

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 necessarily 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 ranged, 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 America 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 have 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.