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I'm writing this as we absorb the enormity of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, so soon after the 22 Feb earthquake in Christchurch. Mani and I spent the early days after 22 February trying to remember which directions the various Swiss travelers we'd met in the South Island were going. We became convinced that most were heading in safe directions - hopefully! But the horror of Japan is beyond words. We can only feel. Perhaps our closer understanding of the impact of disaster in a community we know well increases our empathy for people half-way across the world.

It's had me thinking about the manner of our deaths, too. I suspect we all have an unspoken expectation that it will be like the old paintings. Family and friends are gathered round our aged serene self on our death-bed, all that needs to be said has been said, old hurts forgiven, and love affirmed.

The idea that it could be sudden, separate, and that our last words to our loved ones were something about the shopping list - or worse - is shocking.

I like to think maybe we're all taking an extra moment in those routine partings from family and friends to express appreciation or love, or say something that would pass muster as our last words.

Because I'm never sure I'll be able to come up with something utterly memorable for my last words, I file quotations by other people. This one from Louis Celine seems apt: *Most people die at the last minute; others 20 years beforehand, some even earlier. They are the wretched of the earth.* So, whatever happens, let's resolve to live right up until we die!

Our *joie de vivre* can carry us through even if our bodies are less bounce-back than once they were. Mani's been nursing a pinched sciatic nerve since before we went on holiday, and we deferred an excursion to Golden Bay to come back and get some attention for that. Doing so, we've found a whole new community of interest. It seems that 80 percent of everybody has had sciatica - or has a partner who has - and everyone has their own version of exercises and remedies. Perhaps it's yet another of those evolutionary jokes. Getting up on our hind legs let us be cleverer, but somehow parts of our anatomy haven't quite caught up with the redesign!

Pain hasn't stopped the production line. The kirsch from the cherries we put in the barrel in the back of the bus is now in bottles. The venison Mani's boys shot is smoking quietly away, and the quinces have been turned into a liqueur, which is trying at the moment to turn itself into a quince jelly in the bottle! How can it be that when you

want to make a jelly it won't set - and when you want it to stay liquid, it gets all perverse? Ah - another of nature's tricks on us to stop us thinking we're so smart and advanced!

The quinces came from friends who've developed a lovely old-fashioned orchard on their life-style block - a large piece of which they've turned back from an often-boggy dairy paddock into wetlands. Doing their research they found that it had been a wetlands and a favourite food-gathering area for Māori generations ago. Turning back history has been a real job: deconstructing the drainage system, moving soil around to create islands (they had to be shaped to have beaches for the birds!), and planting planting planting. A couple of wet autumns, and now it's a lake. The reward is clear - the project has now been blessed by a group of five royal spoonbills who've decided to make it home.

It is inspiring to be with people who have a long-horizon dream, and set out to make it happen. The wetlands is now under a QEII covenant to protect it for the future, just as they have retrieved it from the past.

Ah - that reminds me of another favourite quote, from Joel Barker. *"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world."*

The last spoonbills I'd seen were in the white heron colony near Okarito, where they nest with the kotuku and little black shags. This truly is a "must-do" if you're on the West Coast between October and February when the birds are in residence at their only New Zealand breeding place. You get in there by jet-boat, and then a

bush-walk, and when you enter the large wooden hide, you're looking directly across the water at tall trees full of birds. Young white herons clamouring for food; adults still in their fine breeding plumage (so beautiful that its appearance on women's hats once resulted in the NZ population going down to 4 breeding pairs!); black shags nesting cheek-by-beak with the herons - and the royal spoonbills nesting there too, often way higher up in tall rimu. It is breathtaking, and feels like something of an honour to be able to stand there and observe.

Some things have such a deep resonance. Māori see the flight of a kotuku as being of spiritual significance, and for many pakeha this has become part of our Kiwi belief system. There's something over and above the beauty and rarity of the bird that tugs at our spirit. That's had me starting to think about how certain things become deeply meaningful, but such musings will need to wait for another day.



Displaying those once-fatal feathers