

2020 began with a high level of anxiety running through my brain, scrolling for news of the bushfires. It ended with a similarly high level of anxiety, scrolling for news of state border closures. Again.

In between, it's been a challenge for everyone in different ways. January was all about the smoke and the fires, and possibly the most surreal moment of my life at that point was making Chloe's birthday cake in the back room ready for her party with fire dancing visibly on the hills out of our back window. As her birthday party day turned out to be 45 degrees Celsius, we were very grateful she had opted for an indoor party with a location that had air-con!

February saw us as a one-car family for the month, with my car sitting forlornly on a side street with no back windscreen and a badly cracked front windscreen, courtesy of a late January hailstorm that took out thousands of cars and windows across a very specific strip of Canberra. It took 6 weeks for the glass repairers to get to it. Despite that, February was good. My work was at levels I'd never worked at before. Lucy started preschool and took to it like a duck to water. Chloe dived into her new Year 1 class with the delight of seeing her friends again, missing some that had moved on and making new ones. Lucy started ballet class, Chloe took on jazz as well as her ballet, and life was busy but delightful. My best friend had a baby right at the end of February, baby Lizzie, and she has been a joy through this year.

And then March arrived. Things started to get strange. I took the girls to the coast for a weekend in mid-March, desperate to regain some control over things. I returned to work with my head on straight again, ready to face it, and the world started to go mad.

Airport after airport closed. Trying to get my Dad and a couple of other people back to their European homes was the most stressful week of my life to date. "Singapore's closed, I've booked you through HK"... 4 hours later "HK closed too, I've rebooked you through Japan or Malaysia"... 12 hours after that "Japan it is. Now PRAY". Japan it was, the last flight out of Perth to Tokyo got them safely back to London. Then the international borders closed. No-one has been allowed out of the country since then, without an exemption from the Australian government (unless they are returning to their home country). Schools closed. I worked from home around the clock for 3 weeks while Pete was busy relocating his team's technology to allow them to work from home. I never switched off. Border closures, cancellations, credits, refunds, the rules changed constantly, policies were updated daily. Stores were closed, so many of our teams were stood down, and our incomes vanished overnight, literally. Those of us that were left were in a spiralling nightmare of trying to look after multiple teams' worth of bookings in a world we had no control over and knew nothing about with angry customers wanting the moon without really understanding how tied our hands were. We made it through, somehow, supporting each other in any way we could.

The girls were amazing, home full-time together at that point. They were desperately missing their friends, and so Chloe got an account on Kids Messenger, where she could message and video-call her friends with safety. We also connected her in with family overseas, and it's been lovely to see that continue although the amount of time she spends on the tablet has reduced drastically since she was allowed to see her people here in person again! School term began again in April, online. Chloe joined her class for half an hour a day via an elderly laptop, time to catch up and say hi and be with her people. Lucy had 15 minutes each day with her preschool teacher. It kept them in touch. The rest of the time they were looking after themselves, with me back to work and Pete working from home full-time. We're very glad they had each other through this time. Their friendship and connection has deepened immensely this year.

In May, as our case numbers looked to be under control, schools reopened. A huge sigh of relief for parents and kids. The girls were ecstatic to be back with their school friends. We were relieved to be getting some normality back. Well, sort of. My work continued to be cancel and refund, cancel and refund. We were getting a huge amount of flack from customers wanting refunds and not understanding how the travel industry income works. And on it went.

June started to look sunny again. We were able to move around a bit more, and there was a snatched weekend at the coast with my friends Femke and Bren, and baby Lizzie (4 months old by then). Sun and sea and companionship was the fresh air into the world of insanity that continued to be my work. International travel was still closed and starting to look long-term, people were starting to cancel further and further ahead. Policies continued to change by the week. People wanted answers we didn't have. State borders were starting to open again though, and people were booking Australian holidays. There was positivity in the air.

Until early in July, covid escaped from hotel quarantine in Melbourne, and suddenly everything came crashing back down again and we were back to square one. On the flip side, dancing started back up. Swimming started back up. Football was back for Pete. The social interactions and activities started coming back into our lives more consistently and everyone was better off for it! Chloe changed her dancing shoes from jazz to tap and has absolutely loved it. Lucy has had such a happy time doing ballet, and I have been enjoying increasing my fitness with bounce and feeling like I'm dancing again with some Broadway Jazz. It's been a delight. At the end of July Pete took himself down to the snow for a day snowboarding, mask and all. A chance to get away, relax, enjoy some fresh air and have some breathing space.

On the year went. In August all the state borders were shut, all eyes were on Victoria as they went through endless weeks of hard lockdown, curfews, masks and stay at home orders. Here in Canberra we felt removed from it, with no covid cases, restrictions holding steady at 'eased' and able to meet up with our friends and family from around town again. September came and went, with another girls weekend to the coast – much love, laughter, good food, sunshine and even a swim! October brought the news that not only was our area leader losing her position, someone who had a huge influence over my Flight Centre time, but a week later we found out that my little store was one of the final casualties of the Flight Centre restructuring, and I had a stressful two weeks waiting to hear whether I had successfully reapplied to one of the other stores, which ended with a sigh of relief as my new team leader called to check what days I was able to work as she found a way to fit me into her team. I also took the girls back to the coast when we were finally allowed out again – and the weather was warming up a bit – they miss it as much as I do over the winter!

So in early November we finally closed our little store in Kingston, said adieu – and come and find us again – to the community there, and I walked into my new team at Woden. It's been a good move for me, and I'm very happy with the way it's worked out, though it's been a bit of a readjustment from a community store to a major mall! November was busy at work, as Christmas was looking good and people planned to travel over the summer holidays. Life was getting rosy again. And then a week before Christmas a new covid cluster popped up in Sydney, and over the last 10 days travel restrictions have changed daily yet again, plans have had to be adjusted, cancelled and realigned. Having cancelled our planned WA Christmas months earlier, we were lucky to be able to have our Plan B holiday down at the South Coast in beautiful Eden over Christmas, with just over a week of beach, playgrounds, icecream and more beach. The kids were excited to go on a boat ride on the bay and we loved watching the friendly dolphin that came along for the first part of it!

Throughout the rollercoaster that has been 2020, though, although the work story has been a hell of a ride, and the family story has been a completely different journey, there are some important parts that have held out through the year...

There have been Thursdays, since May; Femke, Cat & Lizzie Thursdays. Some Thursdays we went exploring. Some Thursdays we did as little as possible. Some Thursdays we got our errands done. Every Thursday we took the kids swimming after school. Thursdays have been invaluable in so many indescribable ways and I am so grateful for the time we have had this year.

There has been Dance Central. Both for the kids and for me. The support, the care, the family that is DC. They are endlessly welcoming, friendly, helpful and encouraging. Endlessly and consistently. Through what has been an incredibly tough year for them, DC has been such an important part of this year for us, with all three of us taking part in the end of year show (filmed instead of performed live) – what a fab experience we all had!

There have been dessert nights, and birthdays, and walks, and playdates in the Arboretum woods. There have been tears and laughter and prayers and encouragement and support, friends checking in and sending cake on bad days, friends that are there with whatever it is you need. Friends online, friends on the phone, friends over the internet. There have been rejuvenated connections and new friendships. There has been new church! St-Martin-in-the-Fields (home to my oldest friend, Cath) made the jump to online services very rapidly as lockdown began. I joined them for Easter via their Facebook livestream and have been joining them on Sunday evenings ever since. They have something special there and I have appreciated it every single week.

And of course, there has been Pete, quietly, endlessly supportive. Doing what needs doing. Keeping our family running comfortably. Being there whenever he was needed to be there for the kids. Picking up the pieces as I came home from yet another “I’m not ok today” day. Making sure there was chocolate in the fridge. And alongside all of that, keeping his entire office team running comfortably with minimal fuss – first with the move to work from home, then getting a few people back in the office and others home. New systems implemented, new twists in the road with much larger amounts of work than were planned for. He has done an incredible job working away in the background. We would not be where we are without him.

2020 has given us a lot to think about, as a global community. It has been a year of getting up, taking a deep breath, and going to do it all over again. A year to be open about how hard any particular day is, and what you need right now. A year to be kind to ourselves, to allow ourselves to not be ok. A year to remind ourselves that life is about the people in it. That life is about love.

2020 is not a year to be kicked aside, forgotten about, written off as a disaster. It is a year to be remembered. Remembered for the resilience so many people have dug out of their souls. Remembered for the snatched moments. For the first hug after so many months apart. For the wonders of the modern world that have produced multiple effective vaccines in less than 12 months, that have allowed so many people to keep connected in so many ways whilst not leaving their homes. For the creativity people have shown and developed, as they found ways to keep themselves entertained, or created new ways of doing things, or developed new skills and trades as their old work petered away in the face of pandemic lockdowns. 2020 has been an important year. A precious year. A year that gives us strength we never knew we had.

2020 has been a challenge. A challenge that everyone I know has risen to in ways we never ever believed we could. Remember that, and be proud of it. You did it, I did it, our kids did it. Grab that, hold onto it, and never let it go, as we walk tall, together, into 2021.