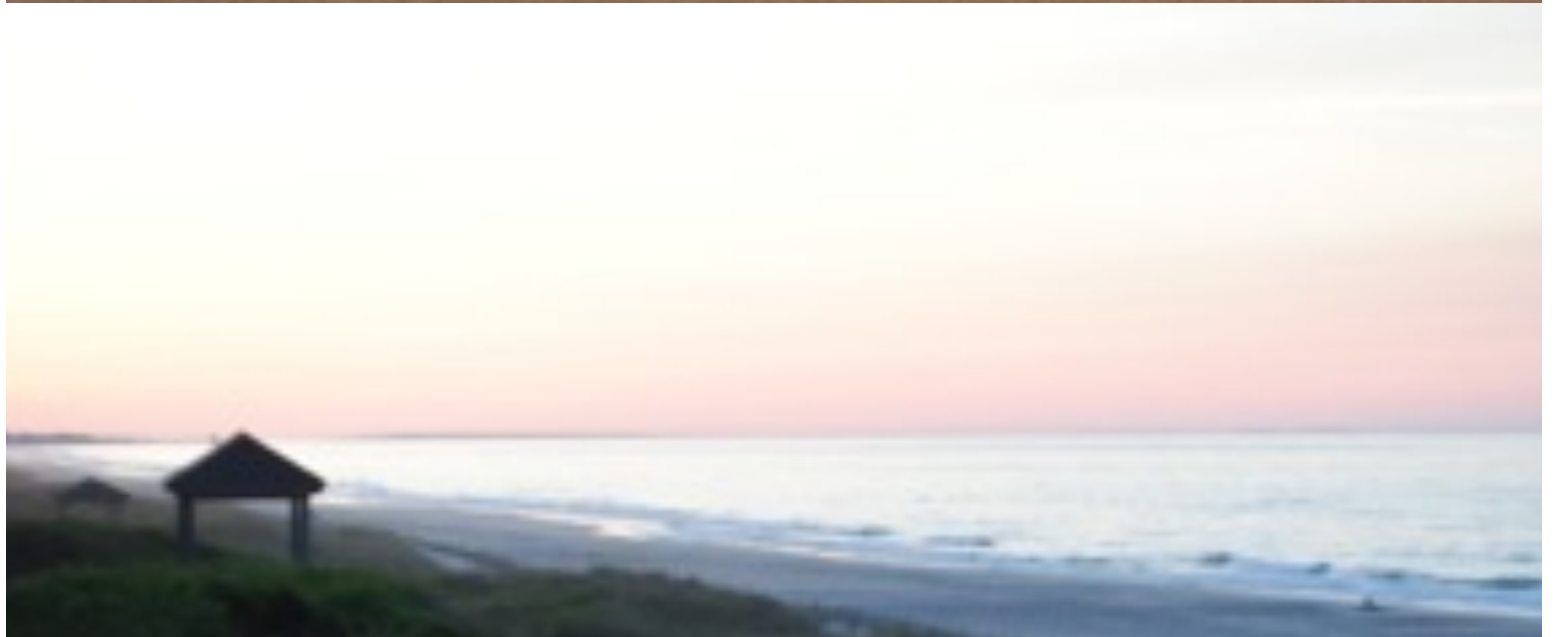
I wish humans could show outwards signs of all we have endured because this brings hope to other trees who are currently living sideways or recently have been wrecked by the wind and the waves. Our physical presence would be a constant reminder of all we have tempo-



rarily endured *and* our decision to once again find the courage to grow heavenward.

*“Like a tree that is planted by the water,  
I shall not be moved.”*

I Shall Not Be Moved, by Johnny Cash



I took French in high school because it was considered a romantic language, and being a 15 year old naïve girl, I wanted to be associated with all things romantic. Even with several years of French under my belt, I currently could give you no more than a polite greeting. And the accent would likely be *all wrong*.

I found my French instructor to be one of the most eccentric people on the planet; therefore I wanted to be around her as much as possible. “Madame” was like no other teacher I have ever known. Let me pause and make sure you are reading the proper pronunciation of her name. When you read, “Madame” please read and pronounce from here forward: “maaa” as in the sound a goat makes, and dum like the sucker. And please place a strong emphasis on the maaaa. None of her students ever used the proper pronunciation, including Madame herself.

Madame was a dark haired slightly disheveled, delightful woman. She had a strong zest for life and a unique humor that both entertained and offended her students. Today I can still tell you in French, “shut the door” and “shut your mouth” as the repetition of those phrases were never ending. If Madame was annoyed with you or was expressing some sort of utter disgust, she would cross her eyes and stick her finger up one nostril. I shrugged it off as strangely European. Although, I am pretty sure she is of French Canadian descent.

Madame’s class was a bit like Forest Gump’s box of chocolates...you never knew what you were going to get. You may get wide eyed Madame who had a crazy night concerning matters of her ex and we would hear about the antics of their fractured friendship. We might

learn the French word for hospital, and then quickly tangent to a very detailed explanation (in English) of what a C-section looked like in Scandinavia. If a student was not in the mood for class she would ask Madame's opinion on a certain political figure and the rest of the class would be devoted to a speech with lots of arm waving and French expletives. If someone died, be it within our small community or a national figure, the majority of the class would be devoted to discussing the details.

Some days in Madame's class were particularly unique. Madame had a storage room between her room and Heir Shade's classroom. (Heir Shade taught German, and most of the jocks in my high school took this class for different reasons, but there are not enough pages in this book to delve in to all of that. Let's just not judge my decision to take French.) Madame used the storage room as an extension of her classroom. It was sometimes used as solitary confinement for a talkative student who refused to "ferme la bouche" in class. But it was also a quiet place to make up a test. I remember a student arrived with a migraine and was ushered in to the storage room to rest. One day a friend of mine was having a particularly hard day; she showed up with dark circles under her eyes and clearly was not her chipper self. I think her mom drank too much and she was the one who pretty much ran the household. Madame immediately could see it had been a rough morning for this student and so she offered the storage room to the classmate and told her to take me along so we might have a few moments to talk. We didn't talk about her mom or the drinking; sometimes in high school you just need someone to acknowledge you need a break. Madame may have appeared a bit flighty to some, but her keen understanding of the cruel and tiresome days of high school were obvious.

If the purpose of high school is to prepare you for college, I officially was unprepared in the foreign language department. However, my life education was enhanced due to the time I spent in Madame's class. I would not trade my "French" education for anything in the world. The hours spent within Madame's four walls are some of my favorite memories of high school.

I realized, thanks to a zany French Canadian, I prefer the unpredictable. I prefer to not go straight from the book, so to speak. I prefer different scenery daily. I prefer to be given a hall pass every once in a while to see what everyone else is doing while I am in French class. I prefer the surprise and the shift from the mundane. I prefer the grace and the acknowledgement that at times; life can and should stop to discuss matters of the heart.

The seascape at the beach is always changing. On the balcony from which I write, I never see the same horizon twice. Always the waves are there, faithful; but at times, I find only one tiny white crest barely finding the courage to meet the sand. At other times the waves are grand and curling, with three to four barrels tumbling to the shore.

Some mornings pods of dolphins swim by, splashing and porpoising. Other mornings I am greeted by smooth glass, not a creature is stirring above the waters. The sky can be dark and moody, or wispy, pink cotton candy. This place, though erratic and unpredictable, is never a disappointment.

God is a conundrum. Recently, while asking some of my most unanswerable questions in His presence, a friend shared, “I don’t want a God I can figure out.” Point taken. What I realized within the past month of living in a place where I daily watch the scenery change; is that I value the unpredictable. I don’t want the same, mundane view. I desire different. Give me whimsy. Give me blankets of depth. I appreciate the wonder and awe reflected in changing waters and skies. I don’t want the same. I don’t want a predictable God.

Some days I look out and the horizon of this life looks pretty bleak. Dark ominous clouds have settled and don’t appear to be leaving any time soon. The hope of God’s grace is that the sun *will* come out tomorrow...but it won’t just be sun. It will be thick hazy purples with champagne pink at sunrise. There will blood orange hues with cherry red wrinkles at sunset. Each day is so very diverse filling my senses with joy, bringing contentment. The different days color me with hope.

Unfortunately in this life, the “dark days” we endure are not calendar days--but weeks, months or even years. So waiting for the sun can be cruel and tiresome. But somehow I see glimmers of grace within those days. God gives us those storage room moments, with friends, or nature, or a refrain from a song. In those storage room moments our hope is reignited. We believe there will be a day when the clouds will clear. There will be a day when our pain won’t suffocate our soul. There will be a day when we can feel the warmth of the sun on our skin. On that day we wake surprised, because the unpredictable One brought about a *new* day. The sun brought about a rare beauty amidst the pain. The day we thought impossible...unfolded...we survived...and we smiled.

*“This is the day that the Lord has made,  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*

Psalm 118:24 ESV

A full moon is visible in the upper left portion of a dark blue night sky. Below the horizon, the moon's light is reflected on a body of water, creating a bright, shimmering path. The overall scene is serene and minimalist.

The End



My mini memoir cannot touch some of the deeper questions of pain and the general condition of suffering on the planet. What I know to be true is there has been much assembled through nature along my journey toward healing.

Our pilgrimage to the ocean has not been a disappointment. Nature was my guide during this reprieve, but there were other agents of healing: Consistent, powerful prayers; appeals made on our behalf to the Great Physician. Books on the subject of pain were not read but devoured. Other sojourners, who have experienced the bottom falling out, delivered healthy doses of empathy and compassion. Delving in to the history of our forefathers of the faith; researching their hardship, brought comfort and courage. Writing words has delivered a medicinal effect to my soul. Giving voice to the venomous thoughts, the misunderstanding, and the despair was tremendously healing.

Healing has not been dependent on one thing. It has not been one blog, one book, one prayer, one scripture passage, or one phone call at which point a fork appeared on the road toward recovery. It was **all** the elements mingled together creating a mini mosaic titled...Healing Grace.

In 2000, Chris' mom took us to Europe. Despite all of the masterpieces including David and the Sistine Chapel; the most awe-inspiring art throughout Italy were the elaborate mosaics. Tiny little busted pieces of glass or stone now being repurposed and assembled to create one amazing piece of art. Some mosaics covered an entire wall of a cathedral. If upon close inspection a bystander were to look at one or two pieces of broken glass he would not see or understand the beauty of the

art before him. The bystander certainly could not understand the importance of the piece or the value of its contribution until he stepped back 5, 10 or 25 feet. Only then could he breathe in the massive, expansive story the artist intended to tell.

I wonder if all of the pieces of our pain, joy, and healing will be mounted within a far grander mosaic? All the busted broken pieces we once held tightly called hurt, or shame or guilt melded together for a more monumental purpose? All of the pieces we wished were not a part of our story; we wished right off the wall. What if this grand mosaic held pebbles of pain *and* bliss intermingled forming something so majestic we have to *wait* to see it?

*"Since before time began no one has ever imagined,  
no ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you  
who works for those who wait for him."*

Isaiah 64:4 The Message

There are still oceans between me and the children I love. The children who have two mothers. But the gap is closing on the oceans between me and my God. I wait in expectation for the next small piece of the mosaic to snap in to place. In the meantime I can hear the melody of an old familiar tune lingering outside my door. Patiently the delicate refrain repeats in the distance. I know the day is not far when I will join in and someday say...*it is well...it is well...with my soul.*

# The About



My husband (best friend) Chris and I have recently been re-routed from Uganda back to North Carolina. We live in Raleigh with 3 of our 6 children. (Two currently live in Uganda and the oldest by way of spiritual family is now old enough to live on her own.)

I have been writing online at *100 Cups of Coffee* for about four years. I am currently in the process of writing a book about how to process pain without losing your faith, and am attempting to tackle other messy questions surrounding the mystery of suffering.

I have a passion for the written word and have appreciated authors providing me with words when I found I had none of my own. It is my sincere hope to provide a safe place and platform for readers to be honest and journey through life with God in the most authentic way possible.

# The Acknowledgement

Thank you to all of my friends who have continued to encourage me to put pen to paper. The words expressed in these pages have brought about a new wave of healing for my soul. I will be forever grateful.

This book would not be possible without the opportunity to live at the beach for a month. Thank you to the Hale Family for providing a safe, soft, and inspiring landing spot for our transition.

A special thank you to Sara Walters, Amy Gardinier, and Shannon Hensley for their willingness to read, edit and believe in my work.

Thank you also to Courtney Koctar for her willingness to be raw and real and share a snap shot of her story. You can read more words written by Courtney at [Stories We Tell](#).

# The Request

## **Let's stay connected!**

If you have signed up for my ebook via my blog—you will receive a monthly letter from me.

You can also connect with me at...

**Blog:** <http://100cupsofcoffeewithjenni.com>

**Twitter:** @CoffeewithJenni

**Email:** [100cupsofcoffeewithjenni@gmail.com](mailto:100cupsofcoffeewithjenni@gmail.com)

*Oceans Between Us* is my gift to you.

Feel free to share it (in its entirety) with anyone you would like.

Please do not change it or charge for it.

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