

The Simple Joys

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I'm tempted to use the word 'we' but the truth is, I've been doing a lot of complaining lately. It's hard not to. There's politics; the pandemic, rising food prices, the pandemic, the chronically underfunded health care system and the underpaid nurses who work there, and the pandemic and??hmmn, maybe I should start over?

My goal was to try not to complain today. I was hoping for a more cheerful column, with a focus on the simple joys. What prompted this retreat from all the bad news of late? As I sat down to write this column, I gazed out at a winter wonderland and couldn't help but smile as a soft, pristine, blanket of white covered every grubby, dead and dirty winter surface. I'm no fan of snow but I was instantly tempted to run outside, lay down on the front lawn and make a snow angel. Sometimes it's the simple joys you must cling to in the most trying of times.

Those of us who have to 'spin the wheel' on those surveys asking for our year of birth will recall fondly when a snow event like the one we saw this past Monday resulted in a 'snow day.' Back in our day, a snow day actually involved SNOW! It meant sleeping in if you were lucky and then 'having the entire day OFF school.

It meant front doors opening around 9 a.m. and the streets filling up with kids bundled up in more clothes than Ralph's little brother from A Christmas Story. Toboggans were dug out from basements or storage rooms and, one year, I recall there was so much ice we were able to skate (with actual skates on) up and down the sidewalk. You know what we DIDN'T have to do? Online learning.

I can't keep it all straight these days. Whether it's called synchronous, asynchronous, virtual learning or e-learning 'what I do know is that on the days it snowed there was NO learning to be had, except perhaps learning the hard way that when your wool mittens got wet they stunk and your hands got cold. Frankly, that kind of learning was ok once in awhile and I don't think it did any of us any harm. The truth is we don't even have to go that far back in time to recall the pure joy of snow days. My own kids have already, or are just about to, squeak past the teen years and enter their twenties, but living where we do, there were often extra 'snow days' because of the bussing situation.

While there was some limited access to teachers posting homework assignments online, for the most part, as in my own youth, my kids embraced the snow days as a chance to slow down, regroup, get outside and toboggan on the local hill and then drink hot chocolate and enjoy some downtime. I fondly recall the joy as the school tweets and breakfast TV shows announced school and bus cancellations, even if it impacted my workday and made scheduling a challenge. Who wants to work on a snow day anyway? I couldn't help but get caught up in their excitement for a day off school.

You know what children have these days? More 'learning opportunities.' On what would have been a snow day in the past, they now have a chance to sit online, in front of a computer, doing schoolwork while the snow falls outside. We have many outdoor community rinks to skate on (thanks Town of Caledon and community supporters) but no kids to skate on them because teachers are being asked to pivot on a moment's notice and go online to teach instead of the kids taking a day off.

We talk about the importance of children's mental health and, in fact, this was one of the driving forces behind sending kids back to school in the middle of yet another rapidly escalating COVID variant. Our health care system is overwhelmed, again, and yet when provided with a prime opportunity to get children outside doing something fun, creative and physical (like building snow people, sledding and skating) we yank their snow-filled smiles and expectations back down to earth and attempt to harness that energy into focussed attention on a Google classroom site.

What 'exactly' was wrong with the simple joy of a snow day? I would think getting outside, playing and actually being able to connect with friends (I think the outdoors is still safe to gather) would help to promote good mental health and wellbeing. In fact it does.

If you Google mental health for children one of the first things that pops up is the importance of getting active. You'll also find advice on being aware of how much screen time they're experiencing and ways to reduce it along with the suggestion that physical activity is an important tool to promote good sleep hygiene; healthy eating, manage stress and in boosting confidence. Play IS important to mental health and goodness knows our children need all the support they can get after living all this time in ?unprecedented times.? The haphazard plan for a return to school is one I was not comfortable with, nor is it a ?one size fits all? solution to fix children's mental health. In fact, I would argue doing so while kids are still at significant risk for contracting COVID is even less helpful to their overall state of wellbeing. So, the very least we could do on a day where traffic ground to a halt and better than 40-50 cm (or more) of snow fell overnight and into the morning ? is give the kids a chance to get outside and enjoy it!

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