

BROCK'S BANTER: Who needs a candle?

By Brock Weir

A few years ago, I decided to make the extra effort to do at least one new thing on either New Year's Eve or New Year's Day to conclude or begin the year on a high note.

Occasionally, it works out that I can kill two birds with one stone and continue whatever the new thing is ? whether it is meeting a new person, trying a new experience, or as simple as starting a new book ? so it is perfectly timed to cross the midnight threshold. Either way, it is a good feeling.

This year, however, I decided to revisit something I haven't done in quite some time: battle through the hoards to ring in the New Year with a few million of my closest friends.

The last time I attempted this was New Year's Eve 2006.

As luck would have it, one of my closest friends just happened to be apartment sitting in the Greenwich Village area, so we had an interesting base as we strategized our day.

We didn't strategize very well, apparently.

Our motley group of four had the bright idea of going to see a Broadway matinee that afternoon.

?We'll have lots of time,? we agreed, and set out to see Chicago.

It let out in good time and we still thought we had lots of time, so we decided to hit up a nearby Chinese restaurant for some nosh (it was, after all, New York, and that word seems appropriate) before finding our place in the crowds for some long-haul standing. Big mistake.

By the time we finished whatever we happened to order, Broadway was filled to the brim with revellers and we had to stake our claim the next block over. Unbeknownst to me, there was a ?no backpack? rule at the time (still is) and as I happened to be the only one carrying one, my group turned me into the pack mule and I tried to saunter into the stream of people laden with a bevy of sweaters, snacks, and so forth, to keep our group warm and satiated.

It didn't turn out that way. The cops were quick to enforce the rule, so I was forced to abandon our belongings, wedging the bag between a bus shelter and a Port-O-Potty in the hopes it would survive the melee relatively unscathed, if not aromatic.

In the end, we lost two members of our group as they got swept along with the crowd and the other remnant and myself were stuck back near West 55th Street with the ball of the ball little more than a dot in the distance.

We fared better this year, setting out early, avoiding all matinees, Asian temptations, and any distractions, packed snacks and other survival tools in our pockets, and despite a nightmarish attempt to even get into the stream of people filing through the police crowd control, ultimately ended up in a prime location just four blocks away from the main action.

But, by the time we got to our places, it was only 6 p.m. and, of course, that meant we had a six hour wait to cool our heels in the mild winter evening. That left a lot of time for contemplation.

The sights and sounds of Times Square this time around were very recognizable, but there were very noticeable differences.

In the lead up to the Holiday Season, one of our very own columnists shared her initial plans to also travel to New York City for the celebration, only to scuttle them well beyond the embryonic stage after ISIS released a video their radicals apparently filmed in what was set to become the centre-stage for that evening's party. I wasn't prepared to let them spoil the party, so I continued on my merry way. A couple of hours before I set off to take in the action ? come what may ? I got a text from this individual recommending an extra layer of Kevlar to keep warm.

Thankfully, it wasn't needed.

Compared to the last night of 2006, there was a noticeable change in how long it took to actually get in there. Not only was there an initial crowd control measure carried out by the NYPD at the very entrance where one lined up to get close to Times Square, there was not one, but two security checkpoints, both looking for the same items, both wielding the same metal- and substance-detecting wands, and both prepared to frisk, if necessary.

I got frisked at the second checkpoint, so that was my ?something new? neatly taken care of and I could relax the rest of the evening. By the end of the first hour came the latecomers. Two particularly pushy twentysomething women pushed their way through the crowds on the pretense of finding their mother whom they tearfully claimed to have been separated from. As soon as they reached the group of four twentysomething guys in front of us, any thought of poor mom was thrown out the window.

By the end of the second hour came a trio of young Muslim women who were, in my estimation, in their late teens or early 20s.

They seemed downcast when they first arrived, leading me to wonder if, on a night like this, their hijabs, somewhat concealed by the

fur-lined hoods of their winter jackets, were unjust reason enough for the powers-that-be to subject them to extra scrutiny. As they sat down on the pavement to huddle together and keep warm, their positions on the ground revealed two of them were wearing socks with marijuana motifs. Clearly, these were not the kind of people the NYPD were looking to find, but they obviously had interesting stories to tell!

Once they were warmed up again, they turned out to be the life of the party (probably not attributable to the products they were advertising on their ankles and feet) and, as the hours passed, it was truly like ringing in the New Year with close friends, but on a very large scale. In addition to this fun trio, to my left were new Americans from Spain who had recently settled in Texas before heading north to the party, a couple visiting from Egypt, a young Brazilian family, and a very tall man with a very short partner who were reluctant to say where they were from, but had interesting accents nonetheless.

This Christmas and New Years, our leaders ? the Queen, the Governor General, and Prime Minister ? offered similar messages to Canadians, punctuating their messages with themes of ?compassion, kindness and generosity? (Trudeau), ?compassion, inclusion, innovation and excellence? (Johnston), and ?love, happiness, and light? (Her Majesty).

?There is an old saying that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness,? said The Queen.

With blazing neon lights in Times Square putting Vegas to shame, not to mention the fireworks, and the beams coming out of that Waterford crystal ball, I wasn't able to find much darkness in Times Square, and I hope this sets the tone for the year ahead.

I hope your New Year was bright as well, and the light continues to shine.