

BROCK'S BANTER: Putting a price on culture

By Brock Weir

Memory is a powerful
thing.

Sometimes there is no
rhyme or reason on how memories are filed away, or how they are conjured up
once again, often to the surprise of the individual.

They can often be
evoked by sight, smell, taste and sound.

We all know the
sensation of a scent or flavour that has an instant familiarity. As far as
familiarity goes, it can sometimes be elusive, something that conjures up
seemingly random images that don't necessary fit together. Like a 1,000 piece
jigsaw puzzle that has taken you days to put together only to find you're short
one key piece to make the image come into full focus.

Whether it is a taste
of something your grandmother cooked decades ago, or a voice that rings eerily
close to that of someone who had a special impact on our own life ? it has more
in common than just being a memory; it's part of your history, the collection
of people, places and things that converge to make you who you are.

If life was a
tapestry, they are stitches of experiences, fulfilling or otherwise, that come
together to form the whole. If one is fulfilling, chances are there are more
that serve as lingering reminders of trauma ? physical or emotional. Each
stitch, however, is just as important as the last, and we don't often
appreciate what they bring to the whole until they are just out of reach.

To this end, a certain
meme making the rounds on social media over the last few years has always made
me laugh. It can take various forms, have any number of evocative images used
to underscore the point, but the gist is usually the same: book lovers are
still traumatized.

By what?

The fire at the
Library of Alexandria.

Yes, that fire. That
fire that Julius Caesar's troops purportedly set when they sacked the city.
Yes, that very same fire that happened nearly two millennia ago.

This meme, of course,
is wholeheartedly tongue-in-cheek, but there is an underlying truth in it.

That fire was not
just a fire ? and, truth be told, it was probably more of a symbolic fire than
anything else ? rather, it was the wiping out of thousands of years of our
collective human history.

Who we were, and what
we had been up until that point, was largely wiped out; a link to our
collective history irreparably broken and, of course, impossible to replace.

The meaning behind
the meme has, in my opinion taken on new meaning given world events that post-date
its existence, particularly the fire at Notre-Dame last month.

That fire, of course,
received its fair share of column inches in this space, but in the days and
weeks since the blaze, the tone of the conversation has changed.

While the flames
raged, the people of the world seemed united in disbelief that such a stalwart
symbol of history could be all but destroyed by a flame, regardless of whether
its underlying cause was a rogue spark from ongoing renovations, a short
circuit, or a carelessly discarded cigarette.

The first sour notes seemed to come the
following day when French billionaires began lining up making significant
donations towards the cathedral's rebuilding fund, compounded by President
Macron's vow that reconstruction of the iconic building would be complete
within five years.

Why, asked some voices in the crowd, were
private resources being sought for this project when there was nary a word from
the Vatican on how much they would be offering up from their impossibly rich
coffers?

A valid question, and a question that
still remains valid, but the fact the Catholic Church, in theory, did not claim
ownership of the building factored little into the conversation.

This argument was followed shortly
thereafter by criticism stemming from the US government's decision ? or, at the
very least, the White House's decision ? to help in the rebuild in the face of
mounting challenges at home, not the least of which being the lack of
government support towards restoring clean drinking water to Flint and other
parts of Michigan. A very valid concern, and a concern which has been top of
mind for a number of people for many years, and one which is still yet to be
fully addressed.

More pointedly, there were questions of scale.

In Jerusalem, for instance, Muslim faithful were shocked at the blaze at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest sight in Islam, at the same time that Notre-Dame burned. Although the fire was relatively small and contained compared to what happened in Paris, criticism began to fly about a disproportionate amount of news coverage given to Notre-Dame compared to this non-Christian site, and all the conjecture of racism and prejudice entailed in that.

If disproportionate coverage is a talking point, perhaps a more apt comparison is the seeming lack of coverage and, in turn, public awareness over a spate of arsons in the United States targeting primarily African American places of worship.

Many people in North American quite rightly pointed out that there has been ? and continues to be ? a complacency beyond Louisiana of the fires that destroyed three historically black churches in one of the state's parishes over less than two weeks, and a subsequent fire that appeared to target a largely white church in the same area.

Whether it is a fire that damaged or destroyed a place of worship, a humanitarian crisis relatively close to home, or human rights issues anywhere around the globe, they are issues that should concern us all, regardless of where we live, what faith we belong to, or if we don't subscribe to any particular faith whatsoever.

If one grieves for one, or chooses to support one particular cause, it does not invalidate any other experience. Each one directly impacts the collective human tapestry.

Mourning the loss of a cultural touchstone, however you choose to define it, shouldn't be derided, particularly in this climate that seems to be trending towards a society discounting the value and impact culture, history and the arts has on our society, re-framing it as something that is either elitist or irrelevant.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

History and the arts are all part of culture, but so too is everything else. It is who we are, what we want to be, and what we will be.