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"A different Light"

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Stand me up at the gates of hell

These life-and-death concepts were brought into sharper focus with news of the death of the 66-year-old rocker with a special place in our household, Tom Petty.

Sally and I were well overdue for a break. We thought we'd take a leaf out of Winston Peters' book and pay homage to the first capital of New Zealand.

Russell/Korokoreka. Hellhole or manhole? Who knows, who cares? We were up here for a week's hols.

It was a time of rest and reflection. We brought rations of cheeses and chorizo, bacon and eggs, vodka and tomato juice, reading glasses and literature. Sally bought Facing the Fifties - from denial to reflection from the local bookshop, and I bought the October edition of M2, New Zealand's "only men's lifestyle magazine".

Sitting across from the waterfront, I perused M2, lazily flicking through the images of uber-successful blue-eyed bearded men. It was a First Impressions 101 master class. I was reminded how powerfully first impressions impress upon us, I should have had that learning well under my belt.

At the Duke of Marlborough restaurant we were ushered to the bar to wait for a table. Sally ordered bubbles while I ordered my fave single malt, Laphroiagh.

I attempted to engage the barman in some repartee. I said, "My mokopuna is called Isla." The rest of my korero was about how Laphroiagh was made in the Scottish Island of Islay.

Instead of responding to this, he kept repeating, "Okay, have a nice night." I looked at Sally for some interpretative assistance, but she was clearly over it.

The next day we saw the barman in Russell 4 Square. He recognised us and said hi to Sally. I wanted to get back on that horse, so when I saw him buying a big bag of limes, I gregariously inquired if they were for his mojitos.

His reply, "You too, have a good day", was repeated twice as I strenuously tried to make myself understood, to no avail.

The first impression he had of me was that he found me unintelligible and, as such, I was someone he could not engage with.

I love the way Sally is such a voracious consumer of literature and I consume this by osmosis when she reads me snippets I later regurgitate for conversational kudos. Soon we were Facing the Fifties together, and I found it vaguely brutal. The overriding kaupapa of the book was to realise that you were entering the phase of putrifaction. (No, that is sadly not a misspelling of 'purification'.)

WTF? Sally explained that, according to the book, every life stage leads to a phase of facing death and disconnection and only when this is faced can we move on to rebirth.

The 50s is about the acceptance of pre-ageing as we view impending death with sorrow, and integration of our whole selves - the yin, the yan, the whole shebang.

Success in the outward, male, rational M2 image appeared to be the antithesis of living a full life in one's mid-century. M2's focus was on the dream of being singly focused and the Winston Churchill ethos of never, ever, ever, ever giving up.

Halfway through our respite in Russell, as we wrestled with these life-and-death concepts, they were brought into a sharper focus with news of the death of the 66-year-old rocker with a special place in our household, Tom Petty. It was touch-and-go but the writing was on the wall.



I'd been toying with getting a tattoo that resonated with a line from a Lady Gaga song, "I'm on the right track, babe, I was born this way", as a permanent affirmation on my skin. On Thursday, I met Pete, the local tattooist, who is hilarious in his John Cleese approach to customer service, outrageous reverse psychology: "Make up you're f***** mind!" Priceless.

And then there was Warren, from Albatross Cruises, whom I chatted with on the wharf and who had the only independent owner operator Bay of Islands cruises in the region. He had a refreshingly passive approach to encountering dolphins in the bay where we were escorted by a pod of bottle-nosed ambassadors who humbled us with their grace and agility.

Warren patiently listened to my rants about his service's point of difference, and he should charge a premium for it.

"It's not just about the money," he quietly replied.

When I think of my endeavours to overcome first impressions and my attempts to engage with people at all levels of NZ society, a phrase from Tom resonates: "I will stand my ground and I won't back down."

RIP Tom.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability: A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei-based disability advocacy organisation.