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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 7 May 2022 - "Reconnecting after two years can be bittersweet"

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. It is a cliché that we hope bears fruit now that many people around the world have now been 'reconnected' after an absence of over two years. We have welcomed (for the most part) the reconnection of whanau and friends who have been parted –from at least 2020, when free and easy global travel was abruptly curtailed. The memory is still stinging sore for many; borders closing and the only prospect of getting into Aotearoa seemed to be your ability to jump through multiple fiery hoops and scale insurmountable barriers. Yes, the year 2020 brought to you by the letters W T and F!

So, over the last month border controls have eased in New Zealand ending some long and difficult absences. We've recently experienced such a separation and reunion. The long-lost Libby, my wife's sister who lives in London hasn't been home for three years. She finally got a chance to visit her homeland. She left NZ in the late 90's and went to Mexico where she fell into a job as Kate Winslet's double in the filming of the Titanic. She scored the role because one of Libby's key features is a mass of curly red hair. It was this recessive gene that contributed to our mokopuna who has the same red hair albeit straight. It was Libby's hand that slid down the car window in the steamy intimate scene with Leonardo di Caprio. Her whanau consistently note "Libby's froggy fingers" when we watch the movie.

My wife's rather large whanau were all enthusiastically happy to see Libby. She carries a cheerful exuberance - a somewhat international Woman of Mystery charisma, which you just want to be around.

Libby looks just the same- a massive rust coloured mane, freckles and flared nostrils. Her daughter however had grown over two feet, well over 6ft at the age of 15, with startingly glamazon looks to match. Libby's visit over here peaked when we held a 50th birthday celebration for her with the rest of the whanau converging at our place. We even had a theme, 'mint' after her father's nickname for her 'Libbymint.' We wore mint coloured clothes and hoisted mint coloured bunting. There's was large mint coloured birthday cake and lashings of mojito's were poured. Laughing, singing, dancing and plenty of it.

A week later it was Libby's last day in Whangarei. I said a quick goodbye in the morning, leaving them all at home. Driving to work I thought about how I wouldn't see Libby or her daughter for several years, and it felt daunting. When I arrived home my wife's mood was

distinctly morose, as she had obviously been reflecting on the same reality of the elongated absence of her sister and niece that rolled out before her.

When people leave to go abroad one can feel as if they are going through a grieving process. It's almost as if they have died. We have to remember they haven't- we are blessed that they are still there, just way, way over there. It's bittersweet. One day another meeting, another reunion, and another celebration will take place that will make up for the absenteeism. And yes, the cliché holds true.

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