

## TIME TO STAND AND STARE

I was planning this week to emulate some of the great writers of my own and previous generations, conjuring up words penned harmoniously and thoughtfully far from the madding crowd, neatly encapsulating and expressing what Wordsworth described as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. I have taken a week off to devote to pure R & R in Ballito on the north coast of KZN with my girls. Staying in rented accommodation overlooking the beach, temperatures in the late 20s not much to do but read, relax spend quality time, reflect and sip afternoon aperitifs. Time to gather my thoughts, heal my soul and re-bond with my daughters. That was the plan.

After all, it's the end of the year and certainly the season to be jolly, peace on earth and goodwill to all men, so we're told, but personally I feel that if Santa placed his big fat frame in front of me right now it would give me the greatest of pleasure to deck him! Quite frankly I am in a foul mood and feel like I am teetering on the edge. For starters we're far from being far from the madding crowd - Its bustling fit to bust down here, you can't go anywhere near the shops and if you do, parking is a nightmare and on top of that my two 'soul sisters' seem to do nothing but irritate each other to death. We're supposed to be feeling joyful, thankful, peaceful and all the other 'ful's normally associated with this time of year, but the holiday harmony has not set in yet.

It's like this every year. It's only a few days since the holidays began and it's taking us all time to unlearn how we have been living for the past few months. The minute we take a break we have to re-programme ourselves to learn how to cope without the standard day-to-day stresses that we are so accustomed to, take for granted and don't really view as problematic. But, when you take them away you realize how integral they are to your life, you start to see how stressed you have been, how stressed the family has been and how difficult it can be to become, dare I say it, normal again; living without rushing, having time to stop, to ponder and reflect, time to chill out and throw out the schedule. But that packed timetable and regimentation becomes totally imprinted. On the second day here I woke my youngest daughter at 9.15 in the morning because it was 'time to get up'. She looked at me sleepily and asked why I had woken her and I had no idea. I just felt we should be up and about – still in last week mode.

Last week, you see, was a text book case of how not to prepare for a holiday. The seven days before school broke up felt like a marathon and having run a few marathons in my life I speak from experience. This was the real thing. It was swimming galas, parent-teachers meetings, prize-giving assembly, exams, strange pick up and drop off times. Every time I got in my car to meet one kid there was barely time to get back for a quick meeting before I had to dash to the other side of town again to collect the other one. Add to that a growing number of looming deadlines and a large-scale project that was threatening to go off the rails and which had to be back on track before I could get away and you can see this was no gradual year-end wind-down.

So the stress levels were off the scale but there may be another reason why I am feeling so dissatisfied. Am I one of the many who sees through the farcical nature of Christmas, gets perplexed with the insatiable appetite of consumers contrasted with the majority of the world's starving population? Someone who just doesn't know how to instil in my children the real reason why we are supposed to have a few days of peace and good will and a few silent nights when all is calm, as opposed to rushing, even on holiday, to the nearest PostNet to get a Facebook update?

Or perhaps I may just be suffering something else. Maybe it's just when we do have time to stop and take stock of who we are and what we have achieved it's just too sad, too ugly or too painful? The festive season is known as a menacing period psychologically-speaking when unresolved emotional conflicts, loneliness and other problems trigger an alarming rise in psychiatric emergencies and suicide. I think that whether positive or negative, this time of year will always be an emotional one because it's the one time that we stop to listen to ourselves and just 'be' and when we 'be', we become human again and not the work-churning beavers we are Monday to Friday the rest of the year. Sticking our heads in the sand and burying ourselves with business and busy-ness is a great way not to deal with the real you. Like me you have probably heard that the suicide rate goes up during the festive season. That the joy that other people experience during the holidays drives home the hopelessness of the situation to someone who is alone in the world. All the merriment happiness and ho, ho, hos just highlight to the less fortunate what they don't have and as a result the whole thing comes tumbling down in a great depressive, self-revealing slump and the only way out is to end it all.

Or not - at least not this week. According to recent evidence holiday depression is as real as Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer himself and is a notion that is unfounded despite it having been around forever. One of the largest studies to examine seasonal trends in suicide and psychiatric problems found no increase around the Christmas holidays. In fact there is evidence to suggest that depressive periods are below average during holiday times. However, one group of researchers did discover an increase of suicides on New Year's Day and attributed this to, people becoming depressed because it is perceived as the end of the holiday period and, wait for it, that the prospect of returning to work and everyday life is just too unbearable.

So if you are feeling less than festive this season you can't blame it on the time of year – that's a myth. It's having the time to look back and finding that you don't much like what you see. And if that's the case try looking inwards instead, find your own inner peace, make sure that you are living your life the way that you are supposed to January through December, and not the way society tries to dictate. That there's a year-long balance between work, home, family and friends, not just something that can only be scheduled in over Christmas and New Year, that despite what the carol says, it's not only Christmas that should bring tidings of comfort and joy, even if that's the only time you have to truly stop and think about it. That way you might even find a bit of that elusive festive spirit lurking somewhere deep inside, not just at the bottom of a glass!

