

# First Person: Straddling two hemispheres

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I grew up with a mother who came from the Southern Hemisphere, from Down Under, from Australia. She stood out in our small California town, with her strong Australian accent. She said zed instead of z, naught instead of zero and when I came home from the third grade and told her about the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party and the brave patriots who fought for American freedom, she became very incensed.

“Oh nooo! (Very strong Australian accent here.) You have it all wrong. They were the ungrateful colonists!”

I learned at that moment, that history was made up depending on whose side you were on.

Years later, my own daughter, age 5, said, “Mommy, Nana Bonnye talks funny.”

My mother never lost her accent.

My own relationship with the Southern Hemisphere began 11 years ago, when I met and later married an American turned Kiwi who had settled in Golden Bay, New Zealand. We began a comfortable routine, a yearly zig-zag of three months in New Zealand and nine months at my home in Northern California, as we swapped a California winter for a New Zealand summer.

My three-month visit this year has stretched to 15 months and counting. When COVID-19 hit and the zig-zagging stalled, our flights home were cancelled and the New Zealand borders closed, locked down.

I had to outfit myself in warm clothes, as I faced my first fall, then winter and spring. My summer wardrobe of shorts and flip-flops wouldn't do.

New Zealand acted early and hard against the pandemic and has stamped it out, five times now, holding steady at a total of 26 deaths, five deaths per million. Each time, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, , along with 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.

I'm grateful to be here, though I miss my home and my family there. But the longer I stay, the more I feel with what my mother might have felt. I'm the one with the strong accent here. One time, in our local market, I watched a girl, about 5, stand with her mouth open, it seemed in astonishment, as I asked a helpful young man where I might find biscuits, (cookies). The girl had clearly never heard anyone "talk so funny."

And there is the constant reminder to drive on the left, oh and walk on the left, go upstairs on the left, push my trolley or trundle, (shopping cart) on the left in the supermarket.

And I've had to learn some new vocabulary words and terms. If we're invited to come to a gathering, "bring a plate" does not mean to show up with an empty plate, but rather to bring a dish to share. And if we're invited to tea, it may not be tea and cucumber sandwiches. Better check. It is usually an evening meal.

A "torch" is not a flaming fire brand, but rather a flashlight. Trash here is "rubbish," hiking is "tramping," and a "cooler" is a chilly bin. And if someone is "crook," it doesn't mean they are a bad guy, but rather, that they are under the weather.

"Stuffed" doesn't mean you've eaten too many meat pies, it means you've screwed up. And "pissed" doesn't mean you're angry, but rather you've had too many pints of beer. I know to ask for a plaster, if I need a band-aid and that if someone asks me if

a have a spare rubber, they are looking for an eraser, not for what that particular item is in the states.

I'm now starting to say "zed" instead of "z" and "herbal" instead of "erbal", (silent h). As for new foods, forget about Vegemite, (a rich spread made from leftover brewer's yeast, salt and malt extract). Ugh!

I read US newspapers each day, trying to stay current with the COVID-19 crisis in the world, the US and California. I felt proud as I watched the inauguration of President Biden and the swearing in of the first female vice-president of the US.

All my friends and even acquaintances here show me how attentive they are about what is happening in America. Even strangers, hearing my accent, have stopped me to talk. I have learned that the world is watching, analyzing and praying for our great American experiment. They want us to prevail and are holding their collective breaths at our recent struggles.

As I am present to the green hills, the sheep and cows in this tiny, island country, isolated in its safety zone, my idyllic day to day reality feels otherworldly. I'm faced with the unusual challenge of enjoying my life and the blessings of being safe here, knowing the rest of the world isn't.

I've experienced a rainy winter and the wonder of so many baby lambs frolicking in the green meadows and standing close to their mothers in the spring. I celebrated my first Christmas in the summer.

As a woman of a certain age, as they say in France, I've waited my whole life to be in a country run by a capable, young female prime minister.

As I look back on the one-year mark of being here, though I feel a bit of a strange bird here at times, I'm grateful for the beauty, safety and warm welcome New Zealand has given me during my prolonged stay.

Even if I am the one with a strong accent. Even if I "talk funny."