

Cultural Daily

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First Person Earthquake: The Wellington Transcripts

Pallas · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

On August 16th, a 6.6 earthquake hit near Seddon, New Zealand. It destroyed some homes at the epicenter – but just did limited damage in the capital, Wellington. No one was hurt, but many were shaken pretty soundly. The temblor hit just weeks after a 6.5 quake, centered in the same region, had closed the heart of the capital's Central Business District. In both cases, sizable aftershocks kept things rocking and rolling for weeks afterward.

I was out of the country when the first big quake rocked New Zealand's capital, Wellington. My husband was holding down the fort (or trying to, at least). When I texted to make sure he was okay, I got a "Yee-haw!" in response.

Not quite the reaction I had when the 6.6 temblor hit just yesterday. I was driving and thought at first that a wheel was coming off the car. With nothing immediately reported on the radio, I called my husband and left a message asking if there'd been an earthquake. If not, I warned I would just park the car and call a tow truck because there was something seriously wrong with our vehicle.

Then I saw the shocked expression on the face of a woman standing in the middle of the street – hands out to either side as if she were trying to balance.

That answered my question.

By then, the news was on the radio. I listened – as I kept driving, up the hill and toward my home. When I looked around though, I noticed very few people acting as if anything had happened. Most were just calmly walking. What else could we do, really? Who knew when the next shock would come? You can count on aftershocks, but you can't predict how strong they'll be or when they'll next occur.

As it happens, I was driving back to the airport to deliver the passport my husband had forgotten when the first big aftershock hit. Sitting at a red light the car shook back and forth like a boat being tossed about by the wake of a much larger, faster vessel. Then it stopped.

Again, we all just kept on going.

My husband's plane was only delayed, not canceled, so I managed to get his passport to him in time. He ended up taking off in between the multiple aftershocks that followed. No point in asking him to stay behind. Life goes on.

And so did the aftershocks.

I went to pick up my older son from school. The students dove under the desks in their classrooms a couple of times before the authorities decided it was probably best to call it quits early. It was Friday, anyway.

We were just ten minutes from home and five minutes from where my son was supposed to be getting a haircut later that afternoon, so we decided to make our way there a little early, in case the salon was still open.

Bad plan. Forty minutes later, we were still in our car.

We'd managed to make it maybe 8 blocks before coming to a complete standstill. When an earthquake as big as this hits, all trains are canceled so workers can check the lines for safety. Everyone was trying to head out of town and away from the tall buildings – all at the same time. There was also a gas leak (likely triggered by all the jolts) in the middle of the Central Business District, which made for more chaos as emergency vehicles tried in vain to snake their way through traffic to fix the problem.

At one point the driver in front of us decided he'd had enough of the waiting and locked up his work truck, before popping into a dairy (convenience store in Kiwi-ese) to grab a few snacks. He just made it back into the driver's seat when the traffic lurched forward – though only about 20 feet. Not long after, I managed to make a left turn when the light turned green. Well, almost. I was caught mid-turn when the traffic stopped again.

And then the next aftershock hit. I looked out the window and noticed the light pole right by the passenger seat door. The shaking wasn't enough to disturb it, but by this stage, I'll admit – I found just its proximity pretty disturbing.

When that shake stopped, I looked at the clock and realized my younger son would need to be picked up from basketball across town. Normally a 15 minute drive, at this rate it could well take another hour to accomplish. When I tried to call him and warn him, I realized he'd left his cell phone at home. Turns out I was one of many parents who ended up having a "little chat" about responsibility – and how critical it is to be able to communicate in a potential emergency.

After a call to another parent, I learned basketball had been canceled and there were several students at the courts – waiting. It would be a long wait for all of them.

I slowly wound my way, taking the road by the sea and avoiding the tunnel. I noticed people out enjoying the mild and sunny winter afternoon, walking their dogs and taking their children to local parks. Many were talking on cell phones – no doubt reassuring far away family members and recounting their stories of where they were when the first shake happened. And yes, it was all okay – at least for now.

My boys and I all made it back home safely by early evening but we were shaken – literally and figuratively – and still feeling a little nervous. Several more aftershocks jolted our house, which we now know tends to "move" a little more at the front than the back. So we stayed in the relatively safe family room while I cooked dinner and the boys played video games.

Then a stream of visitors started arriving.

Our neighbors, native Kiwis who admitted this was worse than they'd ever experienced, were more worried about how we were feeling. They brought me wine as well as calming company. The kids were happily distracted as the family room started filling with others kids their age – laughing and joking. By the time we all went to bed, we were more relaxed. There hadn't been another detectable aftershock for hours.

Still, we weren't really counting on sleeping soundly.

I put both boys in the furthest-back bedroom of our house and I slept in the guest room – away from the brick chimney that is definitely an earthquake hazard, positioned just above my headboard. That day, strengthening it shot to the top of the to-do list.

Overnight I woke up several times with the bed shaking and my heart racing. I was prepared to jump and run, with all of our earthquake supplies at the ready by the front door and a flashlight by my bedside. But nothing lasted long enough for that kind of drastic action. And by the time morning rolled around and we headed out to my youngest son's rugby game, things were definitely much quieter. However, I now felt like I'd spent the last 24 hours on a boat and hadn't gotten my sea legs back yet. It's as if my body was anticipating the next swell in the ground below me.

Our nerves may be rattled, but our heads are screwed on straight. We, like everyone around us, continue to put one foot in front of the other.

“Keep Calm and Carry On” is a trendy (though historic) phrase that keeps leaping to mind. Apparently the motivational words weren’t seen much by the World War 2-era British public they were intended to inspire. But they sure hit their mark with me over the past 24 hours. It seems we are all marching to the same tune here in Wellington.

Clearly, we cannot claim to be remotely shell-shocked, compared to those who’ve lived through the Christchurch earthquakes and thousands of aftershocks there. However, we all seem to have one wary eye on the lookout for the next one that might well be “the big one”.

I promise to keep you posted...

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