

BROCK'S BANTER: A part of us

By Brock Weir

If you were like me on Monday, you might have found it very hard to get work done as you sat gripped to your computer, television or device watching the fire at Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral unfold.

At the outset, it seemed within the realm of hope that it might just be a small roof fire, sparked by ongoing renovation and restoration efforts intended to keep the iconic edifice in good repair for another millennium.

Sadly, and all too quickly, it became all too clear that this was not a fire that could be quickly doused.

Within an hour or two, flames were raging through the architectural marvel of the ceiling, reducing it to beams, then cinders, before it ultimately came crashing down on the floor below; a floor that had been trod on for nearly 1,000 years by innumerable members of the clergy, millions of the faithful, ever more millions of tourists from around the globe, not to mention a panoply of the great and good, infamous and terrible from the annals of our collective history ? kings and queens, emperors and popes, traitors, historical heretics and martyrs.

Watching the life stream from the bottom left corner of my computer screen, my momentarily diverted eyes were drawn back to it again as a gasp that will be seared forever in my mind emanated from the hundreds of onlookers as the cathedral's spire, and way-finder for generations, collapsed like a house of cards into the inferno below.

This unforgettable gasp was followed a short time later by something equally unforgettable: the sound of hundreds of voices raised in hymn for hours as they watched their ?home? burn down.

For many of the members of public, it was their spiritual home; a place where they were baptized, married, gathered for important observances, or said farewell to a loved one. For others?well, it was a spiritual home as well, an embodiment of yet another eternal city, a guidepost, a testament to something that transcended mere time, a monument that had withstood centuries of religious strife, conflict, a handful of revolutions, two World Wars, and ongoing civil unrest.

And, with a spark, almost all was lost.

At the point of this writing, the outer walls of the cathedral, including its iconic towers, appear to be safe. Given the destruction within, it's something of a comfort that these landmarks will continue to be a beacon of sorts to generations to come, but the loss inside is

incalculable.

My thoughts are with all Catholics and all French people, said French President Emmanuel Macron in a statement as the fire raged. Like all of our compatriots, I am sad this evening to see this part of us burning.

It is important to note that the President did not say, a part of the city, or a part of our history. It is, indeed, a part of us. No matter where the upper branches in our family tree first sprouted, threads of our collective consciousness could be found inside.

If you are a member of the Catholic faith, the connections don't need to be stated, but the relics protected in what was once Notre Dame, from the purported relics of Christ to the incomparable works of art, are something each and every one of us could relate to in our own way.

On a personal note, I just wish I had a clearer picture on just what this personal connection was.

When I visited Paris in 2007 on an extended stopover on the way back from elsewhere, I had the pleasure of staying at a youth hostel in the heart of the city. Certainly not purpose-built, the hostel was built into the solid stone walls of a conglomeration of historic buildings, each with a story to tell.

My arrival at the hostel was not auspicious.

At first, my reservation seemed to have gone astray. Then, once found and a room assigned, my battle-scarred suitcase gave up its will to live on the fifth flight of my six flight trip to my bedroom, leaving two months worth of clothes streaming down a flight or two and once finally settled in I felt like I was almost on autopilot: aware of my surroundings, conscious of the fact I had a whole new city to explore, but slightly detached from it all.

As I climbed back down those six flights of stairs, a journey made tricky by a back still a bit angry from the suitcase debacle, I set out to visit one of the places on the top of my list: Notre Dame.

Being slightly dazed from the long journey, I don't remember much of what happened next, just a feeling.

I opened the heavy wooden gates of the hostel and walked casually, without a map, and definitely with no GPS on my pay-as-you-go flip phone, directly to the cathedral not even

paying attention to the landmarks around me. Yet, somehow I knew instinctively how to get there.

As odd as it sounds, I experienced a peculiar sensation as I walked to Notre Dame that I had been down that path before, many times. But that was certainly not the case.

Once behind its stone walls, I was overcome with that sensation as it intensified: an indescribable feeling that I was back where I had once been, a place that in which I had already spent many hours and had been, in a way that I have not been able to pinpoint, somehow influential to my past.

Elusive as it was, I had hoped to visit once again sometime in the years ahead to see if that feeling was still as potent as it was the first time and, if so, being more conscious of the feeling, whether I would be better able to discern why that feeling was simply so overwhelming.

I wonder how many of you who had been privileged enough to walk under its arches experienced the same thing. Once France rebuilds this testament to our collective heritage, will it be possible to experience it again?

This Easter or Passover, however you observe, it might be an opportunity now to take stock of your spiritual home and the treasures contained within, and make renewed memories of the things you might otherwise pass by without a second glance. If your spiritual home, however you define it, is outside a traditional place of worship, make a special effort to appreciate it.

We all know it can be gone in an instant.