

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #13
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from
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Near Geraldine, South Island, New Zealand

Pandemics are common.

Every plant and animal species seems to suffer through one periodically. Take trees, for example. In very recent history the Dutch Elm Disease pandemic wiped out all but a few of the stately elms that thrived throughout eastern North America. The magnificent walnut suffered the same fate earlier, and pine trees in the Rocky Mountains continue to die at a pandemic rate far exceeding that of people. We are all subject to the same natural forces.

It's vital for us to recognize that nature is behaving now exactly as it always has. The virus causing this pandemic among humans keeps finding good places to settle down, reproduce, and spread, but humans and all other species do the same thing, often with disastrous results for others. But, in one way, humans are special. As far as we know, only humans have the capacity for self-reflective consciousness. This means that we have the power to choose between controlling and symbiotic relationships, as in a well-balanced marriage or partnership. If we were to choose being keepers rather than rulers, between being sustainers rather than dominators, between being friends rather than enemies, we would have learned something from Covid-19 that is profoundly useful to us all, to Earth. *fp*

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The positive side of every difficult experience or situation is the opportunities it provides for learning about the world, your community, and yourself. One thing Covid-19 has brought home strongly for me is the value of having lots of good memories to function as a strong emotional underpinning,

So, I recently turned to my huge slide library, a greatly underused resource, and sorted through the thousands of images that I've made on my many trips to New Zealand between 1989 and 2016, selecting images on aesthetic merit, instructional value, and pure nostalgia, and taking boxes of them to my office manager, Kim Nickerson, for scanning as digital files. As Kim returned the images to me by We Transfer, I took each file into Photoshop to make any necessary adjustments. In the process I came to two dominant conclusions: 1/ Film certainly is a superb medium for capturing accurate colour and tonal range and deserves the resurrection it is experiencing, and 2/ I made many of my best NZ photos on three two-week motorcycle trips through South Island. Why? Because the motorcycle enabled me to stop and park practically anywhere – no road was too narrow not to have some sort of shoulder.

After flying into Christchurch, where I'd have a rental motorcycle waiting for me, I'd get a good night's sleep, then pick up the bike next morning and head out of town in whatever direction promised me the best weather. I carried two cameras, lots of film, a Manfrotto Art-190 tripod, a change of clothes, and little else – no phone, no pad, and no plans whatever. Making overnight reservations before a road trip is the best way I know to curtail the potential of the experience.

On one trip as I headed west from Christchurch toward Arthur's Pass I watched the sky over the mountains becoming stormier and blacker, so I turned south at Darfield and rode south through the foothills toward Geraldine, an area surrounded by rolling cultivated fields and sweeping pastures studded with sheep and often bordered with Lombardy poplars. Later in the afternoon I rode the few kilometres on to Fairlie and found accommodation. Strolling along the main street at dusk I met two other bikers from a group of 40 local men and women at a nearby pub, just beginning a weekend of riding around the central part of South Island. "Come on down," the two insisted, "We've already picked up a guy from Denmark, but we need a Canadian." You can guess what I did for the next couple of days.



Black's Hotel in Ophir in the Otago region was a country pub that closed every evening at 21h00. I stayed here for four nights, riding in all directions during the day and sharing dinner at the pool table with the proprietor after everybody had gone home.

On another trip I was heading up the west coast, expecting to find a room at Greymouth, but due to a marathon every last bit of accommodation was booked. So I kept on going north but finding nothing until, just as night was falling, I rode into a small cluster of six houses. Picking one at random, I knocked at the door and, when an elderly gentleman appeared, I told him I was a Canadian motorcyclist who had been unable to find a place for the night and asked if he had anywhere I could sleep, even if it were in his little barn. He replied, "No, but there's a woman two houses down the road who, I think, will help you out." When I knocked on her door, explained my plight, and told her that I was from Canada, she immediately said, "Oh, I know you're from Canada all right and, furthermore, that you're from the Maritimes." Before I could overcome my surprise, she went on, "I moved here from Nova Scotia 13 years ago." I ended the day with a lovely meal, a comfortable bed – and a really great chat!

Next morning I rode farther up the coast to the Punikaiki rocks and Paparoa National Park, where I spent most of the day photographing the famous rocks and hiking trails near the beach, where I met two other bikers doing the same thing. The next two pictures came from that day's explorations.





To join me on a motorcycle ride around South Island, New Zealand to some of my favourite spots, click [HELMET](#) now.

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“If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It is lethal.”

Paulo Coelho

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On my bike trips I usually took inexpensive accommodation and often prepared my own meals so I'd have some spare cash for aerial photography, which I always enjoy. Many towns have a local flying club where it's relatively easy to hire a pilot and an upper-wing Cessna for an hour or longer and, thus, to photograph the Earthscape from another perspective.

On one of my trips I booked a three-hour flight over the Southern Alps, which was fantastic, as the pilot went everywhere I asked. On another trip – traveling by car with a photographer-friend – I booked an hour-long flight as a surprise for her. Both times, knowing it would be cold over the mountains and that I would not be opening the window to make photographs, I wore very dark clothing and black gloves to reduce the possibility of reflections in the plexiglass. For the same reason I also wear black or dark upper-body clothing on commercial flights when I've booked a window seat.

For aerial photography I always leave my long zoom lens behind and rely completely on one in the 24-105mm range and use a polarizing filter, which is essential for reducing haze and eliminating distracting light reflecting from water and other surfaces.



Flying west from Wanaka along the Matukituki River toward Mt. Aspiring

To view more aerial photographs of South Island, New Zealand, click your [SEAT BELT](#) now.

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Two of my good friends from South Island are Sally Mason of Nelson (seen here among huge Gunnera leaves near Akaroa, NZ) and Kath Varcoe from Christchurch (standing beside Clause Monet's house in Giverny, France.) Sally and I taught several workshops together over the years and Kath was our computer whiz on a number of them. Both of them have been with me at Shamber's Bluff, but wherever in the world we've been together, we've always found great pleasure in making photographs.



Sally (left) and Kath (right)

One day Sally decided I simply had to see Birdlings Flat on the coast between Christchurch and Akaroa. It's a kind of ramshackle of summer cottages jumbled together along the beach, notable for imaginative construction from "found materials" in many cases. (In New Zealand a beach or wilderness cottage is called a "bach." No, that's not pronounced like Johann Sebastian Bach, but like "batch." Just make sure you pronounce that right!) Anyway, to Birdlings Flat.



Sally's straw hat without Sally, who was making pictures somewhere



You can see what I mean about building with "found materials."

At the time Sally was living in Christchurch and developing an amorous relationship with Don Kelly who lived near Blenheim. They subsequently married, but before they did this symbol of their growing love and affection appeared in Sally's backyard. What could be more apt than two doves and the colour red. I entitled the composition "Sally and Don, Don and Sally."



Kath and I were last together in March and April 2019, first spending two weeks together wilderness camping in Namaqualand, South Africa, and then joining up again soon afterward for three days in Paris before we both headed off to a workshop in Claude Monet's garden in Giverny. Kath is one of two or three friends with whom I can totally "lose it!" Oh, the memories of gut-wrenching laughter! Laughter so intense that the silence is broken occasionally only by little squeaks before finally erupting in shrieks loud enough to wake an entire neighbourhood. One day on the beach in Hopewell, NZ, I stumbled on this assemblage by Kath, landscape art à la Andy Goldsworthy, soon to be taken by the rising tide.



If you've found yourself spending too much "screen time" during the Covid-19 experience or for any other reason haven't been getting enough exercise, here's a simple, highly effective four-minute workout that you can do anywhere. I've been doing it three times every day since early February (soon in far less time than four minutes, so I've added reps) and it's really helped me to keep fit.

ZACH BUSH MD | 4 Minute Workout - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwJCJToQmps>



This is an efficient anaerobic workout.

Another good alternative to screen time, of course, is books. I tend to graze through them the same way that I eat – a little whenever I get hungry. Sometimes though, and this is always an exciting surprise, a book becomes “non-down-puttable,” to use a description I reserve for the most special.

One such book is This Is Happiness by the Irish writer, Niall Williams, who has been longlisted for the prestigious Man Booker prize. There's no “normal” plot development in this novel set in the fictional Irish village of Faha, yet everything of importance that happens to a person between adolescence and old age happens here and the descriptions are so rich and evocative that time and time again I found myself shaking my head in amazement at the sheer brilliance and the beauty of the writing. This book is the complete antithesis of texting. It is an example of writing as art at its highest level.

Friends who know my range of interests give me books and their choices are usually excellent. One day in early March David Corkett dropped in with neuroscientist David Levitin's Successful Aging, 400 plus hot-off-the-press pages, causing me to wonder if David thinks I need the book or that I would simply find it informative. Regardless of his thinking, I can tell you that this book is a veritable compendium of information and useful guidance about extending one's “health span.” A valuable gift! Often I found myself absorbing the overall thrust of a unit, such as the three fundamentals for good health that most of us can control – diet, exercise, and sleep – while at other times I was brought to full stop by a single statement or a comparison, such as loneliness having the equivalent effect on one's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Levitin has many happy “aged” friends, some over 100!

More recently my friend Bev Barron phoned me from Victoria to tell me that she was sending me a copy of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. The back cover states: “January 1946: writer Juliet Ashton receives a letter from a stranger, a founding member of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. And so begins a remarkable tale of the Isle of Guernsey during the German Occupation and of a society as extraordinary as its name.” Ranging between sheer air-headedness and good history revealed through the letters of ordinary citizens, this novel will provide you with many a chuckle and a good look at a time and experience that in certain respects parallels our own at present.

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When Cambridge University was forced to close in 1665 because of the bubonic plague, Isaac Newton was sent home. While presumably procrastinating in his garden, he saw an apple fall from a tree. He said this became the inspiration to formulate his law of universal gravitation.
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The popular phrase “take control of your life” even sounds mature and spiritual. It is the fundamental message of nearly every self-help book. On a practical level it is true, but not on the big level. Our bodies, our souls, and especially our failures teach us this as we get older. We are clearly not in control, as this pandemic is now teaching the whole planet. It is amazing that we need to assert the obvious.

Learning that we are not in control situates us correctly in the universe. If we are to feel at home in this world, we have to come to know that we are not steering this ship. That teaching is found in the mystical writings of all religions.” *Richard Rohr*

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[Jessye Norman + Kathleen Battle 'He's Got The Whole World ...](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJJ3PIU-IKq>



[Stand By Me | Playing For Change | Song Around The World ...](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us-TVg40ExM>



Here's hoping you are hiking, canoeing, climbing, skiing, gardening, photographing, painting, singing, cycling, or biking your way through all sorts of good memories!
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by Evelyn Symons