



Healing the Heart in New Zealand

After a devastating loss, a trip to a distant land helps provide new perspectives.

By **Elle McKinnon**

Nothing earth-shattering happened on my recent trip to New Zealand. No, my earth shattered three months before. Yet as I explored this new territory, subtly my inner landscape changed.

As I settled into my airline seat late in April I watched the hills of Los Angeles disappear as the pilot guided our plane above the ocean into the sunset and toward the Southern Hemisphere. I nodded at the stranger in the seat next to me, pulled a headband over my eyes and retreated.

For a while I wanted only to think — to review the past few months and deal with the searing reality of my husband's death. Dick was to have filled the seat beside me; this was a trip we had dreamed about together. With friends living on the South Island we had hoped to hike and explore, eat new foods and relish a unique city. We applied for passports, checked fares and dreamed. Now on the plane, I dreamed those dreams again — alone.

I awakened during the night and watched as a map appeared on the movie screen showing our progress along the flight path. Somewhere in the middle of the night, Thursday had become Saturday morning as we continued a southwesterly course past Fiji, beyond and below Hawaii. Smiling attendants distributed moist warm towels as the sunrise awak-

ened passengers. Then breakfast and instructions on passing through the customs checkpoint. I felt the usual spikes of anticipation that precede a new adventure and smiled a little; travel is potent medicine for melancholy.

As we neared New Zealand, I thought of our friends Johanna and Dave Whiteman. We had first met in Colorado back when our marriages were new and we were fresh from graduate studies. Now Dave was completing a semester as a visiting professor at Canterbury University and I was coming to share the last of that experience. Jo had planned an itinerary that mixed country and city, mountain and seashore, things familiar and things new. Dick would still be part of this experience, for we would honor him as we shared memories and created new ones.

Shortly after I arrived, Jo and I set off for Oamaru, a little-known town built primarily of white limestone that claims two attractions for visitors: a shoreline strewn with enormous round boulders and two colonies of penguins. As we walked new terrain, there was time for long conversation and reflection.

The next day would take us inland to territory that looked remarkably like Idaho. We hiked through a larch forest and up into the foothills where we met no one, hearing only the sound of the wind and our own footsteps as we walked along the path covered with pine needles. The

land became sparsely forested as we neared the summit and there we looked down over the blue reservoir of Lake Benmore. I thought of Lucky Peak above Boise, half a world away and relished the beauty of brown hills caught between the blue of sky and water.

We journeyed on, winding our way upward and reached Mount Cook in time to savor the evening's alpine glow. As we watched color and light shimmer on glacial ice, we listened for Kias, green parrots that live on glaciers. These alps glowed with a sunset that would soon be a sunrise at home.

Things are not far apart in New



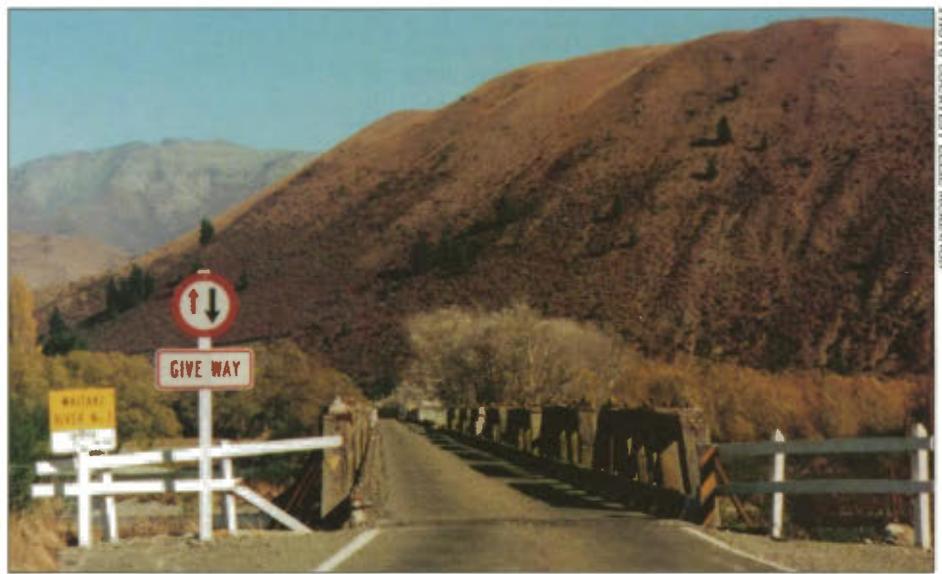


PHOTO-COURTESY ELLIE MCKINNON

The New Zealand landscape reminded McKinnon of home.

Zealand. On the South Island, the terrain changes rapidly and the roads lead from alps to the gentle, rolling pastures of the Canterbury Plains. Sheep, several times more numerous than people, stare blankly at the passing cars. We pulled onto a country road heading to a farmstay, a bed and breakfast on a working sheep farm. At this exquisitely situated place, owned for three generations by the same family, we learned a great deal about sheep farming and the ravaging drought that was cooking the land. Again I heard echoes of Idaho and felt the impact of change. This is the last generation — and perhaps the last year — this family will own this land. We

watched as a large portion of the herd was sold, the result of the effect of drought on scarce feed resources.

Dave waited for us in Christchurch. This is a city of contrasts and surprises where the massive Gothic Cathedral and the old Canterbury University shout of England and whisper of history. But this is a young city of only 150 years, and everyone here, including the South Pacific Mauris, are “settlers.”

We walked the parks of the city, enjoying the natural bush habitat of Rickerton Bush Preserve and drinking in the autumn colors and scents of the formal gardens. We passed cricket and rugby fields and at Mona Vale Estate, we watched boaters punting on the Avon River as we enjoyed high tea on the lawn. We applauded the Christchurch Philharmonic, enjoyed a French film, an Argentine symphony, a museum.

We dined on ostrich Wellington, lamb and venison in a restaurant with food so unusual that I requested a copy of the menu to remind me of the flavors we enjoyed. Fresh new experiences wove rich threads into the tapestry of our lives as we absorbed the sense of the city and talked of beginnings and endings, of work and play, of love and loss.

Outside the city is a place called Castle Hill. There, we hiked through a landscape of rock mammoths made of limestone sculpted by wind and water, and picnicked on cheese and apples. Laughter came easily as we lay on our backs reading the skies while Dave, an atmospheric scientist, interpreted the movements of the clouds. In this surreal place, a sense of well-being surged. Something deep inside responds to autumn air, sunshine and laughter.

And one last place. There is a library on the shore of Brighton Beach in Christchurch designed to look like a ship. The side of the building facing the ocean is plate glass and is lined with a series of large, comfortable armchairs equipped

with audio headsets. It is the kind of place my husband would have loved. I could almost see him sitting there, alternately absorbing the panorama of the surfers riding the waves toward the beach and diving into the pages of a good book.

As Johanna and I walked the beach below those windows, our conversation traveled over familiar terrain of the past. We surrounded the pain of loss in soft folds of cherished memories. We also talked of stepping onto new paths, using the strength of the past to support the future. Johanna recently lost her mother and accompanying that loss was the sale of her beloved childhood home. I recently lost my husband and along with that loss, a way of living. The rhythms of our lives have been interrupted.

Time will need to pass as we journey through grief until we reach a point where we look back and feel gratitude for the journey rather than pain that it has ended. The currency of friendship buys safe passage on that trail. And though travel alone does not completely heal a severely bruised heart, it does provide new perspectives, which in turn nourish seedlings on a seared heartscape.

As the airplane lifted from the runway in Christchurch, I looked back on the island falling away below us and I reflected on the glowing pink sunset we enjoyed in the alps. In Idaho I have watched the sun play across the beautiful Sawtooth Mountains. There, one evening years earlier, I had wept as I watched the sun set over land scorched by a blazing tongue of the Yellowstone fires. Dick had reminded me that new seedlings, born from seeds burst from pine cones by the flames, take root in the blackened soil. In time the land will recover. In time, so will I. □

Ellie McKinnon is coordinator of JumpStart, a program that assists high school students who attend Boise State. Her late husband, Richard, was director of student housing at Boise State prior to his death last January.