

BROCK'S BANTER: Strengthening the ties that bind

By Brock Weir

Every once in a while in this business you have a week where just about every conversation you have, and every event you attend, can be bound by a common thread.

On Sunday, however, I thought I closed the loop and went to Toronto for an annual lunch commemorating Accession Day, the anniversary of the death of King George VI and, consequently, Queen Elizabeth II's accession to the thrones of the United Kingdom, Canada, and many other countries around the world.

How wrong I was.

Shortly after our salad of very trendy microgreens topped not by croutons, but a donut-shaped butternut squash chip, it was time to raise a glass to Her Majesty.

As we waited for the main course, the woman leading the toast gave plenty of food for thought as she reflected upon this past Monday's anniversary, the 65th anniversary of the Queen's accession and the very first Sapphire Jubilee in the history of the Commonwealth.

It is a historic milestone, and one which coincides nicely with the 150th Anniversary of Canada this summer. In her remarks, she reflected upon the Canadian experience and the Crown's place within it.

?Patriotism can't simply be based on waving the flag or feeling positive about our country,? she said. ?Emotion must be coupled with understanding. We must continue to embody the values of equality, freedom and inclusion. These are not platitudes; they are Canadian principles. We are recognized, we are observed, and we are duty-bound to be exemplars of all that is best and most admired in the Canadian Ideal.

?Create a thread in which this nation is woven, coloured with nuances like voices, assembled to compose a melody of what is possible. It requires each unique piece to comprise the whole. It is with the strengths of our differences and unique perspectives that we shall continue to be a country worthy of Her Majesty's realm.?

And, with that, we were back on the thread of the week.

Many Canadians woke up last Monday first learning of the terrorist attack on a Quebec City mosque the night before.

I think it is fair to say that just about every Canadian shared in the horror that such a thing could happen on our soil and opened their hearts to the victims' families and friends left behind.

Suddenly, we were no longer part of ?the other,? watching events unfold in the United States from a lofty perch. We were in the thick of it and it was a shift which permeated the thoughts and behaviours of nearly everyone I encountered.

Within just a few hours, just about every faith community in Aurora and Newmarket was in high gear, organizing vigils and other observances to provide not just a chance to mourn, but facilitate a healing moment for the community. Aurora and Newmarket finalized the details around the same time, but Newmarket's got underway first ? Friday night at the Newmarket Community Centre and Lion's Hall, part of Riverwalk Commons.

The hall was filled to capacity with individuals from of all faiths, all colours, from both communities, and beyond. As I milled about the room, the sadness in the air was, to a very slight degree of frustration, largely directed at the political arena. While representatives of faith groups, politicians and a representative of LGBTQ+ youth were greeted warmly, a pointed remark by the representative of the Or Hadash Synagogue got one particularly resounding round of applause.

?I wish I had a magic wand to make a foolish president wise,? he said.

A few of the individuals who took part in Friday's vigil were also on hand at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Saturday afternoon for our local community vigil, but there were predominantly new faces in the crowd. With those new faces came, I observed, a different air.

It was a less politically charged atmosphere, and noticeably more contemplative and reflective.

Perhaps it can be chalked up to people having that cathartic round of applause the previous evening, or whether a shift of tone can take place in the cold light of day, but the question on people's lips seemed to be: where do we go from here? Frustration was gone, souls seemed to be buoyed in the intervening hours, and resolve was steeled.

Maybe it can also be chalked up to the moving moment near the very start of the Vigil when nine-year-old Omar Mohamed got up on stage to lead the Muslim Call to Prayer.

I have heard the Call to Prayer many times over the years, but there was something particularly moving about hearing it from the mouth of someone so young who, perhaps due to his age, might not be fully conscious of the world we're living in today and how

different it is from the world he entered nine years ago.*

Over the past week, I have seen Canadians united and galvanized in a direction that is becoming increasingly rare.

Some might fear that the worst is yet to come and might let the fear overcome them rather than using it to fuel the fire of forging onward, but to do so would be a costly mistake.

While the iron is regrettably hot, now would be a prime opportunity to strengthen the values so many stressed over the course of the last 10 days to be irrevocably Canadian.

Sunday's toastmaster was right: patriotism can't simply be based on flag waving or a vague sense of shared positivity. There does have to be a true understanding of the ties that bind, a renewal of the values of equality, freedom and inclusions.

?We are bearing witness to a nation that is tearing itself apart, a nation that is losing its unity, a nation that has lost the value of community,? said York Regional Police Chief Andre Crawford at another Aurora event little more than an hour before the Community Vigil. ?We must never forget that that is not us. We must never forget that we, as Canadians, are far better than that.? Everyone at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Saturday were living embodiments of that sentiment. But, we can't take the view that ?we, as Canadians, are far better than that? as a simple statement of fact. Whether we are or not is a debate for another day, but if we want it to be true, it will only be the result of our collective efforts.

*Full disclosure here: upon talking to Omar at the end of the Vigil, I realised he was more precocious than I initially suspected. He was very keen to someday type his name into Google and having this week's front page photo pop up, so I'm simply doing my part!