

BROCK'S BANTER: A Trip Down Yondr

By Brock Weir

There once was a time when the very idea of claustrophobia was confined to, well, the confined ? those tight spaces ranging from heavily packed elevators to drive-thru car washes and airplanes to being shoulder to shoulder with complete strangers in concert crowds.

Whether they admitted it or not, everyone experienced claustrophobia in their own particular ways.

For a good long while, I was one of those individuals who claimed to be immune from claustrophobia. I had no problem with squeezing into an already well-populated elevator, never had an issue with going through a car wash or getting comfortable on a plane, and, as for concert crowds, they were always more of an inconvenience rather than a fear factor.

That all changed, however, when I was getting ready to do an internship in eastern Africa in my last year of university.

Our group was bound for various media outlets in Rwanda. With some going off to French language radio, a local television station, and other media, I was headed for a copy-editing position at what was then the country's only prominent English-speaking paper.

The anticipation of getting my feet wet, as it were, in a country wholly unfamiliar to any other nation and culture I had experienced, filled me with adrenaline. When I go somewhere for any purpose, I try as much as possible to experience the reality of the situation I am in. The hyper-polished tourist destinations that are retrofitted to conform with the expectations of visitors is simply not up my street. In fact, more often than not, they are just plain ol' boring.

Guidebook in hand, I spent the time I still had in Canada making my plan, devising a checklist of all the places I wanted to go, all the villages I wanted to soak in, and all the customs, rituals and ceremonies I wanted to experience with all of my own senses ? those experiences I probably would not otherwise have a chance to save to the memory bank.

As my memory bank created some space for all the snippets and images of life I hoped to collect, I suddenly heard the proverbial record scratch.

Everything ground to a halt during our orientation session. We were being put through our paces, but when the facilitator touched upon internet service, things took a turn.

It seemed like such an obvious thing, but something I hadn't considered until that very moment.

We were blessed with some pretty top-notch internet service ? yes, even in 2007 ? and we were going to a nation where internet service, although pervasive in just about every corner of society, was occasionally hit or miss.

At that time, as most of you well-remember, Facebook was still in its relative infancy, Twitter wasn't quite on the launching pad, but we kept our respective fingers on the world around us through fairly regular log-ins to new sites.

Given the times, most of us had to do so from the comforts of our own desks and laptops or, for students, the nearest available computer lab, as those lucky enough to have smart phones, zealously guarded their data and rarely used it for such fripperies.

The idea that such luxuries would soon be less readily available filled me with a sense of dread, but it wasn't the lack of internet itself that filled me with anxiety; it stemmed from losing grasp of the pulse of the world, in real time, and falling behind.

The idea of being disconnected used to be seen as a luxury. In 2007, it was a luxury that was just beginning to recede into the distant past, and it has only gotten worse over the subsequent 11 years.

We no longer need to worry as much about data overages, and, therefore, we don't need to stretch as far to keep our finger on the pulse of the world. It's right there in our pockets.

But, I have to say with all honesty, I experienced that never-experienced-since wave of dread when I got an email this past spring after purchasing a ticket to see comedian Amy Schumer at this month's Lucille Ball Comedy Festival.

As soon as the confirmation was received, I received an email with the following message: ?Amy Schumer & Friends is a phone-free show. No phones, cameras or recording devices will be permitted in the performance space. Upon arrival, all phones and smart watches will be secured in Yondr pouches that will be unlocked at the end of the show. Guests maintain possession of their phones throughout the night and, if needed, may access their phones at designated Phone Use Areas in the venue. We appreciate your cooperating in creating a phone-free viewing experience.?

Once I read those words, the dread set in. I put it out of my mind until the weekend of the show, and then it came back, along with the question: what should I do with the all-mighty iPhone? Many of those attending the event weren't especially stoked about these ?Yondr? pouches.

Some had legitimate reasons to be concerned, like an important family issue they were trying to stickhandle remotely. Others, like myself, had concerns that bordered on the ridiculous, like ?What if something happens during this two-hour event?!?

It was at that point that I gave myself a shake and realised there was a problem here. Eschewing the idea of my phone taking a trip down Yondr, I bit the bullet and simply left the phone in the hotel room.

Earlier this year, I wrote about my goal of trying to disconnect for a little while, avoid living my life through a viewfinder, and finding a healthier balance. But, you know what? I got nowhere on that goal ? at least until Amy Schumer and her team dropped the hammer.

As soon as I left the phone behind and shut the door, I felt a strange mix of anxiety and freedom, the anxiety ultimately being outweighed by the freedom from the obligation I felt to check my phone periodically ?just in case of?? a blank that is never satisfactorily filled.

And ? and, as we all know, sometimes it is about the simple things in life ? I had almost forgotten what it was like to see a show without a sea of cell phones, illuminated aloft in front of you capturing every nuance for posterity.

It was like getting out of our increasingly urban, light-polluted area and seeing stars again, almost for the first time.

So, Amy Schumer and your privacy issues, thanks for the reminder!