As it has for so many people, this period of lockdown has brought with it dislocation. In my case, the dislocation is literal. My usual weekly pattern of travelling from my home in Birmingham to work at St Paul's Cathedral in London has gone; instead, I work in my study all day every day, often via Zoom or telephone calls. Working with and among people who are actually a hundred miles away brings all sorts of challenges — for them, as well as for me.

One of my greatest sources of consolation and inspiration has always been stories. Stories offer us another world to inhabit — a world in which we can immerse ourselves, see things from a different perspective, or through another’s eyes, and, in doing so, untangle knots of anxiety or uncertainty within us.

Stories — both long and short — offer us a brief respite from the present. In the company of their characters, they help us to lift our vision, offer comfort for our souls, and the strength to return to our own lives once more, renewed and refreshed. At times like this, when we can’t travel bodily to a new place, we can travel in our imagination to new places, with new people, and new worlds.

At times of particular distress, the stories that I return to are the ones I know best. They are old friends who, like the comfiest of comfy jumpers, provide security and reassurance in troubling times. One of the authors I often reach for is Elizabeth Goudge, a 20th-century writer whose writings pulse with themes of grace, forgiveness, and hope.

So it was lovely to run across a quotation in the first volume of her Damerosehay trilogy — The Bird in the Tree (Duckworth, 1940) — which indicates that she felt exactly the same about other old books as I feel about reading hers: “David also, on going to bed, resigned himself to hours of reading, but he had a good deal more control over his thoughts than Nadine had and he was able to keep his attention firmly riveted on his book. It was his favourite book. . . “In times of storm and tempest, of indecision and desolation, a book already known and loved makes better reading than something new and untried. The meeting with remembered and well-loved passages is like the continual greeting of old friends; nothing is so warming and companionable.”

MY FAVOURITE film also explores the power of stories to transform. Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café (starring Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy) tells the story of Evelyn Couch, a timid, unhappy housewife, who — through her friendship with Ninny Threadgoode, in a nursing home where her husband’s aunt lives — hears the story of the Threadgoode family, and in particular of two friends, Idgie and Ruth. Through their story, Evelyn finds herself and is transformed. The story that Ninny tells her gives her the key that opens the door to her freedom.

Given my love of reading, and the ways in which it has healed and restored me when I have needed it most, it is hardly surprising that the painting to which I am drawn in times like this is Rembrandt’s The Prophetess Anna. It depicts Rembrandt’s...
Slow dawn in another sky

THE Irish writer Susan L. Mitchell was a journalist and poet better known for her satirical verse than for anything spiritual. She had a long working relationship with George Russell, for whom she worked at the Irish Homestead. Despite her early death from tuberculosis in her early thirties, she was dogged by illness for the rest of her life.

The soul aflame is still a wandering wind
The breath that blows
The spicy grass, the honey robbed from the wild bee.

One of her spiritual poems, “Immortality”, was included in the Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse (1917):

Age cannot reach me where the veils of God have shut me in,
For me the myriad births of stars and suns do but begin,
And here how fragrantly there blows to me the holy breath,
Sweet from the flowers and stars and hearts of men, from life and death.

We are not old, O heart, we are not old. The breath that blows
The soul aflame is still a wandering wind that comes and goes;
And the stirred heart with sudden raptured life a moment glows.

A moment here — a bulrush’s brown head in the grey rain
A moment there — a child drowned and a heart quickened with pain;

The name of Death, the blue deep heaven, the scent of the salt sea,
The name of Christ, and the scent of the salt sea.

Put on Christ

John Donne (1572-1631), poet and Dean of St Paul’s, had much to say about living and dying well, not least in his sermons, of which 160 survive:

No man may take the frame of Christs merit in peeces; no Man may take his forty days fasting and put on that, and say, Christ hath fasted for me, and therefore I may surfeit; No man may take his Agony, and pensiveness, and put on that, and say, Christ hath been sad for me, and therefore I may be merry. He that puts on Christ, must put him on all; and not one by one, that Christ hath dyed, not onely that he hath died for him, but that he also hath died in Christ, and that whatsoever Christ suffered, he suffereth in Christ.

(Sermons V, 226-34, quoted in One Equal Light, edited by John Moses (Canterbury Press, 2013)