

Lessons from New Zealand

For the first time in my memory, I had a sunburn in December.

Before further questions are raised concerning my veracity or the issue of climate change, I need to offer an explanation. My wife, Cindy, daughter, Annie, and I left on Christmas Eve for 10 days in New Zealand to embark on the longest vacation (Kiwis would say “holiday”) I’ve ever experienced both in terms of duration and miles traveled.

One of Cindy’s longest-term friends has lived in Christchurch for just over 20 years and they decided it was time for a visit. As an added bonus, we could celebrate the New Year by watching Mandi perform one of her gigs as an accomplished Kiwi singer. Because Annie is a senior in high school and curious about the world beyond the boundaries of our farm, we thought it appropriate to make this a presumptive graduation gift to her. As an aside, I feel compelled to divulge that nearly five years ago on the occasion of son Willie’s high school graduation, he was given a 40-year-old John Deere combine that he spent time overhauling while we were in the Southern Hemisphere.

Though I would rather spend 13 hours in the seat of a tractor than an Air New Zealand 777 seat, I must confess that I thoroughly enjoyed the trip and thought I might share a few observations therefrom.

First of all, Oregon and New Zealand share many similarities. Both are around 100,000 square miles in area, both have

populations in the neighborhood of 4 million (although New Zealand’s population is growing extremely fast), and both are bisected by significant mountain ranges. Both have a traditional economic base in agriculturally related endeavors, yet both have urban numbers that make up around 80 percent of the population as a whole.

As a rule, I found New Zealand to be greener and cleaner than the parts of the U.S. I have visited (25 of 50 states). I did not see near the amount of garbage in the gutter or alongside the road as I’ve come to expect at home. Plastic one-use bags at the grocery store are outlawed as of January 1 (I’d vote in favor of that one) and recycling enjoys a wide appeal. Electric vehicles are more common than here, but that also has

a practical element to it. Kiwis tend to commute less than we do and essentially have no domestic oil production. While I observed a fair number of Ford and Chevy vehicles, Japanese-built vehicles are definitely the norm, with essentially no full-size pickup trucks or SUVs. Diesel-engined vehicles are very common and fuel economy is a high priority, which is to be expected when fuel sells for two bucks a liter (that equates to nearly \$8 a gallon for those of you scoring along at home).

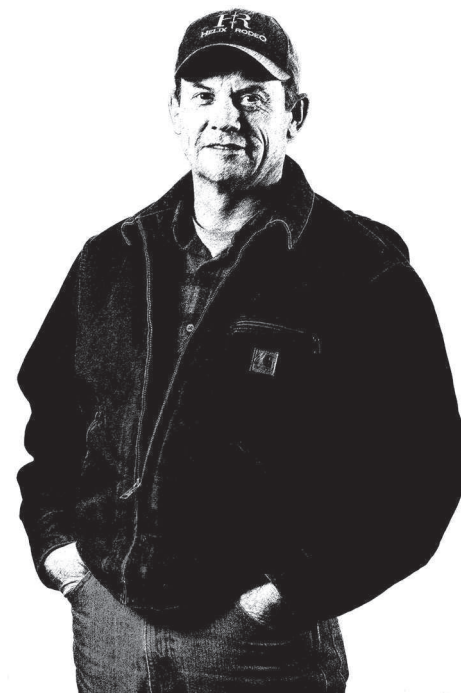
Speaking of prices per liter, barley pop is commonly priced at around \$10 a pint. I couldn’t personally resist the temptation to imbibe even at that price and I found the local beers to be quite good and the conversation at the pubs to be lively and

informative; some things are just universal, I suppose.

I was fortunate enough to tour two farm operations while on our trip, both of which were arranged by my new friend, Halcombe. Hal was, by the way, a truly delightful gentleman with an encyclopedic knowledge of his native land. His enthusiasm for New Zealand was unparalleled and I was amazed that he had not yet been appointed Minister of Tourism.

We first visited Gerald and Sue on their cattle and sheep farm (no “ranches” in Kiwi jargon) near Geraldine in the hills overlooking the crop-farming region of the Canterbury Plains. Through his expert work in artificial insemination, Gerald has imported American bloodlines to his herd and has established what must be the premier line of Angus cattle in New Zealand. After suffering a potentially debilitating back injury at age 50, he shifted gears, bought an excavator and established a lime quarry on his place. At age 75, he still works hard and has heart surgery scheduled for late January; he is definitely my kind of people.

Our second ag tour was at the sheep farm and vineyard of an “Air BnB” proprietor named Daryl. Once a typical New Zealand farm where sheep pastures prevailed, Daryl now has joined many of his neighbors and has planted grapes. Interestingly, he has adapted his sheep operation to fit the changing landscape by leasing additional adjacent vineyard lands on which he can graze a couple thousand head. The sheep prune the vines and graze the grass in between rows. He said if timed properly, the sheep won’t eat the grapes and are beneficial to the vineyard. His genuine hospitality and willingness to share his bucolic corner of the world were much appreciated. One of Daryl’s proudest



MATT WOOD
FROM THE TRACTOR

feats was shearing 404 sheep in a nine-hour day in his prime — WOW!

One final observation on New Zealand and its people would relate to their sense of pride and identity. While not at all boastful or overtly patriotic, every town I visited had a simple, yet highly visibly, monument to young men lost in the two world wars. Though seemingly isolated, particularly in the Great War, New Zealanders contributed a great deal. At a time when their entire population was just over one million, approximately 17,000 Kiwis were killed from 1914-1918. For perspective, that would be roughly equivalent to the U.S. sacrificing 5.1 million residents from our current population.



EO File Photo

Several Pendleton football players make a tackle during a 2017 game at Pendleton High School as a referee gets a close-up look.

Students learn from people they love

A few years ago, when I was teaching at Yale, I made an announcement to my class. I said that I was going to have to cancel office hours that day because I was dealing with some personal issues and a friend was coming up to help me sort through them.

I was no more specific than that, but that evening 10 or 15 students emailed me to say they were thinking of me or praying for me. For the rest of the term the tenor of that seminar was different. We were closer. That one tiny whiff of vulnerability meant that I wasn’t aloof Professor Brooks, I was just another schmo trying to get through life.

That unplanned moment illustrated for me the connection between emotional relationships and learning. We used to have this top-down notion that reason was on a teeter-totter with emotion. If you wanted to be rational and think well, you had to suppress those primitive gremlins, the emotions. Teaching consisted of dispassionately downloading knowledge into students’ brains.

Then work by cognitive scientists like Antonio Damasio showed us that emotion is not the opposite of reason; it’s essential to reason. Emotions assign value to things. If you don’t know what you want, you can’t make good decisions.

Furthermore, emotions tell you what to pay attention to, care about and remember. It’s hard to work through difficulty if your emotions aren’t engaged. Information is plentiful, but motivation is scarce.

That early neuroscience breakthrough reminded us that a key job of a school is to give students new things to love — an exciting field of study, new friends. It reminded us that what teachers really teach is themselves — their contagious passion for their subjects and students. It reminded us that children learn from people they love, and that love in this context means willing the good of another, and offering active care for the whole person.

Over the last several years our understanding of the relationship between emotion and learning has taken off. My impression is that neuroscientists today spend less time trying to locate exactly where in the brain things happen and more time trying to understand the different neural networks and what activates them.

Everything is integrated. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang of the University of Southern California shows that even “sophisticated” emotions like moral admiration are experienced partly by the same “primitive” parts of the brain that monitor internal organs and the viscera. Our emotions literally affect us in the gut.

Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington has shown that the social brain pervades every learning process.

She gave infants Chinese lessons. Some infants took face-to-face lessons with a tutor. Their social brain was activated through direct eye contact and such, and they learned Chinese sounds at an amazing clip. Others watched the same lessons through a video screen. They paid rapt attention, but learned nothing.

Extreme negative emotions, like fear, can have a devastating effect on a student’s ability to learn. Fear amps up threat perception and aggression. It can also subsequently make it hard for children to understand causal relationships, or to change their mind as context changes.

Even when conditions are ideal, think of all the emotions that are involved in mastering a hard subject like algebra: curiosity, excitement, frustration, confusion, dread, delight, worry and, hopefully, perseverance and joy. You’ve got to have an educated emotional vocabulary to maneuver through all those stages.

And students have got to have a good relationship with teachers. Suzanne Dikker of New York University has shown that when classes are going well, the student brain activity

synchronizes with the teacher’s brain activity. In good times and bad, good teachers and good students co-regulate each other.

The bottom line is this, a defining question for any school or company is: What is the quality of the emotional relationships here?

And yet think about your own school or organization. Do you have a metric for measuring relationship quality? Do you have teams reviewing relationship quality? Do you know where relationships are good and where they are bad? How many recent ed reform trends have been about relationship-building?

We focus on all the wrong things because we have an outmoded conception of how thinking really works.

The good news is the social and emotional learning movement has been steadily gaining strength. This week the Aspen Institute (where I lead a program) published a national commission report called “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope.” Social and emotional learning is not an add-on curriculum; one educator said at the report’s launch, “It’s the way we do school.” Some schools, for example, do no academic instruction the first week. To start, everybody just gets to know one another. Other schools replaced the cops at the door with security officers who could also serve as student coaches.

When you start thinking this way it opens up the wide possibilities for change. How would you design a school if you wanted to put relationship quality at the core? Come to think of it, how would you design a Congress?

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Dear Mom and Dad: Cool it

If you are the mother or father of a high school athlete here in Oregon, this message is primarily for you.

When you attend an athletic event that involves your son or daughter, cheer to your heart’s content, enjoy the camaraderie that high school sports offer and have fun. But when it comes to verbally criticizing game officials or coaches, cool it.

Make no mistake about it. Your passion is admired, and your support of the hometown team is needed. But so is your self-control. Yelling, screaming and berating the officials humiliates your child, annoys those sitting around you, embarrasses your child’s school and is the primary reason Oregon has an alarming shortage of high school officials.

It’s true. According to a recent survey by the National Association of Sports Officials, more than 75 percent of all high school officials say “adult behavior” is the primary reason they quit. And 80 percent of all young officials hang up their stripes after just two years of whistle blowing. Why? They don’t need your abuse.

Plus, there’s a ripple effect. There are more officials over 60 than under 30 in many areas. And as older, experienced officials retire, there aren’t enough younger

ones to replace them. If there are no officials, there are no games. The shortage of licensed high school officials is severe enough in some areas that athletic events are being postponed or cancelled — especially at the freshman and junior varsity levels.

Research confirms that participation in high school sports and activities instills a sense of pride in school and community, teaches lifelong lessons like the value of teamwork and self-discipline and facilitates the physical and emotional development of those who participate. So, if the games go away because there aren’t enough men and women to officiate them, the loss will be infinitely greater than just an “L” on the scoreboard. It will be putting a dent in your community’s future.

If you would like to be a part of the solution to the shortage of high school officials, you can sign up to become a licensed official at HighSchoolOfficials.com. Otherwise, adult role models at high school athletic events here in Oregon are always welcome.

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