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Strengthening and redefining family bonds

I don't know about you, but I've always had a love-hate relationship with Family Day.

Don't get me wrong; I love my family, but a whole day to celebrate it? Taking religion out of the equation, isn't that the one thread related to Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas we can generally all agree on?

Family Day just doesn't have the same gravitas. How could it? A holiday borne out of an election promise by Dalton McGuinty for some extra time off during the winter, a promise which certainly played no small part in his election victory in 2007 just doesn't carry the same heft as a holiday steeped in custom and tradition.

And, let's face it, the name ?Family Day? was not particularly out-of-the-box thinking. At least the August Civic Holiday is backed by our heritage, being formally known in Ontario as ?Simcoe Day? in honour of John Graves Simcoe. Uses of that formal title these days, and chances to underscore Simcoe's influence on the development of what is now the Province, are few and far between.

As Family Day often approached, I'd sometimes laugh to myself remembering a scene from The Simpsons where the Board of Directors of Costington's Department Store are sitting around the table spit-balling potential new holidays to scare up customers and profits.

Executive 1: Okay, people. We need to cook up a new holiday over the summer. Something with gifts, cards, assorted gougables.

Executive 2: How about something religious. We had great penetration last spring with ?Christmas II.?

Executive 3: I know! ?Spendover? like ?Passover.? Less talk, more presents.

Executive 1: No, it's got to be warm and fuzzy. Something like ?Love Day? but not so lame.

Smash cut to The Simpsons family observing ?Love Day? with the same reverence as, say, Canada Day, with Marge excusing herself from the conversation to go out to the front yard to ?dismantle Love Land.? Love Land? Why, a collection of large, mechanical teddy bears in questionable outfits, rubbing bows against violins, presumably to a ?traditional? Love Day song, of course. Even if said observance was born out of committee just a few months before.

Maybe it is that Family Day doesn't have enough years behind it for the development of any significant tradition. People can freestyle it and make Family Day what we want it to be. As I write that though, I realize it is not strictly true, at least for those of us in the newspaper industry.

Almost since the advent of the holiday itself, I have spent the day following a nearly invariable routine. Charging up the camera and all other tools of the trade the night before, it would be off to cover any variety of Family Day events ? often those involving snow and ice.

There is never any shortage of images to capture but, perhaps most importantly, it is the first real chance to get out of our winter hibernation and interact once again, face to face with our neighbours.

These events never fail to underscore the fact that Family Day can be celebrated on the theme of ?family? writ large, well beyond the nuclear unit to a whole community.

Reconnecting with our community family this year is still a way's off. Instead, this Family Day we were, whether we like it or not, closer to our nuclear units than maybe we have ever been before.

Sticking to our households, we have very little choice than to make the best of it. The past eleven months may have been a challenging time for families on many fronts. Perhaps for the first time there was an opportunity for Family Day to live up to its name, or even its intent, and help families reconnect, reconsider the ties that bind, consider new traditions, and find renewed gratitude in family, however you define it.

Not everyone is so lucky.

Over the course of the pandemic, I have often thought that no matter how claustrophobic it might feel to see the same four walls and the same familiar faces day in and day out, we are lucky we not only have that sense of ?family? but also the reality of fellowship.

For the most vulnerable members of our community, opportunities to find this sometimes elusive but invaluable sense of fellowship have become even fewer and further between.

Chances to have a sit-down meal with others beyond our family units was something many of us took for granted, but for others it is anything but. For people in need, community meals facilitated by such organizations as Welcoming Arms, an ecumenical organization churches in Aurora, ON, united by a common mission, have stepped up more than ably to provide this ? as long as circumstances have allowed.

Welcoming Arms, co-founded by Aurora resident Beverley Wood, who died Saturday after a brief illness, successfully made a nearly seamless pivot to make sure stomachs were fed in a drive- or walk-thru format, but what hasn't been able to be retrofitted to our new reality is the chance to foster the face-to-face fellowship that only sitting down together to break bread can offer.

As the light at the end of the tunnel grows ever brighter with vaccination programs being brought back on track, I believe getting these programs back up and running as quickly and safely as possible, and as close as possible to how they were before, should rank high on our collective to-do list for post-pandemic recovery.

The last eleven months have been hard on everybody, but particularly the vulnerable who have been more isolated than ever before.

This Family Day, I was at home with my family, capping the night binge-watching classic programs that never fail to make us smile. I also raised a glass to Beverley not only in honour of our friendship formed over the last eleven years, but the invaluable community bonds she worked tirelessly to promote over her decades of volunteerism.

The idea of celebrating the families we are born with as well as the people we have brought into our circles as ?chosen family? might be a relatively new concept, but it is no less valuable. I hope the number of chosen families facilitated by Beverley and the team she helped assemble over the years brought comfort and joy during this winter celebration.

What a wonderful and enduring legacy she has left behind.