

BROCK'S BANTER: Pilgrims' Progress

By Brock Weir

There is something to be said about community.

But what is it, exactly?

For most of our collective existence, it has been our home, our place of work and our support network. The whole has been significantly greater than the sum of its parts.

Increasingly, however, it appears from my point of view that viewpoint is often seen today as outmoded, quaint, and kitsch.

It is not dead, however, and a place like Aurora continues to surprise.

I had a lot of time to think about this on Saturday night as my nostrils filled with the scent of musty wood as I took my place on a hand-crafted wooden bench that was split, carved and refined when that sense of community as a place to live, work, and support one another was far removed from outmoded, quaint and kitsch.

Taking in my surroundings, my eyes landed on the far end of the bench. It was next to a window and the light coming in from that evening's sunset cast a certain purply-orange glow on a few light-coloured spots about half a metre from where I sat.

Sliding over, I found these nickel-sized spots to be white flakes, just as another fluttered down from the ceiling above, landing alongside its brethren with impressive precision.

It was clear upon looking up this building had seen better days.

The beams were water damaged. Sculpted plaster, still clinging onto a few vestiges of a creamy lustre were deteriorating. But, together, they conspired to keep the ceiling up ? bearing a few beads of sweat, perhaps, but not yet ready to buckle under the burden. Earlier that day, there was a poignant reminder of the devastation that can happen when something like that does buckle under the weight. It was exactly one year to the day so many of us gathered at the corner of Yonge Street and Tyler Street to watch helplessly as Aurora United Church burned to the ground. After spending eight hours on site on April 11, 2014, the smell of the smoke was still fresh in mind when I joined over 100 parishioners and community members on the site for a noontime moment of remembrance and reflection.

April 11, 2014 happened to be a Friday, and although their spiritual home was still smouldering the following morning, it was business as usual as they pooled their resources to deliver the traditional Rise and Shine Breakfast to community members in need. That was the drill this past Saturday and after the needs of the community were attended to, it was time to head over to Yonge Street and remember.

Following the service, I went to the other side of Town to take in the Aurora Home Show, where the owners of new and venerable local businesses, as well as service clubs, politicians, and soldiers set up shop to make money, recruit new members, and raise awareness.

Despite some initial misgivings voiced by organizers over the unavoidable new location of the Home Show this year, it was, in my view, a resounding success. Perhaps some missed the timeless fragrance only 50 years of sweaty athletes can impart to a venue, but I'm not one of them.

Although it is only a matter of time before that is a particular odour synonymous with the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex as well, there was freshness in the air, a new energy, and ? lo and behold ? real, actual sunlight pouring onto the arena floor. It was certainly a step up, in my view.

This seems to have been a perspective shared by many of the vendors.

Stopping to talk with one particular booth-holder from Richmond Hill, he spoke of his delight at the continued success of the Aurora Home Show, particularly as efforts to get something similar off the ground in Richmond Hill have all but fizzled. In these days of online shopping and countless regurgitated home improvement shows, the notion of a home show, we agreed, might be seen today as outmoded, quaint and kitsch, but Aurora seemed to be having none of that.

The show, despite trends elsewhere, remains a top community draw.

As I sat on that wooden bench, eyes trained upwards waiting for the next flake to fall, I shifted my glance. Looking down from the balcony of Newmarket's Trinity United Church, I was looking over another group of people who are bucking the trend.

All too often we hear of broken links, whether they are relationships that have gone bust, friendships that are tested to the limits when one or both parties move away, or families that disperse once their common lynchpin is no longer there to bind the family together.

Social media might be there to pick up some of the slack, but once those physical connections are severed, they are very hard to

restore.

That is not the case with members of the Aurora United Church.

‘Over the months of this year there have been many times we have declared ourselves to be pilgrim people, travelling lightly, but with purpose – our hearts and minds focused on what God might have in mind for us,’ said Reverend Andy Comar on that barren plot of land that blustery morning.

Added Reverend Lorraine Newton Comar: Life is a journey, best when we go together.

The physical connection exemplified in the buff bricks that came together to form Aurora United Church on that plot of land may have been violently severed from its members one year ago, but that lynchpin, whether it is faith, a sense of family, or a sense of community, is still there to hold them together.

These ‘pilgrim people’ quickly found a new place to call home but, more importantly, they stayed intact.

As they gathered in Newmarket, the venue might have changed, but the scene varied little from what I took in the last time I sat in the balcony of Aurora United Church the November before the fire. In each other they found their home, their place of work for the common good and, most importantly, their support network.

If there is any drive to challenge the idea that traditional notions of community are outmoded, quaint and kitsch, we would all do well to take a page out of Aurora United Church's common book.