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A Kiwi Comes to Michigan

The tyranny of distance is both geographical and psychological. Grand Rapids might be a long way from New Zealand, but its people are warm and welcoming.

After a visit by Dr. Caryn King to the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand during 2003, an offer had been presented for me to teach class at Grand Valley State University during the summer of 2004 and to present at two conferences.

So out came the maps, on went the computer and GVSU was googled. Out went the e-mails (many) and my wife and I went into negotiation—after all, even though Dr Caryn King had stayed with us, an offer of accommodation with an attractive woman living by herself in a country miles away needed careful handling. In the end, compromise: I would teach four weeks and my wife would join me for a bit of R&R.

I had been a regular traveler to the USA having taught in graduate schools in Texas, New Mexico and Oregon in previous years. The distance didn't really faze me. Additionally, the flight (three hops and you're there) was mostly through the night, and I slept thanks to noise-canceling earphones and a small white pill. The new service, Air New Zealand via San Francisco is great.

But before takeoff there was the interview at the USA Consulate in Auckland (through bomb-proof doors and windows) which cost \$NZ125.00. After being stripped of my car keys, cell-phone and belt I was "interviewed." "What will you be talking about?" Pardon? "What will you be talking about?" I tried to cover the content of two conferences and a summer school in twenty-five words or less. Fingerprints (digital scan) and photographs followed. "If you want the visa you have to supply the stamped addressed envelope (large) so we can post it. You can buy them downstairs." Not the best start I thought.

But after all the arrangements were in place, I said my farewells and made the flight, firmly clenching laptop with precious Power Points. The flights from Auckland, New Zealand and San Francisco took off like Swiss watches—until I arrived at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

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This location gave me time to contemplate, watch other passengers waiting, send e-mails and wonder about the air traffic control system.

What made the journey even more reassuring was knowing that the course I was hired to teach was organized, and that Caryn King would be waiting at the airport and whisking me off to comfortable accommodation. But what really made the difference were the genuine welcome of the faculty and the positive response of the students. But you never quite avoid the culture shock—the plants, buildings, language, buildings, politics, students—everything is different and everything is the same.

So what are the lasting impressions, the images that stay?

Geographically the moments that stick are:

1. Looking down from the top floor of Eberhard at a fisherman in waders standing in the river and trying to imagine the same scene in winter.
2. Looking out across Lake Michigan – no distant shore and the biggest ship I have ever seen, plying this bend in the Earth.
3. Sailing on Lake Michigan (with an all female crew—awesome ladies.)
4. Driving up the UP and eating fudge on Mackinac Island—and again trying to imagine the lake frozen in winter.

Psychologically the images that stick are:

1. The reception (an unexpected privilege) introducing myself in Maori (our indigenous language) that felt normal to me, but realizing that no one understood what I was saying until I translated. But they knew I was talking about them because they heard their names... kind of a powerful feeling that. And again at the reception meeting a faculty member who pressed a smooth old stone in my hand as we were introduced—a man of the land, Professor Steve Mattox, from the Geology Department (that stone is here on my desk).
2. Being interviewed on radio about literacy and cognition (those questions prepared beforehand) then being asked at the end of the interview

(unscripted) what the attitude of New Zealanders was to the war in Iraq!

3. Entering the teaching classroom and being impressed with the facilities, but wondering how I would make it a learning environment. Entering the classroom on the third day and knowing, pretty much, who were the Democrats and who were the Republicans. Entering the classroom on the fourth day (walls covered with the understandings of the students), and feeling that, with a bit of slack from the cleaning staff, it was turning into a learning environment.

4. Feeling for the first couple of days that that there was less flexibility in how the course could be interpreted than in New Zealand and that the assessment stakes in schools were also high.

5. Feeling the tension and pain of excellent teachers who said: “We would like to do the things you are teaching us, but we wouldn’t be allowed – it’s not in our K-12 curriculum.”

6. Listening to John D. Graham at the Fredrick Meijer Gardens—awesome. Marveling at the long cues to see Sam Adams who dispensed brown medications in big cups at the same event.

7. Eating salmon—delicious.

8. Addressing a huge number of people in the ballroom at the Eberhard. Asking: Can you hear me? (Yes). Can you understand me? (New Zealand NOT Australian accent)—and the ballroom erupting with laughter. I felt comfortable and we had a great but exhausting day.

9. And of course, greeting my wife after four weeks and heading up north.

I would like to thank all at GVSU (some of whom I only heard on the telephone), especially Dean, Elaine Collins, Loretta Konecki, Kristy Martin, Barbara Reinken, Maggie VandeVelde, Kate Stoetzner, Allison Marlowe, Jacque Melin the computer consultants and many others. But especially I would like to thank Dr Caryn King who efforts made the trip both professionally and personally rewarding. The dialogue continues. The benefits of teaching and studying internationally are visceral and rewarding.