

A New Zealand Thanksgiving essay: Counting my blessings, even the mixed ones, from 7,000 miles away

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When my husband and I traveled to New Zealand last January, for our yearly three-month visit to our home here, we could never have imagined we'd still be here eleven months later. But when COVID-19 hit, New Zealand acted early and hard against the pandemic and stamped it out, twice.

Each time, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the minister of health provided clear science-based leadership, encouraging "Team New Zealand" that if we all worked together we could eliminate the virus. We did.

We are currently in "normal" again and have been for more than two months. Normal never felt so delicious. No lockdowns, no restrictions, no masks, no social distancing, plenty of gathering and hugging. We are sheltering here till the vaccine comes out next year.

We're at the end of spring, heading into summer. These last few days of November feel strange — no crisp fall weather or cozy fires. And New Zealand doesn't have a Thanksgiving holiday, the last Thursday in November. The irony is that here, where we could all gather together to feast, hug each other and count our blessings, there is no Thanksgiving and no family to gather.

While I count among my blessings that I am currently in a COVID-free country, my main blessings, my children, grandchildren and other close friends and family members, are 7,000 miles away. And as I relish normal here, each morning I read several American newspapers, trying to keep up with the situation there, which, even from this distance, is alarming and distressing.

The death toll here in New Zealand is still 25, just five deaths per million, with two new cases of returning Kiwis in strict quarantine, run by the government. As I write this, on the US death toll has now reached more than 262,000, 799 deaths per million, with 107,737 new cases on Nov. 24.

Each day, I read aloud to my husband, the number of people who died the day before in America. One single moment to honor those who are now gone and whose deaths might have been prevented if a stronger, earlier response had been put into place.

Even as we enjoy COVID-free life here again, we are still encouraged to use the contact tracing app on our phones each time we enter a building, just in case there's an outbreak, so contacts can be easily traced and the virus stamped out quickly again. Though masks are not required, television ads show people donning masks with the tag line, "We cover for each other."

So as I count my blessings that we are safe here, my heart is heavy when I think about America and the rest of the world, fighting the pandemic.

This Thanksgiving Day, we, as many families, will gather around computers, not family tables, laughing, smiling and connecting across virtual space, trying to reach what we cannot touch, sending our love across the airwaves, and in our case, across hemispheres, the international dateline and many, many time zones.

On this Thanksgiving Day, I'm also sending hope and encouragement from a COVID-free country, 7,000 miles away.

Stay safe California. My heart is there, and I'm watching from afar.

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