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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 4 June 2022 – The mastery of being “visually diverse”

“This is a low point”, I thought to myself, as I looked in the mirror on Monday morning. A forehead with a big angry looking graze the shape of an elongated butterfly reflected back at me. To say it stood out would be a gross understatement. It looked like a banner that shouted DEBAURCHERY and DEPRAVITY at the same time. The cause was rather relatively innocent. The Friday evening prior I had a coughing fit and fainted. Apparently, the medical term for it is Cough Syncope. What happens is while coughing the autonomic nervous system reflexes connecting the brain, heart and the respiratory system get stimulated. This causes a temporary drop in the blood pressure. Also, with severe coughing episodes, the pressure inside the chest increases further affecting the blood flow to and from the heart. As a result, the heart rate slows down and with interrupted blood flow, the brain receives less oxygen, ultimately causing you to pass out or faint.

Great! Just what I need! It has happened a few times in the past, but I have never ended up with a secondary injury or issue. I blame the chair I was sitting on at the time. It is upholstered with leopard skin and high armrests. The leopard skin was inconsequential, but I must have pivoted over the armrest then plunged down into the carpet in a spear like fashion onto my forehead. Thank goodness we went for the extra thick underlay.

As I looked into the mirror in disbelief I remembered I had a Zoom meeting that morning- a whakawatea for the Northland District Health Board, as it was their last meeting. This is part of the nationwide health restructure and the abolition of District Health Boards to be replaced by a New Zealand Health Authority and partnering Maori Health Authority.

“Oh no” I thought, zoom meetings focus in entirely on your head. Being incongruently vain I wanted to disguise or hide the graze. No amount of concealer would have done it. I could have worn a hat but that would screamed midlife crisis. My wife suggested a plaster which I thought was a great idea so she put a large white slab of a plaster on my forehead. All set.

When I launched Zoom it started connecting and came up with the image of my head. All I could see was an enormous white bandage that seemed to dominate everything else. Zoom gave me a choice: Join with video? Join without video? Vaguely panicked, I chose the latter and attended the ceremony with only my name to mark my presence. My participation level was an uncharacteristic zero.

The next morning, I decided that I couldn't do another day with a sanitary pad like bandage on my forehead. I combed my fringe down and asked my wife what she thought. Her reply was “It's a little bit Dumb and Dumber” comparing it to the Jim Carrey movie in the 90's. I looked at the long lanky strands over my forehead and had to agree. “Why don't you just own it?” she said.

Of course, she was dead right. The visual impact of the graze was all in my head. I have actually mastered being visually diverse throughout my life, having Cerebral Palsy which is profoundly unmistakable and different both graphically and audibly. You can't afford to be self-conscious with CP, or you wouldn't go anywhere or say anything. Vanity, however is a different kettle of fish. I believe it's a form of self-love to keep trying to keep one's standards up and a reminder to avoid carpet burn at all costs.

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