

BROCK'S BANTER: See and ye shall find

By Brock Weir

I often wonder how websites and social networks like YouTube and Facebook structure their algorithms to deliver targeted material to their users.

It is a family tradition each Christmas Morning to turn on the CBC before the holiday brunch to hear what The Queen has to say to the Commonwealth and no sooner had I written a Facebook note to that effect than I clicked on a video that showed up in my feed. Lo and behold, along the right hand side of the page was a recommended video: 'The Queen's Christmas Message 1985.' Not only was it themed around something I had written just moments previous, but YouTube also took it upon itself to recommend the broadcast from my own birth year.

Intrigued by this cyber-skullduggery, I clicked and was somewhat surprised at what I heard.

'Looking at the morning newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching television, it only too easy to conclude that nothing is going right in the world,' said Her Majesty, at that this stage in the game still a brunette, sitting at a desk inside Buckingham Palace as snow weighed down the boughs of the trees just outside the window behind her.

'All this year, we seem to have had nothing but bad news and a constant stream of reports of plane crashes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and famine. And, as if natural disasters weren't enough, we have heard of riots, wars, acts of terrorism and generally man's inhumanity to man. It used to be said that no news is good news, but today you might well think that good news is no news.

'Just think of the quiet courage and dedication of the peacekeepers and the rescue workers and all those who work so hard to restore shattered lives and disrupted communities.'

Were it not for our monarch's mention of volcanic eruptions, one of the few calamities 2016 has yet to deliver in any significant way, it is a message The Queen could simply copy and paste into her iPad as she puts the finishing touches on her speech this Sunday.

Three decades has not diminished the message. On the national and international front it is indeed easy to conclude 'that nothing is going right in the world' and, at the moment, we are still seeing the ongoing devastation of wars, terrorism, man's inhumanity to man.

While peacekeepers and rescue workers have never flagged in their work restoring shattered lives and disrupted communities, we now have activists striving to restore democracy, hope and a sense of decency in war-torn, far-flung corners of the world and, sadly, much closer to home where so many of our neighbours fear for their basic human rights in advance of what is set to unfold before the end of next month.

But I have to disagree with The Queen on one point: I don't think the people of 2016 have subscribed to the viewpoint that 'good news is no news.' That might have been the case in the 1980s which, in retrospect, has come to be defined as the 'Me' Decade where 'more was always more.'

On the contrary, I think we are living in a world where, despite the vitality of reporting accurately about the darker deeds going on in the world around us, the appetite for 'good' is stronger than ever.

As I considered The Queen's words, I also considered what might be my favourite 'good' news story of the year.

The first one that came to mind was, on the face of it, not what one would ultimately think of as 'good news.'

Back in March, I was called by local author Marina Nemat to sit in on a roundtable discussion she was holding with Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev, and fellow volunteers from the Our Lady of Grace, who had recently sponsored refugees from Iraq and Cote D'Ivoire.

In between the call and the meeting itself, we experienced one epic snowfall and the refugees, who also attended the meeting, were bubbling over with excitement over their first signs of a truly Canadian winter.

As much as they were bubbling over with excitement, there was a serious issue to address at the meeting: closing service gaps faced by refugees throughout York Region.

Wide ranging deficiencies were identified to Ms. Alleslev and her staff, copious notes were taken, and promises were made to find ways to bridge said gaps. Here and there were opportunities to chat with the recent arrivals in Aurora, some who had an impressive command of the English language while others who spoke eloquently through Ms. Nemat, herself a native of Iran.

Some had clear ambitions, with one girl in her late teens setting her sights on Seneca College while others spoke of their eagerness to join the work force.

On the other hand, there was another woman in the Iraqi group who, at first, seemed to come across a little bit more timid than the

rest. Perhaps she was overwhelmed by the whole experience, but she came to life when she took a fussy baby from the Cote D'Ivoire contingent into her arms.

From the look on Baby Davina's face, the feeling was mutual.

I left the church with my story, which highlighted the challenges, but I also left with the question of whether we would ever cross paths again.

Sponsored individuals often find themselves on the move, whether it is to find employment elsewhere or to move closer to an enclave of immigrants from their home countries have settled to have a stronger sense of support.

Earlier this fall, however, I was sitting near the back of a Viva bus heading north from Finch Station to Aurora, when somewhere just north of Thornhill, I saw this same lovely woman board the bus.

She was travelling alone, perhaps from a newfound job.

Gone was any semblance of the overwhelmed timidity I sensed just a few months earlier. It was replaced with confidence. She was holding her head high, and the sense of personal satisfaction was palpable.

While I had a desire to chat, I kept my distance, in case she remembered me as the guy with the pencil, pad, and audio recorder, possibly looking for an on-the-spot interview!

Instead, I contented myself looking up from time to time, perhaps a bit protectively, but it was something more than that: observing this new Canadian come into full flower.

We both got off the bus at Yonge and Wellington, she heading north in the direction of Our Lady of Grace and I south towards The Auroran.

I felt buoyed that a group in our community could even go halfway towards helping one individual ? let alone two entire families ? achieve this sense of pride and confidence in what have been, at first, to be a very different environment, and the people responsible are just quietly doing what they think is right.

They could be your neighbour, your co-worker, or the person who waits on you in a shop.

They too have the quiet courage and dedication The Queen spoke about three decades ago and they are working in their own way to restore shattered lives and provide a sense of a stable community.

2016 has undoubtedly been a rough year, but there is a lot of good to be found.

I hope you seek and find yours this holiday season and throughout the year ahead.

We'll see you in 2017.