

BROCK'S BANTER: On the outside looking in

By Brock Weir

A shared glance.

A subtle wink.

A short, curt nod.

You see these gestures in everyday life.

Sometimes you might be on the receiving end of these signals and somehow, instinctively, you usually have the tools at your disposal to translate them into some reasonably useful information.

They have spotted the same thing on the horizon.

They are in on the joke.

You have met before.

These tools can often come in handy when observing interactions between others as well.

Then there are other times when these tools fail you.

You are thrown into something ? be it a situation, conversation or another kind of exchange ? where you only have the sum of its parts and can't possibly hope to come anywhere close to holding the whole in your hands.

In this line of work, you can find yourself in situations like these on a fairly regular basis.

You might be talking to a parent who has lost his or her child to war, mental illness, addiction, or a drunk driver, interviewing a family experiencing significant loss, or individuals who have, for one reason or another, and in one way or another, had the rug ripped out from under them and are trying desperately to get back on their feet.

The only people who have any chance of knowing exactly what they are feeling are those who have been in those situations themselves, but you try your best and hope, to the best of your ability, to take it down and package it in a way that can transmit even a fraction of what they are going through to readers.

Last week, I stood off to the corner watching a conversation unfold that, I knew from experience, was impossible to penetrate.

I had the honour to be invited recently to participate in The Note To Self Project, an initiative spearheaded by area photographers to get people in the community thinking about what they would say to their younger selves if given the chance.

The finished product launched at the Aurora Public Library on Thursday night, with readings from just over a handful of participants.

Arriving at the Library, I quickly scanned the room and recognized a great many people who have featured in these pages over the last few years, including two local veterans.

Comfortably seated in a chair was Allen Griffiths, a veteran of the British Royal Navy, who is currently in the second half of his 103rd year. Standing beside him was the equally fit figure of Carl Bedal, a sprightly and spry 91, who served in the Royal Navy's Canadian counterpart, both in the Second World War.

Their conversation was jovial and from a short distance away I could hear they were trading stories, but I knew, at the end of the day, however open they were in their experiences, these were experiences shared by just two men in the room.

What Carl experienced on shipboard and what Allen experienced below the surface on submarines are experiences unfathomable to any of the rest of us; experiences that undoubtedly shaped the nearly 200 years shared between them.

In short, it was a conversation doomed to be impenetrable to everyone else in the room, but invaluable to overhear. Thanks to Note to Self, snippets of these experiences, easily digestible and tenderised by the wisdom of remarkable longevity, are recorded for posterity for all to enjoy.

I had a similar feeling of being just on the edge of an impenetrable conversation last fall in Council Chambers as members of the Royal Canadian Legion and Queen's York Rangers Regimental Council came forward to make their pitch on why the Aurora Cenotaph is the ideal place for a Light Armoured Vehicle deemed surplus by the Department of National Defence, ostensibly to serve as a memorial for those brave Canadians who fell in the Afghanistan conflict.

Those bolstered by the strength of their convictions approached the podium to make their successful pitch, but they were accompanied in the audience by two uniformed veterans of the conflict in question who were, it was argued, unable to speak for or against the issue of the day, lest they be dragged into a political conversation.

It was fascinating to observe these two soldiers as they sat in the audience listening to the conversation unfold. Theirs were, in equal measure, not the faces of passive observers. Their brows were furrowed, their eyes were lowered, their mouths were contorted from

side to side as if biting their lips wanting to say something or perhaps trying to bury a memory ? memories and experiences only understandable to each other.

But, we will never know what was going through their minds.

They were not asked by local lawmakers tasked with making this decision.

Few questions of any import were actually asked at the end of the day.

But, as letters to the editor in recent weeks have proven, it is a conversation that needed to be had and residents were all too eager to talk.

When I first wrote about this issue last fall, one local blog looked cockeyed at my statement there were those in the community with equal passion on both sides of the issue. I feel these letters have bolstered that statement and I am proud The Auroran has been able to serve as a conduit for this important community debate if it was not welcomed in another venue.

You have made a dent in an otherwise impenetrable conversation and we certainly welcome the continued dialogue.