

BROCK'S BANTER: Healing an Open Wound

By Brock Weir

It was a phrase which was on the lips of so many Aurorans on Friday and throughout the weekend, but it is true ? there are no words.

After spending the bulk of Friday watching Aurora United Church be felled by flame, I got back to the comfort of my own home knowing that, rationally, the previous six hours had actually happened but it was almost impossible to comprehend. Therefore, I can't even begin to mention what the parishioners must continue to feel nearly a week after the tragedy.

When the community came together the following day at the traditional Rise & Shine Breakfast, now held across the road at Trinity Anglican Church, there was no doubt this particular dedicated community had risen from the ashes, determined to rebuild and replant their roots.

Yet, the fire itself seemed incomprehensible.

Later that day, the rear of the wreckage was once again accessible. People flocked to survey the damage for themselves. Some brought cameras and smart phones to capture it for posterity. Others brought their kids and, straddling a trench carved into the saturated ground to let the torrents of water still gushing from inside the church's shell flow onto Tyler Street, share memories with their toddlers of milestones celebrated within its now exposed walls.

Despite it all, it still seemed surreal, until a glint caught my eye within a break from the one remaining plume of smoke still billowing into the atmosphere.

Something had caught the light as the bulldozer inched closer to it.

After an uncharacteristically gentle prod by the claw, the object turned very slightly.

It was one of the intricately beautiful railings from the second floor balcony, emerging relatively unscathed before it was dumped unceremoniously into the rubble below.

Suddenly, in my mind at least, my very fresh memories of Friday found a permanent, yet uncomfortable place in my mind.

Outside of one brief trip with my Beaver troop, which was based at Newmarket's Trinity United Church, my first true encounter with Aurora United Church was at a Doors Open Aurora event, courtesy of historian Helen Roberts.

At the time, I marvelled at the bright and open church until I was instructed to look up. There, Ms. Roberts excitedly told the story about how parishioners long since passed had shared their memories of these railings they once thought lost in the mists of time.

Evidently, they captured the imaginations of their resident historians who had spent the most recent decades looking at austere wooden barriers in place to keep those in the flock up in the mezzanine from tumbling into the pews below.

Recent renovations, however, cleared those mists as restoration experts found the original, gleaming cast iron railings encased in the wood panels. After the renovations, they once again took pride of place, this time protected with sheets of Plexiglas for everyone to admire.

And, indeed, it was something I did admire on each subsequent visit. My most recent excursion into the church was for a riveting presentation open to the entire community by Holocaust survivor Leslie Meisels to mark 2013's Holocaust Education Week.

Attended by Aurorans from across the religious spectrum, including a small crowd of boys who were just a few days shy of being confirmed right in the church, it served to embody not only the spirit of inclusivity the church had come to stand for but (selfishly) as I was on duty with camera in hand, I had a perfect excuse to go up and sit directly behind these railings as Aurorans had done since the 1870s ? even if they didn't know it.

As I am writing this, demolition crews are still working on the scene, and the charred railings (including that one gleaming exception) are now in a heap of rubble in the bottom of a shell. By the time this gets to you, they might very well end their days in a dumpster, but I certainly hope not.

The way the community has come together in the aftermath of the fire has been heartening. I attended the 11 a.m. service at Trinity Anglican Church on Sunday and was struck by the open hearts with which they received each displaced parishioner, lending a hand wherever it was needed to help guide the United Church parishioners through the slightly more elaborate Anglican service.

This weekend, and in the week ahead as Easter approaches, has served to remind people exactly what a community is, and what it is there for. We would all benefit from keeping this reminder uppermost in our minds as they begin the process of rebuilding and making fresh memories that will be handed down the generations.

NOW WHAT?

As they rebuild, however, more questions are going to be raised.

As I watched the building burn on Friday, it might seem strange, but one of my first thoughts was, "This really puts some of Aurora's recent squabbles into perspective."

Over the last few months (and let's be truly honest with each other, the last few years and decades), there has been increasing discussions, debate, and bickering over just what should be done with Aurora's Downtown Core.

Aurora's Promenade Plan is intended to provide prescriptions for new builds and planning that would foster not only a sense of community, but an attractive, walkable, community. The proposed Heritage Conservation District, the boundaries for which Aurora United Church fell just short, is intended to preserve a heritage flavour of the community while fitting into the rest of the plans. Most recently, Council approved the Community Improvement Plan, which is ostensibly there to provide some financial supports and incentives to spruce up Aurora's Downtown Core, encourage intensification in the area and, when you get to the bottom line, restore the area to what it once was "the heart of a bustling community."

Of course, not all of these plans were approved unanimously "although the Community Improvement Plan came very close" as some of Aurora's lawmakers professed different visions for Aurora's Downtown Core. At least one has said they do not see any sort of decay in this area, as storefronts are shuttered and businesses struggle.

There have been roundabout debates for almost 13 years on what to do with Library Square, when the majority of the community seems to be on the same page on just what should be done, lest a decision after over a decade is "rushed", and on and on it goes.

Whether or not one can see the decay in the area, or whether or not one recognizes the urgency in moving forward on some of these plans, and some of these constraints, there is one certainty: the heart of the community is no longer in decay, it is not something that can be fobbed off until a sexier new vision comes along, or something that can simmer away on the backburner until the next Council is elected and can take all the glory.

The heart of the community now has an open, weeping wound.

It is time to put differences aside, confine politicking to the campaign trail rather than the council table and, if need be, bite the bullet, and get down to business plotting a course of action everyone in a position of power can live with and get behind, not only to revitalize the area, but also help the community at heart, still reeling from the gut punch that was Friday, get back on its feet.