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It's checklist time again! I don't know what I'd do without that ever-growing list of reminders about what needs to be done, as we prepare to leave for Switzerland - or go away in the house-bus - or for that matter, re-enter "ordinary" life. Is it that life is getting more complicated, or my mind is holding less? Anyway, I sleep better when the lists are in my computer rather than running through and through my mind. That leaves me free to concentrate on the more philosophical things... like - how funny it is when our assumptions get overturned!

We have a resident black-backed gull - inherited from our house's previous owner. We moved in. The gull appeared under the kitchen window and greedily accepted whatever food flew out of it. We were bird-trained! According to our neighbours, the bird stays around even while we're away, ready for the window to open again. We've always thought it was a male, mainly because "he's" an aggressive protector of "his" territory, screaming loud warnings to other gulls who dare over-fly this place, and fiercely pecking at "the other gull" who appears as his reflection in the patio door. In spring, there's sometimes a second gull allowed to stay - his girl-friend, we assumed.

Now, four years on, our assumptions are challenged. There's a young gull, in the speckled brown plumage of its youthful camouflage, in constant attendance, begging for food from "our" gull, and occasionally being fed by it when it gets too insistent. So - either "our" gull is a female (in which case who did the chick-raising while she spent her time on the roof here?) or male gulls take over the chick-raising at some stage, and the chick has moved in with dad, probably to learn the finer points of human-taming. Ah, the mysteries we have yet to comprehend.

As we prepare to head for our other life, we've been re-connecting with important parts of this one. Last month we had time with Mani's boys in Nelson, and this month it's been a turn for my family. My father, Alf, has just had his 92nd birthday - and we got together to celebrate in Te Puke. It was so good to see someone still relishing his life, and enjoying his "gang" of nearly-as-old mates.

Alf and the gang regularly get together to hold "Board Meetings" at which the world is analysed and put right, over a few whiskies of course. They seem to be just as dedicated to their role in improving society as are the gatherings of our gang in Switzerland. That's been a bit of an eye-opener to me. I've always been one for balanced enquiry - staying curious, not taking a firm position until I was sure I'd fully understood the situation, always allowing that

other people might see things differently ... But the fun and drama of no-holds-barred debate, of opinions vigorously promoted and disputed with little regard for logic or even consistency, and no (lasting) offence being taken - that's had my jaw drop more than once around the table in Altenrhein. But there, it's probably just as well that I don't have enough language to join in!

Another reconnection was a quick trip over the hill to the Wairarapa where I was born and raised, to pick grapes. The work in progress on the Rimutakas made us realise that we'd not been that way for quite some time - indeed, for long enough for large sections of hillside to be cut through, and gullies filled, as clever men with machines reconfigure some of those infamous corners. No longer will I recognise the many bends I threw up on as a car-sick child, or the ones that were a rite of passage for a learner driver. But that first view into the blue-green of the Wairarapa valley will always be something that grabs at my heart. There are landscapes that do that for us - I guess they're often the landscapes of our childhood, or places that have been special in our lives. You know the feeling - somehow your spirit rushes out to fill those spaces when you see them again.

The grape-gathering was lovely fun - super-ripe sticky-sweet Chardonnay bunches there for the taking. We picked, and nibbled, and picked ... and now we've cleaned them, crushed them, and they'll ferment in the garage while we're away. When we get back, it will be to make grappa - and maybe even cognac if the juice is as good as we think it is. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any *Jungfrauen* in this retirement village to tread the grapes, so Mani improvised a grape-crusher from a heavy mallet. It worked - even if it wasn't as picturesque!

Carrying crates of grapes in the car has had an unexpected effect: you wouldn't believe how many spiders, earwigs, lady-birds, and other insects hitched a ride over the hill! When we got in the car the day after we had to clear away spiders' webs, and chase out disoriented stragglers, including a little weevilly creature whose English name I don't know, but Mani recognised as the *Reblaus*. He remembered the old Viennese comedian Hans Moser's song...

Ich muss einmal in meinem Leben eine Reblaus gewesen sein;

Darum habe ich den roten wie den weissen Wein so gern.

(Once I must have been a grapevine-louse -
That's why I like red wine just as much as white)

And so we sing our way to Altenrhein. Next time, from there!

