

A Cautionary Tale

The gift of a long journey to a far-away country, particularly if it's been a longed-for bucket list destination, is the opportunity to let go— to decontextualize, re-order habitual behaviors and sharpen perceptions. Three weeks into just such a trip to New Zealand, where every day brought stunning sights, interesting conversations, pleasing physical exertion, new foods, historical and cultural education, my husband and I felt the trip had already exceeded our expectations.

This type of travel, which I think of as adventure immersion, requires an opening of mind and tolerance, an appreciation for difference, a willingness to see and do another way from the habits of home. A tour of the North Island with a son, an eight-day cycling trip on the South Island and three days of touring up the west coast brought us into the last week of our month-long excursion. We'd mastered driving on the left side of the road and the right side of the car, one of us had decoded the New Zealand accent thoroughly enough to negotiate any kind of conversation, and we loved that beautiful and interesting country, where people had been helpful and friendly.

So being assaulted by a motorcyclist was far from our list of concerns as we made our way to one of our accommodations along the wild and dramatic west coast on the Tasman Sea. I had just driven through a small town where the speed limit was 50 km. There were cars in front of me and cars behind me. I slowed from the 90 to 100km speeds that are only rarely achieved on the winding narrow mountain roads. Perhaps I didn't get all the way down to 50, but the line of cars I was traveling in couldn't have been going faster than 55 or 60 (30 to 35 mph). We were all driving sedately down the Main Street. In the blink of an eye, we were out of the small town and back on the open road when a motorcyclist appeared in my rear-view mirror, cutting in front of the car that had traveled behind me through the town, He then pulled out and signaled for me to pull over. This was not a law enforcement person and I wasn't speeding, nor did anything appear to be wrong with my rental car. I asked my husband "What does he want?" We drove further, the motorcyclist dangerously close to my car and dangerously driving in the oncoming traffic lane. Again, he signaled for me to pull over. I pulled over .

What followed was an outright assault. Yelling and swearing, he accused me of having traveled irresponsibly fast past his home and his children. This was a grown man, wearing shorts, a heavy jacket and the most frightening helmet with what looked like a gas mask completely covering his head and face. The shouting continued, and my husband said "get out of here!". I raised the window, and started to drive, but the motorcyclist screamed "BITCH" and revved his bike, only inches from the car when he kicked the front panel above the wheel with enough force to leave a ten-inch dent. I stomped on the gas, leaving him to eventually turn back toward the town.

I began to shake. We were both so stunned, it took a minute or two to even understand what had happened. When I was certain we weren't being followed, I pulled off the road again, and we decided to call the police. The officer we spoke with efficiently took our information, gave us a case number, and instructed us to have the car rental company phone the station so they could report that the damage didn't result from driver error. We gave the best description we could, including the time and place, And that was it. We continued to our destination, but suddenly New Zealand was no longer only the magical place it had been only an hour before.

Just to be clear, this is not a story about an assault gone so wrong as to be life-changing. But it's the closest I've ever come to experiencing the trauma of personal physical assault. I'm approaching my 70th birthday. It's the first time I've ever felt vulnerable due to my age. During the trip of a lifetime, an incident left me to reconcile the intrusion of a frightening event which led to feelings of self-protection and withdrawal in the midst of an expansive generative journey.

Though we went on to be moved and delighted with more places and people and experiences, we had been reminded that senseless violence, and unhinged people are everywhere and that we were vulnerable to both. Immediately we began what was a day's worth of 'We should have's' and more frighteningly "What ifs.'

We didn't get his license number. We didn't take a cell phone photo. We had stopped. I opened the window. We both thought something was wrong with the car or that he needed help. He screamed, swore and kicked a dent in the car. He didn't touch us. He didn't have a gun. We got away. We didn't argue with him.

The ripple effect of this incident has been with me ever since. This is what I have learned.

- Assault is shocking. Normal thought processes, perceptions and awareness may vanish.
- The immediate desire to make sense of the senseless leads to self-doubt and questioning - *it must be something I did*. I knew I hadn't been speeding, but had I driven close to the edge of the road? I hadn't hit anything. I hadn't seen any children anywhere near the road. *Maybe the man just lost his job and HE is feeling vulnerable*. Only many hours later did the forceful knowledge assert itself that NOTHING I did in any way justified the dangerous and harmful behavior of this man.
- Older people are more vulnerable. We celebrated entering our eighth decade on this trip. We are healthy and active, but no longer fast and strong. We are easier targets. I have no idea why this man chose our car from the four or five that drove through that town with us at the same speed, but once he did, I understood more about the vulnerability inherent in aging.
- People respond differently to an assault. I was shaking, disoriented and chilled for hours. My husband was enraged. He even considered going back to find the guy. He wants to follow up with the police.

I want to put this aberration of an experience behind us. Not to forget, but not to obsess on either. Certainly, I don't want to let it mar my memories of our journey. But for better or worse, I understand a little more than sympathetically what victims of more serious assault must feel. And in opening my mind and attention to new places and adventures, they won't always be good ones.