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As I've been waiting for my thoughts to organise themselves into words, I've been gazing out the window. And there's one of the delights of returning to New Zealand - Scruffy the blackbird is still hopping round the lawn. Scruffy lost a patch of his chest feathers last year when he was just a fledgling, and they never grew back - so we were quite convinced he would not last the winter without his feather muffler... but he has!

Switching sides of the world throws the "what's still the same" and "what's changed" into a sharp focus. It seems that our human minds (mine anyway!) like a balance of the familiar and the new - we delight in recognising things we know, just as we delight in seeing something different. Even bird brains can recognise familiar patterns. Our resident seagull has once again taken up his station outside the kitchen window. He has a girlfriend with him at the moment (it is that time of year), but he's not gallant enough to share the goodies that fly out the window when Mani is cooking.

As those of you who travel regularly know - often the first question people ask is "how is it to be back?". After the top-of-the-head reactions about the weather, I was struck this year about the "ordinariness" of returning. There are the routines about getting the technology reconnected, about restocking the pantry, about re-joining groups and activities.

The things that stop you in your tracks are the unexpected things. The friend who died unexpectedly. The row of trees cut down. The impact of the Christchurch earthquake on how we all think about our security. They remind us to "seize the day", do what you really want to do, now!



Säntis over Appenzell farms

September in Switzerland is so often *dunstig* - hazy, misty - not enough to be called a fog, but enough to make Germany disappear from view across the Bodensee, and have the mountains fade into the romantic blur so loved by European landscape painters. So - when a September morning was exceptionally clear, we headed for the Säntis - the long way!

We told the Tomtom navigation system to take us by the back-roads. What a magical mystery tour! Normally, it's just 15 minutes to St Gallen. This time we took nearly an hour to get there, by roads Mani

had no recollection of ever seeing before. Then another hour from there to Schwägalp - again through new-to-us roads. Up the cable-car to views over the mountains and valleys, over the Bodensee... I restrained myself from a Streisand-burst of "on a clear day, you can see forever..." but truly you could.

We returned home reminding ourselves... seize the moment - and take the unfamiliar route. Seeing familiar things and places from an unfamiliar perspective jolts us from the dichotomy of "what's the same and what's changed" - the thing is still the same - but our way of seeing it has changed.

Ah - all this philosophising! It might have to do with writing this after my birthday breakfast of whitebait and champagne (a very New Zealand celebration). We were talking about whether we really age, after a certain stage of maturity. Physical evidence notwithstanding, I'm sure I'm really still 30 years old. But - our focus changes.

Sometimes our memory needs a little more prodding too. Until I started looking at photo files to choose for you, I'd forgotten about a couple of delightful evenings just before we left. There was a local music festival, and Mani and I went to hear a group singing jazz standards. "Georgia" sounds divine with a Swiss accent. Then a couple of nights later we took the gang for a night of Appenzell music. Both concerts were started with groups of students from the Music School. The next generation of talent arises!

It was interesting coming back to the NZ local government elections, from all the hoo-hah in Switzerland about the new Bundesrat appointments when it became clear there was going to be a majority (shock horror!) of women Bundesrätin. My attempts at gentle humour about the risks inherent in *real* democracy (that is, letting women get the vote in the first place) didn't seem to be understood. Perhaps it was the language barrier...

Here, for us, it was the challenge of trying to get rapidly back up to speed with what the issues were, and what the candidates really stood for. It seems a bit unethical to vote *without* being properly informed.

We'd been thinking about that at the Swiss Abroad meeting in St Gallen. 130,000 of the 700,000 Swiss abroad are registered to vote - but how many can feel well enough informed to exercise that right - and who knows how many might choose to enrol and vote if they felt they could do so "properly"?

Anyway - here we are again. Mani has smoked his first new season's batch of *mostbröckli* - and yes, our neighbours are fine! The next lot he'll smoke with apple shavings instead of manuka, since son Konrad and his family have visited bringing a gift of two full bags. The venison Konrad had hoped to bring walked past him the other day when he didn't have his gun ... next time!

Next treat is the Wellington Swiss Club Fondue evening ... and then we'll feel truly back in this part of our lives.