

GO RANDOM STRANGERS

YOU ARE AWESOME

MARCEL CURRIN



HAPPY TO BE A LITTLE PĀKEHĀ

I have no idea what it is like to be Māori. Nor do I have any idea what it is like to be Samoan, Asian or anything other than the little Kiwi white boy that I am.

21ST
MAR
2014

New Zealand is my home and it is all I have ever known. When confronted with census forms I don't much enjoy ticking the NZ European box. 'European' feels foreign to me. I'd prefer to tick New Zealander. Or even better, pākehā.

I like being pākehā. The word seems to have snuck out of vogue ever since someone muttered sniffily that it might be derogatory, but for me it's an identity I grew up with, comfortably and with Kiwi pride.

In my mind the pākehā label anchors me to my country. It helps define me as a white person of New Zealand. In a multi-cultural line up, I'm the indigenous white guy, if there is such a thing.

New Zealand has three official languages: English, Māori and New Zealand Sign Language. I've had a crack at learning all of them. A hefty dictionary of New Zealand Sign Language has sat on my bookshelf for the past decade. I've worked out how to say "Would you like coffee?" but that's about it so far.

I took te reo classes at university. I've since forgotten most of anything I learned but I've retained a healthy respect for the Māori language. It is a language filled with nuance, poetry and humour.

I can't think of any real downside for a nation that is bold enough to embrace the richness of its own heritage. In fact, I wouldn't object if te reo was a compulsory subject in every New Zealand school. Maybe that's too far for some people but it would be wonderful to see a whole generation of New Zealanders able to converse in Māori.

Delving into a language gives you a better appreciation of its associated culture. Some people have no time for Māori

culture because culture is where world views collide. Differences lead to misunderstandings. It's hard enough visiting the relatives at times.

My cultural confession is that I don't like hāngi. I also don't particularly enjoy kapahaka songs. Is that a form of heresy? I love the poetry of the language, but not so much the food or the music.

I did once take part in a proper haka and it was glorious. Our te reo class had stayed for a week on a marae and it was time to thank the hosts with a concert. The women did their singing thing and then we men stepped through with our haka. I was the little white guy at the end of the line, but in releasing that haka I was swept up by a wave of adrenaline that took me completely by surprise. In the spirit of being culturally connected it was a spiritual moment for me.

In many respects I am a cold-hearted rationalist. I struggle with the underlying spirituality that informs a lot of Māori tradition. I do my best to appreciate and respect the symbolism of concepts like tapu but it's not easy because at a fundamental level I am not Māori and I don't always understand the depth of some of that stuff.

So, mostly, I keep to my pākehā world where my first language is English and my second language is internet acronyms. Imagine if Māori was a natural second language for most Kiwis? I can only see benefits to that.

New Zealand is growing into a multi-cultural society. We've inherited fraught histories and bothersome politics, but one way or another the whole motley lot of us have ended up living together in this little land we all call home.

One thing we have that no other country has is te reo Māori. This pākehā thinks that is something to be celebrated.

YOU'RE NOT JAMES BOND

4TH
JUL
2014

My favourite quote from the last couple of weeks comes from the former mayor of Auckland and governor general, Dame Catherine Tizard. When asked what she thinks of the current Mayor of Auckland, she answered: "I supported Len Brown when he ran and I still do. I did, however, whisper in his ear, 'You stupid f***wit' when I first saw him after that affair."

That's how it was written in *The New Zealand Herald*, with those naughty little asterisks hiding the uncomfortable truth. Much like the way Len Brown once tried to hide his own uncomfortable truth about his marital affair. As Brown found out, you always get found out. Closets have a way of creaking open.

I like the quote because it depicts a good-natured right-royal telling-off, a sincere but gentle scolding delivered with a tinge of maternal warmth. I don't imagine Len Brown felt entitled to disagree with Dame Catherine's candid assessment. When you've screwed up, you've screwed up.

Marriage and faithfulness is on my mind this week because my wife and I are high-fiving our way to another wedding anniversary. We're up to 17 years. My standard quip is that it's been the best 13 years of my life.

That's a positive, not a negative joke. Every year I deduct some happiness from the grand total on account of a few steep learning curves, but it's no lie to say that the other years have been genuinely great.

It helps that we really, really like each other. It's easy enough to love someone, but the hurdles of life are a lot more fun if you are able to like each other too.

That said, I understand how people stumble into having affairs. No matter how much you care for your partner, the sparkle and shine will fade if you grow complacent.

Bathroom habits and grocery bills wear down the gloss pretty quickly. We're only human after all. Throw in some kids for extra exhaustion and suddenly anyone who lives outside your domestic routine looks a whole lot more attractive.

It's probably a bit like craving KFC. Those secret ingredients play on your mind for many months before culminating in an uncharacteristic moment of indulgence that is followed by instant regret.

The path to this misguided fantasy is signposted, very subtly, with innocent-looking moments. The most innocuous walk in the park or a casual text message can be loaded with intent, even if neither person admits it, turning those moments into tasty little transactions of illicit intimacy.

In the early days it took me a while to recognise the dangers of these slippery signposts and I ambled blithely past a few of them. I'm older and wiser now and I have a very simple rule: "Don't be that guy."

Everyone knows who 'that guy' is. He's the guy who thinks he's James Bond but in reality he is a married man who is trying to live vicariously by fabricating intimate moments with other people he fancies. More often than not, everyone else can see exactly what he's up to.

Just because something is appealing doesn't mean you are entitled to it. I'm not James Bond and, disappointing as it may seem at times, all of the attractive women in the world are not waiting for me to hit on them.

I quite often take a step back to observe my wife as though she's not my wife, just so I can see what everyone else sees. It turns out she's the ideal woman for me. If we weren't already married I would totally want to have an affair with her. So I do.

I may not be James Bond but I've already got the girl. If I were to pursue anyone else I'd be a stupid f***wit and the former governor general could rightly tell me so.

CONVERSATION WITH MY YOUNGER SELF

Tomorrow I turn 40, which is not something I planned, it just kind of happened when I wasn't looking.

10TH
OCT
2014

Being 40 is fine by me. It's not even all that old. The thing about getting older is that everyone around you is getting older at the same rate. Except for Bart Simpson. If Bart had kept pace with the rest of us he'd now be about 35. That's a bit scary.

It's also scary when you realise that MacGyver and Seinfeld are now in their 60s. Han Solo is in his 70s. Has he always been older than my Dad?

Turning older shouldn't make you feel any older. It's just a number. You can still be the same young soul on the inside. At least, that's what you think – until you talk to people who are half your age and you realise that you have, in fact, grown up a bit.

I was reminded of this when I travelled back in time to give my younger self some advice. He was in his second year at university, tapping out a literature essay on an electric typewriter. "I am your older self and I am visiting you from the future with my collected years of wisdom," I announced.

My younger self handled it really well. "Nice beard. Mate, I can't believe I'm going to grow a beard when I'm older."

"Thanks. Now look, I'm here to tell you some things that will help you through the next 20 years."

"How long did it take to grow? Mate, I tried to grow a goatee but it went all fluffy."

"It took a couple of weeks. But listen, I need to tell you – "

"Am I married in the future? Am I rich? Where do I live? Will they end up making more Star Wars movies? Mate, I bet they're totally awesome!"

And so on. He kept saying 'mate', which was kind of annoying. He also talked too much. This kid was way too hyped and he hadn't even discovered coffee yet.

It made me realise I like myself a lot more now that I'm 40.

For starters, I've learned to be a better listener. Twenty years ago I was dead certain about my own opinions. These days I'm more cautious of absolutes.

I'm also a lot more comfortable in my own skin. I used to wear my confidence as a disguise to hide the fact that I usually felt like the smallest, most vulnerable guy in the room. I was one of the shortest kids in my school right up until sixth form. It took me a while to figure out that being a shorter man doesn't make me any less of a man.

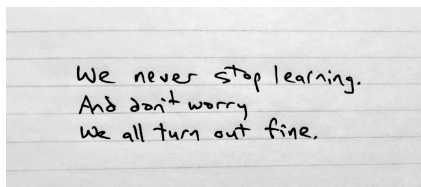
Thinking about that, I realised my younger self's bolstery chatterboxing was probably his way of coping with an intimidating situation. After all, right now he was suddenly faced with an older, more self-assured version of himself.

"Relax," I said to him. "You're over-compensating. You don't need to do that with me. In fact, you don't need to do that with anyone."

"It's the beard," he replied. "It makes you look more grown up."

"I am more grown up," I said. "But you are exactly who you are. Don't ever be scared of that. Look, I've got some important stuff to tell you."

He shook his head. "No need. Our 60-year-old self arrived just before you did. He wanted me to give you this." It was a note:



We never stop learning.
And don't worry
we all turn out fine.

"Wow. Hard to imagine being 60," I said. My younger self replied,

"Mate, it's hard enough to imagine being 40." Then he added: "Maybe next time just bring me the Lotto results."

SEMICOLON TATTOO

I'm not a tattoo guy but I really like the idea behind the semicolon tattoo. It is the superhero story of punctuation; the humble semicolon called to greater purpose.

28TH
AUG
2015

It began with the Semicolon Project, an American movement wanting to launch an ongoing conversation about depression and mental illness.

The idea is that the semicolon represents a point where the author could have ended their sentence but chose not to. As a tattoo, the semicolon becomes a symbol of hope and determination.

This little tattoo evidently carries more weight than a mere passing trend for those who get it. One description I read said that the tattoo is a reminder to pause, breathe, and keep going.

I think it is incredibly powerful; a simple punctuation mark that is being used to drag depression out of the darkness and into the light.

Depression is not a logical illness. It doesn't care if you've won Lotto or scored a date with an All Black. It is a chemical rebellion in the brain that has utter disregard for anything good that might be going on outside.

One of the most unhelpful things we can say to someone who is depressed is: "Why? What do you have to be depressed about?" They probably can't answer those questions because depression is its own boss and doesn't need a reason.

Depression is not sadness. Sadness is what happens when something sad happens. People get sad all the time for all sorts of valid reasons. Depression is more about feeling mysteriously drained of vitality. It is a lack of momentum. It is gumboots filled with porridge. It is living on dial-up in a world of ultra-fast.

Depression makes everything bland. It is a mono earplug. It is fish and chips with no salt.

In the secret world of the depressed person, death can

become a morbid preoccupation. A bit like buying a new car; if you've been looking at Hondas, you start to notice Hondas at every intersection. In the same way, the depressed mind goes shopping for gloom and notices darkness at every corner.

It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with wanting to die; it is simply a detached curiosity, a dull fascination. It is not until people are clear of the fog that they realise in retrospect just how opposite of normal that dark thinking was.

If you ever find yourself in such a space, be assured that it is not normal and that the sunlight will return. You just need to get some help; it's not something you can easily navigate on your own.

This is why the semicolon symbol has the potential to be so powerful. Whether it thrives as a tattoo or ends up on T-shirts doesn't really matter. It is a mark of solidarity and a note of encouragement, a reminder that the grey weather is not permanently fixed in place.

I read a fascinating account of a West African exorcism, as told by Andrew Solomon in an excellent book of true stories called *The Moth*. Partly for research, Solomon submitted himself to the *ndeup*, a ritual that casts out the evil spirits of depression with ram intestines and chicken blood and drumming and spitting and dancing. The whole thing sounds completely bonkers.

As part of the ritual, an entire village took the day off to offer him raucous support. Solomon didn't buy into any of the spiritualism but he did experience the cathartic power that came with being cheered on by the community in the sunshine.

The best treatment for darkness is a dose of light. If a simple semicolon can help draw back the curtains, even a tiny bit, so much the better.

Fly, little semicolon. Save the world.