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Happy New Year! I loved the greeting "einen guten Rutsch ins 2010" - the idea of sliding into the new year is so appealing. Of course, some of us slide more gracefully than others - so whether you slipped, glided or stumbled into 2010 may it treat you well, and may you stay on your feet throughout the year!

We had a delightful mix of the Kiwi and Swiss approaches to Christmas. Mani was Schmutzli to Bruce Dunlop's Samichlaus at the Wellington Swiss Club. The youngsters played their part wonderfully - despite the misgivings of some of the littlies - presenting Samichlaus with their drawings and musical offerings. The well-pointed comments from Samichlaus about where they'd been good during the year, and where they still had some improvement to do, just proved what a well-informed chap he is. They well deserved their bags of treats, and Schmutzli was left empty-handed!

I remember as a child holding onto the appearance of belief in Father Christmas for far longer than my logic really allowed. My excuse was that it was for the sake of the younger members of the family ... but perhaps there was a bit of self-interest in pretending....

Our kiwi Christmas was traditional in quite a different way - a gathering with long-standing friends to enjoy our customary feast of smoked salmon, salads and cold ham and heaps and heaps of summer berries. This year, a newcomer to our festivities didn't quite understand what we meant when we said our custom was total laziness - no effort permitted - and insisted on cooking a turkey. It was superbly done - but I don't think she'll do it again. Listening to Swiss friends talk about what a celebration the whole Weihnachtsseason is, I sometimes wonder if we're missing something with our laid-back Kiwi approach - but hey, it's supposed to be summer, and too hot to do much of anything... Shame the Wellington weather forgot that!



As I write a pukeko is teaching a chick how to pull and eat the sweetest tenderest bits of grass on the lawn outside my window. They select a blade

from the centre of a clump and pull it out with their strong beaks. Then they hold it with one foot lifted elegantly in front, and nip off the tender part from the bottom of the stalk, and pass this to the chick. The chicks are happy to be fed - though I've also observed the older chicks doing the whole trick for themselves when the adults are not on duty. Perhaps that's their version of maintaining their belief in Father Christmas!

Back to Kiwi/Swiss Christmasses ... Kapiti Village got treated to "carols with cowbell" this year. A group of us who'd enjoyed singing together in the Village Vocals choir decided we'd delight our fellow residents by doing a tour of the village singing carols. I guessed (rightly!) that we'd need something more than the power of our voices to break through the sound of their televisions and entice them outside, so the trusty cowbell came out and was rung vigorously as we traipsed from place to place and started our serenades. It worked - and is booked again for next Christmas!

Our Wellington Swiss Club Choir "plus" also had a lusty carol singing session at the outdoor carol concert at the Botanical Gardens. The "plus" members were German friends who added their voices, and members of the Austrian male-voice choir who were there to do their own bracket, and joined in with ours too. That gave us a great line-up on stage - just as well, because we were competing with the sound of a cold wild wind in the trees which threatened to blow our voices away - as well as our music, and the picnics of the audience. We buffered ourselves against the weather with healthy schlucke of Mani's Kirsch - that helped the voices too, we're sure. A "first" for this concert: with the encouragement and help of French-speaking members of the club, we sang O Tannenbaum in French! Those who'd spoken little French since school polished up their accents, and "Le Beau Sapin" is now part of our repertoire. The Choir also led the singing at our Swiss Club Christmas dinner, so vocal chords have been well-exercised.

Singing together is one of those pleasures I hope we never lose. The act of singing is so good for us anyway - there's all that oxygen we have to suck in, and the endorphins we generate through the pleasure of making some kind of tuneful noise. Then there's the added enjoyment of doing something in concert with others, working tightly as a team. And when it all comes together, there's that really physical frisson of joy as voices rub against each other in unison or harmony.

So whether it's the informal sing-song in the evening Altenrhein-style after the second bottle of wine has gone round the table, or something a bit more formal (even with the nerves of public performance) - here's to keeping on singing! I'm even taking a couple of clarinet lessons before we go back to Switzerland so I can have something to hand to remind our after-wine Altenrhein singers of tunes they think they've forgotten. Let's see how that goes!