

Can we ban banning things?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

These are increasingly dangerous times. We're witnessing a slow and steady decline into what feels like a state of chaos fed by misinformation, zealotry, and sometimes simply through good old-fashioned but misguided attempts at righting a wrong, resulting in an over correction instead. Worrisome trends across the globe abound, and here closer to home too. Caledon isn't immune. There are no easy answers to any of this but I wonder, despite the obvious contradiction in the statement, whether or not we could start by agreeing to ban banning things?

Banning something is akin to adding fuel to an already roaring fire. When you ban something, it takes away ? or, at least, certainly limits ? the potential for conversation and open dialogue and haven't we all at some point in our lives been taught that open communication and dialogue is the way toward finding mutually agreeable solutions? Of course, the key to open communication and dialogue is not only to speak, but to also listen. I'm seeing less and less evidence of that!

Two recent examples where dialogue is muted include Florida and York Region. One is a kind of unofficial province, with snowbirds and Disney fans, and the other close enough to Caledon to be of concern. In Florida it's book bans and here at home there's talk of banning rainbows.

In Florida, a Bill known as HB1467, demands every book, in every school library or classroom, be vetted by an educational media specialist, someone trained (by whom?) and who has been told to ?err on the side of caution,? when pulling books from shelves. The result? Many school libraries are simply closing their doors altogether meaning no books for students at all. The language of what will be considered acceptable moving forward is described as ?challenging and subjective,? with the working phrase ?harmful to children? left purposefully vague. Given that teachers will be subject to a felony charge if they are found teaching something that hasn't passed through the vetting process AND that ?HB1467 works in tandem, providing the mechanism by which parents or citizens who are censorship-minded can scrutinize school collections for books with topics they disfavor, books they feel are not age-appropriate, or books they feel violate these laws.? you perhaps start to get a sense of the magnitude of the type of book bans that Florida faces in the future.

Combined with troublesome news that Roald Dahl books are being rewritten to remove offensive words (offensive to whom?) and many other authors also facing requests to edit books or have them removed from libraries altogether, banning is fast becoming synonymous with censorship. Are there SOME books and SOME phrases and expressions that are not only outdated but frankly abhorrent? You bet! Does that mean that every work of fiction produced prior to 2023 need now be declared redundant and banned? No. When we know better we do better. How do we know better? By engaging in an open dialogue about what is problematic with some of these stories and/or the language they contain and then exploring and discussing together, what we can learn from them and how we can and must do better now. To do otherwise becomes a true Orwellian exercise in constantly editing even our edits until we edit ourselves out of words altogether.

Speaking of words, for a more local take on things, you may have heard a lot of shouting from our neighbours just to the northeast of us a few nights ago. A Catholic School Board meeting had to be adjourned and the police called because of a group of parents upset about some rainbow stickers. Yup, you read that right. Rainbows are no longer acceptable apparently - especially in the context of their use within the YCDSB as denoting a safe space for LGBTQ2S+ students. Why the controversy now - when the stickers have been in use since 2013? No one seems to know (or perhaps want to admit) that the answer might be, because much like those seeking to ban books in the US, the voices of conservatives (and conservative Christians in particular) are feeling particularly emboldened. In the case of one YCDSB parent, so emboldened they felt they could speak in place of the Pope!

Now, I'm Catholic myself and you may recall I ran as a school trustee. So, I make the following comments with a healthy degree of concern and perhaps some bias too given that I ran on the position of fostering safe, open and welcoming schools, something the eventual winner did not champion. The Pope is by no means infallible but to claim, as the York Region parent did, that ?there are

Biblical reasons why homosexuality is considered a sin regardless of what Pope Francis might think, is the very epitome of emboldened. This same parent also stated, "Catholic schools should not allow transgender or LGBT students to attend." I'm sorry - but what? She knows better than the Pope himself? She practices a faith that teaches tolerance? Ms. X, I might remind you that against much opposition,

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