A photograph of a path lined with trees covered in white frost or snow under a clear blue sky. The path is in the center, leading towards the background. The trees on the left are heavily laden with white frost, while the trees on the right are bare and dark. The sky is a solid, clear blue. The overall scene is bright and crisp, suggesting a winter day.

MIKE RIDDELL

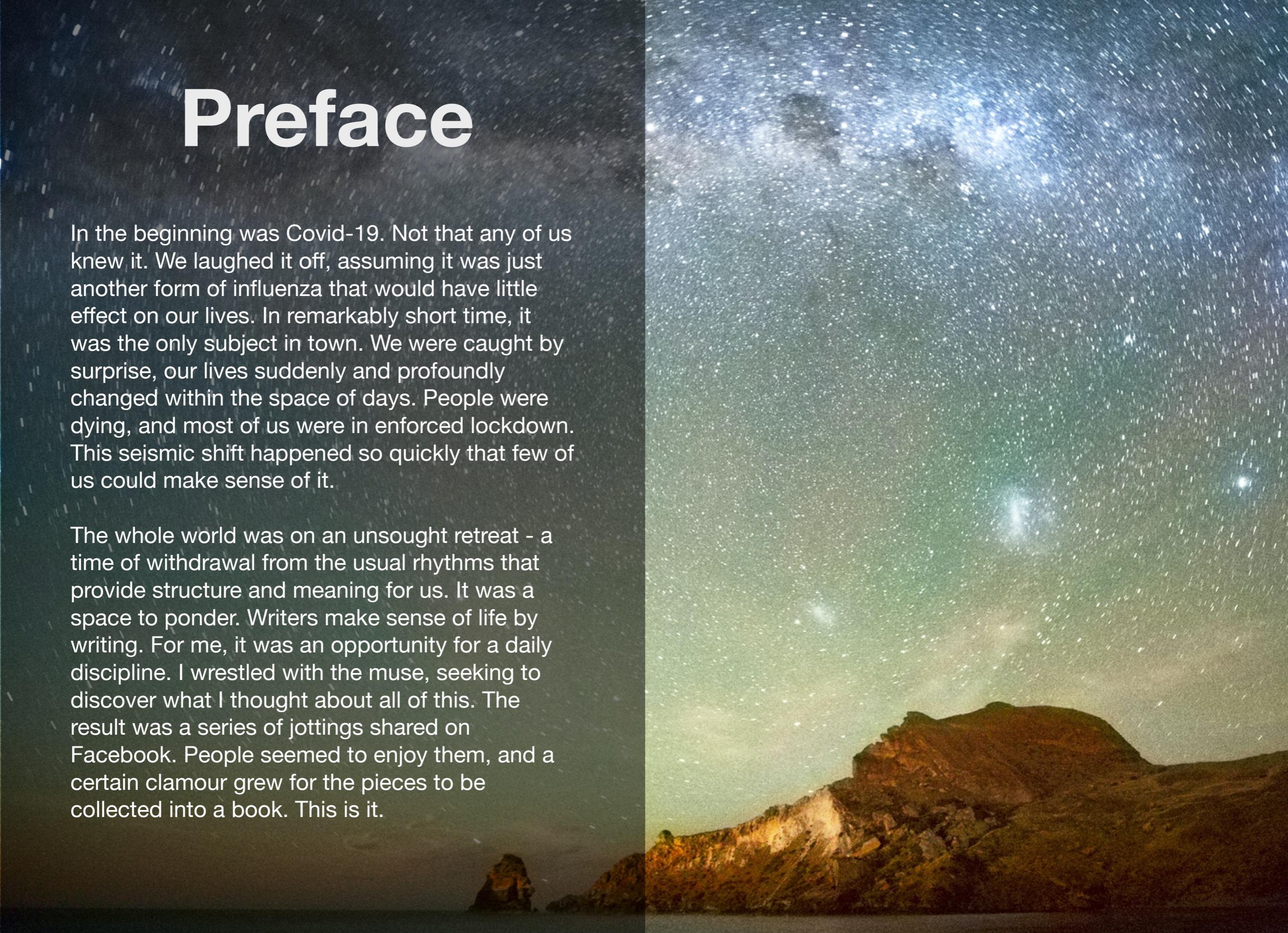
# Imagining Anew

Lockdown Reflectons

# Preface

In the beginning was Covid-19. Not that any of us knew it. We laughed it off, assuming it was just another form of influenza that would have little effect on our lives. In remarkably short time, it was the only subject in town. We were caught by surprise, our lives suddenly and profoundly changed within the space of days. People were dying, and most of us were in enforced lockdown. This seismic shift happened so quickly that few of us could make sense of it.

The whole world was on an unsought retreat - a time of withdrawal from the usual rhythms that provide structure and meaning for us. It was a space to ponder. Writers make sense of life by writing. For me, it was an opportunity for a daily discipline. I wrestled with the muse, seeking to discover what I thought about all of this. The result was a series of jottings shared on Facebook. People seemed to enjoy them, and a certain clamour grew for the pieces to be collected into a book. This is it.



My wife and I were on holiday in Japan when news reached us of Coronavirus. We left the summer of our homeland of Aotearoa-New Zealand for a taste of winter in the northern hemisphere. Our sojourn began in Sapporo at the annual snow and ice festival there. We fell in love with Japan and her people. Later we were to discover that the outbreak of Coronavirus in Japan was at the very festival we'd attended.

Not chastened in the slightest, we returned to our small village in the deep south of the country, where we happily mixed with our neighbours. We paid scant regard to the danger we were putting them in, or exposing ourselves to. In our defence, it was early days. We came home in late February. One month later, the whole country went into lockdown, and the borders were closed.

It's not that it's a great hardship to be sequestered in our tiny town, surrounded by mountains and a vast plain of gentle farmland. The two hardships were being cut off from our friends and neighbours, and the question of how to get supplies in to keep ourselves fed. Apart from that, I took to the solitude quite happily. As an introvert, I felt I was in familiar territory, without being pried out for arcane reasons.

The little snippets that form chapters of this book are largely unplanned and stream of consciousness. My neighbour across the back fence - a fellow writer - has a motto that's something of a modus operandi for her: "Write before you think". I took it to heart in each of these small offerings. I never knew from one day

to the next what might be the topic, never mind what my opinions on it were. I'm still a little unsure of the value of them, but have been persuaded to put them in the public realm.

As is my habit, my jottings are confessional and sometimes confrontational. There's more here about my own small life than you probably care to know. Honesty and vulnerability are touchstones for me - but not necessarily everyone's cup of tea. I offer my words as a gift. If they don't resonate with you, then lay them aside gently, and get on with other things.

should you find  
a word of mine

among your beans  
or wilted greens

chew slowly;  
it may be holy

# Staying Alive

So we're all heading for lockdown. My daughter Kat suggested I might do a series of postings regarding life in the post-corona world for your edification. I'll see how long I can keep it up. Here's the first - 'Staying Alive':

I just had my birthday. It wasn't a significant one, but two events impinged upon it. The first was a series of 8 treatments of radiotherapy to my pelvis, where a tumour was growing without my permission. The hospital visits went well. All I had to do was lie still, which even for a writer is reasonably straightforward. The machine did all the work.



I'm not too sure what it did, but it was clearly very expensive. It was sleek and white and huge, and looked like something out of Star Trek. I was strapped to a table while the pristine behemoth rotated its arms around me. It probed but never touched. Something was happening, nevertheless, as evidenced by the radiologists who left the room while it embraced me, and locked the door behind them.

I lay back and thought of, not England, but how fragile mortality is. Most of the time I like to think of myself as an angular character with something to say. But once in a hospital robe, I became a potential cadaver being rotated through a busy schedule of other patients. It makes me become im-patient. Which is churlish of me, really, as the good people are simply trying to make me better.

After the two weeks and 8 sessions, I thought I was done and could go and find a reputable bottle of wine. But a final consultation with the registrar (who looked like he'd just finished 5th form biology) introduced a sinister note to my recovery. "Of course," he said, "you need to be careful. The radiation will keep working for 7-10 days and may yet burn a hole through your bowel." This, I took it, would not be good for my continued existence.

And so it was, 7 days later, that I woke in the early hours of the morning with a pain in the afore-mentioned pelvis. It troubled me that this may be the onset of incipient intestinal leakage, which

would be messy. Perhaps fatal. But what peeved me even more was the realisation that it was the pre-dawn anxiety of the celebration of the day I came into the world. And much as I'm fond of round numbers, a birthday didn't seem a good time to arrange a funeral.

The fact that I'm writing about this is probable cause that such angst was more in my head than my bowel (which appears to be still functioning). However, the slings and arrows have continued. Our marvellous Prime Minister chose the day of my birth to announce that everyone should go into hiding from that pesky and deadly virus, my Corona. While honoured that she should grant us all a lengthy holiday to celebrate, it's not quite what I'd like to be remembered for.

So here we all are, in New Zealand at least, on the cusp of hunkering down in isolation and contemplating the state of, if not the universe, then how to survive our own company. The world appears to have become a little balmy. This silent enemy is abroad, and we unfortunately are not. Every breath carries the potential importation of an invisible death. What stands between us and that is – nothing much at all.

Let us begin with unit 101 then. Life is not to be taken for granted. There are no guarantees. This morning I drove back from the medical centre after an injection with a very large needle, and mused to myself "A little pain never hurt anyone". And then immediately realised how ridiculous that statement was. The

nonsense in my life was for a moment laid bare. Stupidity and anxiety may well be the best attributes to bring to these times. You can count on me for those.

### **Radiotherapy**

*(for Rosemary)*

pinned to my altar slab  
deep in the maw  
of medical purity  
I thought of you

your flaunting red hair  
the summer in your eye  
how you infect me  
with innocent joy

and I recalled  
why it is I want to stay  
to hear the song  
of your life on the air

so I lay very still  
while that austere Cyclops  
burned my deep impurities  
eager to cleanse sins

there will come a time  
to die, to die  
with a languorous sigh  
and resting of the eyes

but this day  
this is not that one  
and nor tomorrow  
when autumn may come

with a hint of winter  
no, we will  
toss back life  
like cheap red wine

talking to a standstill  
pressing lips as flowers  
whispering of those days  
that none can share

for this moment  
and the next  
we are together  
together forever

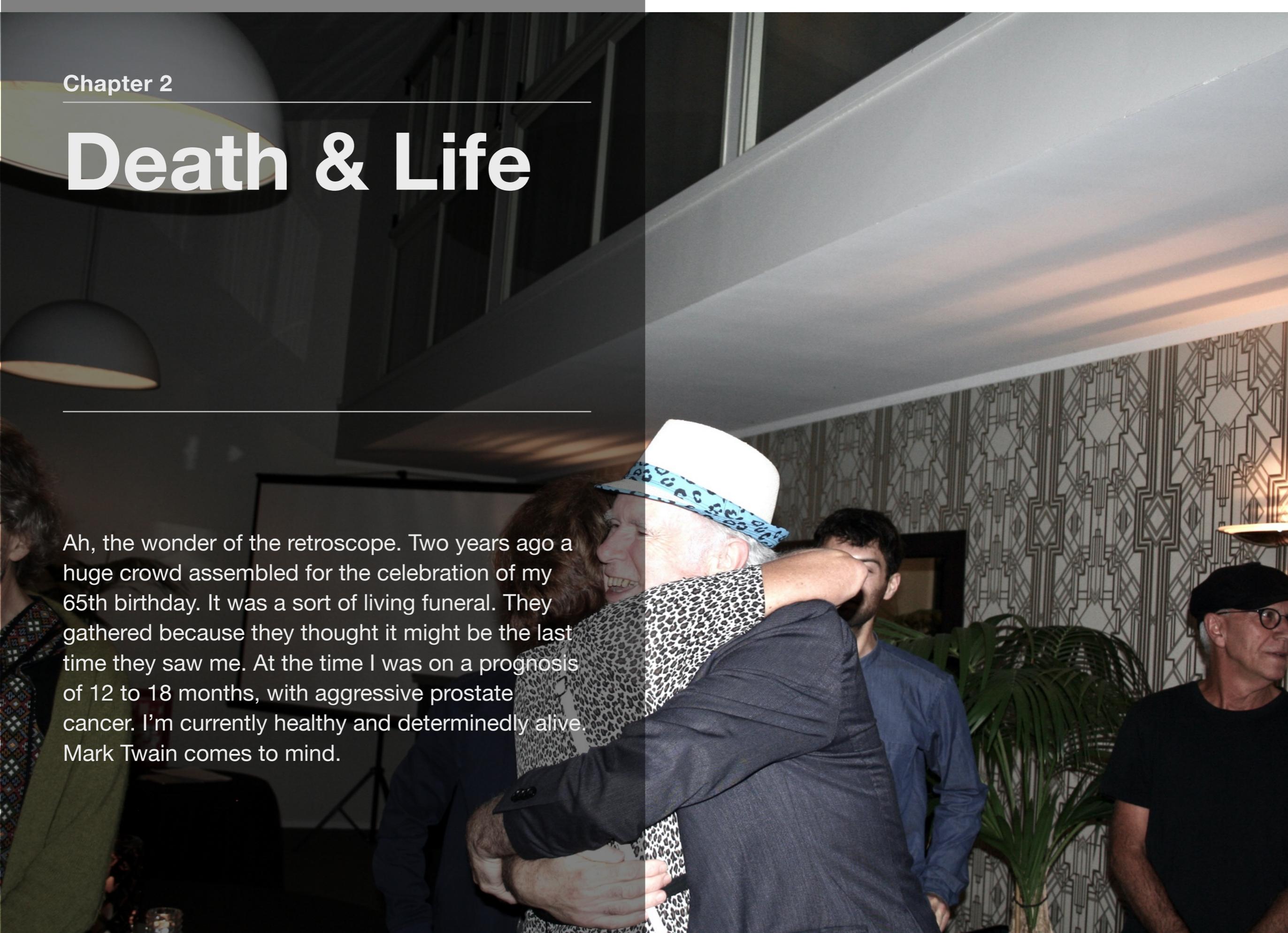
## Chapter 2

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# Death & Life

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Ah, the wonder of the retroscop. Two years ago a huge crowd assembled for the celebration of my 65th birthday. It was a sort of living funeral. They gathered because they thought it might be the last time they saw me. At the time I was on a prognosis of 12 to 18 months, with aggressive prostate cancer. I'm currently healthy and determinedly alive. Mark Twain comes to mind.



It was a surprise party, exquisitely planned by my wife and my daughter, and perfectly executed. Fortunately I had a poem in my back pocket, which turned up today on my FB memories.

Death shall have no opinion  
though on occasion  
may question  
the false confidence  
of each breath -  
just asking

- - -

sixty five years  
is no viable defence  
against mortality  
achieving gold  
brings no podium  
more likely odium  
in the eyes of  
the casually young  
who live forever

- - -

but we who remain  
might well consider  
our days number  
chewing our cud  
and cogitating  
the fag end of life

- - -

I never inhaled  
self-pity or gloom  
too high on life  
or too dumb  
to notice  
the tide's ebb  
no matter -  
none gets out of here  
alive

- - -

I could retire  
fold my tent  
act my age  
put on my whites  
roll up on the green  
grow hair in each ear  
sleep in my chair  
shuffle quietly  
drink weak tea

- - -

surrender beckons  
creeping silently  
bestowing senility  
as evening falls  
I decline the offer

I choose life  
- - -  
my groin sliced  
by Death's sickle  
my sex excised  
the foreplay  
of extinction  
a first caress  
- - -  
and yet I stand  
here among friends  
blood in my veins  
a crack of light  
at door's edge  
beckoning, beckoning  
- - -  
hand in hand  
I move forward  
to what must come  
be it end or beginning  
be it start or finish  
I choose life  
and Death shall  
have no  
opinion

Today in lockdown I'm resoundingly grateful to still be alive, and for family. Yesterday we achieved a little bit of granny-snatching. Rosemary flew up to Auckland and kidnapped her 91 year old mother, bringing her down to Central Otago to be with us permanently. Together with the dog, appropriately named Gracie. We've got a life-giving bubble happening here.

One of the beneficial side-effects of anticipating the end of life is the way it makes you value those things that you once took for granted. Now that we're all facing the prospect of a deadly virus, it provides an opportunity to reflect on how very precious it is to be sentient and aware. Each moment is charged with the grandeur of life in its magnificent simplicity. And for those who accompany us.

Two years on from my living funeral, in which many pleasant lies were told, I received a couple of wonderful presents. My gorgeous wife gave me a book I'd never come across before. It is entitled 'This Land of Light' by Eric Taylor. It contains his photos of New Zealand landscapes, which are interspersed with poems by the venerable James K. Baxter. The vistas are delightfully accompanied by some of the best poetry to have emerged in this land.

The other present was from my daughter Kat and her husband Chas, who presented me with a relic from my childhood. It was a 3D Viewmaster, in original 1950s packaging. I had recently marvelled at my memories of owning one as a boy, and the magic

it brought. And now I was able to reconnect with this sense of wonder, through viewing the stereoscopic reels that accompanied the gift.

Both of these celebratory offerings encouraged me into a new way of looking. For those of us with sight, the world presents itself to us on a daily basis. And yet, so often, we fail to truly see what is there to observe. It takes time, and careful attention, to focus and to absorb the world into our souls. Most of the time our gaze is flicking restlessly from this to that, missing the vitality and import of what is freely given.

Now we have all received the gift of time in which to slow down and contemplate. The shadow of death hangs over the world, and this fact alone can make us aware of the shining beauty streaming into our lives. I hope we're not tempted to squander such an opportunity. We're not so much in forced deprivation, as we are enjoying a chance to practice attention. L'chaim!

# Lockdown

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The clock is ticking. In just five hours time I will be breaking the law if I hug my neighbour. A state of emergency has been declared. I love a good emergency as much as the next person. This one seems surreal. The sun rose, the air was as fresh and sweet as ever, and water still ran from the taps. If you had no news, you wouldn't know that anything had changed at all.

But we do have news. Each day it consists of numbers that keep increasing. Reminds me of when I had a mortgage. Except these are deaths. The demise of real people who have families and memories and people who love them. Many of them



were old or frail. They might have died anyway. They're not to be thought any less of for that. It's hard to grieve for statistics, but not for a precious person who brought light and love into your world.

Maybe we should be presented with the faces of each person who has been scythed down by Covid-19. Perhaps that would make us stop hosting barbecues or considering ourselves invulnerable to things we can't see. Or pretending that the economy will start humming again by Easter. The only thing likely to be humming by Easter is flies. I read the story from Spain of a rest home where the workers fled and left the residents to die uncared for.

When survival is threatened, our instinctive response is either selfishness or generosity. I come from a Western generation largely untroubled by war or famine. All of us in this cohort have been seduced into thinking that things will only get better. On that premise we've done what we can to destroy the beautiful planet that sustains us. Don't get me started.

Now we're waking up to the fragility of existence, and we don't like it. We vaguely knew that somewhere in the long distance death was coming for us. But it wasn't supposed to be just yet. Just a month ago, for most of us, these current times seemed unbelievable. We were in charge, and now we're not. We want someone to fix everything for us, and we get grumpy when they can't.

Welcome to humanity. Life is not a series of problems to be solved, but a risky adventure to be navigated. Death is not an optional extra for losers, but an intimate reality that stalks us on a daily basis. Selfishness or generosity. What's it to be? Here at the bottom of the Mercator world, we are fortunate to have a Prime Minister who gives us glimpses of the beauty of being human.

Over and over again, while announcing unpalatable measures such as the closing of liquor stores, she has reminded us to be kind to one another. Coming from someone with less character, this might be viewed as a platitude. It strikes a chord with me. Kindness is greatly overlooked in the saga of humanity. It's easy to be pious, more difficult to be kind.

As the Dalai Lama has said, "Kindness is my religion." Religions tend to over-complicate things, and historically produce more misery than joy. Kindness is achievable by any of us, and the opportunities to practice it unlimited. However fearful or bored or frustrated we become in isolation, we have it within us to transform our own lives and that of others with acts of kindness.

A neighbour just returned a dish that had contained a vegan meal for her. She dropped off (at appropriate social distancing) a pair of avocados that another neighbour had provided. These are simple acts, but rich in weaving the social fabric that makes us human. Strangely enough, this care and generosity in the face of adversity makes us into more than we might otherwise be. Let this be our universal virus.

# Being Alone

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A dear friend sent me a link this morning to a poem by the wonderful David Whyte, entitled 'The House of Belonging'. It seemed worth sharing.



I awoke this morning in the gold light  
turning this way  
and that  
thinking for  
a moment  
it was one  
day  
like any other.  
But  
the veil had gone  
from my  
darkened heart  
and  
I thought  
it must have been the quiet  
candlelight  
that filled my room,  
it must have been  
the first  
easy rhythm  
with which I breathed  
myself to sleep,  
it must have been  
the prayer I said  
speaking to the otherness  
of the night.

And  
I thought  
this is the good day  
you could  
meet your love,  
this is the black day  
someone close  
to you could die.  
the tawny  
close-grained cedar  
burning round  
me like fire  
and all the angels of this housely  
heaven ascending  
through the first  
roof of light  
the sun has made.  
This is the bright home  
in which I live,  
this is where  
I ask  
my friends  
to come,  
this is where I want  
to love all the things  
it has taken me so long

to learn to love.  
This is the temple  
of my adult aloneness  
and I belong  
to that aloneness  
as I belong to my life.  
There is no house  
like the house of belonging.

It seemed wistful and sad, as well as magnificently perceptive. It speaks to us of our essential loneliness that comes with maturity, while recognising our deep need to belong. I have three siblings – two sisters and a brother. Each of them lives in solitude, my brother in a dementia ward. Never have they been more alone than in this season of social isolation.

By comparison I'm a lucky bastard. I have a wife of 45 years (duration not age). I live in a village of 34 people, including poets, painters, writers, farmers, truckdrivers, publicans, and storekeepers. We know each other by name and more. Just down the road our daughter and her husband live with their two dogs, and are part of our social bubble. And now, as previously mentioned, my 91 year old mother-in-law has come to live with us, bringing her own small dog.

Not long ago people thought we were mad to have moved to the middle of nowhere. Our town seemed on the very outskirts of

civilisation, and many wondered how we would survive. We moved here by choice, and have never regretted it. The sense of belonging to a place and to a community is visceral. Like David Whyte, I wake each day to the awe of 'the gold light'.

Somehow we humans have become distant from each other – suspicious, fearful, intolerant. Now, thanks to Covid-19, we are relearning an essential truth. We all depend on each other and need each other. A great number of us have lost any sense of belonging to anyone or anything. It's a deep and aching loss, that we only become aware of when distractions cease.

A few months ago, it seemed there was no way back from this. That may still be true. But in recent days I've begun to think that this new season may bring hope for retrieving what appeared remote. To belong is to be held, to be known, to be recognised, to be forgiven. There are many false ways of belonging, as facism and nationalism demonstrate, when we define ourselves by what we hate.

But there is also a belonging borne of love. It starts, as Whyte expresses, with 'the temple of my adult aloneness'. It grows through the awareness of a need for companionship. It flowers when we become willing to link our lives to those of others, not in fear but in gratitude. Genuine belonging is not constraining but enormously enriching.

Perhaps it is easy and facile of me to observe these things. I am not alone. As the Beatles sang in Eleanor Rigby: 'All the lonely people, where do they all come from?'. I would that my heart were big enough to bring them all in and give them a seat at the table. Even if it did mean breaking the law. We can only wait, and hope that change may come from adversity.

# Ars Longa

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There was a time when the arts were considered self-justified. They had no need to prove themselves profitable or make a case for their existence. When did all that change? Within my lifetime, certainly. In my school days no one much new or cared what gross domestic profit or fiscal drag was. That was fodder for rare pointy-headed economists. We were more interested in psychedelia and free love.



There were no segments on the news to update us with the latest financial information. It was a realm best left to specialists who lived in the rarified air shared by theologians. What they did in their bathrooms was their own business. Then something shifted, and the economy was front page news. Suddenly the general population was talking about foreign exchange and the current deficit.

Before long the Western world went mad about money. Nothing was as infectious as financial psychobabble. New university departments sprung up like poisonous toadstools, and politicians were expected to know how to tweak the levers to make everyone comfortably rich. As if that were ever possible. It was a time when alchemists ruled the world, and the black magic of markets became as common as muck.

Intensification, adding value, inflation, quantitative easing – these became the language of love – like John Cleese seducing Jamie Lee Curtis in *A Fish Called Wanda* with a mixture of Russian and Italian. Soon we all believed that the state of the economy was vital to our wellbeing. The daily papers became fascinated by whether the markets moved, like a matron checking the state of our bowels.

As with Coronavirus, it all seemed innocent to start with. Little did we know. Before long this new obsession devoured the world. And the planet. Exploitation and profit-taking became de rigeur. We began fracking the shale for oil, and converting land to

dairying. It was all justifiable because it produced money. No further justification was necessary.

At the same time, the arts began to wither. Writers struggled to make a living, English departments disappeared from universities, Art History withered in the cold winds of necessity. We have lived for a generation thinking there would be no consequences. But when you cut a culture off from its roots, no one should be surprised that what is above ground shrivels and dies.

I'm not one of those to say that our present virus-inspired tragedy is the direct result of such an aberration. But I do think a lockdown gives us time to pause and reevaluate. Strange how heresies now become possible. From austerity we somehow find huge tranches of money to invest in what a month ago would have been derided as socialism. How the tide has changed.

Would it be too much to hope that we might also consider a resurrection of that part of human aspiration and imagination that we call the arts? It's as if we live in a society that practices pre-frontal lobotomy on itself for the sake of protecting against disturbance. It works, but only at great cost. Poetry, music, visual arts, literature – these are the very soul of our common life, and always have been.

There's an old form of farming that believes in the importance of leaving land fallow for a time, so that it may recover and reestablish itself. Here in lockdown, it may well be a season for

the whole human race to consider what is of value in life and community. A bit of Hopkins to conclude:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

## Chapter 6

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# Gratitude

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Oh the golden light was ethereal this morning. For those of you who don't know, we live in a remote valley where the sky is bigger than heaven, and a constant presence in our lives. There was a little March frost to sharpen the mind and the air. I was aware of a tranquil stillness – a deep silence that brooked no sound. I took a deep breath and enjoyed the first moments of wakefulness, grateful.

I love it here. Not long after we came here in the summer, I penned this poem:

In the End (for Rosemary)

in the end  
there's just you and me  
a tibetan blue sky  
to envelop us  
the Hawkduns indifferent  
absorbing  
sun's caress  
at day's surrender  
no one else  
will know the why  
the rush of unsought joy  
bubbling in our hearts  
the feel  
and waft  
of straw yellow grass  
under bare foot  
myriad stars glistening  
in dark so deep  
it might swallow  
truth and meaning  
thyme scented wind

caressing neck and hair  
lifting the page  
of possibility  
a landscape  
wider than morning  
dreamy with absence  
listening always  
we're here together  
at reason's end  
let me hold your hand  
and wonder

My gratitude lasted as long as it took to wake up and realise that the power had been cut. When you live in the country this is a common occurrence. The prospect of starting the day without coffee dispelled any incipient mysticism. There was only one thing for it – to light the fire. A benefit of being rural is that you're still allowed to have a woodburner.

The village grapevine kicked in. We have a FB group that is a kind of care circle for these Coronavirus days. The common thread was caffeine deprivation. Then someone posted a pic of a kettle on top of their fire. It was a Eureka moment for me. I ferreted out a pot, filled it with water, and sat it on top of the range. Slowly it began to heat, and I found the plunger that we don't use often, and laced it with coffee.

Then further inspiration struck. I grabbed the frying pan, the bacon, and some eggs. Before long the smell of bacon sizzling pervaded the room, and my contemplative ecstasy returned. Fifteen minutes later we sat down to the table with coffee and breakfast, enjoying the yellow sunlight slanting through the window. There is life beyond electricity, if you're set up for it.

In another marvel of simplicity, while in post-prandial bliss, the sun hauled itself around the sky until it struck our recently installed solar panels. These sleek black lifesavers began streaming power into the storage battery, and before long kicked the kitchen appliances back into life. I felt like the kid who'd accidentally found the answers to the exam question just before it started.

I thought about the swing of moods – how easily external circumstances influence the way we feel. And how it's possible to find a different way of looking at things without great effort. Life seems dark and difficult for many in such times. It's easier to focus on the deprivation than on the gift of isolation. Without belittling the real tragedy of these days, I suspect there are ways of finding light rather than darkness.

So much depends on digging deep into our souls to find the spark of hope and creativity. Such strategies only occur to us in times of adversity, when our usual glide through routine conformity is disrupted. As we sat around the table in our little

bubble with the fire-cooked breakfast, we were nothing less than joyous.

Later in the day we learned of New Zealand's first death from Corona virus. These events are not opposites that cancel each other out. They are the warp and weft of human existence – the light and the dark. Between them we find our own path into maturity.

## Chapter 7

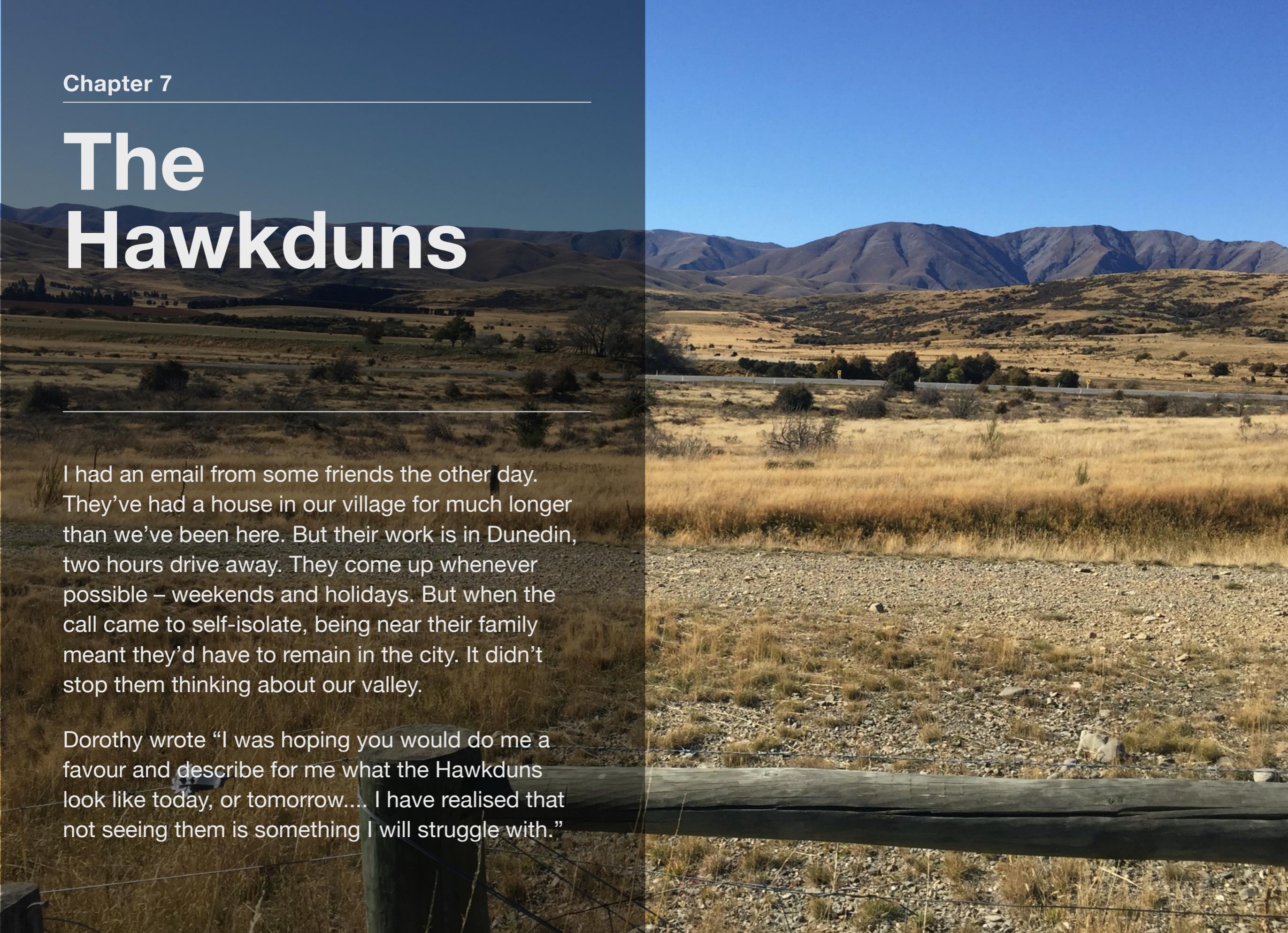
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# The Hawkduns

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I had an email from some friends the other day. They've had a house in our village for much longer than we've been here. But their work is in Dunedin, two hours drive away. They come up whenever possible – weekends and holidays. But when the call came to self-isolate, being near their family meant they'd have to remain in the city. It didn't stop them thinking about our valley.

Dorothy wrote "I was hoping you would do me a favour and describe for me what the Hawkduns look like today, or tomorrow.... I have realised that not seeing them is something I will struggle with."



The Hawkduns are the range of hills that close the northern end of our valley like a curtain. They are an ever-changing panorama of light and drama through the seasons.

In winter these voluptuous peaks are quilted in snow, shining in alpine purity. In summer they beckon with tawny warmth as the strong clear light dances across their ridges. We who live beneath their gaze are deeply influenced by their moods. I find myself turning towards them several times a day. My writing studio has glass doors that look out in that direction, where these mountains loom sedately.

I replied to Dorothy thus: “The day is grey, and the Hawkduns are shrouded with cloud draping their shoulders. Nevertheless they are there, standing in silent solitude, indifferent to whether we’re in lockdown or not. They’ve witnessed many a generation come and go, including their plagues. I understand completely your wanting to know, and the missing of their presence.”

One of my neighbours is Brian Turner – a name that means something to New Zealanders. He’s the last of the poet-philosophers. He lives just down the road. This is a small poem of his:

Where I come from  
the hills are conceived  
in the late evening’s afterglow  
and grow slowly

through the night

and they are there  
wet and shining  
in the wondrous mornings.  
I guess you know  
there’s truth in that,

but unless you are alert  
in the half-light  
before dark  
and follow the contours  
east west north and south,

mapping the land,  
how are you to know  
which are newly born  
and which  
were there before?

This speaks tenderly of the ranges as living creatures, conceived by night and presenting themselves for our delight in the dawn. It’s testament to a living relationship between us and ‘the whelming bowl of hills’ (Baxter) that binds us. Nature mysticism –

the ability to see the thing within the thing. A commonplace to most indigenous peoples, but viewed askance by the emissaries of capitalism who set out to colonise the world.

Does Brian believe that the hills have souls? You'd have to ask him, and he'd probably refer you back to his poetry rather than attempt an answer. But I know that he and I and many others who live in this evocative landscape regard it as having a sacrality that deserves respect rather than seeing it as a resource to be exploited for the betterment of humanity.

It's time for us all to pause and learn how to commune with the natural world, as tempestuous as that relationship can be at times. I lift up eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? A question that is deeper than it seems.

To finish, a few of my own words...

I have seen light  
fondle these hills  
as if to find  
an old lover's  
sweet spot

caressing cracked skin  
awakening memories  
probing black shadows  
forgotten clefts

secret spaces

bringing to sight  
hidden pleasures  
enlivening what seemed  
barren, bereft  
of touch

there was  
a dance of sorts  
flickering ecstasy  
flashing and turning  
an illumination

you might say  
of a longing  
as enduring as  
the scabbed memory  
of the land

it was wise  
to turn aside  
leaving what burned  
in the heart  
alone

# Looking Ahead

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Francesca Melandri, a writer in Italy, has penned a piece reflecting on her experience of living in the epicentre of Corona virus, and giving advance warning of what the rest of the world might have to come. She concludes, “If we turn our gaze to the more distant future, the future which is unknown both to you and to us too, we can only tell you this: when all of this is over, the world won’t be the same.”



The definition of madness, so they say, is to keep on doing the same thing and expect a different result. I wonder what will happen when all this is over, and life starts up again? Of course things will be different. The world economy is likely to be tanking, businesses will have closed, and some of our loved ones will no longer be with us. It will be time to find our way tentatively into an unknown future.

A possible response might be a rush to get back to normality, where we attempt to find our way back to what we had before. While that might be comforting, it would be a tragic missed opportunity. What we are going through now is life-changing and disruptive of former patterns. It forces us to cease the routines that provided markers for our daily existence.

The same thing happens in a minor way when we go on summer holiday. The days seem endless, we notice the natural world around us, and we make resolutions about how our lives will be different once we get back to home and work. Maybe we dream of buying a holiday house. But before we know it we're back into the same old rush and bad habits that have always defined us.

Will the same thing happen when lockdown is over? Will it linger only as an item of nostalgia to be laughed about between friends? I guess the question is how deep does this experience take us, and what do we do with it. For the first time in a century, the whirlwind has stopped, and we have the opportunity to understand that our tasks don't define us completely.

Some of us remember those uncles and cousins who came back from the war, and were either unable to speak of it, or refused to. Their silence spoke eloquently of their pain and shame at what they'd lived through. They did their best to carry on with life, and yet a part of them was always missing – a vacant stare that never quite found what it was looking for. Their wounds were beyond repair.

Once our bearings have been dislocated by tragedy and pain, the future that seemed assured is up for grabs. Survival is not the same thing as healing. It all depends what happens on the other side of the disruption. We can bury our pain, or deny it, or rush into distraction. Or, and this is our challenge, we can change our ways. On my recent trip to Hiroshima, I felt keenly the Japanese desire that their agony should never happen again.

Most of us are aware that the world has been in a sorry state long before this virus brought us to a standstill. We've all been complicit in letting things go too far; of reaching that point where evil triumphs because good people do too little. It's the sin of omission – not that we intend ruin, but because we don't know how to stop it happening.

The promised land always lies on the other side of the wilderness. There are no shortcuts. When we emerge from our current crisis, and most of us will, the journey will only be half completed. The call is upon us to try something different than what we have come

to accept as normal. Are we up to it, or will we simply slump into routine and destructive habits? I honestly don't know.

# Captivity

---

It's Wednesday. A week ago at midnight, our lives changed forever. We were placed in lockdown, along with everyone else in New Zealand. It's not the first time I've been sequestered. Back in 1974, I was a guest in a Moroccan jail for six weeks. The charge was possession of tobacco grown without a permit. It was a means of dealing with foreigners who were found with hashish, which at the time wasn't illegal for Moroccans.

That lockdown was more rigorous. There were more than 30 of us in a cell the size of a modest lounge in a New Zealand house. The floor was concrete, and our bedding consisted of one blanket each. The only way we could lie down to sleep was to do so by imitating sardines, top and tailing. For one person to turn over, everyone had to turn over.

There were two drawbacks to this arrangement. One was that there were no psychiatric hospitals in Fes where I was imprisoned. So the mentally unstable shared cells with we criminals. This produced some interesting encounters. The other niggle was that the place was crawling with lice. At night, sleeping so close to warm bodies made the lice particularly active.

My preferred activity for this period of incarceration was to go through the seams of my clothes, crushing the tiny white eggs of lice between my thumbnails. Get them before they hatched. It was as absorbing as any board game. For an hour a day we were all allowed out into the courtyard – the most dangerous place to be. Scores were often settled with a blow to the head from a rock wrapped in a tee shirt.

So, by comparison, the current period of home detention seems luxurious. The only danger is boredom, and that's usually the result of insufficient imagination. Yesterday, in our bubble, we celebrated my wife's birthday. I made a moussaka, accompanied by a green salad with lettuce from our garden, and warm bread

that I'd just baked in the oven. There was plenty of wine for those who wanted it – just within our bubble of course.

It's a long way from misery. I do recall that on one auspicious day in that earlier prison, all the Europeans in the cell were rounded up and taken to a visiting room. We were anxious about what might happen to us. We discovered to our delight that it was at the behest of an Italian stranger. He'd been caught up in the Algerian revolution back in the day, and spent time in prison himself.

He never forgot it. His response was to regularly visit captive strangers like he'd been, and take them gifts of food. We returned to our cell bearing unspeakable treasures of delight, such as cheese and figs. When I was finally released, I looked up this lovely man and had dinner with him. He was a lively conversationalist, and so very generous in his hospitality.

Kindness is infectious, and the smallest act in difficult circumstances finds a home in the heart. Here in the valley we are surrounded by wonderful neighbours. We keep our social distance, but try not to be isolated. The warmth of human companionship reminds us that in a time of limits, we are greatly blessed.

“Two men looked out from prison bars – one saw mud, the other saw stars”.

# The Matrix

---

I was in Sydney when *The Matrix* came out. With good friends, we went to one of the very first screenings. We'd seen the trailer and were intrigued. I don't think any of us were prepared for what unfolded before us on screen. The Wachowski brothers pulled off a minor miracle by weaving together action, philosophy, religion and conspiracy in a riveting story that also pushed the boundaries of cinema back in the day.

Much has been written about the film over the years. Things have moved on. But the conceptual leaps the screenplay contained were epic when it first appeared. It was something of a paeon to post-modernity, with its questioning of whether what appeared to be real could be trusted or not. As Morpheus says: “You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

But the prescient quote for our current times comes from Hugo Weaver playing the sinister Agent Smith, and it’s this one I’ve been thinking about of late. He says:

“I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species and I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You're a plague and we are the cure.”

Worth thinking about. Does it take a virus to put an end to an even more virulent virus? As a lot of people have been asking, is this our wake-up call from the earth? My thoughtful friend up

north sends me snippets of reading he thinks I might be interested in. Today he provided a link to reflections by Liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan priest once silenced by the Vatican.

Boff notes: “The current coronavirus pandemic represents a unique opportunity for us to rethink our way of inhabiting the Common Home; the way we produce, consume and relate to nature. The time has come to question the virtues of the capitalist order: unlimited accumulation, competition, individualism, indifference towards the misery of millions of people, the downsizing of the State and the exaltation of the Wall Street motto: “greed is good”.

I don’t want to draw a direct line between the ravaging of our planet and Coronavirus, but I do think it raises a question as to how we might continue once the crisis is over. Boff references French President Emmanuel Macron, who has said: “Dear compatriots: tomorrow we will have time to draw lessons from the moment we are going through; to question the development model that our world chose decades ago and that shows its failures in the light of today; to question the weaknesses of our democracies.”

Every epoch and each day of life is an opportunity to reinvent our lives – both individually and as communities. This pause is custom made to do so. I don’t know any more than you do. We are all of us in this together, and have a unique chance to be part

of a change that might last beyond the length of our lockdown.  
And if not, maybe we could just re-watch The Matrix again.

# Autumn

---

Autumn. A season of dying. A time of mellow beauty, when the air is still, the light yellow, the days retracting in anticipation of what will inevitably come. There's a dank peace upon the earth. The rocky hills here loom sharply against the ceramic blue, cutting the eyes like diamonds. Mornings are cool, with a hint of sharpness. By midday I'm wiping the sweat from my brow as I dig a trench in stony soil.



Spring is my favourite season, but I can't deny I have a bit of a thing going with autumn. I love that it produces a pause and a calm. There's a necessary journey as the earth turns. We will find winter, or at least winter will find us. But right now we're at the pivot point, and experiencing a golden interlude before the necessary dying. I've encountered this spell so many times before, but with each recurrence it seems richer and fuller.

Back in 1946, at the age of 20, James K. Baxter wrote a poem of autumnal longing.

Blow wind of fruitfulness  
Blow from the buried sun:  
Blow from the buried kingdom  
Where heart and mind are one.  
Blow wind of fruitfulness,  
The murmuring leaves remember;  
For deep in the doorless rock  
Awaits their green September.  
Blow from the wells of night:  
The blind flower breathes thy coming  
Birds that are silent now  
And buds of barren springing.  
Blow from beyond our day,  
The hill-born streams complain:  
Hear from their stony courses

The great sea rise again.  
Blow on the mouth of morning  
Renew the single eye:  
And from remembered darkness  
Our immortality.

It's a song of yearning for the life that's contained in death – each being part of the same cycle of existence. Some of you will know the wonderful poem of Clive James, 'Japanese Maple', that I quoted during my recent trip to Japan, and which covers some of the same territory. Read it if you haven't. Both writers are conscious that death is the constant partner of life, and that we are annually reminded that it is so.

Our minds are preoccupied with virus and vulnerability, as if this were something new on the horizon. Though all of us in all ages are continually reminded that we are mortal. One of the tasks of life is to contemplate death, and maybe vice versa. It is this dance between demise and regeneration that hangs in the pause that is autumn. Spring will inevitably follow winter. Whether we will be present to see it is the angst of Clive James' poem:

Ever more lavish as the dusk descends  
This glistening illuminates the air.  
It never ends.  
Whenever the rain comes it will be there,  
Beyond my time, but now I take my share.

When I woke this morning, there were faint wisps of mist hovering over the lucerne paddock across the road. The late-rising sun lit them until they shone with gold. Something was passing, and something was being born. It has been ever so. Fear has the effect of robbing us of present joy. I'm hoping that the calm of autumn may penetrate deep into the hearts of us all.

My wife's chapel shines in the light, framed by a gloriously tawny rowan tree. Rowan trees are sometimes called the tree of life. They are considered to protect wayfarers from evil. Whatever happens, we are somehow safe beyond our knowing.

# Coronavirus: The Novel

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I hear a doctor talking on the wireless about the novel Coronavirus. Spend a long time searching Amazon and Barnes & Noble looking for this work of contemporary fiction. Lots of titles about Coronavirus, but none of them look like creative literature. So maybe I've got it wrong. I start worrying that there's some sort of virus that attacks novels. Thumb through some volumes from the bookshelf but they all seem okay.

I might have heard it wrong. Perhaps 'novel' was being used as an adjective instead of a noun. If that means anything to people under 25, which I doubt. If it was indeed adjectival, the meaning might be as the Cambridge Dictionary suggests: 'new and original, not like anything seen before'. Well that would work. I can go with the 'not like anything seen before'. Not that there's much to see with the world on freeze frame.

New and original sounds enticing. There's a lot that's new but not so much original in recent times. In another lifetime, when I was lecturing in theology (I know, you've never heard of it, but it was how universities started), I was seduced by a movement known as 'Process Theology'. This school conceived God not as some divine autocrat in the sky, but as the divine pull forward.

Not so much in the direction of 'progress', which is eating the planet, but in the sense of leading the universe toward maturity. It was a highly speculative framework which suffered from too much abstruse terminology. But basically it postulated that the sacred centre of the universe operated by luring creation toward better choices, while preserving the freedom of will to deny such beckoning.

At the level of both conscience and becoming, every creature (including rocks and possums) faced the possibility of repeating previous certainties, or more interestingly, choosing to venture forth into new possibilities. Only when entertaining novel ways of being or acting are we able to move the universe forward into

what it is called to be. God was to be found in the unrealised possibility, always luring us forward.

I know – this sounds a bit like the Flat Earth Society on steroids. Yet the idea of changing up our lives in novel directions is a worthy thought while we're in confinement. Would it be possible to reconceive capitalism? Is there a way of living together on this planet without destroying it? Could societal decision-making be conducted in a less farcical and confrontational fashion?

Sometimes our tendency to recreate the past comes from a lack of imagination – the inability to think outside of paradigms that seem inviolate and self-evident. When normality is suspended as it has been in recent months, we find a little space to reimagine not only our own daily existence, but the global madness and inhumanity that has engulfed us in recent times.

I don't want to over-simplify such developments. However, nor do I want to underplay the urgency of tackling the big issues of this epoch. We are very close to Leonard Cohen's 'Closing Time'. Either we allow the pull of new ways of thinking to disrupt destructive patterns, or we effectively perish as a consequence of failing to do so.

Someone should write a novel novel. Not about Coronavirus, but about how to live when it's done with.

# Film Noir

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Spare a thought for independent filmmakers in the current crisis. Film has always been a marriage between art and commerce. No matter how you slice the cheese, it's expensive to make a feature film. It's a communal effort, involving a tribe of creatives who routinely bring their best game to the project. They work long hours and subsume their own comfort for the good of the story they're making.



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Independent filmmaking was already struggling in recent years, under the shadow of studios churning out populist high budget material to entertain the masses. Look at the preponderance of Marvel comic adaptations for the screen. Big on computer-generated special effects, these stories slide off the memory like oil on teflon. They're the equivalent of high sugar food, that titillates but doesn't satisfy.

No wonder a lot of creatives and audiences are drifting toward Netflix productions. Many fine dramas are located on streaming services, backed by seemingly limitless budgets flowing from the global subscription windfall. And now in lockdown, how do we survive without our addictive binge-watching? I enjoy the high-end entertainment with fine acting and complex multi-layered storytelling.

The drawback is that once again commerce rules. Try getting an indie film on the platform and you'll understand the barriers that exist. Like much of life, the big boys rule. I guess we have a global problem, driven largely by the concept of fame. Audiences

want to like what everyone else likes, and get on the bus that the majority of the population is already riding. It reinforces our sense of belonging.

Which creates a problem for the artistic end of cinema. It was always a struggle, but now with coronavirus, tanking speculative funds that might once have taken a punt on an edgy film, those who play in the indie realm are toast. It's not just that the jobs have dried up, but there seems little hope that they will ever come back again.

The artistic survivors have in recent times ended up working on lavish made-for-streaming gigs to try to earn enough money to enable them to produce their own material. But then how do they win an audience for it? The idea that good films will gain their own momentum is demonstrably untrue. They compete in a playing field that is dominated by financial bullies, who spend oodles on promotion, and wine and dine the critics.

Declaration of personal interest: I've been working on a film about NZ plastic surgeon Archie McIndoe for the last 11 years, directed by Roger Donaldson. It's a great yarn, and one relevant to our current times. I won't go into the ups and downs of the project, except to say that at one stage we were within reach of the \$10m budget. Negotiations were still ongoing up to a month ago. And then coronavirus hit. Goodbye a decade of life.

On the positive side, ten years ago some good friends and I managed to get a film up with just the generosity of people who believed in it. My wife and I mortgaged our house to get it going. The budget was \$500,000. We collected a crew and cast that brought their best despite their not being much money in it for them. Rosemary directed it. The movie was released in New Zealand and the UK to very good reviews.

But we had no money left over for promotion. Even small studio films will spend a million on this. We couldn't compete. Ten years later the film still stands up, I think. And the good news is that you can now watch it online for free. Have a look if you haven't seen it. And feel free to share away as much as you like. Art for art's sake.

# Holy Week

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Trigger warning: Sexual Abuse, Death, Religion

So it's Holy Week. Not that you'd know it, with all the churches shut down. Which probably comes as a relief to most of the world. Now you can eat hot cross buns and easter eggs without being harangued by some holier-than thou prat. The season of Lent will come to an end. We've all been unintentionally observing it by doing without takeaways and hardware stores.



I'm going to dive deep over the next few days. As a one-time minister of religion, I feel like our culture is glossing over its heritage, like a tree that decides it's had enough of being rooted in the soil. I'm not trying to convert anyone to anything. More like reflecting on my own journey. Take it or leave it. As a wiser man than me once said, "If my words find no home in you, just leave them quietly by".

The events of this week are a retelling of a story that has great resonance for me. It's a tale of rebellion, persecution, misunderstanding, isolation, betrayal, mockery, torture, death, and mystery. I think all of those words have some deep personal meaning, and more so for me in the light of events during recent years. I feel like I've experienced my own torrid journey through easter.

Let the story unfold. This week I've been cleaning out my writing studio, given that I set it up in a bit of a hurry when we moved to our new location deep in Central Otago. A few months prior, our daughter Pollyanna, and her faithful friend Lola the Labrador, were sleeping in the hut that is now my space to reflect and write. While sorting through things yesterday, I found a card Polly had left behind.

"Dearest Dad,

Difficult to find the words to express just how very dear you are to me. However, I thank you for your gifts, your nurturing, your

onwards and upwards, up and at 'em approach to life. Teaching me to be brave enough to write, to cry, to scream, to push on, to keep going and to forever see the symbolism in things, the poetry. For 'there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in' light! You are so indefinably, insatiably dear to me and I love you and thank you with every cell that is a part of me. Thank you for everything."

I cried. Because she is dead. I want to reach out for her, but it's no longer possible. She's not physically present to all of us who loved her. A troubled child. Raped at the age of 11, a drug addict, sex worker, beneficiary, abused in so many ways. That's one way to describe her. Or zany, outrageously funny, wildly creative, spiritually aware, painfully sensitive, fiercely loyal, staunch and feisty, beautiful. She died at the age of 40, too good for this world.

She had returned from a trip to Switzerland, before coming as a sort of advance guard to this tiny village of Oturehua where we now live. Rosemary and I were still up in the North Island. I spoke to Polly by phone pretty much every day. She told me she would need to go down to Dunedin because her car had a crack in the wing mirror, and she'd need to get it replaced.

there was a crack  
in her side mirror –  
that's why she left  
and never came back

too much looking behind  
at what was past  
when the windscreen was full  
of what lay ahead

i'm clean, she said  
the night before she died  
i'll be back in the valley  
tomorrow

instead we carried her  
home in a box  
and buried her  
in a place with a view

the middlemarch horses  
paid their respects  
mournful eyes  
at the wire fence

no more looking back  
with cracked vision  
all clear ahead  
endlessly

but we stand searching  
the wide horizon  
don't regret  
our fractured lives

Grieving and loss are part of the human condition. Anyone who pretends they don't suffer is inhuman. That ache in the heart that no words can salve, no distraction erase. We resist it but it finds us, inevitably. Holy Week is a journey down into the depths. It speaks to me of not being alone in my pain. And whispers that there is something sacred and important to be found there.

Rebellion, persecution, misunderstanding, isolation, betrayal, mockery, torture, death, and mystery. These are not empty words for me anymore. Let us be present to our pain, and mindful of its power to make us different people. Nothing that is glossed over or hidden can be healed. Let's expose our wounds to the air.

# Passover

The 8th of April is the beginning of Passover, one of the most important festivals in Judaism. I no longer assume that anyone knows what Passover is, or the way in which Easter has piggybacked on it. Typically on the second day of Passover, the Jewish community gathers for the Seder meal. This is a wonderful tradition, in which the youngest person present asks questions. The responses allow for the telling of the story of the people of Israel being led out of Egyptian slavery in what is called the Exodus.



The Talmudic story involves the oppressed population calling out to God for freedom. Moses is appointed to ask the Pharaoh to let the people go. When the ruler refuses, a series of plagues ensues (timely subject). There are 10 of them, building in intensity, including blood, frogs, boils, locusts, and darkness. The final and most dramatic is the passing of the Angel of Death over the land, resulting in the demise of every firstborn son.

The enslaved people are instructed to mark their front doors with the blood of a lamb, so that the dark angel may pass over their homes – hence ‘passover’.

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood...

Nobody saved the lambs. But the people were spared, and finally the grieving Pharaoh relented and released the captives.

Christians inhabited the story, and the crucifixion of Jesus during Passover is interpreted as the death of the ‘Lamb of God’. This is seen in traditional terms as sacrificial. In a twisted view of God, some forms of Christianity have expanded this into the idea that Jesus was killed by God as a substitute for us. This is a bizarre view of divine love, and is wrong on so many levels. Nobody asked for it, and it’s kind of freaky.

In fact Jesus was executed for perceived insurrection and blasphemy. As such he has become symbolic of all those who are

unjustly oppressed. The reason you see those slightly grotesque statues of crucifixion at the front of churches is because this is the symbol of God’s identity as a loving sufferer. Not the cause of suffering but the fellow-sufferer. It’s an important distinction.

Shortly after Polly died, we took delivery of a beautiful small chapel that was built for my wife as a place of meditation and prayer. Six months after the burial, I found myself painting the trim on the building during Easter weekend. It generated a poem, which is how I deal with feelings too powerful for prose.

I painted  
the chapel’s lintel  
with a brush  
not made of hyssop  
used pioneer red  
for lamb’s blood  
as good as any  
to mark death  
and separation  
the cows over the fence  
roared defiance  
their calves newly stolen  
the farmer unmoved  
on good friday  
our firstborn spared

but we went to see  
the second  
in her clay cavern  
rituals barren  
to save us  
and only the nor'west  
passing over  
this indifferent land

It's a protest poem from the depths of my soul – a song of grief, a lament. What is the point of 'salvation' if it can't save? All of us who suffer carry it in our hearts. We thrash about looking for someone to blame or punish. It's a long time before those salted waves cease to bash us against the rocks.

I was tempted to blame God. In doing so I assumed that the centre of divinity was harsh and punishing, and on the side of those who had destroyed our daughter's life. I would continue to do so if it weren't for the notion that my image of God is tied up in Jesus – a fellow human who knew the path of oppression and misunderstanding, of loneliness and death. It shouldn't help, but it does.

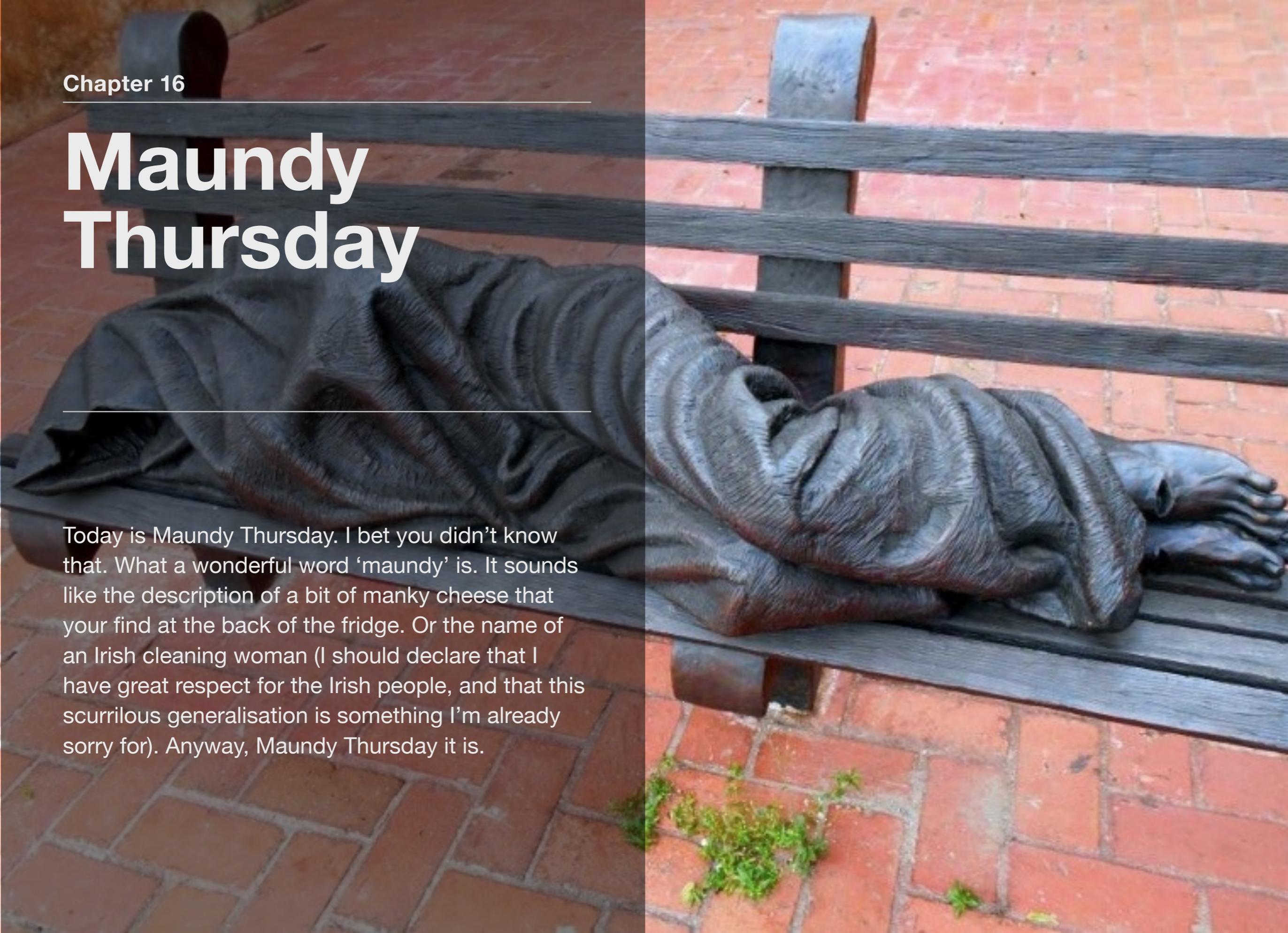
Holy week is like *Apocalypse Now*: a journey into the heart of darkness. And into my own dark heart, which sometimes carries currents of revenge and prejudice. There is no recovery from grief, but there is, slowly, transformation. In the Passover meal, one of

the elements is the consumption of bitter herbs. Only those who have tasted bitterness can know the price of love.

# Maundy Thursday

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Today is Maundy Thursday. I bet you didn't know that. What a wonderful word 'maundy' is. It sounds like the description of a bit of manky cheese that you find at the back of the fridge. Or the name of an Irish cleaning woman (I should declare that I have great respect for the Irish people, and that this scurrilous generalisation is something I'm already sorry for). Anyway, Maundy Thursday it is.



It celebrates the Last Supper. Everyone gets round one side of the table and waits for the artist to finish painting them. No, I'm being silly. On this day churches celebrate the final meal that Jesus had with the inner circle of followers, sharing bread and wine. His word to them was that from now on, whenever they had food and wine together (unless they were Christian wowsers) they should remember him.

In some places this day is marked by footwashing. Personally I try to shower at least once a week, but I may be a bit OCD (once again no offence intended, but feel free to take it if you must). In the religious ceremony, the aristocrats of the church take a bowl of water and a towel, and demonstrate their humility by washing the feet of the poor. Of course, making a song and dance about one's modesty rather defeats the purpose of it.

And then there's Cardinal George Pell. A prince of the church, and the very epitome of maundiness. A big man, an authoritarian, a conservative Catholic, a leader in whom one would search long and hard to find humility. He's just been declared not guilty by the Australian High Court, an institution that considers itself far more enlightened than the poor ignorant serfs on the jury that heard the evidence and found him guilty.

I can say without a shadow of doubt that he is guilty. Of the charges he faced, I have no knowledge. But he is demonstrably guilty of protecting a cabal of sexual abusers by moving them from parish to parish, thereby setting them free to prey on a fresh

gathering of innocent victims. Guilty of putting the reputation of the church above the devastation wrought in the lives of children. Guilty of designing a crafty scheme to stop the abused pursuing legal action, and limiting the amount they could be paid out.

Besides which, IMHO, he's an arrogant arsehole (now I'm intentionally causing offence). He's the epitome of the distortion and evil that has white-anted the church, where men have pursued careers and lavished praise upon themselves. No wonder the most common rejection of Christianity is due to the charge of hypocrisy. On the evidence, there's no valid defence against it.

Me, I'm a terribly flawed example of someone who tries to pursue the teachings of Jesus. I'm on the side of the casualties of the system defended by Pell. I know the brokenness and devastation caused by authority figures expressing their inner sexual demons by raping children. It seems to me the antithesis of all that Jesus represented. Some practices deserve the title of demonic.

Jesus of Nazareth said: "Do not call anyone on earth your father", "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last", "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant", "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me", "For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest", "Whoever exalts themselves will be humbled."

I've stood in great European cathedrals, awed by the scale and the architecture. But also wondering what it all has to do with a poor man in sandals who was executed. Gold leaf, diamond-encrusted chalices, monuments to wealthy donors, hierarchical furnishings, marble altars, the preserved foreskins of saints. It's all a long way from Golgotha.

Well, that was a bit of a rant, wasn't it? At the dinner party we've come to know as the Last Supper, Jesus was betrayed by one of his buddies. These days his whole movement is betrayed by people who claim to represent it. Which is why I feel a great sense of shame in using the term 'Christian', loaded as it is. In fact I try not to say anything, preferring to continue badly representing the way of Jesus in words and deeds.

Maundy, maundy, maundy. I'm feeling maundy. On this journey into the darkness of Holy Week, we've just about reached the bottom. A man who lived and spoke of peace, forgiveness, solidarity, liberation, endless love – this man has come to be a symbol of abuse, authority, wealth, power, and enslavement. This is the deepest betrayal of them all. After this there is nothing but darkness and emptiness. God save us all.

# Good Friday

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Friday. Good. TGIF, said no one.

“You want it darker,” sings Leonard Cohen in a poignant growling poem released after his death. “Vilified, crucified, in the human frame.” Cohen has been something of the minstrel in my life, after I saw him perform at the Royal Albert Hall in 1974. Steeped in the human condition, and a troubadour deeply influenced by Judaism with a sprinkling of Buddhism and Christianity, he has accompanied me through the adventures of my life.



As such he has been the wise man of a generation, and his passing is keenly felt. Early in his career, he penned what I consider the finest articulation of the adventures of Jesus ever composed. No doctor of theology could deliver a more poetic or accurate expression.

And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water  
And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower  
And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him  
He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them  
But he himself was broken, long before the sky would open  
Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone...

As someone who has been a 'drowning man', this verse from 'Suzanne' speaks for me and to me. The simple is profound. We sail the oceans of our life, often rudderless and unsure of where we're going. Hoping that somehow the sea will free us, but not too confident that it will. We are all drowning, trusting only in those who, like us, have sunk below the surface of common wisdom.

As Cohen has it, only those who slip below the surface and are beyond rescue are able to 'see' and understand. The darkness of Easter is a recognition of this plunge into the depths of the bleak unknown. To lose all reference points, to question all certainties,

to give up all defences. I've found a compatriot in one 'forsaken, almost human' who has trammelled the chasms of pain.

To look at the face of our daughter in the morgue undid us all. It was the absolute breaking point, from which there was no coming back. I don't reference this to wallow in grief, or at least I hope not. Rather it is to say that by rights it should have destroyed all hope, all thoughts of salvation, all petty deities who might be called on to rescue me, all prayer itself as an empty delusion.

You want it darker? There was no darker. And yet, and yet. In the crucible of pain, I felt I was not alone, that somehow I was accompanied. Shall we call it a mystery? I don't call it anything. I have lost words for that which cannot be spoken. But as my fragile dreams were bashed against the jagged rocks of reality, there was some residual impulse that invited me to keep drawing breath, to hold to my loved ones.

If I must believe in God, I prefer the image of a drowning man to that of a despotic heavenly ruler. I like the company of friends who have learned how to curse at God in their times of angst. I choose to laugh at the black humour only learned in the dark satanic mills. I find hope not in the baubles of commerce, but in the resolute strength of people who have been crushed but choose life on a daily basis.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the cry of Jesus from the cross. That, I think, is the song of faith for the broken.

# The Harrowing of Hell

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Getting near the end of these Holy Week reflections, for which I'm sure many are grateful. We're currently in the no-man's-land between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Or as it's otherwise known, supermarket shopping day. If you've got any room left in the pantry, after the panic-buying on Thursday. Should the worst comes to the worst, at least we'll die well-fed.



In various church traditions, the day is known as Holy Saturday, Black Saturday, Hallelujah Saturday, or the Harrowing of Hell. This latter sounds the most intriguing, and is the topic I'm thinking about today. It refers to the myth that in between the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus descended into the underworld (hell) to share good news with those trapped there.

Like all such myths, it's a story which expresses some deeper truth. It appeals to me because like many of you, I've been through hell. Through many years in varied experiences. Some years ago I wrote: "The weight of humanity is to carry wounds that are not obvious. Mine declare themselves at inappropriate times, with a flash of rage or a fall into self-pity." We hide our pain and it slowly destroys us.

In my own pit of despair, I could have done with a visit. I like to think that the tale of Jesus entering hell is a reassurance that divine love has no limits, and no territory is beyond redemption. It's not always apparent that this is so. In fact we're likely to push people away, convinced there's no way any of them can understand, or scared we'll lash out and hurt them in ways we can't control.

James K. Baxter, a New Zealand poet and prophet, reflected some years ago on the people who dare to enter the 'bubble' of those in pain. He wrote:

"Meanwhile the wicked world goes on healing the wicked world. Women who think they have ceased to be Christian shack up with dying alcoholics and wash their piles with warm water. Men who think the same extricate the head of their neighbour's wife from the gas oven, and find they have a new woman to look after and another mark on the crime sheet."

Goodness is not defined in what people refrain from doing, but what they're willing to do for the sake of others. In many ways it can be summed up by the word 'presence'. On that terrible night when two policemen came to our door to tell us our daughter was dead, we were broken and alone. I made one phone call to dear friends, who appeared at our door shortly after.

They didn't attempt to offer answers. Rather they sat with us in silence as we wept and howled into the darkness. They stayed till after midnight, when it seemed safe to leave us. We are forever grateful for their human touch and companionship. When all seemed lost they simply held us. It was a precious gift – a visitation in hell.

The most bitter part of suffering is loneliness – the feeling that no one can touch the black molten core of our pain. The fear that if they do, they might somehow be destroyed by it. The temptation is to curl into a ball and shut out the world. In doing so we create our own dark prison cell, our own hell if you like.

Hallelujah Saturday holds the hope that somewhere between the darkness and dawn there is a presence in the solitude, and that should we be courageous enough to let go of our fears, we might find that we haven't been abandoned. Instead we are held and loved. The harsh country we find ourselves in has already been visited, and we are not alone – nor will we ever be.

# Saturday

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There's icing sugar snow on the Hawkduns this morning, and a razor sharp wind from the south. The air is pristine with thousand mile views. It's not winter, just a little foretaste, as we here get gifted sporadically throughout summer and autumn. People always assume we're troubled by the variation in temperature. As it happens, we love every day for its unique visitation.



Saturday was the perfect golden day – no wind, warm streaming sunshine, a wonder. I jumped on the mountain bike and headed up the valley. Past stately poplars bearing Otago gold against the infinite blue sky. Gently uphill all the way to the end of the Ida Valley. I hardly noticed, so entranced was I by the shining delights of the landscape, which popped vividly.

I discovered I'd forgotten to take a water bottle. So I stopped half way up the rail trail at one of the many apple trees laden with blushing ripe fruit. There's something very rewarding about picking straight from the tree, and eating on the fly. Even more so, given that these trees are the result of people who generations ago turfed their apple cores out the window of the train.

At the top of the incline, I paused to take in the vast scope of the tawny mountains that form our corridor of being. Feeling the warm sun on my back, savouring each breath of the crystal air, picking bits of apple skin from between my teeth. In that moment I was as aware as I've ever been in my life. It takes some decades to bypass the inner chatter in order to simply be and appreciate what lies before you.

The ride back was sublime – the odd stroke of the pedal as the bike propelled itself over the gravel. I considered the gift of the apple trees. Generated by a careless toss out the window of something that had been finished with, and was no longer needed. Whoever lobbed it would have given no further thought to it, returning to whatever was consuming their inner world.

In the earlier years of our lives, we're full of ego and ambition. We rate our performance by what we achieve – thrilled when we get public accolades, broken when we discover ourselves ignored. It's the tragedy of youth to expend ourselves chasing recognition – a target that is beyond our capacity to achieve, and food for disappointment. Passing through middle age often brings a season of regret.

As folk like myself near the latter season of our lives, we reach a glorious land of self-acceptance. We concentrate not so much on achievements as on the joy of daily life. I've come to think that our best work is something like those apple cores. Discarded, unnoticed, and yet silently growing at the side of the trail until they miraculously produce radiant crops.

Who knows what follows in the wake of our existence? It may not be what we've been so focussed on. The hug of a stranger, a kind word to someone who annoys us, some personal honesty wrung out of us in despair, the surrender of plans to the ether. What we have in front of us is each moment, to either be embraced or ignored. We're no more able to control the outcomes of our lives, than the discarded apple understands its destiny as a tree.

But in the crunchy sweetness of my 'found' fruit, I found myself grateful for someone who had passed by before me. So very good to be alive.

# Prostate Cancer

This is probably a men-only piece today. Unless, like our Polly, you worry that prostate cancer might be hereditary. I think you have to have a prostate to get problems with it. The female equivalent is breast cancer. The difference is that women tend to take it seriously and do something about it. Men, like me for example, do nothing until the symptoms get really annoying.



So far we've had 9 deaths from Covid-19 in New Zealand. By comparison, just over 600 men will die from prostate cancer this year, and every year. We blokes tend not to take it seriously until it's too late. One reason for this is the prospect of the finger up the bum. Despite the fact that women are frequently having their private parts explored by medical professionals. Maybe men are innately homophobic, or just easily embarrassed.

After I was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer, I started writing a little book about the subject, entitled 'Wonky-Ponk Down Under'. I was never able to find a publisher for it, because no one wants to know about such things, especially those with a Y chromosome. In it, I described my dilemma in relation to visiting my GP in these terms.

"My GP is attractive and extremely vivacious. I've had dinner with her and her entrepreneurial husband. She's funny and compassionate. But just at the moment she has her rubber-gloved finger up my anus, wriggling it around in a vaguely discomfiting manner. I doubt whether she enjoys it any more than I do. I guess a return dinner engagement is probably off the table for a while.

"I'm facing the wall and pretending that it's quite common for people to apply gel and explore my rectum. In truth I'm struggling with the fact that the probing is producing a sensation rather similar to the prelude to defecation. That could engineer a very messy end to our friendship. Finally it's over, and I'm allowed to

retrieve my clean underpants and my soiled dignity. 'Well,' she tells me, 'I can't feel anything out of the ordinary.'"

In fact, it turned out after a biopsy that I had cancer with a Gleason score of 10, which is as high as it gets in terms of aggressiveness ('Fuck you!' 'Nah, you fuck you!'). Surgery was the only option. "We'll have to go wide," the surgeon told me, with all the fervour of a half-back eyeing his wing from the base of the scrum. He demonstrates with his hands, indicating a breadth that would clean out my hipbones as well. I think this might be hyperbole.

What he means is he's going to remove not only my prostate, but all prospect of gaining an erection naturally. At last, men, I'm sure I've got your attention. Would you rather have a finger up your bum, or a permanently floppy dick? I decided to go with the operation, preferring that I remain standing erect, even if nothing else would. I guess it helps that mostly older men get this type of cancer.

Things became worse, which is a general rule of thumb for life. After the surgery, I was informed they'd been unable to get all the nasty little cells. I was referred for radiology. The radiologist examined the scans, and informed me he couldn't do anything because the cancer was too close to the bowel. He then informed me that his best estimate was that I had 12-18 months to live.

That was more than two years ago. Today I'm still having treatment, which mostly involves hormone treatment to extinguish testosterone in my body. This guarantees that sex is off the agenda. I had hoped it might restore hair to my balding pate, but no such luck. Surprisingly, I'm fit as a buck rabbit, even if not so horny. And feeling as healthy as I ever have, despite the radiologist's prognosis.

But like a survivor of some terrible accident caused by inattention, I now feel the need to alert my fellow brethren of the importance of getting that little nut in your groin checked out before it's too late. Dignity is overrated, in comparison to waking up each morning. Oh, by the way, please don't see my confession as an opportunity to send me whatever whacky remedy you have for prostate cancer. With Trump around, I get impatient with snake oil purveyors.

Finally, men, pee well.

# Secrets and Lies

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Was there ever a family that didn't harbour secrets? Edith Schaeffer once described a family as a door that variously opens and shuts. Douglas Coupland penned a novel with the title 'All Families Are Psychotic.' Let's not neglect the marvellous Mike Leigh film, 'Secrets and Lies'. Jeanette Winterson: "Unhappy families are conspiracies of silence. The one who breaks the silence is never forgiven."



I've been thinking about the damage done by family confidences, inspired by a forthcoming book from a good friend of mine about adoption. She was stolen away at birth, and legally transferred to another couple. The unfolding pain and loss of identity from her mother informs the substance of what is an incredibly moving and riveting memoir. The quest for information about her natural mother meets a cloak of institutional silence.

My own father was the result of a one-night liaison between two young people in a small town. The woman was part of a large working class family, the father the son of a well-off prominent church family. A deal was struck, and the entire family of the pregnant mother paid to move out of town, in order to hush up the scandal. When her baby was born in a new city, he was raised among the parents and siblings of his mother, as one of the family.

His shame was such that when, later in life, he proposed, he burst into tears. He was certain that he would be rejected when it came out that he was actually a 'bastard'. I grew up without grandparents, as far as I knew, even though I had a plethora of uncles and aunts. One day in my teenage years, one of the aunts died. I was called into my parents' bedroom and informed that Auntie Eileen had actually been my grandmother.

The humiliation had travelled down the generations to claim another victim, as I was wounded by the loss of opportunity. Perhaps the most bizarre thing was that when one of my sisters

got pregnant, she was thrown out of our house and sent away by my father to smother the ignominy. For my sister this exile was a massive rejection, her nascent child regarded as something to be hidden from public view.

I realise I'm opening the window onto family secrets here, but I can no longer be party to the cloak of suppression that grows in the dark. I confess that I participated in such death-dealing conspiracy, when Polly got pregnant as a teenager to a fellow heroin addict. She arranged an abortion, and I kept the whole event secret from my wife, thinking this might shield her from pain.

It was one of those decisions that was clearly wrong. This was our first grandchild, after all. I visited Polly with flowers, but Rosemary never knew until years later. I have confessed this error, and been forgiven – but apologies don't extinguish the hurt caused by me. So these things roll on and on through families, unless the light of honesty shines into the deadly murk.

I say deadly, because it is. People kill themselves, or self-harm, or simply wither away through the viral effect of family secrets. I suspect all of us who have survived families know the tragedy that is promoted by trying to hide what is seen as a blot on reputation. Better to cover these things up, we say. Not recognising that the best way to promote the growth of internal decay is by sealing it in a hidden chamber.

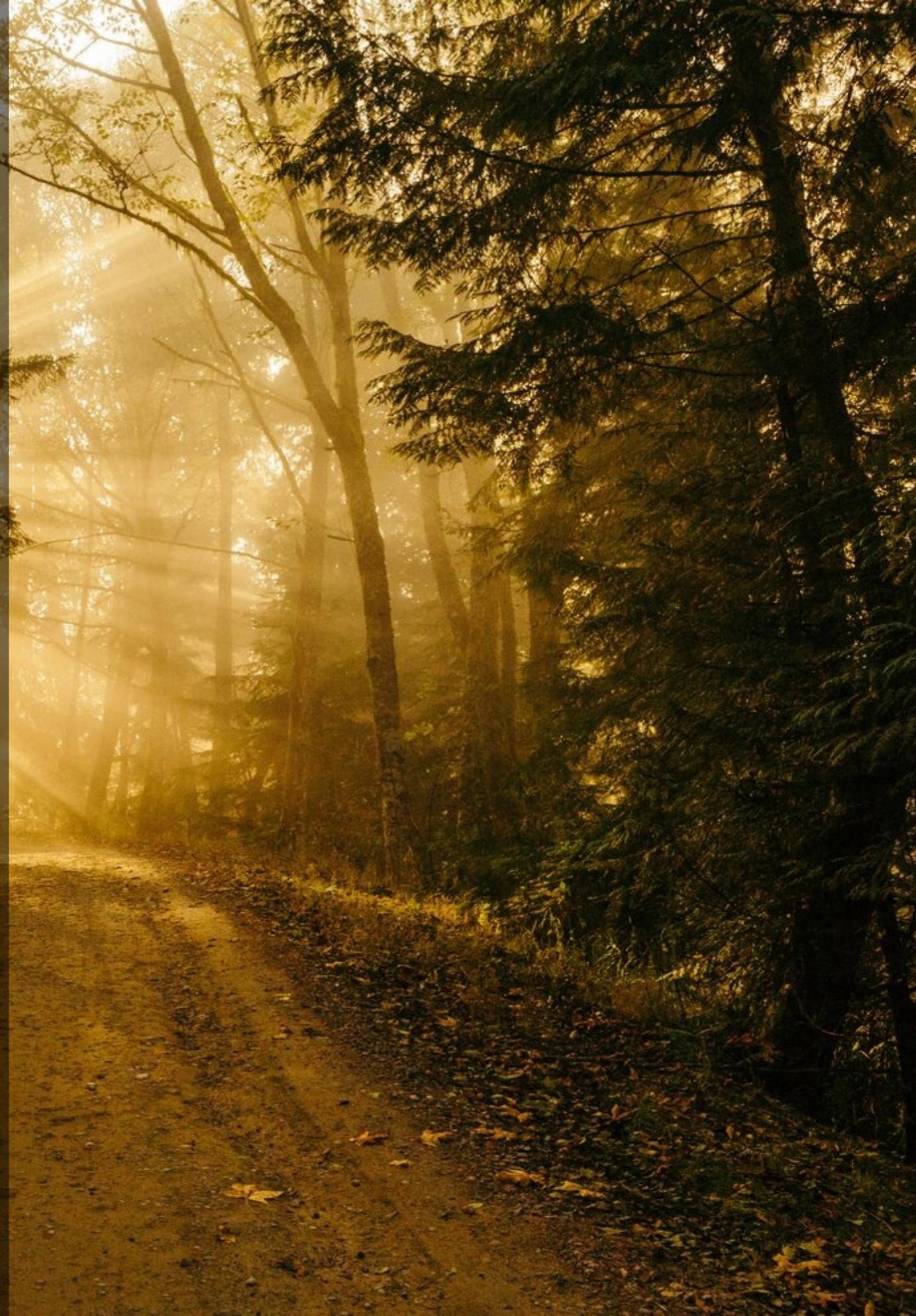
Truth will out, but how much more corruption of souls is promoted by gestation of toxic knowledge? What horrors lie behind closed doors? And how many of us have mutely contributed to abuse through our reticence to upset those close to us or protect what should never be shielded?

If we are to move forward at all as humans, it's time to open the curtains. What is revealed can be shocking, but it causes less damage to us all than the brewing hatred and disgust sheathed in dishonesty. We are all broken, and many times we act out of that brokenness. This is my call to confront the truth, to step out of seclusion, and to face into the fresh winds of freedom.

# Silence

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From time to time, when I've wanted to clear my head or work out a big decision, I've gone on retreat. Most of the ones I've been on have been contemplative retreats, often with guided periods of silence to still the mind. And it does need calming, that little chatterbox. The old adage goes that if you put muddy water in a jar and leave it still, it eventually clears. My mind becomes murky, regularly.



Three weeks of lockdown is a bit like a retreat for all of us. Not a silent one, at least not in our bubble. There's a lot of laughter and conversation. But also long periods of quiet punctuated by food. Many of us feel uncomfortable with this, and try to find ways to either punctuate the silence, or to fill the void with Netflix. We speak of 'filling in' time. Often it's better to leave it be and sit in it for a while.

I do understand that some of you extroverts are climbing the walls, or starting arguments in order to provide stimulation. Lockdown is introvert's paradise. We who often seem moody or withdrawn in comparison to the people around us, are now in our element. We know how to survive in isolation, because that's the way we feel most of the time. We could carry on for months.

So, welcome to our world. If there's one bit of learned experience we can offer from our awkward silence, it's to face into the emptiness rather than attempt to escape it. A book that was formative for me many years ago was 'The Other Side of Silence', by Morton Kelsey. Just the title is enough to be evocative. What is there beyond silence?

That question is the beginning of a very long journey. For most of us, the experience of silence is disconcerting. Our synapses start firing things at us, like one of those automatic golf ball dispensers. "Have I fed the cat?" "I must ring Jeremy." "I wonder what it would be like if I used that new stuff I saw advertised last

week?" "My hip hurts – could that be cancer?" "Is it too early for a glass of wine?"

Getting beyond the incessant drivel generated by our minds is enough of a problem. How to do it? I've found the answer is to be found in breathing. Of course, if you're not breathing, it's probably not an issue for you. You will have already achieved perpetual silence. For those of us still sentient, we need to allow our deep slow breathing to lure us beyond the cerebral to the seat of the soul.

Riding our inward breath down, we travel to the interior. Somewhere near the region of the solar plexus, we might discover the centre of our being. Strange territory for some of us. Once happened upon, we discover a cavern of calm and peace. It's always been there, of course, but often we've been far from it. In this place we renew ourselves in a silence so deep you can sink into it but never touch bottom.

Lingering here, you might find, is a way of luxuriating in the absence of stimuli, and being refreshed in a way that could never be imagined. The way to this oasis is well known in pretty much every religious tradition. A lot of people are content to set up camp there and enjoy the benefits of it. The question Kelsey asks of us is "What lies on the other side of this silence?"

That's a challenge that is another whole voyage, and is not likely to be answered with any accuracy by my few hundred words. Is

there nothing? Do we simply see our own reflection in a very deep well? Or is there something resembling love streaming toward us? You won't find the answer to that in a Murdoch newsfeed. Even those who have explored deeply, will most likely only smile gently when asked.

It may be that this one challenge from Kelsey could occupy us for the whole of a lifetime. It has done for me. Meanwhile extroverts can get on with ruling the world... we may not be them, but we love them in our lives!

# Regeneration

Oh, I saw a picture this morning that made me smile. It's of a lion pride in Kruger National Park, South Africa, napping on a road. They would normally hang out in the grass or bush, but have now reclaimed the whole of their territory as safe, thanks to Covid 19 lockdown. I find it hugely encouraging. It doesn't take long for the animal world to recognise that life is safer for them while humans aren't around.



Reminds me of a Bruce Cockburn song, 'I Wonder Where the Lions Are'. A couple of days ago, riding my bike up the Rail Trail on a sunny day, a huge hare was perched in the middle of the track, eyeing me curiously. It seemed querulous, wondering what the hell I was doing there. Eventually it grudgingly leapt away into the undergrowth, resigned to making way for an interloper.

There are more birds singing. Or at least we can hear them without the roar of traffic. I guess this is true all over the planet. The natural world has already started making a comeback. Which may serve to remind us that we are not the only species inhabiting the earth. And that it only takes the human race to retreat a little bit to allow the natural world to begin to flourish.

The air in cities is becoming transparent again. Rivers are clearing, and fish are flourishing. It's a foretaste of how possible it would be to regenerate the earth, should we begin to take climate change seriously. I'd like to think it's a tipping point – a glimpse of possibility – but then I'm an optimist. I can't see the Koch Brothers fracking off any time soon, more's the pity.

What a gorgeous and vibrant planet we have been lucky enough to be born upon. How wondrous the daily cycles of beauty that unfold before us. Consider the miracle of the seed. A tiny hard thing that can sit on a shelf for years. Bury it in the soil, give it a little water and warmth, and suddenly it is alive – green and thriving. We can reduce the wonder of it to botanical science, or we can just watch and marvel.

And beasties of all manner. Some we like, some we don't. A farmer would have shot my hare. And God had a hangover the day mosquitoes were created. What is beyond doubt is that life of all forms is teeming in our skies, on our land, and in our rivers and seas. So much so that we can't get our heads around it, no matter how many David Attenborough programmes we watch.

We live in a house where cattle and sheep are often moved down the road past us. They're being farmed, which is probably not good for their future prospects. But I love their faces, the way they bond as a group, and are constantly looking out for their young. We're also fortunate to have three dogs in our bubble, who keep us amused and offer constant unconditional love (so long as they're fed).

It seems to be taking us a long time to learn that the natural world is not our enemy, nor a resource for us to exploit. Would it not be marvellous if we could expand the concept of community care to include living creatures and the vibrant ever-changing landscape that surrounds us? So many of our destructive tendencies seem to spring from fear – fear of 'wild' animals, fear of going without.

And yet, we are the ones who should be feared, given our history and destructive habits. I guess a fundamental change is too much to hope for. I still look at that picture of lions, and it warms my heart.

# Trump

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As a general rule of thumb, I try not to focus on problems without doing so in the context of offering hope for solutions. There's so much to be thankful for on a daily basis, and I believe that the majority of people are innately good rather than bad. I once worked as a chaplain in a maximum security prison, that held New Zealand's worst offenders. My estimate was that no more than a handful were irrevocably bad people.



When I was first diagnosed with aggressive cancer, it seemed unbelievably bleak. I'd never spent a night in hospital in more than sixty years, and now it seemed I was destined for a quick and painful death. But as time went on, I started to appreciate the benefits of my cancer. It drew my attention to all that is wonderful in life, and in particular to the love I have for the people who are close to me.

Even this plague of coronavirus has its silver lining. It gives us all a much-needed sabbatical, and leads us to think about the direction we've been taking that has led us to this place in history. There's an opportunity as well as a curse in every crisis. Not in any way to deny the tragedy from sickness and death, but simply to acknowledge that for those of us who survive, we have choices to make in the future.

Having said all that, I can no longer overlook Trump. I do my best to ignore him most of the time, because even the slightest bit of attention given to malevolent narcissists pours fuel on the flame of their disorder. And I confess to a touch of schadenfreude watching the consequences of the USA having elected such a person to be the leader of the nation. What did they think would happen?

I have a vivid memory of a presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Trump. When she was speaking, he prowled around behind her like a menacing ape. It was classic dominating behaviour that any victim of domestic violence would recognise

and recoil from. In that moment I felt that I could see into the soul of the man, and I was disturbed at the sight.

Any analysis of his speech patterns tells us all we need to know. He's lacking in intelligence and vocabulary. This is because there's not much going on behind his eyes, other than perceiving threats to his fragile but massive ego. Everything that happens around him, whether coronavirus or the stock market, is viewed through the lens of how it affects him and his prospects of reelection.

It's not enough to say that he lies. He lives in a fantasy world of his own creation. Sadly it's now one that drags us into it because of the consequences of his illness. People and the media are classified into two distinct categories – those who are friends and those who are enemies. Trump is incapable of distinguishing shades of grey – you're either with him or against him.

Those who are enemies are disposed of. Those who are friends learn to watch their backs. There is no comfortable way of living with a narcissist. And not much in the way of cures to be offered outside of institutionalisation. The real tragedy is that he is in some ways mirroring the culture he has arisen from. The evangelical right, the gun lobby, the small-minded racists are in thrall to a powerful madman.

So is there any hope in this context? If there is, it lies in those Americans who have been galvanised by the sheer awfulness of

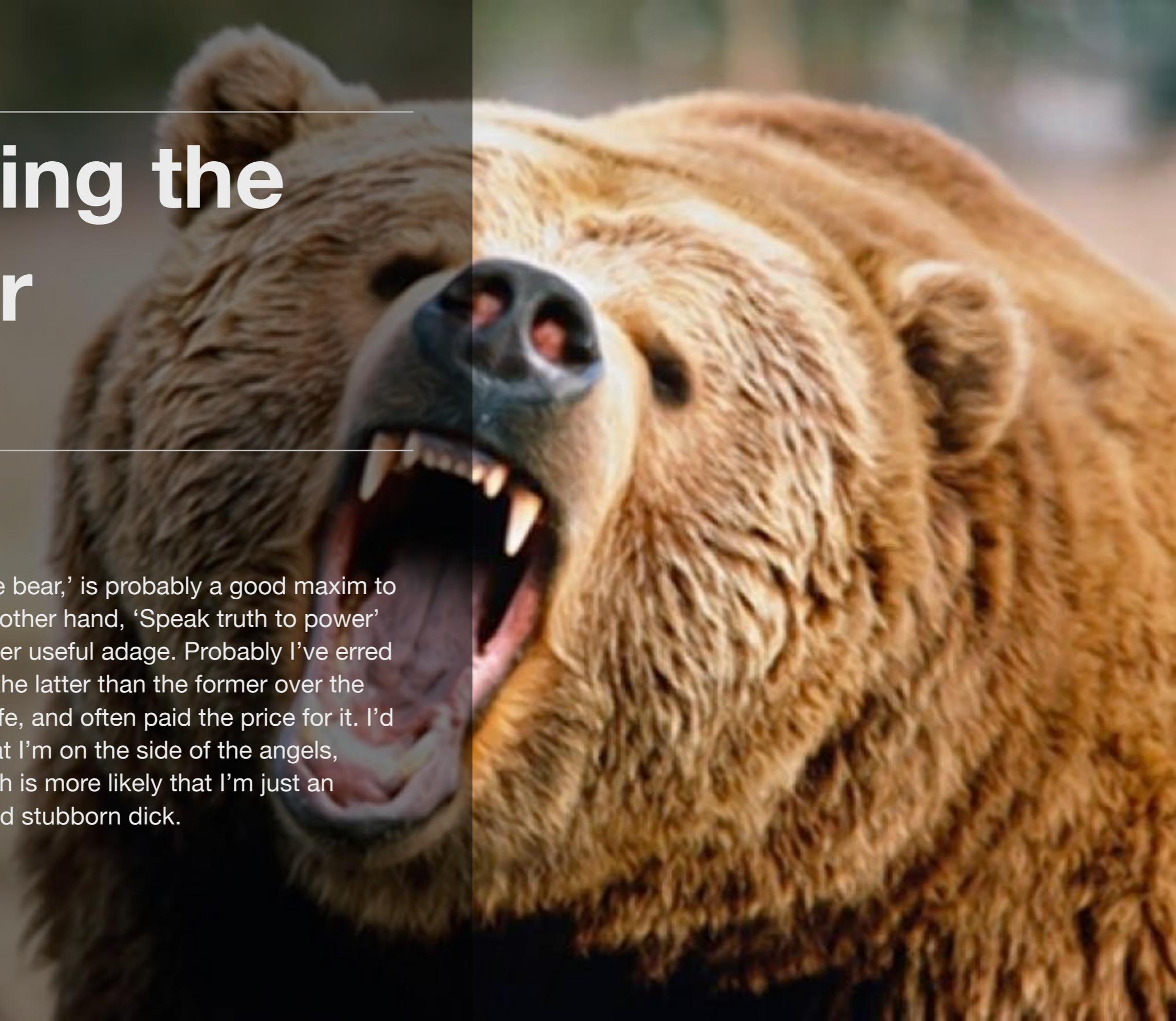
what they are experiencing. The young, the women, the immigrants, the poor. We who look on from the outside gape in horror. But others have to live with it on a daily basis. Every American with a shred of decency needs to rise up and resist, before the debacle becomes even more tragic.

There are times in history when we need to draw a line in the sand – for good people to become articulate and motivated to action whatever the cost of that might be. I suspect we are living in such an era.

# Poking the Bear

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‘Don’t poke the bear,’ is probably a good maxim to live by. On the other hand, ‘Speak truth to power’ provides another useful adage. Probably I’ve erred on the side of the latter than the former over the course of my life, and often paid the price for it. I’d like to think that I’m on the side of the angels, though the truth is more likely that I’m just an opinionated and stubborn dick.



The piece I wrote on Trump yesterday seemed to ruffle a few feathers, particularly those of Eagles and Hawks. Citizens of the USA got themselves in a lather that I should dare to criticise from the extreme margins of Aotearoa-New Zealand. Many insisted that they didn't elect the man in question. I do actually understand that he got less than a majority. But he is still the president of that unique country.

I do realise the dangers of sticking one's nose in where it's not wanted. I remember a time when I was biking past a couple on the side of the road who were arguing loudly on the footpath. When the man started getting violent, I got off my bike and went to try to calm them down. Their response was to both turn on me, telling me in no uncertain terms what a charmingly nice bloke I was, and threatening me with imminent demise if I didn't get lost.

But here's the thing, citizens of America. For several centuries the nation has acted as the police force of the world, getting its way through brute force and uninvited intervention. Since the idea of 'manifest destiny' (look it up) informed the soul of the people, the rest of us on the fringes of the planet have had our affairs directly influenced by what happens in the good old US of A.

Some of this has been for good, and some of it for bad (Vietnam and Iraq for those with short memories). Here's the thing – we can't ignore what Trump is doing, even though he's a fierce nationalist. Speaking of poking the bear, he's made a career of it. North Korea, China, Iran... And this is a man who is Commander

in Chief of the entire military of the nation, with all the nuclear force at his command.

So excuse us foreigners feeling a little concerned about the state of affairs in the White House. Of course Putin and Xi Jinping are also empire builders with an array of weapons to play with. We're nervous about them as well. The difference is that alongside their will to power, there seems to be a modicum of rational thought.

I don't seek to offend the good people of America. There are many great and admirable qualities about your land and culture and presidents – Theodore Roosevelt and Barack Obama are non-partisan examples. To be honest, I'm self-interested. I would like the world to keep existing – a dream that is more at risk in the present climate than it has been for generations.

Really, it's not us and them. It's just us, with all the differences in perspective we have and diverse experiences. It always strikes me as something of a miracle that we all coexist as well as we do. However, it doesn't happen by accident. It demands all people of good will to speak up and defend the dignity of humanity in the face of all forces that seek to degrade it.

I was arrested three times in 1981 for opposing the rugby tour of South Africa to our tiny land. I'm something of a rugby fanatic. I protested because I considered apartheid as evil. The tour divided our nation, with many demanding we keep politics out of

sport. In retrospect we can see that institutionalised racism was grievously wrong. At the time it was not so clear.

Life is indivisible, as is politics. We live in a contest between good and evil, and it has always been so. Currently the immediate conflict is between greed and compassion, whether in commerce or ecology. Each of us has one life to work with, one voice to raise, one heart to hold love. What we do with it is down to us. Here's hoping.

# Wonder

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A little poetry today from Wendell Berry. This one seems fitting for our times:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may  
be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron  
feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The grace of the world. It streams into our lives like morning  
sunshine brushing the drooping heads of rye grass. We find it as  
a trout rises to the surface of a bubbling stream. And just now, in  
this part of the world, it comes through dying leaves giving the  
best of themselves in resplendent colour. “May the whole earth  
be filled with God’s glory,” as the Psalmist wrote.

I understand innately why the subject of God is controversial, and  
the very good reasons why. For those who would rather live  
without such notions in their world, I doff my hat and say to you,  
we are still sisters and brothers finding our way forward. Let’s do  
so in conversation rather than acrimony. We might hope that  
whatever is real in life will make itself evident along the path.  
Conversion is a type of brutality.

However, my own experience of life and this glorious world give  
me a daily glimpse of the beyond – through the most mundane of  
activities. Alongside Hopkins, I want to echo:

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things

Which is, as I understand it, a way of saying that there is more in  
the natural world than meets the eye. Or as my friend and  
neighbour Brian Turner puts it:

The loveliest places of all  
are those that look as if  
there’s nothing there  
to those still learning to look

Of course I was once a minister of religion. It’s quite possible that  
I’m painting the world with my own faith, rather than seeing it as it  
is. The one thing I do know is that whatever history or culture any  
of us carry with us, we all share the natural world as a common  
treasure. A gift that should be revered, but in our times is being  
ravaged. It is our joint heritage. Mary Oliver:

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

To find one's place in the family of things – now there's a task  
worth considering. To resile from domination and exploitation; to  
recognise our connection to all that has life around us. Simplicity  
and love are never far from us, should we take the time and give  
the attention required. Even when the world stands still, and we  
fear what will become of us, birds sing at dawn.

This morning I cleared space for a new garden of wildflowers. It  
was hard physical work, the sweat streaming down my back as I  
worked the shovel into the stony clay thatched with thick twitch.  
The sun shone from the crisp air following the early frost. It was  
honest work, toiling alongside the good earth to produce  
something of beauty. It seemed to me a form of prayer.

# Fixing Things

Trigger Warning: Bloke speak, and sexual abuse

I like to think I'm a reconstructed bloke, but I'm still a bloke. I like to fix things. I know that's entirely gender specific, but the fact that women are probably better than me at fixing things doesn't take away my sense of satisfaction at attempting the task. The main frustration for me in New Zealand lockdown is that hardware shops are off limits to mere mortals like myself.



I've just finished doing a few repairs on my wife's chapel. The original round brass door knob mechanism was poked. I took it to bits, as one is inclined to do. Some pieces flew out before I had a chance to see what they were in there for. Scratching my head usually works, but this time it drew a blank. The obvious solution was to discard them. They were clearly superfluous to the job at hand.

With a bit of jiggery-pokery (a technical term used by blokes), I reconstructed the unit and reinstalled it. Using a bit of electrical tape helped to secure the door handle. And wouldn't you know it, it now works as good as gold (another technical term for she'll be right). Except it's no longer possible to lock the door, which may have something to do with the bits left over. Never mind, securing a chapel is God's problem.

One does what one can. Sometimes it's not enough. Teenagers, in particular, are difficult to fix. Most often it's because there's nothing actually wrong with them, except in the eyes of their parents. Also, there's no plans to follow. I know this from experience. By the time it comes to being responsible for adolescents, most of us have conveniently forgotten what it's like to be one.

There are things that can't be fixed. It's taken me a long time to recognise this, but I got there in the end. One of them is sexual abuse. Some years ago I began writing a series of letters to my older daughter, Polly. Her life was broken when she was raped by

a stranger at the age of eleven. There was no coming back from that – no healing, no mending. In one of the letters I spelled out my angst:

'Since your rape, my whole life has been an attempt to do what is impossible. To save you. There's a deadness in my soul because I found myself incapable of doing so. I confess that my best efforts have foundered on the rocks of reality. Slowly it comes to us that we can save no one other than ourselves. And even that incompletely.'

As previously pointed out in these missives, she is now dead. It was beyond my ability to fix her. The only thing that I could do, that our whole family did do, was to love her. To my lasting satisfaction, Polly knew she was loved. She wasted no opportunity to let us know that. We couldn't make her better. We could make her accepted and cherished.

Last year I wrote a book for parents who struggle with the visceral pain of their children who don't follow the 'success' pattern. I've met a lot who feel isolated. But my publisher told me that there would be no audience for it, that people just don't care anymore about children who fall through the cracks. She might be right from a commercial point of view; I hope she's wrong in regard to compassion.

The other problem in the chapel was that of flies somehow getting in. After some blokish study, I discovered there were some

gaps up where the vaulted ceiling formed an apex, and the little agents of Beelzebub were getting in there. The obvious solution was a bit of silicone. The hardware shops are shut. So I used a bit of electrical tape to seal the gaps. Problem solved. I think.

Someone once said that wisdom lies in fixing what can be fixed, and living with what can't be, and knowing the difference between them.

# Writing

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Why do people want to become writers? I think they imagine their books on airport shelves (actually that's a really bad analogy at the moment), cocktail parties and book signings, animated conversations with readers. Which is about as likely as winning lotto. The fact is that writing is a form of neurosis, almost as difficult to cure as coronavirus, and not half so influential.



Most of us full time writers spend our days thinking of excuses not to write. Staring at a blank screen as if it might suddenly light up with inspiration. While J.K. Rowling might have sprung from living on the benefit to becoming the world's first billionaire author, the rest of us would be grateful just to earn the equivalent of a benefit. When our books get remaindered, we buy them in the hope they might one day become valuable.

In the heady days when I was invited to speak at gatherings in different parts of the world, my publisher would sometimes organise book signings. The most embarrassing was at a festival, where I was set up outside a tent with a pile of books at my side. Nobody was lined up. In fact no one came at all, and I sat there like a dick, trying to look inconspicuous. Finally a friend approached to rescue me.

A few years ago I penned a very slim volume entitled 'With Every Breath'. I gave it away for free to promote sales, which is a business model that is remarkably inefficient. After nobody read it, I found it useful to keep as an emergency store of paper for lighting fires. You'd think I might learn. But here's the neurotic side of being a writer... you keep on doing it, hoping for a different result.

I once had a coffee in Edinburgh at the cafe where J.K. Rowling used to write. It produced no tangible results, other than the fact I had to pay for the coffee. The desire to be 'discovered' is one of those false dreams of the insecure ego, and a distraction that

99.9% of us need to lay aside in order to live our small lives in peace and gratitude. We must do what we must do, whatever it may be.

Anyway, all of that is a distraction, which writers are very good at finding. Lacking any spark for a column today, I flicked through 'With Every Breath' – thereby becoming the third person ever to read it. I found a few paragraphs that seemed apposite to our current situation in these days of turmoil, and thought I'd cheat a little by reproducing them here.

'We live in troubled times. Some days it can seem that humanity, kindness, and generosity are regarded as character defects. All around us there are messages reminding us that we are insignificant, unproductive, and unworthy of our place in the world. All of us are drawn toward addictions that mask the inner pain of rejection.

'Resistance is called for. This is an age in which we need to remember the essence of our being, and to live in a way that reveals the deceit around us. At times such a project might require the overturning of myths and dismantling of structures. It is a call that begins in the heart, and is sustained by breathing our way to life.

'So often we succumb to despair in the face of what seem insurmountable odds. What is it that we can do as isolated and unimportant people? The answer is compellingly simple. We can

become ourselves. There is love and grace and justice abroad in the world. It flows through the hearts of those who embrace it.'

There is no greater gift to offer than being yourself. It doesn't often bring financial reward, unless you get really lucky. It does bring the deep satisfaction of integrity – the state of being whole and undivided. It took me a long time to realise that my vocation was to write, and that the whole business of publication and being read and making money was a tawdry motivation for the work of writing.

All of us have something to give – something within us that yearns to be shared with the world. Here's hoping we can all overcome the internal barriers to allowing that to happen.

# Aggression

---

Across the road from our house is a bright green lucerne paddock. It provides feed which is usually baled for winter. This year it's already had a couple of harvests, and the barns are chock full after two good summers growth. So Barry, the local farmer who is slightly bent from leaning into the wind his whole life, has put his rams into the lucerne. They're making short work of it.

I love seeing them there. You'd think they'd be like 'pigs in clover', devouring the fresh fodder. But no. For those in urban settings, I should explain that rams are blokes. So, surrounded by such gastric delights, they turn their attention to fighting with each other. One of them looks at the other the wrong way, and the other voices the equivalent of "What you looking at?"

The setup for what follows is classic. The two rams back off until they're a couple of metres apart (no doubt they've been influenced by social distancing). Then, after posturing for a while, they charge at each other with heads down. There's a resulting 'thwack' which I can hear through the double-glazed kitchen window. Both of them stagger away from the collision, stunned.

In the incident I just observed, their mates got involved as well, and there was a free-for-all of sheep charging at each other and banging heads. It looked like gang warfare. Eventually they all forgot what they were fighting over, and returned to the task at hand of eating. We're short of entertainment in the village, as you might have guessed. Such spectacles could easily generate odds for a bookmaking enterprise.

Aggression. What is it good for? Those who were alive in 1969 will know the answering refrain. Let's start with the obvious. These are male sheep. Most violent aggression comes from blokes. For millennia we've been butting heads for no clear reason. Posturing, threatening, hitting, wounding, killing. One of

my earliest childhood memories is having my upper lip sliced through by a sharp stone thrown by warring gangs.

It's not that women don't fight, though usually they shred personalities rather than shed blood. No matter, we're all diminished by the human capacity for aggression. Most of it starts from dividing people into 'us and them'. The breaking of the sacred bond that acknowledges we're all in this together is the beginning of division, and the origin of prejudice and hatred.

Fear is the wellspring of most that is bad in human behaviour. We fear diminishment or encroachment on 'our' territory, and lash out preventively. What are we scared of? Whatever we have to lose. Yet so often, when we employ aggression, we lose most of what is precious to us anyway. The fact that it's illogical is never a convincing reason to prevent violence.

As Buddhism has helped us to see, fear is in turn driven by false attachments. We try to protect our corner, our point of view, our possessions, our families, our culture, our religion, our people, our way of life. These are all gifts that we've inherited, and while we're right to value them, they're not diminished or stolen by encounter with difference. The fear that drives aggression is futile.

Yet it's amazingly pervasive in every era. Humanity has a long way to go in growing into maturity. All of us can find the seeds of aggression in our own hearts, if we take the time for reflection. The more secure we can become in our own hearts and minds,

the less room there is for fear to spread like a virus within us,  
bringing its brother hatred hard on its heels.

I've often said sheep are not stupid, despite reports to that effect.  
But man, those rams must have thick skulls. A lot like us, I  
suspect.

# Remembering

Ahhh... that's better. Just had a hit of bleach from the laundry, and feeling so internally cleansed. Next up I'm going to swallow my penlight. Not that I really need it. People have always said the sun shines out my arse. In fact that may be where Trump got the idea from. I can't wait for his next press briefing. It's possible that he's heard that radium has curative properties if inhaled from a teaspoon. You have to admire his innovation.



[Warning: the previous paragraph is something called satire – the use of fun to criticise people or ideas to show they have faults or are wrong. Not many people know that. The president of the USA is an intelligent man, by his own reckoning, and only mentioned the ingestion of bleach as an attempt at satire. Any harm done by anything he says is not his responsibility, and it's not true that he has shares in funeral parlours.]

Like the aforementioned gentleman, I take no responsibility for anything I say, whether verbally or by means of written communication. Unless I declare something to be fake news, in which case it is demonstrably true. Life has become complex since the advent of postmodernity. As we like to say in New Zealand, many world leaders wouldn't know their arse from their elbow.

Today in the Antipodes it's Anzac Day. The fact that we celebrate one of our most famous defeats with horrendous casualties reveals something about our sense of inferiority. I'm generally not one to exalt war, patriotism, jingoism, militarism, or colonialism. For those in the northern hemisphere, I should explain that Anzac Day marks the remembrance of a complete shambles in which British commanders ordered we colonials into a predictable massacre at Gallipoli.

Despite my antipathy toward military crusades, like many Kiwis I've come to treat this disaster as a badge of honour. Not for the lunacy that drove the whole misadventure, but for the young men

who died in the mistaken belief that they were doing something necessary. The 2,700 who died during the campaign in a remote corner of Turkey were a significant part of the 500,000 New Zealand males alive at that time.

At the gates of the cemetery in our rural community, the names of the dead from WWI are remembered. I think of these strapping farmers who waited by the roadside for transport to the other side of the world, with no idea of what awaited them. Like all young men they were keen and strong and invincible. But many of them would never see the farms they came from again.

Today we remember them, and all their mates who gave the only thing they had to give, not knowing the tragic futility of it all. To honour the dead is not to glorify war, but simply to recognise the courage of our ancestors – Māori and Pākehā. Their lives were not worth nothing. In many families in our small land their names will be recalled today, and stories told.

A couple of years ago, our dear friend and neighbour (yes I know we have a lot of writer neighbours), Jillian Sullivan, wrote this poem for the village Anzac commemoration. It conveys the beautiful sadness of our tiny community for the absence that is made present to us through the cycles of the earth. It says everything that needs saying.

And Now It Ends

(for the Ida Valley, Armistice Day)

The frost that cowed the blooms was just the start -  
there was hail and snow and thunder yet to come.

And now it ends, we hold the fallen to our heart.

In the dawn, the chill winds laid their mark.

The harvest of our children had begun.

The frost that cowed the blooms was just the start.

They were taken from our yard and from our hearth,  
those who'd bloomed, and those whose blooming was to come.

And now it ends, we hold the fallen to our heart.

The art of war was never any art

for us, when winter's shadows paled the sun.

The frost that cowed the blooms was just the start.

No more the blackened leaves, the silent lark,

nor rubble in the fields concealing limbs,

for now it ends, we hold the fallen to our heart.

We let them go, and in this way, we played our part.

Across the tracks of snow, we call them home.

The frost that cowed the blooms was just the start

and now it ends, we hold the fallen to our heart.

# The Past

---

The cloud cover came over early today, locking in the cold air of the morning frost. It's a grey Sunday, the sort that breeds a pleasant melancholy. In this part of the world the trees are giving up their leaves, settling down for what awaits them. In the northern parts of the world, the sap is rising in every living thing. A time to recall that corona is the name given to the sun's massive aura.



There are days when memories linger like wisps of smoke that curl slowly into the stillness of the sky. As I wrote in the introduction to my memoir, *Until the End*, “My life is like so much smoke drifting on the horizon. It shifts in the breeze, dissipates, and is gone. Was it caused by any glowing embers that once burned? I might well think so, but I might equally be misled by the terror of insignificance.”

My wife’s mother, Lorna, is staying with us, awaiting her move to the house next door. She’s 91 years old and more lively and articulate than most twenty-somethings. Having been raised in the north of Scotland, she speaks the Doric with all its sparkle and sass. On this day 70 years ago, she married her beloved Nick who’d she’d known since she was a girl. They spent their honeymoon on a ship sailing to New Zealand.

For the last seven years their wedding anniversary has been dimmed by the fact that Nick died and left her to make her way on her own. This morning we peered back into the past through a remarkable rehearsing of their marriage ceremony. Nick, always an innovator, arranged to have the event preserved by making a sound recording direct to wax disk at the service.

This is the same man who, anticipating death, recorded a final message to cassette tape for us to play at his funeral. It started with the sound of knocking on wood, followed by the plaintif plea “Let me oot, let me oot”. Those close to the casket were nervous. Nick also commented: “I’m now in that void they call death. It is

not to be feared. It is not to be welcomed either. It merely comes to all of us, whether we like it or not.”

True that. In his last years, Nick drifted away from us a little – frequently forgetting things and not trusting his acutely keen mind. And yet his impish humour and sharp interest in people and science continued. A journalist and published novelist, his writing stuttered to something of a halt as a slight haze of confusion descended. Lorna cared for him wonderfully.

On a day when he was settled down in front of a laptop to browse the web, he must have felt the muse stirring again. Some time later, his son Alasdair discovered a document that Nick had produced: a poem. In a time when his communication had dwindled to the most basic of conversation, the poem was a revelation of his ongoing talent and devotion to Lorna.

Autumn Rain

Yet I can remember

When the pain of loving you

Became an agony of nearness.

How I said the blue-grey

Wisps of wood smoke

Curling through the trees

Smarted against my eyes.

But you were not deceived

Yet did not wholly understand.

And now, in my older wisdom

As I realise

The past must have no resurrection,

Yet, I remember,

With vague regret,

And still some pain,

You, standing by me,

In the autumn rain.

It may be true that the past must have no resurrection, but on this day we listened entranced to the wedding vows repeated in April of 1950, marvelling at all the life and love that flowed from that union. In his prepared speech from the coffin, Nick asked us to pray for him. For those not used to praying, he said, it is simply to remember me with kindness. Today we have done that and more.

The dead are always with us, and our hearts with them.

# Takeaways

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So far so good. Here in New Zealand we're in our last 24 hours of Level 4 lockdown. Tomorrow we shift to Level 3, which has been described as lockdown with KFC. Here in the village, nothing will change at all, except that the local pub is going to do takeaways! In the regime of virtual seclusion, this is a great relief to those of who have been preparing every meal every day for a month (confession: 'those of us' means me).

Kiwis have been very fortunate from a global perspective. Our Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has demonstrated her innate leadership skills with a mix of clear communication, strict guidelines, and tangible compassion. The whole world wants a piece of her, but you're not going to get any. We may be an insignificant nation, but we know a good thing when we see it.

Her opening refrain that we as a nation would "go hard and go early" sounded like the enthusiasm of a drunk husband on a Saturday night. It's currently under consideration for inclusion in the All Blacks haka, should rugby ever start again. It's been the slogan on which our progress against the virus is sustained. When comparing Jacinda to a certain president, we just hope she doesn't ascend to heaven any time soon.

Technically, I could end these reflections at 11.59pm tonight. My lovely daughter challenged me to write a piece each day during lockdown, and it's almost done. But instead I'll ramble on for a while longer, with a Works Burger from the Oturehua Tavern in one hand. There's light at the end of the tunnel, even if it turns out to be the approach of Kim Jong Un's personal train.

So what have we learned thus far? That the values we once considered the province of 'losers' are the most important of all. Among these I would count compassion, generosity, service, friendship, patience, community, and care. We have begun to see through the Emperor's non-existent clothes. Capitalism, greed,

exploitation, surveillance and control wane in the light of simple goodness.

The so-called 'strong men' of the world have been tested in the time of Covid 19 and found wanting. In fact, they've been revealed as what they've always been: corrupt, self-serving, arrogant, manipulative, egotistical, divisive, nasty, patronising – and in the case of one, just plain loopy. It's interesting how crisis events display the character of those who are supposed to be managing them.

When I was a schoolboy, army cadet training occupied the first two weeks of the school year. Sometimes we went up to a mountainous bush area for a mockup jungle camp experience. One of the regimes was 'stand to'. This involved crawling out of our tents 30 minutes before dawn, and lying down in sentry position until 30 minutes after sunrise. The rationale was that this was the time most susceptible to enemy attack.

The only assault came in the form of sandflies. But the idea that the period between night and morning is one of vulnerability has stayed with me. As the possibility of transition from confinement looms on the horizon, we face a determinative choice. We can retreat to the safety of the familiar darkness, or face the scary proposition of building a new society and economy.

In the gathering light of dawn, it's possible to see emerging shapes in faint resolution. I suspect that's the place we're in now.

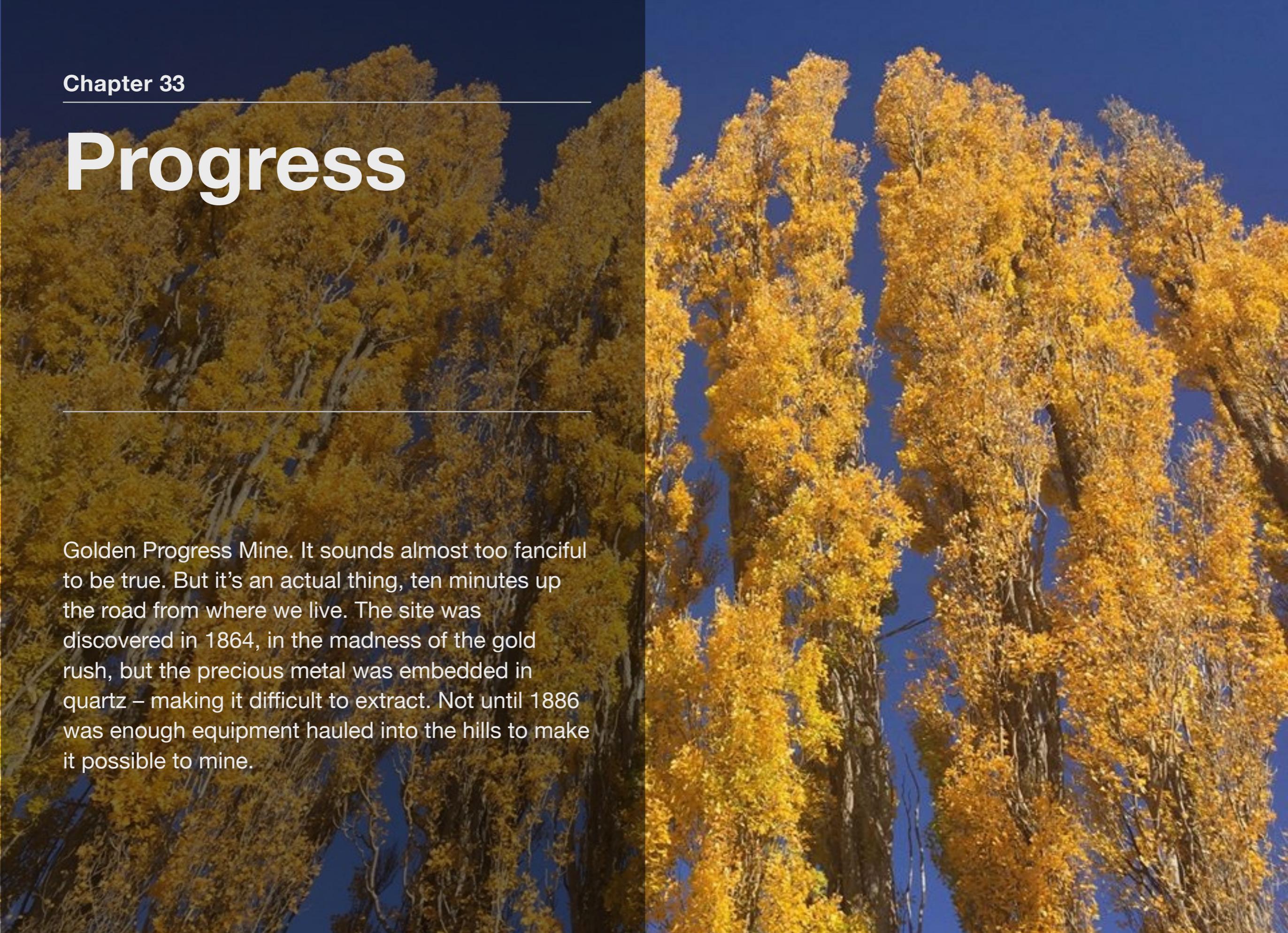
The outline of a new day is gathering just beyond the limits of our vision. It's not fully formed. There are powerful forces among us who would like us to return to the cover of darkness, so that they can continue to profit from the society they've dominated.

Let me end with a dad joke told to me by a theology professor. It won't mean a damn thing to you if you have no knowledge of the Bible. Anyway, Dr Bob Thompson would ask us the searching question, "Why do hens prefer darkness to light?" The answer was, "Because their deeds are oval." My excuse is that it's a public holiday here today. Maybe it is time I gave up these daily ruminations...

# Progress

---

Golden Progress Mine. It sounds almost too fanciful to be true. But it's an actual thing, ten minutes up the road from where we live. The site was discovered in 1864, in the madness of the gold rush, but the precious metal was embedded in quartz – making it difficult to extract. Not until 1886 was enough equipment hauled into the hills to make it possible to mine.



After that, it was the inevitable boom and bust. Though up until the gold ran out, five thousand ounces of the stuff was plundered from the rocks. We sometimes walk up to the abandoned site. Rough men lived and sometimes died there, enduring harsh winters and hot summers in the quest for wealth. Golden Progress – it's so ironic, and I've often thought that it could do for a description of our whole misguided era.

Today, a splendid Otago autumn day, we went along the shingle road to the entrance. And we discovered gold – bright shining gold. Not in the earth, but against the pure blue sky. It came from the resplendent poplars in their dying glory. How strange that all that sweat and clamour was expended in the hunt for gold, and yet it was present in a much purer form in the myriad of leaves towering like tongues of fire into the heavens.

I can't think of a better metaphor for the centuries since the advent of the industrial revolution. We have ripped apart the world we inhabit in the name of profit and commerce, only to find that what we were really in need of is that which we've destroyed in the process. The natural environment has paid the price for humanity's rampant hunger for advancement.

Colonials came to New Zealand, a land that had sustained an indigenous population for many centuries, and set about tearing it apart. They considered the previous occupants primitive, because they acknowledged the spirituality of the trees, the sea, the birds, the mountains, the rivers, the land itself. And so the newcomers,

declaring these things to be false gods, set about tearing the earth asunder in the name of progress.

I have looked at photos of grim settlers standing in front of rough cabins – behind them hills of felled forests. They look for all the world like victims of some sort of holocaust. Survivors standing upright when everything around them has been laid waste. They were serving the god of progress, with the intent of clearing and burning 'the bush' in order to make the land 'productive'.

To treat the natural world as one's enemy is to assume an unsustainable separation from that which provides the only source of life we have. Māori have always known that land is whenua, the sustaining ground of human and every kind of existence. Pākehā are still recovering from the psychic isolation that has flowed down through the centuries of settlement, stemming from treating the planet as a resource to be exploited.

Which is not to ascribe fault, so much as to acknowledge the pain that certain notions of 'progress' have caused to the environment. Colin McCahon (a prominent NZ landscape painter) described Aotearoa-New Zealand as 'a land with too few lovers'. It becomes harder to desecrate that which you learn to love. And congress with that which you have no love for is more accurately described as rape.

A friend wrote last night to inform me that the twentieth century actually carried on until 2020, but now has finally come to an end.

We stand at the cusp of a new possibility, which at the very least must include a new relationship with the natural world around us. There is no future in tearing the earth apart in order to make ourselves wealthy. The treasure our hearts are longing for is here and present, awaiting us.

Friends, it is time for a change. Progress is not necessarily golden, and to date has brought us to the gates of destruction. The hope is that gates both open and shut.

Chapter 34

# Growing Up

I was a lineman for the county... Well, for a rural branch of the P&T actually, the predecessor to Telecom, which became Chorus. So it was a few years back. Living in a ramshackle house (pictured) possessing a can for a toilet, with my lovely wife and newborn son Matthew. Oh, and a stray cat that adopted us. Crosby, Stills, and Nash were more my thing than Glen Campbell. I'd sing (horribly out of tune):

'Our house is a very, very, very fine house with two cats in the yard

Life used to be so hard

Now everything is easy 'cause of you'



If I say we were happy, it's true. And yet... our baby suffered from colic, and spent more time crying in pain than smiling. The cat got fleas, and suffered from dysentery. If we had a few friends round for my home-made wine, the dunny can would full to overflowing. I'd have to dig a hole and bury the contents, rather than wait for the 'nightman' to come with his truck (we use to say it had multiple pisstins) for the weekly pickup.

Beyond the back fence was a washing line that consisted of a wire strung between two posts, with a wooden prop in the middle to raise and lower it. When Rose finished washing nappies in the old wringer machine, she'd hang them on this makeshift line. Sometimes the prop would fall over, and the nappies end up hanging on the sandy soil below. At such times, she had trouble seeing life as idyllic.

We were new Christians, and a pain in the arse. Eventually no one at my workplace wanted to share a van with me, because all I wanted to talk about was religion. They found jobs for me crawling into rat-infested roof spaces, or hand-digging trenches through wet clay. None of it dampened my inexhaustible enthusiasm for telling my co-workers that all they needed was Jesus.

I was, I freely admit, a sanctimonious prat. Nobody wants or needs to be told what's wrong with them and how to fix it, especially by a pious prick who refused to join them in a beer or a dirty joke. It's easy to be holier-than-thou when you've not been

through the stormy tides of life. The Teflon of piety is very effective in sloughing off the real struggles of people who face pain and disadvantage.

Somewhere in my new shining dawn of faith, I lost sight of humanity. It took many years of struggle and suffering to rediscover it. I look back at this earlier version of myself and smile at that annoying pretension. I wouldn't now want to share space with my earlier persona, any more than my workmates did. For many years I sought to bury that era under the loamy soil of repression. Now I'm simply amused, and a tad embarrassed.

As I've begun to age (some would say I've been there a while), I've become more forgiving of my past. The real problem would be if I'd stayed in that aberrant form of religion as I began to live more fully. I don't need to look far to find people who are still stuck in their development, defensive and afraid of whatever might threaten their views. They feel their house is very fine, and are happy to stay there.

There's a thread of continuity, just the same. I still have faith, albeit a much broader, deeper, inclusive, and kinder version. I neither feel threatened by the lifestyles or philosophies of others, nor am inclined to want to 'convert' them to mine. Instead I luxuriate in difference and diversity. I find it much like walking through a field of wildflowers, all so unique in themselves, but together creating such beauty.

Peace is a fragile bloom. For it to survive, we need to learn tolerance, acceptance, generosity. For ourselves first, and finally for all.

# Crisis

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Continuing from yesterday (which these days I never take for granted), in that ramshackle cottage in Stewarts Gully we had what came to be something of a defining experience for me. At that time, as a good little churchgoer, I believed in what's known as tithing – the reserving of 10% of one's income to give away. I treated it religiously, so to speak. But my wages didn't amount to much.



One evening I came home to a distraught wife. We had literally run out of food, and she told me there was nothing to cook. Nonsense, I retorted. I rummaged through the cupboards, finding a few basic ingredients. I self-righteously whipped up fried scones – a scone batter that is dropped in big dollops into boiling oil. To make them edible, it was normal to drizzle them with golden syrup, except we didn't have any.

I proudly brought them through to my weepy partner. She had just finished breast feeding our son, and he showed his appreciation by projectile vomiting all over her. When she laid him on the floor, he simultaneously shat all over the blanket. Not to be outdone, the stray cat started retching. I picked her up by the scruff of the neck, in the process swinging her toward the door. Her dysentery erupted all over the wallpaper.

In a distraught mood, as my loving wife swore evocatively, I went to the drawer where we kept our tithe money, and went out to get takeaways. This was violating what I thought to be a sacred principle. The money belonged to God. But in my frustration I decided bugger it, God can spring for fish and chips. My marriage was more important than any religious dogma.

We often laugh now as we look back on what has been dubbed 'the fried scones incident'. Having one's sacred cows dispatched is a potential learning experience. Later in life it has occurred to me that what happened in those early years defined an interesting pattern that marks human development or the lack of it. It helps

me to understand the way that people respond to crisis situations.

All of us have our convictions about how life works. Sometimes these are inherited from parents or society, or else are the product of beliefs we've adopted. Safe and secure within these boundaries, we thrive and can make sense of all that happens to us. But eventually, inevitably, something happens that threatens the philosophy that we previously thought inviolable.

We enter a situation of crisis, in which an experience totally disrupts our prior framework. At which point we can respond in one of two ways. Either we dismiss the experience as something fake or dangerous, or we reject our earlier understanding of how the world works. The former leads to rigid conservatism, the latter to growth and development. It's the dynamic of progression in life.

As far as I can work out, this is the inevitable process of making one's way in the world. Either we learn and move forward, or we resist and stay put. It sounds simple, when contained in a sentence, but it's potentially painful and confusing. The in-between period is often long and drawn-out, and in that no-man's-land we feel bereft of any solid ground to stand on.

Losing a comforting worldview can seem like dying, and yet it's not until we're courageous enough to step away from the past that we discover the new synthesis we're being called toward. It's frightening enough to cause many people to retreat and return to

what felt more secure. We all know folk who have taken this step backwards. It makes them resistant to change and often bitter.

Growth is painful. Maturing can be agonising. Regretting the past is futile. Resisting crisis is deadly. The way into life is forward, always forward. We understand what we have come from. We're not so sure about what lies ahead. Eventually we learn to trust in the process, and that after the chaos comes a new harbour to explore. We find that what we thought was threatening, is actually love.

# Being Human

WE ARE STARDUST

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Being human. It's a challenge. I mean we all inherit it, so in that sense it's no effort at all. We're just bald apes. I suppose it depends on whether the condition of humanity is taken as determinative or aspirational. Back in the day, we used to sing with Joni Mitchell "We are stardust, we are golden" – and we kind of believed it. But then we were dipshit hippies, half-whacked on weed.

A silhouette of a person standing on a rock, looking up at a starry night sky. A vertical band of light, possibly a nebula or a light trail, runs through the center of the image. The sky is filled with stars and a soft glow of light.

Since those halcyon days, I've visited both Dachau and Hiroshima. Which gives a different perspective on the human race. Apes would be less cruel to their own. So where are we on the scale between Donald Trump and Mother Teresa? For most of us it probably depends what day you ask the question. We're capable of both selfless kindness and vindictive violence, and that's between breakfast and lunchtime.

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde has much to reflect on as a psychological profile. The surface and the depths. What monsters lurk in the underworld of even the most placid of waters? I've learned from experience to be very afraid of people who seem perfect. Give me flawed characters whose faults don't need to be uncovered any day of the week. There's a chance that they might be honest.

One of the most powerful and formative myths for me (and let's not get into arguing whether myths are true or not) is a story in the book of Genesis about the creation of humanity. According to this tale, God scoops up a handful of earth and breathes into it, thus creating human beings. What it conveys in pictorial fashion is that we're a mix of mud and the breath of God.

Sublime beauty and diabolical stupidity cohabit in the depths of our souls. I know this to be true because I discover the truth of it in myself. How quickly I can turn from offering the persona of a self-actualised guru to that of a petty despot. And which of these incarnations is the better reflection of who I am? The awkward

thing is that both are likely accurate descriptions of my mood swings.

It doesn't cause me despair so much as wonder. In order to remind myself of my flawed nature, I try to swear and fart a lot. The former punctures any illusions of piety, and the latter reminds me that I'm still an animal. And I laugh a lot. Humour, particularly black humour, is a means of getting things back into perspective when we've become full of ourselves.

But the dream of becoming entirely human in the best sense of the word lingers. To learn how to practice mercy with myself and others, to offer a hug to people who are desperately lonely, to find ways of creating beauty where there is none – I still aspire to such things. There are moments in which I manage an approximation, and many more when I fail miserably in the quest.

I try not to strive too hard, however, because I've found that's a way of setting myself up for failure. It's not easy to love others if you dislike yourself. So, in my approaching dotage, I'm much kinder to myself and my own foibles. When in doubt, I find a decent rip-roaring fart will clear the air (so to speak). Handy if there's a few dogs around to share the love.

"We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden", Joni sang. Yep, back to the dirt, where we stand to look at the heavens.

# Piercing the Gloom

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The wind's gusting at the door. Spots of rain tap sporadically as if trying to get in. The sky is brooding darkly, in something of a funk. I've just woken from a nap and realised it's time to get some words on the page. We're in May now, and it was March when lockdown started. Who knew what this broken year would hold for us? And we've a long journey ahead of us yet.



The shadows of sorrow creep over the world. I'm in that kind of gloomy space where a little Yeats seems apposite:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Maybe it's something I ate? Whatever, the reservoir of hope that keeps me churning seems to have sprung a leak. I feel a tad deflated. Last year the environmental group I'm part of opposed plans to restrict water flows in a local river. The opponents were irrigators, who wanted to keep making the surrounding fields into something they were never intended to be, so that profits could be made. The fight found its way to the Environment Court.

We lost; they won. Such is the stuff of judicial process. The judgement was a few hundred pages long, and incomprehensible to most folk without a degree in hydrology. I felt shamed, just the same. It was one up for the champions of commercial exploitation, and a loss for the earth that struggles to rid itself of human pestilence. I wrote a letter to the editor (old fart that I am),

saying that all we wanted was rivers that can be swum in. It seemed to be part of our birthright.

Yesterday I learned that the lawyers for the victorious agricultural titans had lodged a claim for costs against us to the tune of \$200,000. Not happy with having secured their position as prosperous plunderers of natural resources, they sought to punish any who stood in their way. This, of course, is the time-honoured way in which those who have power dominate those who threaten their reign.

In brighter times I might have shrugged it off. Good luck to them trying to extract their pound of flesh from we small band of scraggly environmentalists. In this season, however, when nature has presented us with an ultimatum, it seems vengeful and catastrophic that nothing has changed. The same old players, the familiar strategies, the dumb blindness to the consequences.

With Pete Seeger, I wonder 'when will we ever learn'? Here we are in this liminal space, between two futures, and yet there is little appetite in some quarters for change. I find myself grieving. It will pass, as all grief passes, but the realities underlying that grief will not wane of their own accord. Today I feel we might come out of this season of coronavirus, only to be informed 'you had one job to do!'

For those of us who look to the horizon in the expectation of light, maybe these gloomy skies will pass. Who knows what might be

revealed when another dawn greets us, as surely it will.

Meanwhile, a drink with friends a few thousand kilometres away  
via the miracle of Zoom may help. L'Chaim!

Chapter 38

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# Stranger in Town

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Thank you Tomos Roberts. I don't know you. But your spoken poem, *The Great Realisation*, arrived in my inbox four times yesterday, from four different people. It's had 11 million views since being posted 3 days ago. Like most good things, it's pretty simple. A father reading a bedtime story to his children, sometime in the future.



Perhaps the best line is: “We now call it The Great Realisation, and yes, since then there’s been many, but that’s the story of how it started, and why hindsight’s 2020.” In reference to Coronavirus of course. I’ve always been a great fan of the retroscope, because it’s reasonably accurate. And someone said something about those who cannot remember the past being condemned to repeat it.

Tomos has given us a children’s story for adults, which all the best ones are. Telling us how the year 2020 stirred something in the human soul that caused the whole world to change. How we realised how bankrupt we were, and committed to change our lives. It’s fanciful, preposterous, wildly optimistic, and beautiful. For a few moments it opened my heart to possibility.

My wife is a great storyteller. While I used to read our children the occasional book, she would lie down in the bed with them and make up tales. The central character was often Timmy the mouse - remarkable in that Rose fears the ‘timorous wee beastie’ above all creatures. I’d watch our young ones’ eyes light up as she narrated adventures that arose solely from her wonder-full imagination.

Writers and poets have always known that a story can change reality. Filmmakers too. The dynamics of story are pretty simple. You start where your listeners are at. A scene, a place, an experience that they can recognise and identify with. Then you

begin to take them on a journey. The vital ingredient is that they can travel with you, and don’t get lost along the way.

Finally, you lead them to a new place where everything that seemed certain is now up for grabs. Written well, told well, and performed well, the story can open the eyes of an audience to new possibilities, that earlier seemed impossible. And possibility is everything for people who feel trapped. To begin to hope, to see a new horizon, to feel a fresh breeze stirring – these are developments that no political or military power can stop.

The butterfly effect, the tipping point, the fulcrum of history – we know it can happen. Nelson Mandela, blue jeans in Soviet Russia, the Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square, the end of the Marcos regime. Seemingly totalitarian powers crumble quickly when the public imagination shifts. The time had come, we say when we look back. That’s the core of Tomos Roberts’ small tale.

For some years I’ve worried about the direction of Western society. Surveillance technology, monetarism, loss of freedom, corruption of media, destruction of the environment, an austerity that causes people to die of starvation in wealthy nations. There has seemed an inevitability about the rise of such forces, and a corresponding despair regarding the possibility of change for the better.

One of the few basic stories that inform cinema is known as ‘a stranger comes to town’. Into a settled community arrives

someone who is an outsider. We all know instinctively that there's going to be trouble. By the time the story has ended, everything in the hood will have changed. If I have any hope today, it's because a stranger has come to town. A stranger by the name of Coronavirus.

What happens next remains to be seen.

# Jung

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Freud or Jung? Cerebral or spiritual? Thinking or feeling? Thankfully we come bearing a huge variety of personalities. Me, I'm a Jung man (though not a young man). I resonate with his understanding of the human condition. Some people regard dreams as the result of eating cheese before bed, or the product of randomly firing synapses giving our inactive brains a workout. I beg to differ.



Jung reminds me of that wonderful line in Cohen's 'Suzanne': 'He spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower'. For months of each year, Carl Jung would hole up in a tower that he'd built himself in Bollingen on the shore of Zurich See. There he would retreat for months of each year in order to lead a simple life, without electricity or running water, and think clearly.

In a prescient statement, he wrote: "We no longer live on what we have, but on promises, no longer in the light of the present day, but in the darkness of the future, which we expect, will at last bring the proper sunrise. We refuse to recognise that everything better is purchased at the price of something worse..."

"...new methods or gadgets are of course impressive at first, but in the long run they are dubious and in any case dearly paid for. They by no means increase the contentment or happiness of people on the whole. Mostly they are deceptive sweetenings of existence, like speedier communication which unpleasantly accelerate the tempo of life and leave us with less time than ever before."

Our daughter Polly was a Jung fan. When she revisited Switzerland in 2018, she insisted that her brother drive her to the site of Jung's tower. Unfortunately it had passed into private hands, and was not accessible to the public. Not to be deterred, she dragged her sibling through a river and across fields until finally they found it. Such trespassing is very un-Swiss, but completely Polly-esque.

She, like Jung, was an explorer of the interior. We often talked about the symbolic power and truth of dreams, and Polly had survived several remarkable near-death experiences. Vivid dreams, I believe, are love letters from the unconscious mind – that fertile and fecund source of art, poetry, and motivation. We ignore them at our peril. This interior film-noir cinema allows what is hidden in the depths to rise to the surface.

It was Jung's introspective journey into the interior that made us familiar with 'the shadow', which we all carry within us. That which we present to the world in order to be acceptable is our 'persona' – a socially approved version of ourselves. The bits that don't fit within that cookie-cutter are suppressed, but do not disappear. They cluster around a shadow self that is hidden and denied.

But it is a legitimate part of each person, and often wants to have a say. To do so it needs the suspension of the naturally censorious persona. Appearances of the shadow come either in dreams, or in explosions of behaviour when our dark side emerges to find oxygen. These eruptions are normally described as being 'out of character'. Which generally means 'not consistent with the side of ourselves that we show to others'.

The more the shadow is suppressed, the more it festers. If our dreams are full of anger, frustration, sexual desire, or envy, then there's a fair chance that these are elements that have not been admitted to consciousness. With maturity, we may become

capable of peering into that cavern where our shackled cravings lurk. To recognise them and accept them is to reconcile, and so become more fully ourselves.

Fully actualised human beings are a rarity, and a great gift to the rest of us. They offer us the grace to be ourselves without judgement. Greeting one's shadow is the beginning of overcoming fear. We all need to do our own work in this adventure of life, but it becomes much easier when we are accompanied by friends who demonstrate grace and love along the way.

# Kent State

I'm interested in historical turning points. For obvious reasons, in the current circumstances. As Malcolm Gladwell had it in his seminal work 'The Tipping Point', "... the world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is – contrary to all our expectations – a certainty". These junctures are easy to see in retrospect; not so obvious in the present.



Joan Didion, essayist and narrator of our times, reflected on the difficulty in discerning the times in 'The White Album'. Speaking of the late 1960s, she wrote: "I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience."

We take what scraps of information we can find, and then attempt to assemble them into some form of narrative that makes sense to us. Easier for historians than participants. As a scriptwriter, I know exactly the limbo we're in. The characters are defined, there's been a strong opening to the drama, but we are suddenly aware that we don't know how to bring it all to a satisfying climax.

On May 4, 1970, National Guardsmen opened fire on student protesters on the campus of Kent State University. In a manageable slice of history, that was 50 years ago. I was 18. Already I knew that this was incendiary. Four students were killed, nine wounded. In the space of 13 seconds, 67 bullets were fired. Any government that willingly kills its own citizens is staring into a vortex.

I'm not interested in the motivation of the protesters or the mindset of the soldiers who opened fire on them. For many of us who had seen the sixties as a new awakening for humanity, this was the demise of hope. In a reflective story on the incident,

published in 'The Guardian' yesterday, it was suggested that the Kent State massacre was the beginning of the polarisation of America that has resulted in Trump.

Actually, 1970 was the end point of a change process that began in 1968. In that year we had the Prague Spring with its tragic conclusion, the assassinations of both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the Chicago Democratic Convention. The writing was on the wall, even though we drug-addled hippies couldn't see it. We had dared to hope, and were met with a harsh reality.

Our arrogant prodding of the bear had awakened the conservative backlash of middle America. In an incident four days after the Kent State shootings, anti-war protesters marched through New York City. A group of construction workers attacked them with crowbars. The event was dubbed 'The Hardhat Rebellion', and represented the unveiling of a conservative backlash, egged on by Richard Nixon.

As Chris McGreal argues in The Guardian, this was the start of a tribalisation of the United States that not only continues, but has been fanned by the incendiary rhetoric of the current president. Although my rule of thumb is that history moves in a spiral, currently it seems to have gone in a circle. Now the entire world appears to be dividing down sectarian lines. Once again we're at a flash point.

To use Didion's analogy, we're currently faced with a pile of celluloid scraps in a tangle on the floor. The narrative has not emerged, because we need a team of benevolent editors to piece it together. However it may end, I suspect we're at a tipping point. From here on, things will either get much better or much worse.

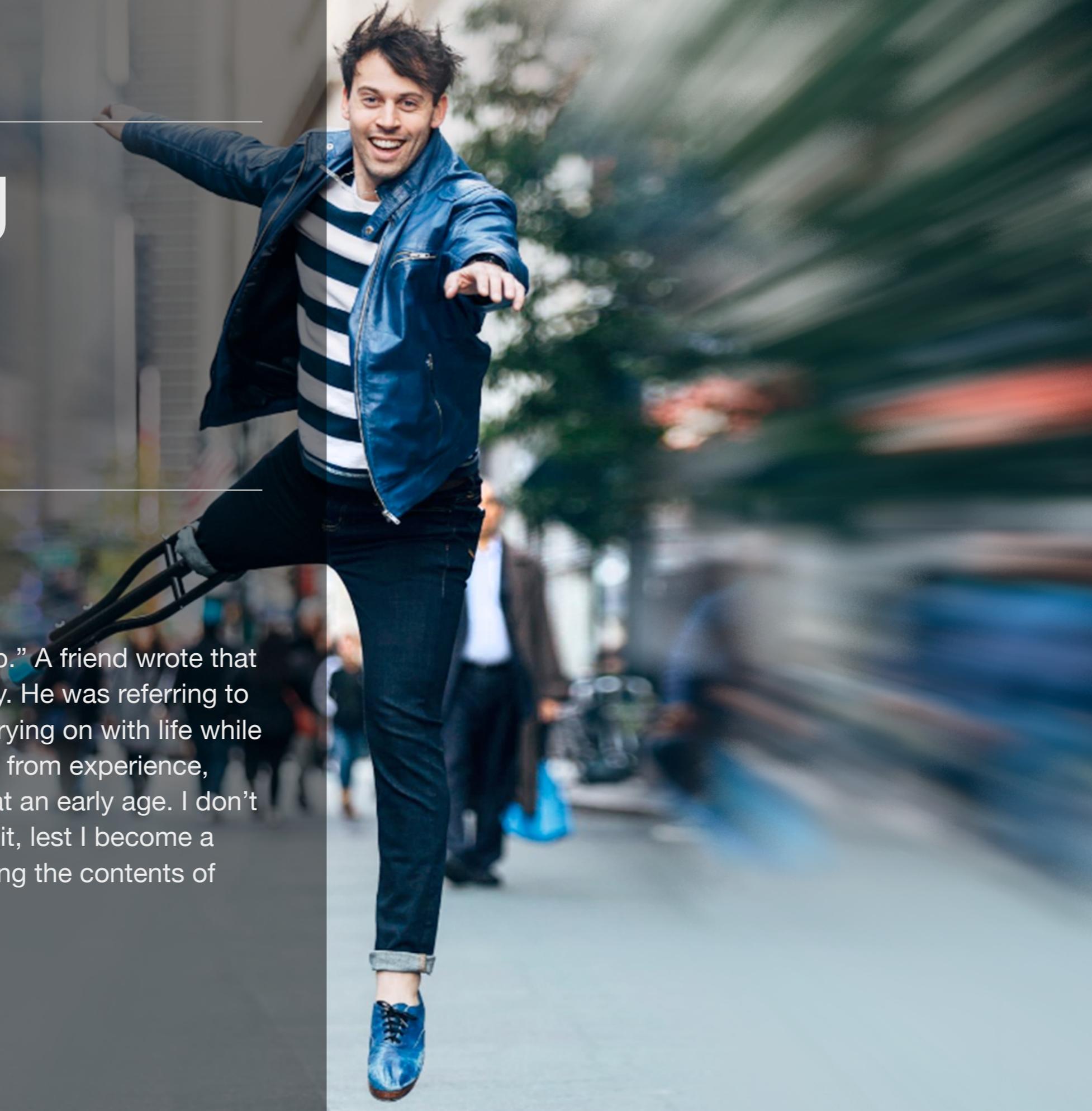
This time though I'm wary of relying on political leadership to point the way forward. As we say in rugby in this part of the world – it's a team effort. Success requires each player to do their job, and not wait to be rescued. Fifty years on from a cultural fracture line, I live in hope of that distant dream of transformation.

As Martin Luther King said, "If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight." Here's hoping.

# Dancing

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“You can still dance with a limp.” A friend wrote that to me in a beautiful letter today. He was referring to grief, and the possibility of carrying on with life while still experiencing it. He speaks from experience, having lost his young brother at an early age. I don’t want to say much more about it, lest I become a sort of Thomas Markle, revealing the contents of private correspondence.



What I can say – now there's a phrase I've learned from politicians – is that this letter was tender, funny, insightful and redemptive. A great gift to start the day with. The next piece of correspondence was not so splendid – a message from my GP to inform me that my PSA score has increased following the recent radiotherapy. Which is kind of the first indication that the treatment didn't work.

My dearly beloved wife had an interesting response. She said she'd like to hit me. Just as well we've been together for so long. I knew that this little flash of anger was directed at the cancer, not me. She prefers not to contemplate the future without me. And, to be honest, I don't feel ready to bugger off either. I'm doing what I can to limit the possibility – sticking with the programme, as my oncologist recommends.

My friend who sent me such wise counsel earlier today was wrong in one respect. I can't dance, with or without a limp. I sometimes manage an uncoordinated series of spasms that have minimal relation to whatever music is playing. But dancing it is not. Nor can I sing. My mother-in-law heard my attempt the other day and asked if I was in pain. In fact I was joyous; only those listening were afflicted.

I understand the sentiment of dancing with a limp however. Our cuts and bruises should not become excuses to withdraw from the joy of life. Only those who have trenched the depths can understand the heights of inappropriately black humour. Having

fun is not forgetting, nor dishonouring the oceans of pain that surround our personal continents. The point of life, it seems to me, is to experience every part of it with as much intensity as possible.

For my part, I've never had much truck with people who long for the afterlife, assuming it will wash away sorrows like some much-hyped soap powder. How can one love an unknown existence more than that which is right in our face? Why write a book about swimming when you've always been too scared to get into the water? Most of my close friends are broken in interesting ways, but would never resile from life.

Sometime this week a digger will arrive at Polly's Place – the house next door where my aforementioned ma-in-law will be living. The machine will excavate earth, ripping into it with a steel claw. It will seem like some sort of violation and assault. The end result, after much hard labour by moi, will be a beautiful memorial garden to Polly, with lavender and roses.

We all know what it is to have parts of the interior hollowed. Some of us seal them off to prevent further damage. Others retreat into the hole and never emerge again. But a few brave souls dream of how they can transform the aching space into a place of wonder and longing. They open up their private anguish to create a park where others might sit a while and find the strength to go on.

Given my hormone treatment for prostate cancer, I am limp in many respects. It will never stop me making a dick of myself or refusing the constant invitation to live fully and as well as I can. Should I stumble it will be in the attempt to move to the beat of an existence I cherish daily. Strike up the band! Let us all make tragic fools of ourselves, laughing like maniacs at the joke no one else can understand.

# Leaders

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I watch the rams in the paddock across the road, seeking meaning to their movement. There's none. They gather at one end, having a long committee meeting. Then one of them will move in a certain direction. The others raise their heads, scandalised. Before long they're all reluctantly following the rebel. I've yet to discern any motivation for their straggly expedition. Boredom or curiosity?



Are leaders born or made? Do they set out to lead, or simply glance over their shoulder, surprised that there's others following in their wake? What constitutes a good leader? Do we need any leaders at all? These are the mindless questions that occupy the fetid mind of a man who has finished his pumpkin soup, only to realise that he's due to feed out hay to those who might have run out of other distractions.

I've just listened to someone who is a very fine leader indeed. She happens to be our Prime Minister. The two don't always coincide. She's 39 years of age, hardly old enough to be weaned, and yet she has a child herself. Jacinda Ardern is a remarkable woman. She descended from somewhere just a couple of years ago. Such competence in a politician has never been seen previously. There's a 'birther' movement claiming she's actually an extra-terrestrial.

If ever there was 'a man for the moment', it's Jacinda. She was the one wearing the hijab and embracing Muslims in March last year, after the Christchurch massacre. Somehow this slip of a girl (as my father would have said) demonstrated what it is to offer dignity, kindness, and compassion to a community reeling from violence. When she spoke, she echoed our own feelings, articulating them before we'd recognised them.

Her government introduced a 'wellbeing budget', aimed at spreading the love to elements of society that had been neglected. She talked about a central tenet of kindness, and the

politics of empathy. At which point several financiers swallowed their silk neckties. Media moguls and opposition parties announced the end of the world as we know it, and were surprised when it didn't happen.

Then along came Coronavirus. Jacinda has now been praised so much internationally for her handling of the crisis that Rupert Murdoch made her an offer to become a page three girl. The New York Times proclaimed: "The master class on how to respond belongs to Jacinda Ardern, the 39-year-old prime minister of New Zealand". Whoopi Goldberg called her "a voice of reason who has taken decisive action". The Atlantic declared her messages "clear, consistent, and somehow simultaneously sobering and soothing."

I could go on, and I often do. Oh alright then, I will. My homeland has often been described as a nation of sheep. We've sometimes validated that opinion. But when it comes to leaders, there's a difference between a sheepdog and a shepherd. One drives, the other invites. The quality that Jacinda exudes is empathy. You feel that she has our best interests at heart, genuinely.

Now I swore I wouldn't speak the names of people at the other end of the scale, so I won't mention Trump or Johnson. Oops. When it comes to leadership, you're either born with it or you're not. No amount of banging on will make people feel invited to follow. There needs to be some sort of widespread recognition that this person has our interests at heart. Here in Aotearoa – New Zealand, we won the sweepstake.

I don't want you to think that I'm a sychophant, but there's an earworm of a song playing in my head, from the musical West Side Story...

Jacinda!

I've just met a girl name named Jacinda

And suddenly that name

Will never be the same

To me...

I might have got that wrong, but the old memory's not what it used to be... Ewe know what I mean.

# God of Small Things

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Whew! I'm a bit sweaty. I've just come in from getting my rocks off. Off the truck that delivered them. They're to fill the gabion baskets. I know – it's a strange term. Initially I thought it referred to something large apes took to the supermarket. But no, these are wire mesh cages that, when filled with rocks (like Trump's head), make for nice landscaping features.



Yes, I am being silly, thank you. It's Friday after all. Remember when it used to mean the end of the working week? No, neither do I. I haven't quite worked out whether I'm working more or less since this strange smog of quietness descended over the world. Here in our valley, the first day of 2020 was marked by eerily yellow skies courtesy of the Australian bushfires. It seemed like a portent.

When my first ever novel was published, I was invited to an event in Wellington. I think it was a PA's blunder. Whatever, the gathering was to do with the launch of a new publishing imprint in New Zealand, Flamingo. Apparently it was a line of literary fiction, so I have no idea how my book got included. All of which is beside the point. Which is that Arandhati Roy was also a Flamingo author, and I got to meet her.

She was being feted for her excellent book 'God of Small Things', recently published. We got to talk with her. That's it for name-dropping. I always hope some of the stardust will rub off, but it never does. She was gracious and charming. When asked in the audience sessions what she'd write next, she said she'd now earned enough and wouldn't need to do anything more. I'm glad she was joking.

A friend sent me something Roy had recently written about Covid-19, and I wanted to share it here because she articulates what I've been saying, only much better. So it must be right, right? I'm half sorry for bleating on about the same old stuff all the

time. My wife will tell you it's not my first transgression. In mitigation, your honour, I plead that the fate of the world is at stake.

Anyways, Roy writes:

"What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. Some believe it's God's way of bringing us to our senses. Others that it's a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world.

"Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

"We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

An exquisite call to arms. Why couldn't I have written that? Probably because speaking of the pandemic as a portal would make me think of portaloos, and I'd fritter away meaning for the sake of cheap wordplay. And what she speaks of is no laughing matter. How we emerge from lockdown will decide our generational fate, and possibly that of humanity's future.

Next floor, Level Two. Going down. Stand clear of the doors. What on earth will await us when we reach the Ground Floor?

Time for a well-rehearsed little parable to finish off on. Once there was a very wise old man whose advice was sought from all over the kingdom. A young and jealous prince set out to humble the old man.

'I will go to the sage with a bird in my hand, and ask him it is alive or dead,' he decided. 'If he says it's alive, I will crush the bird in my hand and kill it. If he says that it's dead, I'll open my hand and let it fly away.'

The smug prince travelled many days and eventually arrived at the old man's humble house. 'Tell me, old man, is this bird alive or dead?' he asked. The stooped prophet looked deep into the man's eyes, and said quietly, 'The answer lies in your hand'.

Chapter 44

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# Fame

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Alright, enough tomfoolery (inside joke for the more astute regular readers of this column). It's a classic Central Otago autumn day, with the temperature in the low 20s. I'm taking a break after shifting a tonne of rocks by hand. I feel like the soundtrack should be 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' from the Coen's 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?'



The high dome of the sky is stretched above, with the sun beating down on us. Somebody didn't get the memo about how cold it's supposed to be. I should be out riding my bike, but I'm sitting in my studio thinking about what I might possibly write about that could make any difference to such a perfect day. Nothing at all, is the correct answer, but it's never stopped me before.

All of us live with some sort of unsatisfied desire. It's what drives us forward, draws us onward, or makes us despair. For the last generation or so, it seems that the universal quest has been for fame. By definition, fame is unattainable to the vast majority of people. If we were all famous, none of us would be famous. But it doesn't stop the aspiration luring the hordes toward a destination that can never be reached.

It seems to escape most of us that fame has something of a tangential relationship with talent. When young people are asked what they want to be famous for, they adopt a look of glazed incomprehension. They don't know or care what people do to become famous – they just want to reach this mythical land where they might be adored and known. Some commit murders to try and get there.

The quest for fame tragically renders us all aspirational for a communal fiction. To be dissatisfied with one's own life and accomplishments is painfully debilitating. I've watched it foment bitterness in the hearts of people who deserve to feel good about themselves. It's why I subtitled my memoir 'Notes on a Small

Life'. I've finally reached a place where I'm content for my life to be small.

Underlying our neurotic hunger, it seems to me, is a sense of loneliness. Surrounded by thronging masses of people, we are desperate for our lives to be somehow worthy or remembered. Here's the ache: we want to be noticed. We yearn for our existence to be of some sort of significance. There's an easy solution to such unrequited longing – buy a cat or a dog (hint: one of these will give you unconditional love, the other not so much).

Another suggestion, bordering on the metaphysical, is to find time to meditate and observe. To dip below the surface into the tranquil depths of the soul is to encounter a space where we are known and loved. Here it is enough to be who we are, without striving to be worthy of anything. This is the healing we all seek. To know it is to understand that we neither need to or are able to find this in the approval of flawed people like ourselves.

It provides the greatest gift of all – the freedom to be ourselves without hungering for adulation from others. In such liberty we can turn the tables. Instead of the hunger to be loved, we are able instead to practice loving the very ordinary people who surround us. No matter how much they ride their achievements, the chances are that they too are lonely and wanting to be noticed.

The vast majority of us quite rightly live in relative obscurity. We go about our small tasks with no more recognition than the

occasional pat on the back from those around us. I feel strongly that we need to find our worth not from universal acclaim but from the simple dignity of our own lives. Each of us has something to contribute to this wonderfully delicate web of human community.

# Mothering

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It's a mother of a Sunday here in the Antipodes. Hallmark are weeping into their profits as cards can't be sent. The whole commercial side of it has always been a poor fit for Kiwis, though by and large it's been tolerated. Celebrating motherhood is a good thing to do on a daily basis, though a special day for it is a double-edged sword. Like most festive events, the marking causes as much sorrow as it does joy.



Those who've lost their mothers, mothers who've lost their children, women who've chosen not to have children, those who are infertile, the ones who don't know their children because they were adopted out, children who've never known their birth mother, mothers who grieve miscarriages or still births. Difficult to be enthusiastically celebratory when there's a stone in your soul.

Mixed feelings for my own sweet wife, mother of three, but only able to embrace the two that remain. Our Polly was never great with these occasions anyway. She hated false sentiment prompted by guilt manipulation. That said, she'd always make a card, employing her artistic skills. It always came a week or so late, because neither Polly nor art can be rushed.

But the poignancy was eased by a visit this morning from our darling daughter Kat and husband Chas. Kat had created her own delightful card, and referenced Polly in it – including stickers of unicorns and rainbows. Chas had sadness in his eyes. His mother died when she was 42. And then we had a Face Time call from our loving son Matt in Panama city, complete with virtual interaction with our drop-dead cute 11 month old grandson Matteo, who waved enthusiastically.

Rosemary has always carried a secret burden of inadequacy relating to motherhood. When our children decided to break with convention by living on the wild side, she felt she'd failed them in some way. When Polly was raped, it pierced Rose's heart like a barbed harpoon. Parents feel illogically responsible when bad

things happen to their children. They think of what they might have done differently.

One night at a family dinner, when such regrets were aired, the insightful Kat responded with a line that has become legendary among us. "Sometimes Mum," she said, "you take too much credit for our failures." I think we laughed and cried at the same time. At that time Polly was still with us, and cackled like a drain. I guess she would still laugh from the other side.

Parenting is not always the saccharine sweet myth that American television made it out to be in the 1970s. To love is inevitably to feel pain. The only way to avoid it is to refrain from love. Women begin the journey of motherhood in pain, and for many that's not the end of it. Letting be is a magnificent gift to all of us, but for those at the core of relinquishment it is often accompanied by anguish.

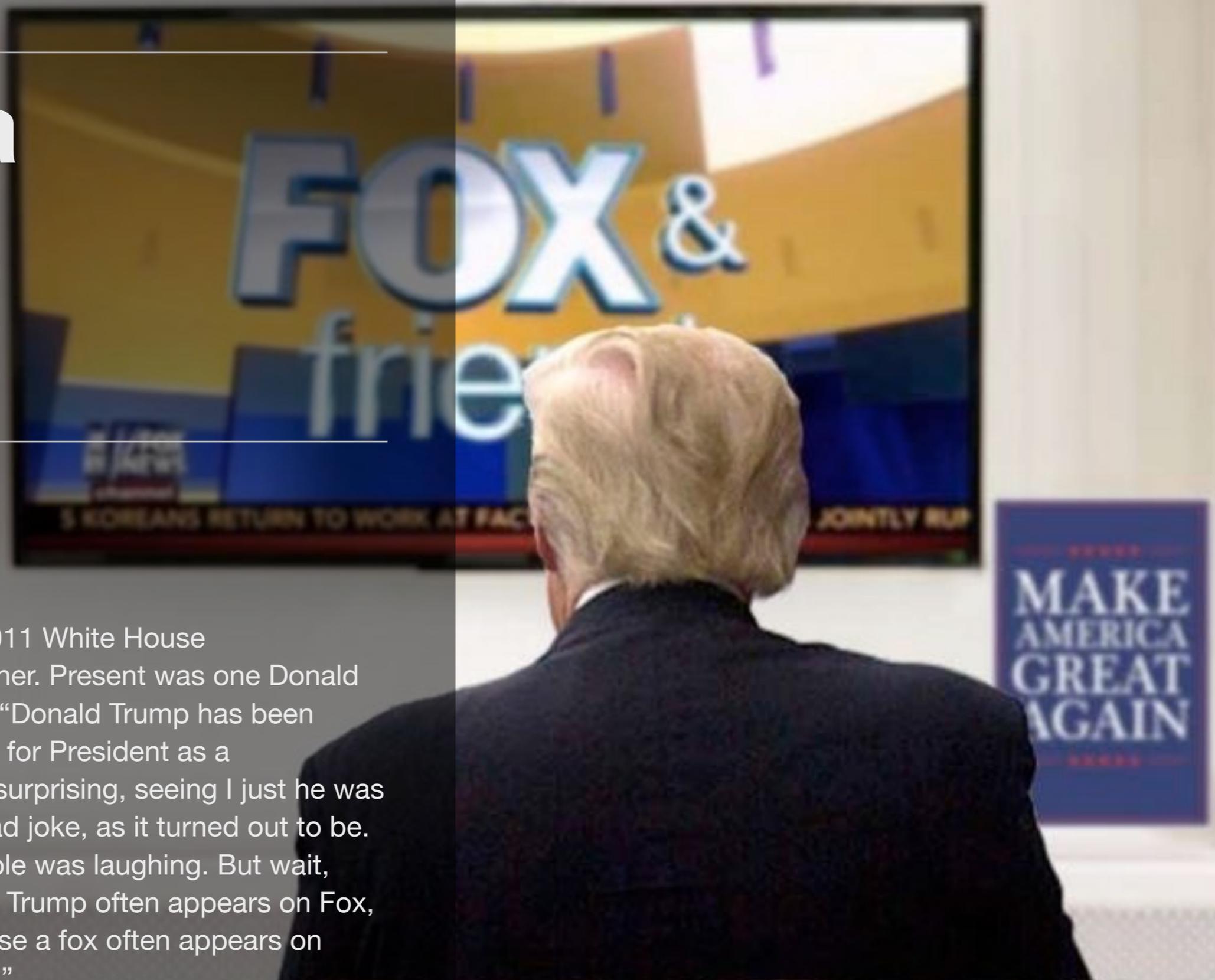
In Māori lore, the earth is known as Papatūānuku, the equivalent of Mother Earth. She has bequeathed us life, and sustains us. This is a sacred relationship. Like all relationships, it is capable of being violated. There has probably never been a period of human history in which we have so consciously and intentionally despoiled our mother. And now we begin to reap the whirlwind.

If this day is to be of value, maybe we should take time to remember our estrangement from the source of all. We're guilty of abuse, and it will take more than feelings of regret to make things

right. And, to all mothers, please be known that you are the most powerful and gentle force for good in the world. Thank you.

# Media

Seth Meyers at the 2011 White House Correspondents's dinner. Present was one Donald Trump. Says Meyers, "Donald Trump has been saying that he will run for President as a Republican, which is surprising, seeing I just he was running as a joke." Bad joke, as it turned out to be. No one at Trump's table was laughing. But wait, there's more. "Donald Trump often appears on Fox, which is ironic, because a fox often appears on Donald Trump's head."



I don't want to talk about Trump. But I do want to talk about Fox, or more importantly, the influence of Rupert Murdoch on world media. Time was when journalism was an honourable profession. The reason news is called the Fourth Estate is because it is one of the foundations of a working democracy. The other three, seeing you asked, are the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary.

When functioning (see ancient history), the four powers provide checks and balances to maintain the essence of a free society. For a long time it worked tolerably. It depended on journalism doing its job as an investigative and critical voice on behalf of the general population. But then, with the digital revolution, things got tricky. Advertising shifted from print to television, and then to social media.

It became difficult to maintain the financial base of print media. Increasingly it shifted from pursuing its critical duty, to begin the two-step with entertainment. Most journalists I know still have a passion for digging out the truth. Finding someone to pay them a salary for doing so is almost impossible. A friend of mine got in early, ditching reporting in favour of PR. Money has become the number one issue for media. Then along came Rupert.

He understood the dumbing down of society and through canny acquisitions developed his media empire to become one of the richest men on the planet (\$19 billion personal wealth in 2019). Murdoch's ethos was revealed when he purchased 'The Sun' in

1969, telling the editor "I want a tearaway paper with lots of tits in it". He has always understood the relationship between news and titillation.

Through his editorial influence on major media throughout the world, he has helped to make us what we have become – a nasty judgemental money-grabbing society. Many of us can't be fagged doing our own research or reading lengthy articles, and so our opinions are formed by Murdoch's purveyors of distortions and outright lies. He promulgates fear and avarice through stories that have no basis in fact.

If the Western world has shifted toward the right in recent decades, a large part of it can be put down to the influence of Murdoch, who Samantha Bee once described as a 'sentient liver spot'. He has used his muscle to shape the face of the world in a way that keeps him largely anonymous. What he oversees is a global propaganda enterprise that would make Goebbels envious.

I'm naively hoping that during this season of lockdown, we will have had time to dig a little deeper into the narratives that shape us. Quality journalism is still there, and is not hard to find. The truth-tellers remain out there; just not getting paid as readily as they might once have been. Like doctors, nurses, cleaners and supermarket workers, honest journalists are essential workers and need to be supported by us all.

Interestingly, in the last couple of months I've read more informed and incisive long form essays than in the whole year prior. I don't know how we support them without some variant of a Universal Basic Income. You don't know how much you appreciate rubbish collectors until they stop doing their job. Should reputable journalists cease writing, the result will be tyranny.

I sometimes imagine a certain president lounging on a sofa in the early hours of the morning, eating burgers and watching Fox 'News', phone in hand to tweet whatever message Murdoch's minions are spreading. It couldn't possibly be true, could it?

# Happiness

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Are you happy? It's a question I refuse to answer, on the grounds that it might incriminate me, or at least intimidate me. Happiness, it has always seemed to me, depends on what happens. If you're living in my skin, a lot of what happens is some bad shit. I can't control what happens, and if I could a lot of it wouldn't. To imagine you could determine the events that come at you would be some kind of narcissism.



As it happens (get it?) I no doubt laugh more than I cry. This may be a sign that I'm unbalanced, idiotic, insentient, comfortably numb, or irresponsible. I plead the filth. That's not a typo. The filth that is filtered through my soul daily. I can either luxuriate in it like an otter in a sewage farm, or I can find some other spring to drink from. I choose the latter.

If I did a quick scan of my life, I could reference my parents divorcing (whose haven't?), my fiancée sleeping with my friend (I think they did more than sleep), a drug experience that nearly killed me, time in a Moroccan prison, being fired for writing a novel, aggressive cancer, and our beloved daughter who died. If that's all there is, I would have shut up shop long ago.

Many of my friends and acquaintances could recount a longer and more terrifying list. As they say, shit happens. It's not bad luck or punishment; it's life. If we link our sense of wellbeing to that which is by definition uncontrollable, despair is what follows. Been there, done that. Fortunately, wallowing in our genuine sorrows is not the only path available to us.

I don't want to be a Pollyanna (except I do because Polly Anna taught me so much about living through pain). I do want to be an advocate of joy. Joy has nothing much to do with events. It arises from the heart. Perversely, the greater one has been hollowed out by suffering, the larger the reservoir from which it is possible to draw joy. Joy has no logic; only abundance.

As I wrote back in 1991, 'Happiness is finding a wallet full of \$20 notes with no identification in it. Joy could hit you as you give your last \$5 to a lovable rogue with an unlikely story.' The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu authored a book with the title 'The Book of Joy'. In it Tutu offered the following insight:

"If you are setting out to be joyful you are not going to end up being joyful. You're going to find yourself turned in on yourself. It's like a flower. You open, you blossom, really because of other people. And I think some suffering, maybe even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for life, certainly for developing compassion."

So here's the paradox. Many of us who have been beaten down by life are irresponsibly joyous and generous. Others, swimming in cash and fine things, are routinely miserable. Go figure. Joy is the oil that keeps the engine of humanity ticking over smoothly. Greed is sand in the gearbox. There's a trick to spotting what's happening in the souls of people – look at their eyes. Joy is irrepressible; the eyes have it.

Am I happy? Depends which day you ask me. Am I joyous? I think I am. I love life, I love my family and my friends and my neighbours. I love this land that surrounds me, in all its moods and changes. There's this internal spring that I never created, which, despite my best efforts, continues to boil and surge within me. I'm sure it drives those close to me crazy. Joy does that.

# Memory

I was going to reflect on the gift of memory today, but then I forgot. One of my favourite non-fiction books is *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, by Oliver Sacks. It's a series of reflections on clinical cases encountered in his career as a neurologist. One of them concerns Jimmy. His long term memory was excellent, extending to the phone numbers of family members in the small town he grew up in.



A 49-year-old, Jimmy's only problem was the present, where he was afloat on a sea of immediate impressions, with no knowledge of how he'd got there. Every encounter was a new one. Sacks wrote: 'He is, as it were, isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all around him... he is a man without a past (or future), stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment'.

My mother used to joke that she had a religious experience every time she entered her kitchen. She'd stop and ask herself 'What am I here for?' Those of us of a certain age are familiar with such existential crises, when we can no longer recall where we put the potato peeler. But we're very good on reciting some poem that we were forced to memorise at school.

It's a fairly normal biological process; we forget the name of the film we watched last week, but can remember the kid who stole our marbles (actual rather than metaphorical) half a century ago. Even that memory might be a little inaccurate. Eventually we discover the truth that memory is not a reliable database, but rather a story that we have constructed to make sense of ourselves and our world.

Memories are narratives that connect the present with the past, and enable us to have somewhere to stand with a semblance of continuity. Storytelling, even when it's to ourselves, plays a vital function in giving us a 'voice'. As I said in my memoir, "it's a way

of presenting the past so as to flatter my own view of myself. It's a lie, but one that might have meaning if it is entertaining."

Anyways, back to Jimmy (wandering off point is another gift of aging). I sometimes wonder if his condition, 'isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all around him', is a reasonable metaphor for contemporary society. Riding the instant for all its worth, we easily overlook where it is we've come from and what the destination was that we set out for.

Today in Aotearoa-New Zealand, at 11.59pm, we cross the fuzzy margin from strict lockdown to a controlled freedom. Most of us have an intermingled sense of relief and anxiety. What will the future hold? More interesting, to my mind, is the question of whether we have learned anything during the 7 weeks of enforced pause. Will our response be a rush back to 'normality', or a considered move into a realm of possibility?

Time will tell, as they say, whoever 'they' are. That's not honest, either. We're not adrift on an ocean of fate, carried by anonymous currents. We are agents, all of us, and more interestingly, communities, who can make choices for change. Against the seemingly impossible odds, we have the chance to change. Lockdown could be a nostalgic tale to tell future grandchildren, or it could be a pivot point.

We live in a time when it's common to rush on from one thing to the next, with no contemplation. The excitement of shopping

malls and hairdressers drives every reflective thought from our minds. This is not the time for that. To quote a line from Paul Thomas Anderson's 'Magnolia', "you may be through with the past, but the past is not through with you".

Jimmy was a thoroughly nice man, friendly and outgoing. He just couldn't retain anything that had happened to him recently.

# Feelings

Just off a FaceTime call with our second grandson Matteo, who turned one year old today. He lives in Panama City, a long way distant. Hard to express what joy His Gorgeousness brought us, or what gibbering idiots we made of ourselves. Clapping, singing, blowing raspberries, waving, and woofing – that was us, not our grandson. He performed brilliantly, showing us all his tricks, and trying to reach out to touch us through the phone.



We can't hold him. The pain of separation, but the delight of feeling that he was present to us. The ache of love at a distance. The joy of pure innocence. I felt the geographic gulf because of the proximity. Emotions tumbling over themselves, jockeying for prominence. Beauty undoes me; the more so when it is unfiltered. It's the way of things. That which entrances us is always just beyond reach.

I guess it all hooks into my lingering grief. The sense of loss for one who can't be held anymore. We wend our way through life seeking love and fearing that it might be taken from us. Dumb, perhaps. Or just human. Each morning when I wake, I find joy in seeing the sleepy head of my wife next to me. Not everyone has that, I know, and I try not to take it for granted.

Even now, on the first day of release from strict lockdown, I find myself a little sad for what we've lost rather than excited about what's newly possible. A neighbour called in this morning to borrow our trailer. We elbow-bumped when it would have been good to embrace. Our conversation took place on the footpath rather than inside the house. Both of us, cancer survivors, regretted that a season was coming to an end.

Melancholy is inevitable – the shadow side of joy. I don't mind it. It has a wistful quality, like a wisp of cloud clinging to a peak on a fine day. Sadness doesn't make me sad, doesn't define me as depressed. Oh yes, I've known the black dog, and have no wish to go back there, into that lumpy porridge of bleakness. One of

the triggers for such misery is a phony facade of contentment used to keep wellwishers from the door.

People are complex. Any attempt to fit them into neat boxes is misguided. Most of the time we're not even sure what's going on inside us, or what the origins of a particular feeling might be. The combination of patriarchy and scientism have given emotions a bad rap. They need balancing, without doubt. What they don't need is suppression, because then we would live a very thin existence indeed.

Nobody takes the greeting 'How are you?' as a serious question. If they did, we'd stop using it, or avoid them. It's not necessarily that we don't care. More that there's no simple answer short of an existential cataloguing that we have no time or inclination to receive. We're all capable of reading body language, and working out when a friend needs care. Unless we're shut-down people ourselves, and scared of going there.

I appreciate people with passion. Those who laugh and argue and celebrate and mourn and enjoy their sins. Give me an argumentative bastard with a forgiving laugh over a mealy-mouthed bird man who never reveals his judgemental heart. A woman who uses her sexuality to heal and tease rather than one who never loves fully in case people think badly of her. We at least know they're alive.

People keep asking when we'll return to normal life. I guess it depends what your idea of normal life is. Coronavirus or not, we only get one shot at it, so we might as well do it as best we can. Love, laughter, pain, sorrow, anger, frustration, fear, hope, confusion – these are all the marks of human existence. We're a long time dead, and the clay is cold.

# Money

Yesterday our government pulled \$50bn out of its pocket as a response to the Covid recession. That's on top of the previous \$11bn or so that someone left as a tip, which was generously shared with the nation. I have no problems with it, and in fact am very happy to see the dosh churning, even though I'm not a recipient of such largesse. Given I'm on the artist's wage (government super), I don't feel I can complain.



What interests me is that last year there was very little to throw around, and now we're spending like Irish Catholics at the racecourse. Declaration of informed bigotry: some of my ancestors are Irish, I'm Catholic (sort of), and I grew up at the races. When I was at the hardware shop this morning (hallelujah), the bloke sorting my timber asked me where all that budget money comes from. I was tempted to say 'oot ma arse', but thought better of it.

As I have often informed my dearly beloved wife, money is simply numbers on paper. It has no relationship to anything tangible on earth. I remember running this argument with her when our combined mortgages became stratospheric. It was just after we'd run up \$150k against the house to finance a feature film, and just before we lost \$350k on a so-called 'investment property'. She wasn't sympathetic to my economic insights.

Unbowed, I don't resile from my monetary philosophy one iota. Money is very similar to magic. You can make it disappear with a flourish of your hand, or seemingly pull it out of nowhere while distracting people's attention. As a teenager I was an amateur magician. I once managed to produce a rabbit out of an empty pot, albeit with a slightly singed bum (the rabbit, not me). It's a long story.

One of the great tragedies of contemporary life is that people take money too seriously. They begin to count everything, which inevitably leads to sorrow. My approach, which admittedly is yet

to be peer-reviewed, is to largely ignore finance. It's a bit like the Easter Bunny, which can safely be overlooked once you reach midlife. The case for the existence of unicorns is far stronger than that for money.

At the beginning of the year 2000, we were all neoliberals, using Ockham's razor to shave the stubble off any sign of expense. Now we're liberal in the true meaning of the word – spreading munificence to all and sundry. There was no money. Now there's loads of money. Like I said, magic! All this is apparently due to quantitative easing, which is what I do on the toilet after a good meal.

Socialists all, every nation is providing fiscal stimulus, whatever that is. Why I like it is that we seem to have remembered that government has a purpose, a big part of which is to look after the people of the land. We actually need things like hospitals and schools and railways and museums and libraries, because that's what makes a country worth living in. Once you've decided that, the money miraculously appears.

It's actually always been so, at least in our house. If you wait until you can afford something, you find that the last one of those was just sold to some prat in a Volvo. The best question to be asking is whether this new project/adventure/dream is one that fires your imagination and might just be possible. Once you've sorted that, the wherewithal often teleports in from the wings.

I'm not advocating rampant capitalism – far from it. Just what we seem to have rediscovered last week – rampant socialism. Money is a tool, and so are many of the people who have it. It exists to grease the wheels of a functioning community, rather than the palms of the moneylenders. Let's all have a good laugh and set fire to a \$50 note – no one uses them anymore anyway.

What's the worst that can happen?

# Broken

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A wee tickler of a frost this morning. Just a bit over -4 degrees C. A tiny taster of what's to come. When I extracted myself from a cosy bed, the hills were white and the sky blue. You could grate cheese on the air outside. Or just stay inside until the sun hoists itself a bit higher. That seemed the better choice to me. Difficult to describe how clear the atmosphere is here. Take my word for it.



A gushing sound caught my attention. There was water spurting from the automatic thingy (technical term) that waters the hanging flower baskets. On close examination, it appeared that a large block of ice had expanded the tap connection, bursting it asunder. The first victim of winter. There'll be more to come, no doubt. We've seen photos of locals ice skating down the main road past the pub.

A couple of hundred yards from us is an ice rink. No machinery required. Brilliant. You dig a bit of a dip into the ground, fill it with water, and wait for winter to come. Easy as. Though with climate change, recently the dam past the village has resolutely refused to freeze solid enough for curling to happen. Curling has nothing to do with hair or rollers; it's a Scots thing something like lawn bowls on ice. Mostly it's an excuse to drink whiskey.

Normally at this time of the year we'd be gearing up for the Brass Monkey Rally. For the last 30 years groups of bikers (up to 4,000) from all over have gathered here to freeze their nuts off by sleeping in tents and get pleasantly drunk. There's always a massive bonfire and fireworks. This year the festival is another victim of Coronavirus. So the only ones enduring and enjoying the winter will be we villagers.

Speaking of blockages (keep up), our daughter just turned up with a blender jar full of creamed brocolli. The problem was the screwtop lid had got stuck, so she couldn't get the contents out. After a bit of blokish grunting and straining, I gave my shrewd

observation that it was indeed stuck. My first solution was to try the battery drill that usually fixes everything. No good. Eventually I took to it with a hacksaw. Problem solved. New blender jar possibly required though.

Two issues in one day with things getting jammed. Enough to remind me of prostate problems. But that's enough about that. What it got me thinking about was the fact that every now and again things freeze up and are no longer fit for the purpose they were designed for. When that happens, they need to be reconsidered and fixed, even if it takes a hacksaw to do the job.

Every now and again you realise that the machinery you have is inadequate for the job at hand. It breaks down, and needs either fixing or replacing. I kind of feel that this is where we're at now. Everything seemed to be ticking over smoothly, until it didn't. Right now, it's all turned to custard, and we're buggered if we know what it'll take to sort things out.

I once ran the bearings on a Vauxhall 12, and tried to fix it by pulling the sump off and attempting to smooth the crankshaft with wet & dry sandpaper. Didn't work, you'll be surprised to know. When things are royally screwed, you need a serious remedy. Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and replace the entire motor. It's a lot of work, but worth every bit of it.

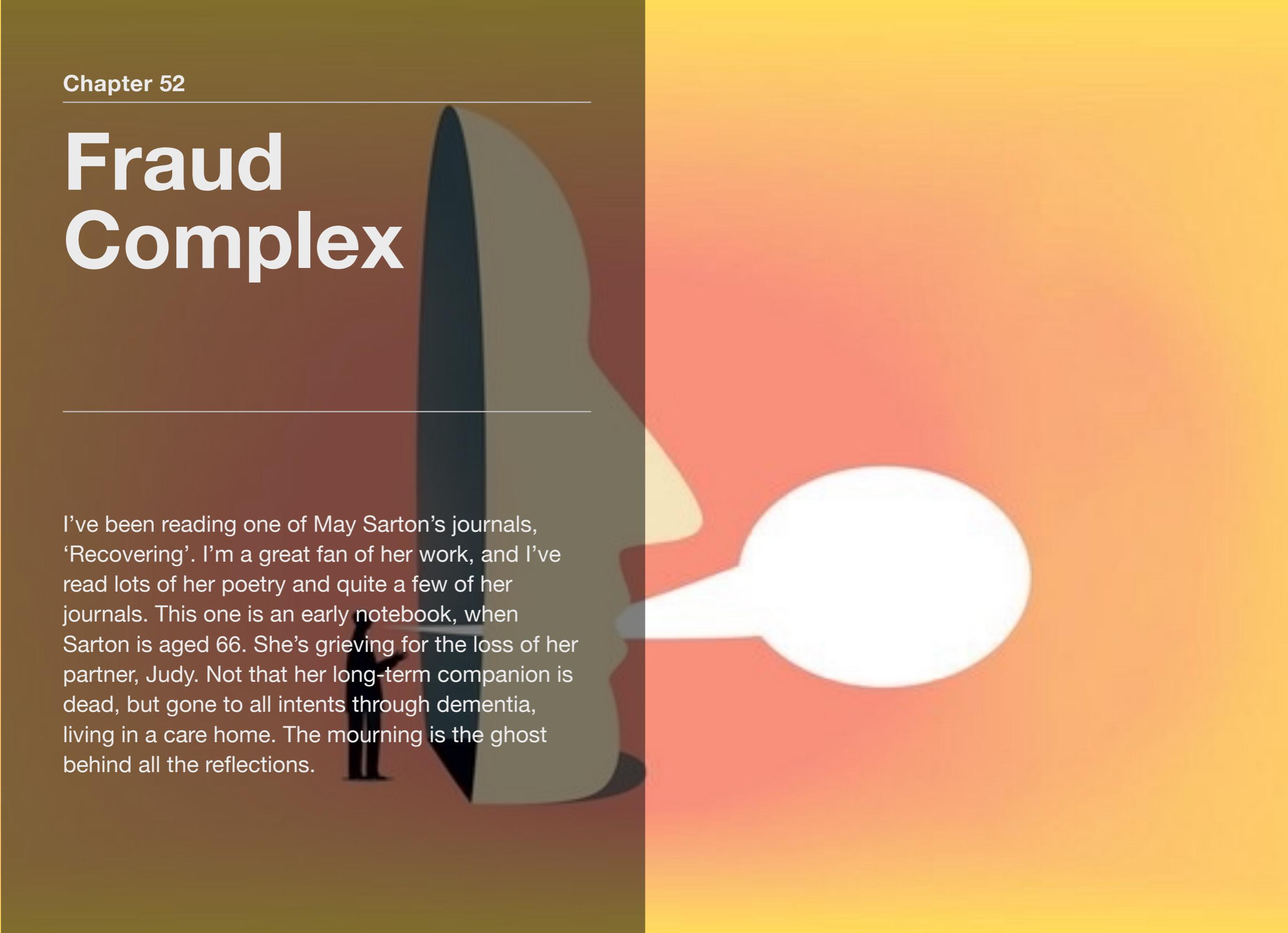
Are we up to repairing what's broken in this world of ours? Or are we looking for a quick fix to just make it a bit further down the

road? These are questions that will only be answered over the next year or two. Everyone wants to hurry up and get to where they wanted to be. Time, I think, to ponder exactly what that destination might be.

# Fraud Complex

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I've been reading one of May Sarton's journals, 'Recovering'. I'm a great fan of her work, and I've read lots of her poetry and quite a few of her journals. This one is an early notebook, when Sarton is aged 66. She's grieving for the loss of her partner, Judy. Not that her long-term companion is dead, but gone to all intents through dementia, living in a care home. The mourning is the ghost behind all the reflections.



What I noticed this time is the level of anxiety that dogs Sarton, and is like a deep bass tone to her musings. Here she is, an established poet and writer, travelling America to give readings, a celebrated icon of literature. Yet she feels deeply any hint of criticism, as if it might strip her of credibility and talent. She worries over her current work as if it were her first, and essential to prove her worthy of respect.

Well, she was a writer, after all. If there weren't some sense of inadequacy, she probably would never have begun putting words on paper. Being a wordsmith, I frequently advocate, is a neurosis. There's no cure for it, but the discipline of herding words is a form of therapy for the condition. I suppose this insecurity is not unique to authors. It seems to be something of a hidden pandemic, seemingly asymptomatic but present nonetheless.

The fraud complex, it's sometimes called. Last night we enjoyed a beautifully-cooked and hearty roast meal down the road at our family's house. In the course of conversation, our daughter Kat recalled a couple of young Irish women who'd come to visit in Dunedin, and how they were a bit star-struck because they'd read some of my books and heard me speaking in the UK.

Kat's husband Chas, who we like to call a son rather than the formal 'son-in-law', posed a question to Rosemary. Did she feel jealous that her partner was receiving such adulation? I laughed

because it seemed to me a bit of a joke. My wife the lawyer, judge, actor, public speaker, film director? Envious of her indigent bumbling writer husband? I couldn't imagine it in the slightest.

I know I'm a fraud. A talentless dick who blags himself up but doesn't know his arse from his elbow. I used to teach at a university, and I was perpetually nervous that the students would find out how little I knew. Speaking to fair-sized crowds was once part of my life. Few of those listening could see the internal terror that clenched my heart. And as for writing, I still tremble a little to call myself an author.

Now none of this is intended to invoke sympathy for me, or to sneakily bring into the conversation my past accomplishments. I simply want to share what I think is widespread. What people see us as from the outside, and how we regard ourselves from our small cage in the soul, are two different things. Rosemary, a respected judge, would sometimes whisper to me how she felt she was fooling people.

I dare to tread on this territory not only because it's so common, but through imagining I may have found something of a cure for it. The secret requires us to 'know thyself'. To understand that our value as people is not to do with our accomplishments or lack of them, but comes in the dignity we have in being human. Offering love rather than receiving adulation is what brings us joy and contentment.

I know now that no one in the entire planet could produce a more searching critique of me or my work than I can. I could produce a thesis on my failings. But strangely, without effort, I've come to be at peace with myself – warts and all. If I can accept myself, then it's possible that others will too. And I won't feel the need to impress people or do the male thing of one-upmanship in storytelling.

When you have no reputation to uphold, it becomes difficult to regard yourself as a fraud. There comes the possibility of being yourself, which is truly the only gift worth giving to the world. Oh, and being loved – which all of us are even though we may not feel it. The more we can be who we are, the more likely we are to find such love. There's no one to be scared of, except ourselves.

# Division

It was 1981. The country was as divided as I've ever known it. A certain Prime Minister by the name of Muldoon had determined that the government would not interfere with the visit of the South African rugby team (Springboks) to New Zealand, despite Apartheid. I was a keen rugby follower. I had autographs I'd collected as a lad, from previous Springbok tours.



Much of my youth was expended on the rugby field, most of it with more enthusiasm than skill. I knew the smell of wintergreen, and the burn of it while pointing a significant part of the male anatomy at the porcelain. I played on the side of the scrum, and even captained a team that won the local competition. Which is remarkable, given my natural clumsiness, and proclivity for dropping the ball with the tryline wide open.

I passed up my glorious future in boots when I was knocked out three times in one season, had my spine chipped, and my GP suggested I learn chess. By the time the 1980s rolled around, I'd been politicised. I marched against the Vietnam War and learned the difference between Trotskyites and Leninists, a distinction now lost in a cerebral haze. I was also involved significantly in anti-Apartheid protests.

So it was that I found myself in the midst of the conflict that tore our young nation asunder. Until the advent of Covid, I've never experienced anything else that affected the whole of society in such dramatic fashion. I was arrested three times, and convicted twice. The first time was when we demonstrators pulled down a mesh fence at the airport and ran onto the runway as the South Africans' plane touched down in Auckland.

Come the opening game of the Springbok tour, I was present at Gisborne when protestors came up with the sensational plan of trying to pull down a fence that separated a few thousand screaming rugby fans from us – forgetting that the crowd had an

abundance of empty beer bottles. Not long later I joined the protest at Hamilton, where we managed a pitch invasion, and all hell broke loose when police cancelled the game. I came home bearing a black eye.

As time went by, there was blood flowing in the streets, with police using the newly acquired PR24 long batons to club obedience into the raggedy mobs. When the tour reached Auckland, I was part of a clandestine group that broke into a rugby stadium in a failed attempt to cut down the goalposts. My brother-in-law in the army was charged with erecting razor wire around the park. I was involved in chucking a grappling hook and towrope over said wire and pulling it down with a car.

Families were split; arguments spilled out of control; bar patrons threw bottles at people with long hair. In the final test, friends of mine dive-bombed the game with a small plane, dropping flour bombs – one of which knocked a player to the ground. It's a marvel no one died in the protests outside the game, where I watched police totally out of control, foaming at the mouth, and indiscriminately clubbing people with their long batons.

Hard to understand now if you weren't there. But the impossible happened – we survived as a nation, even though equally divided. My brother-in-law and I are great mates now, and sometimes watch rugby together. It is possible to get past things that seemed insurmountable at one time. Which is kind of the point of

these self-indulgent reflections. We endured, and our country changed in ways we might not credit.

Muldoon, who manipulated these events for cynical political ends, won another term by running on law and order. He was eventually dispatched. Leadership is key. It can unite or divide. We have examples of both presented to us in this current crisis. Difficulties can be faced and overcome when ordinary people feel they can trust the motives and character of those who govern. Or they can be deepened by a sense of confusion and despair when leadership fails.

Testing times reveal what lies in the hearts of our leaders. They scrape away the layers until the rawness of personality is on display. On this day, I'm very grateful for those few who have been able to demonstrate integrity and kindness, rather than sowing panic and confusion. History has a way of sorting out which is which.

# Aging

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The Gift  
by Mary Oliver

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.  
Earth and heaven both are still watching  
though time is draining from the clock  
and your walk, that was confident and quick,  
has become slow.  
So, be slow if you must, but let  
the heart still play its true part.  
Love still as once you loved, deeply  
and without patience. Let God and the world  
know you are grateful.  
That the gift has been given.

Difficult to speak of growing older when you're still young. It's like a sprinter telling the marathon runner to pick up the pace. No one ever thinks they'll age, and in a sense that's right. The soul is defiant of atrophy, no matter what the body has to say about it. Our Western culture is youth-obsessed, as if life were a matter of splitting hairs – the interlude between the first pubic hair and the first grey hair.

Yesterday we helped Lorna to move into her new house, next door to us. I call her Lorna rather than mother-in-law because her name is what is important to me, more than her familial status. In a little over a month she will enter the number 92 next to the age category on official documents. One of those will be her passport application so that she can accompany us to Rarotonga later in the year.

Lorna is not so much a nonagenarian as a non-age-narian. She has style, humour, keen interest in world events, passion, intelligence, and delight. For her to move the length of the country and set up house in Central Otago would be remarkable at any stage of her life. More so now that her husband is seven years dead and she has two frozen shoulders that limit her activity. None of that has cowed her. She's a force of nature.

I admire her hugely. She's had a series of health issues that have kept her confined to base for a while, but routinely bounces back ready for more. I heard her say a couple of days ago that she hates to wear the same clothes two days in a row. And each

morning she displays her sartorial elegance, never thinking it doesn't matter. Sparkling in spirit she is, as Yoda might say.

So easy to give up, to relinquish the spark of existence, to fold one's hands and say enough. As TS Eliot had it:

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

We, the aging, are invisible to a disinterested society. In times of Coronavirus, the unspoken judgement has been made that it's only the elderly who are dying – a kind of shrugging of the verbal shoulders. I'm not one to whinge about it, and we boomers have surely heaped indignity on the backs of the generations who follow. But the young will also grow old someday, and face the same choices as we do now.

At the risk of being judgemental, I would proffer that we age as we live. Character is formed over the whole of a life, though more easily discernible once the physical glories fade. The beauties of venerable age are to be found in the eyes, in the heart, in vitality, in gratitude, in acceptance, in generosity, in thoughtfulness. "Let God and the world know you are grateful that the gift has been given."

We live in a rural village where the age of residents is skewed toward the higher end. Some have been bent by years working

the land, others twisted by illness and grief. Age has not defeated us. We laugh, we drink, we love, we mourn. All about us the glory of the earth reveals itself on a daily basis, and we are grateful for each day standing. Like ripened fruit, the exterior might be hinting at decay, just as life becomes sweetest.

James K. Baxter, 'He Waiata mo Te Kare':

Now I see you conquer age  
As the prow of a canoe beats down  
The plumes of Tangaroa.  
You, straight-backed, a girl,  
Your dark hair on your shoulders.  
Lifting up our grandchild.  
How you put them to shame,  
All the flouncing girls!

# Roots

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Two things. The first was the dawn sky today that seeped glory into the heavens. It made me think of the Baxter lines: 'Those peaceful New Zealand towns, centred upon a Post Office, a grocer's store, a petrol station and a War Memorial, are strange places to sleep in, if you stretch out on a bench in your oilskin, before the dawn shows itself above the scrub hills like a terrible unhealed wound.'



And secondly, a conversation with friends yesterday. They asked why New Zealand film and television drama is so bloody dark. They were unknowingly echoing the sentiments of Sam Neill in the doco he directed and fronted, 'Cinema of Unease'. In it he claimed that filmmakers "saw the land as a metaphor for a psychological interior and looked at the darker heart of the menacing land".

I found a certain congruence between these events. The history of Aotearoa has been consciously suppressed for generations, but it still finds its way into the substratum of our national psyche. Baxter again: 'Our forgetting is too like amnesia. I think the god of death takes charge of us in spite of our innocence. We are unable wholly to opt out of history. By a process like osmosis, like the seeping of water through gravel, the calamities in which we have not participated reach into our dreams.'

Those who visit the shores of Aotearoa–New Zealand (currently no one) are mystified at the shadow side of our culture, with child abuse and suicide rating disproportionately high. How is this to be reconciled with the natural beauty of the landscape, and the relatively benign lifestyle that is enjoyed in this part of the South Pacific? A partial answer is that abuse of any kind leaves a long tail.

Colonialism was rife with dispossession of Māori land, and the decimation of indigenous culture. Settlement has also been a metaphor for a targeted assault on the ecosystem that existed

before the invasion. The hunger for a new start spurred Pākehā to a covetous disrespect for the people and environment which lived in relative harmony for centuries beforehand.

We want to move on from unpleasantness, but there is no moving on until the wounds heal. Otherwise they will seep blood through the temporary bandages that might have been applied. As we all know, it's important to expose lacerations to the air as part of the redemptive process. There's an uncovering necessary before full health can be restored.

I like to think we've begun this journey of facing into our dark past. Sorting out financial and political settlements has been the easy part. The road ahead will ask of us honest conversation, and some sense of genuine sorrow on the part of we colonists. Like many Pākehā, my forbears have been here for 160 years. That's enough to just scratch the surface of what Neil Darragh calls "belonging with shallow roots".

Last year I planted two weeping willows on our land. One has survived a full round of seasons in this harsh climate. The other perished once its subterranean tendrils struck the stony subsoil that bears witness to a former lake bed. There are not a lot of trees on the great plain of the Maniototo. It's not possible to flourish without getting sustenance from the depths.

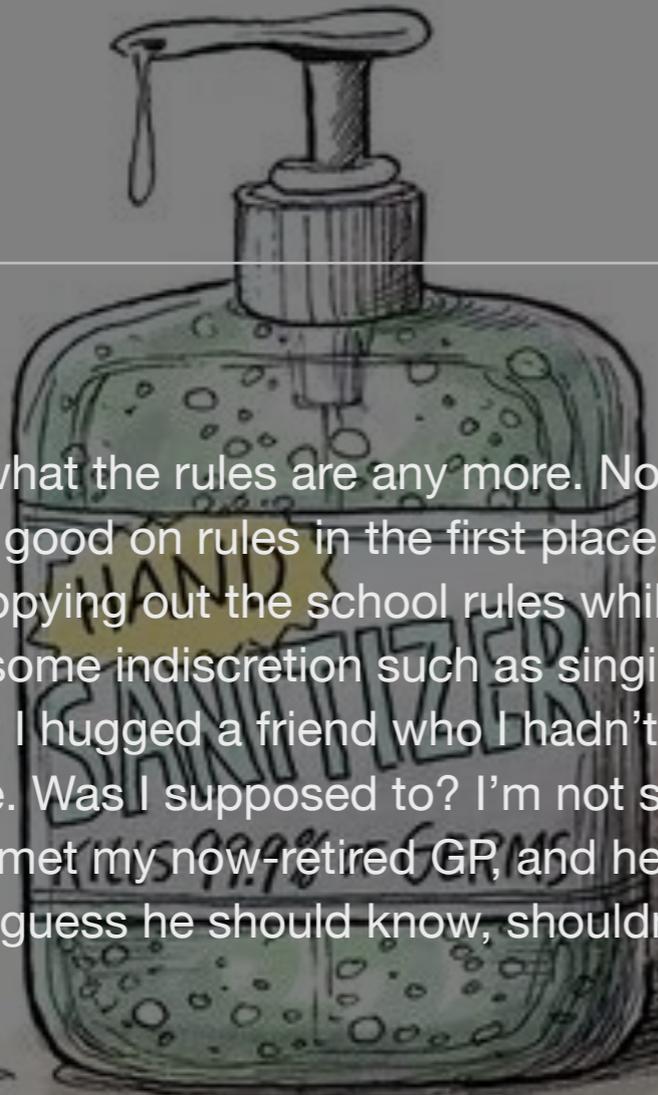
Repentance and apologies are always difficult. We make a thousand excuses and justifications, always wanting to turn away

from shame and guilt. And yet to make the first move toward it creates a sense of freedom and joy. We wonder afterwards why it took us so long, and what we really had to lose by facing into our own misdeeds. I'm an optimist, and feel confident that we're capable of getting there.

CORONAVIRUS  
PREVENTION

# Nonsense

I don't know what the rules are any more. Not that I was ever very good on rules in the first place. Too many times copying out the school rules while in detention for some indiscretion such as singing out of tune. Today I hugged a friend who I hadn't seen for a long time. Was I supposed to? I'm not sure. But earlier I'd met my now-retired GP, and he shook my hand, so I guess he should know, shouldn't he?



# CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE



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CAGE CARTOONS ON  
THE BUFFALO NEWS 2/15

Well, everything in moderation I guess. Including moderation. It's Friday, so I'm in a silly mood. Some would say that's my 24/7 condition, and they could be right. The supermarket tannoy tells me I'm supposed to keep 2 metres away from people. That doesn't seem to be working. Personal space is essentially personal, isn't it? At least for the people standing in front of the peanut butter while rehearsing gossip with their next-door neighbour.

I had bread and butter pudding for lunch. It's a symptom of confusing times. It was delicious, and I wondered why I don't have dessert for breakfast? I may be more of a social conservative than I thought I was. Everyone wants to be a non-conformist. The urge to be different gets us all in the end. We live our lives wondering what other people think of us, while insisting that we don't care.

I've lost track of gender. Is it a thing anymore? Or maybe more like a variable thermostat, where you can wind the dial to whatever position makes you comfortable? Much better than it used to be, when you only had two choices – off or on. Let a thousand flowers bloom, as Mao Tse Tung (oops, Mao Zedong) said before launching the cultural revolution which went through society like a dose of Roundup.

Life used to be less complicated when we could destroy the environment without upsetting people. And wars were a bit of harmless fun, remember? Now you need a United Nations

resolution to get permission to start one. I remember the days when presidents of America used to live on the planet. The current one has just commissioned a Space Force, which is a good idea, seeing he's a bit of a Space Cadet.

Anyway, it's a relief to get away from rules. I understand there's a move to investigate whether gravity is necessary, or potentially an imposition on our civil rights. I must say I've been feeling heavier since the beginning of lockdown. I'm not saying that this is the result of aliens interfering with natural laws, but who's to say they're not? Didn't Obama grow up near Roswell?

And your point is, I hear you asking? How dare you impose your socially-conditioned expectations on moi? I'm a free thinker. Well more of a free associater, actually. But I refuse to submit to the unreasonable demands that I should make sense. Coming to conclusions is revisionist thinking of the highest order – no longer tenable in this mosaic world of broken shards. Logic is tyranny.

Observe the USA, Britain, Brazil... they have successfully overcome such petty restrictions, and now fly free in the glorious stratosphere of fantasy. They don't worry that their citizens are dying, seeing as they've broken the harsh connection of causality. This is the liberty we've all been thirsting for – the freedom from consequence. Or so it's being reported in the National Yodeller – the favourite journal of chooks with their heads cut off.

Rupert Murdoch has just added it to his stable. I must subscribe. Hard to know what to believe these days. Always best to get the guidance of a billionaire. What a relief that none of us have to think for ourselves anymore. I used to smell brain cells burning every time I went to a mall. Now we've attained what Martin Luther King inspired us towards. "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

# Is it Over?

Time to talk about God. John Lennon's song 'God', of course. It's a bleak nihilist track, with a long list of things he doesn't believe in. It came on his first solo album after the demise of the Beatles. The depressing refrain is that 'the dream is over', no doubt heartfelt. His conclusion is that 'God is a concept by which we measure our pain'. Which, actually is a sentiment worthy of consideration.



On the other side of the coin, we have Neil Finn's wonderful anthem 'Don't dream it's over'. Something of a love song, but also a marvellous expression of driving on through difficult circumstances. Try singing it in the car, if you haven't already.

Hey now, hey now

Don't dream it's over

Hey now, hey now

When the world comes in

They come, they come

To build a wall between us

We know they won't win

Here we are, caught between two songs. I feel it palpably as society begins to creep out of lockdown and back to 'normal' life. My horizon of optimism is shrouded with uncertainty. I feel like I just came back from a wonderful long holiday, only to face a pile of dirty laundry. Rested, relaxed; and yet with a looming sense of dread as the old routines gather around and wail in mockery.

The billionaires are on the rise again. The nastiness of scapegoating slides from the pond where we might have thought it had perished. Kindness that I imagined might mark a new way of relating to one another is already wearing thin. Today in the

distance I hear shotguns as the delayed start to duck shooting season kicks into action. And I think – I bet those ducks thought things had changed, when all they got was three weeks respite.

For seven weeks in Aotearoa-New Zealand we dared to dream. It seemed as if we had nuzzled at the edge of something truly significant, and that therefore the future would be different. Today I'm feeling more Lennon than Finn. Self-interest is rising from its premature burial place. The unholy trinity of money, media, and manipulation is already reasserting itself, like morphine to a recovering drug addict.

History suggests that the bastards will always win the long game. They crush idealism like an ice cream cone under a ten-tonne truck. Most expressions of hope turn out to be naivete that flashes across the sky and then is gone. 'The dream is over, what can I say? The dream is over, yesterday.' I want to believe that the young will carry our song for us, and for our planet. We've already failed them.

God is a concept by which we measure our pain. I have no idea what Lennon had in mind when he wrote this. For me it resonates deeply, because I have nowhere else to go with my weary pain, other than to God (however you may understand God). It's the very very long game that we need to be playing, and to me that means reaching forward across the generations.

We need some inspiration for justice, for change, for peace, for gritty love – inspiration that is higher and deeper and more substantial than our small longings. We take the baton from those who struggled for light before us, and we pass it on to those who will follow. Always with a word or two of consolation. The goal of attaining what we seek is bigger than all of us, and beyond us alone.

‘You just have to carry on, the dream is over’ Lennon advises. Ten years later he was shot dead on a New York sidewalk. ‘They come to build a wall between us, we know they won’t win’, counters Neil Finn. Caught between despair and endurance on a grey Saturday, I dare to hope that giving what little we have to make this world a better place may never be lost.

# Stamina

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In the continuing series of lyrical poetry, who remembers MacArthur Park sung by Richard Harris?

MacArthur's Park is melting in the dark  
All the sweet, green icing flowing down  
Someone left the cake out in the rain  
I don't think that I can take it  
'Cause it took so long to bake it  
And I'll never have that recipe again  
Oh, no...



Released in 1968, it was a generational anthem. Written by Jimmy Web as a love song, instead it became a lament for the end of liberty and free exploration as the hippie movement slammed into an authoritarian brick wall. Abbie Hoffman, radical Yippie and author of 'Steal This Book', became a trader on Wall Street before committing suicide at the age of 56.

Jerry Rubin, a fellow protester and member of the Chicago Eight, also turned into a stockbroker, arguing "I know that I can be more effective today wearing a suit and tie and working on Wall Street than I can be dancing outside the walls of power". These early heroes of mine became cautionary tales about the failure of idealism, demonstrating the gravitational pull of age and conservatism.

Before you begin to think that Riddell is a nostalgic depressive, let me say I'm not wallowing in sentimental misery in recalling these facts. It was simply that making a banana cake today got me thinking about Macarthur Park, and one thought led to another. You'll be pleased to know that the cake has risen, like Jesus, so some things are trustworthy. Bake it 'till you make it, as they say.

My cake has baking powder in it – that mystical element that causes a gluggy mix of ingredients to become light and fluffy. Yeast does the same thing to bread. What makes it light and delicious is the fact that it's full of holes. Idealism is similar. It feels great when it works, but it won't protect the end result from being

left out in the rain. And as Dylan noted, sometimes that rain is hard.

Fruit cake endures all, which explains the persistence of some folk that are levity-free. I can think of a few hard-boiled characters that would survive not only rain but snow, hail, and sulphur. Such dense attributes are what provides conservatism with fortitude in the face of digestive acids. Those on the right of the political spectrum will never be fazed by pustules of liberalism, because they know that it will perish of its own accord.

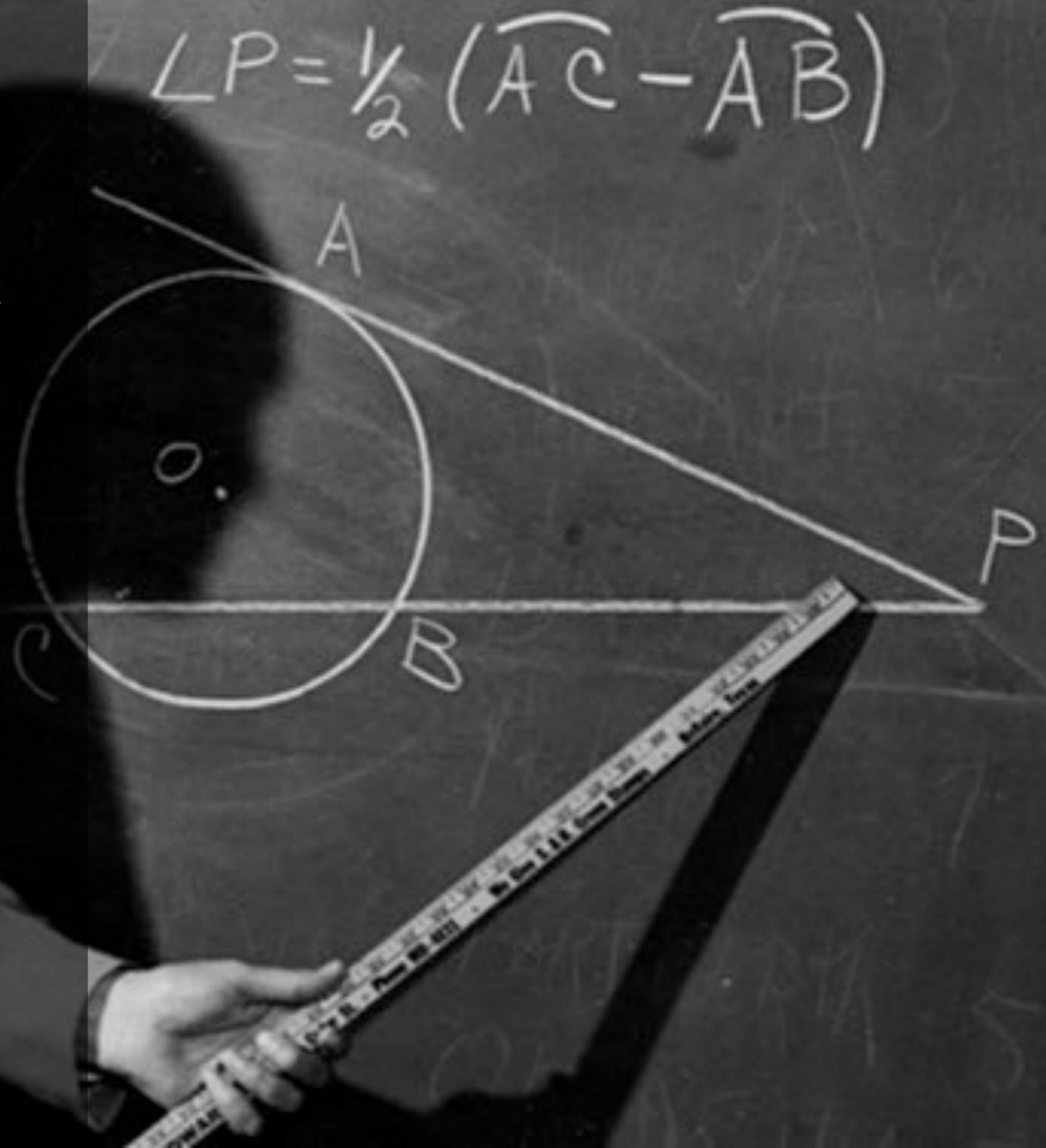
So my point, should there turn out to be one, is that we who work for change need to build some stamina. 'I'll never have that recipe again' turns out to be a wail which announces the beginning of atrophy. Transformation can come upon us like a mighty wind, but if it is to last, it needs a committed community of people willing to do dull and methodical work to sustain it. When radicals become capitalists, they reveal the character that drives them.

We are at a juncture in history. Either the sea will close over us as if nothing has happened, and the great ship of monetarism will continue unimpeded. Or else all of us who yearn for a new and more human future will launch a fresh flotilla of hope to make our way into the unknown. For that to be so, it will require more than waiting for answers to appear like magic out of nowhere. Stamina, community, realism, trust, endurance – these are the requirements.

Half-baked cakes might as well be left out in the rain. Soggy banana cake, anyone?

# Schooling

Marx had a point. Groucho that is. “Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.” Karl wasn't completely stupid either, despite what Joseph McCarthy thought of him. He said, “The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them.”



I should establish, that despite quite liking this quote, I am not a Marxist. In fact I'm not any kind of 'ist'. I find schools of thought to be very similar to schools, and my memories of those are not entirely happy ones. James K. Baxter suggested there are two sources of education: 'higher learning' and 'lower learning'. On the whole he preferred the latter, and I'm with him on that.

At secondary school I learned how to calculate the circumference of a circle, and that any signs of individual expression were likely to result in a damn good caning. I've seldom had need to know the circumference of a circle (the Racing Guide usually tells me the length of the race). I have however felt the need to express my individuality. Often this ends in tears, but sometimes in genuine discovery.

Did I encounter critical thinking at school? I don't think I did, unless you count being told that I was a pustulent prick by a prefect. Mostly I learned that one should imbibe the Kool-Aid, and parrot it back in written form in order to pass exams. All I discovered at university was political protest and the way to the student café, where one could purchase a passable meal for the sum of 29 cents.

I suspect I stumbled upon critical thinking by living a dissolute life, and working out who was to be trusted and who not. Many things I'd been told were true turned out not to be, and vice versa. By the time I reached the age of twenty-one, my

educational repertoire embraced the following unshakable principles:

1. Most bosses are arseholes.
2. Watch out for acid cut with strychnine.
3. Women shall never be understood.
4. Police are the biggest and toughest gang.
5. There's limits to everything, including limits.
6. Sex is not the same as love.
7. Trees are safe, unless they fall on you.
8. Unconditional love exists only for gods and dogs.
9. Nothing is ever free.
10. Getting high leads to getting low.

I found such axioms to be more reliable and useful than Prime Numbers or the value of Pi. It may well be that outsourcing the education of youngsters is of limited value in terms of preparing them for life. Not that I'm advocating home schooling, unless you mean teaching your house how to behave. What I do like the sound of is some sort of combination between mentorship and apprenticeship.

Learning on the job rather than about the job. Building relationships rather than houses of cards. Māori models of education involve hanging out with people and helping them while they do things – always watching and learning. It seems to me to be more organic than the way we teach at the moment. It would mean that everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a student.

After a few years of post-grad study, I wrote my thesis on the shortcomings of the great educational institutions. In doing so I came across the thinking of Ivan Illich, and in particular his book ‘Deschooling Society’. One of his more memorable quotes was: “School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.” That’s a thought that’s worth thinking about, especially for those who would like to see society as it might become.

But hey, what do I know? Very little, and less the older I get. Funnily enough, I enjoy life a lot more.

# Life in the Ida

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We do things a bit different in the backblocks. Needing a consultant engineer to look at some building work, I rang a firm a few hundred kilometers away. There's not too many consulting engineers in the village, even though we have an historic Engineering Works as a local tourist attraction. It used to be powered by a windmill, and now works off water turning a peloton wheel. But that's by the by.

The company I rang was very receptive, but had me stumped when they asked where the nearest airport was. Well there's one in Dunedin and one in Queenstown, both a couple of hours drive from where we are. Wouldn't it be easier to just drive? We just need a paddock, said the woman. Sam will fly in his own plane. Well of course, why wouldn't a consulting engineer have a plane?

I proffered that the Ida Burn Airfield was just down the road. The word 'airfield' is a slight exaggeration. Though until a wee while ago it did have a large sign announcing it as such. That was before the truck delivering phosphate for top dressing backed into it. Now it looks much like what it is – a roughly flat sheep paddock. It sounded like it might just do the trick for what was needed.

All seemed good. I saw Barry at the pub on Friday night – our first time back in that essential institution. "Alright if someone lands in your paddock next week?" I asked him. Barry raised his eyebrows as a sign of assent. "All good," he muttered, "there's no stock in there at the moment". So I was able to report back to the engineering firm that the control tower had approved the landing details. We settled on Tuesday (today) for this elaborate military operation.

Morning fog caused a flicker of worry that Operation Engineer might not be possible, but by lunchtime it had all burned off and the sun was shining. We synchronised watches and agreed an ETA of our aerial support for 1415 hours. Then, about 1400, I had

a phone call from my daughter to report that the airfield was currently occupied by large cattle beasts, happily grazing.

This would not make for ideal landing conditions, and I had disturbing visions of diced beef obscuring the windshield of the Cessna. I donned my boots and jumped in the car, keen to avert disaster. By the time I got through airport security, I could see two things – one was the large black hoofed animals grazing contentedly on the imaginary runway, and the other was a small aircraft already on approach.

The pilot, it seemed, was unfazed by the bovine protest. He touched down in the adjacent field that happened to be Barry's lucerne crop. No harm, no foul. In fact Barry was cruising by, and watched the potential air disaster. Fortunately the lucerne was not concealing any sinkholes from historic attempts at goldmining. Sam the engineer was unperturbed when I informed him he'd set down on a cash crop.

By the time we got back after the work Sam had come to do, Barry was still there, having moved his snow-clearing bulldozer from the cow paddock to the what was now the alternative landing strip. "Just as well you ended up where you did," he told Sam. "Those bloody cattle love eating cables". Sam stared into the distance, looking at the far ranges. "You do any farming up there?" he asked Barry. "I think the correct answer," I interrupted, "is as far as your eye can see."

“Bloody environmentalists,” retorted Barry, with a crooked smile. I didn’t ask him why he had thought it might be a good idea to move his cattle onto the airfield – maybe to provide a welcoming committee? The plane took off safely, removing a few divots of lucerne as it did so. Barry and I leaned against his truck for a few moments, soaking up the sun and chewing the fat.

What’s the point of this long saga, you might ask? Well, by the time I got home, we walked the dog, and met up with our artist friend Julie who was dropping off sheep to our writer neighbour Jillian. We stopped and chatted, as you do. By the time I got home, another column was due to be posted. But I couldn’t think of anything to talk about. Sometimes it’s just better to say nothing.

# Goodnight

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All things wane;  
The tide, the light, the fear.

I wrote these words in 1987, part of a poem entitled 'Pohara Beach', that the wonderful Sam RB subsequently shaped up as a song. The original meaning was a suggestion that things inevitably come to an end, and that's sometimes a beautiful rather than a bad thing.

This post will be the last of my series of lockdown reflections that I've entitled 'Imagining Anew'. For the last 60-odd days I've managed to indulge myself and others with daily meditations on these bizarre days we're living through. It's been a discipline and a joy, and I'm very grateful for the interactions that have resulted from the exercise.

It was our daughter Kat who suggested that weaving a few words on a daily basis during Coronavirus might be a good thing. That little prompt turned out to be a satisfying experience for me. Most days I've had no idea what I might write about, but have been saved by what many might regard as verbal diarrhoea. Better out than in, as my accumulated experience would indicate.

So why am I winding up this series? A couple of reasons. One is that our lockdown here in this land is now 'faux' compared to what it was. It's seldom that I'm aware of restrictions preventing me from anything significant. I'm aware that this is not everyone's experience, and I don't want to minimise what is still very difficult for people in different circumstances from mine.

The other reason is that I need to get onto some other long form writing, including a book that's under way, and I have learned that such projects require an investment of time and concentration. If anything has come from these few months, I hope for all of us it includes a commitment to do what we can to change the dysfunctional aspects of our society, in order to construct a better world.

So, as with Edward Murrow, "it's good night, and good luck". Or, as the Two Ronnies would have it, "So it's goodnight from me, and it's goodnight from him". Maybe "Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow," as per the Bard. Endings are hard, and often poorly managed – that was me, by the way. But inevitably, they need to be faced up to.

In my very first post in this series, I wrote: "Life is not to be taken for granted. There are no guarantees." To live in the light (as opposed to shadow) of mortality, is paradoxically joyous rather than morose. It invests each day with import and glory. Only by facing endings are we able to encompass the labyrinthine paths that entice us into the opportunities for love and gratitude.

We are surrounded by the rhythms of nature: evening and dawn; spring, summer, autumn, winter; sowing and harvesting; feast and famine: life and death. However much we might prefer one than the other, these lived experiences are hints of the cyclical patterns of existence. Many times we are not as aware as we should be of the unpredictable shape of our lives.

All things wane;  
The tide, the light, the fear.

They also wax. Each moment of consciousness presents choices to us, accompanied by the freedom to compose beauty over malice. For some months now the world has paused, presenting

us with the chance to imagine a new way forward. From here on in, it's up to us what we make of the future. Godspeed.