

## A basketful of creativity and wonder

by BROCK WEIR

A lot can happen over the course of a week ? and the impact of all the myriad possibilities sometimes hits differently depending on where you are.

Spending 10 days staying with friends in the United States recently was an interesting experience. We've become accustomed over the last year-and-a-half to waking up in the morning and girding our proverbial loins before taking in all that may have happened overnight, including unhinged late-night verbal diarrhea from people old enough and smart enough to know better.

Being inside the equally proverbial beast when these rumblings happen is an altogether different story.

Here at home, these rumblings can completely upend the news cycle, with pundits being called in to weigh whether each bowl of word salad is an existential threat to this nation. On the other side, however, it felt like this was simply water off a duck's back, or ?just one more thing we have to deal with today. It will be something new tomorrow.?

Some of our domestic issues hit differently as well.

A couple of days before we were due to hit home, we were at an unusual park. Designed to look like a boomtown that would not have been out of place during the California Gold Rush, or any number of once bustling hamlets that remain as little more than ghost towns, it's a place that has been used as a filming location for scores of westerns over the last 80 years.

Once the film crews ?get out of Dodge?, the quaint storefronts give way to an eclectic group of businesses, including restaurants, a petting zoo, and, more often than not, individual, independent shops showcasing the works of dozens and dozens of artisans, including Indigenous creators.

I couldn't help but find the irony in the fact I got a ping about Doug Ford discouraging university students from ?picking basket weaving courses? in their post-secondary careers in a place where the humble act of weaving ? wicker, fabric, and otherwise ? was very obviously anything but a dying art!

At the heart of the issue are changes announced by the Provincial government that will reduce the scope of the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) that will see the amount of support available for students dramatically cut, with the maximum grants now standing at a maximum of 85 per cent being cut to 25 per cent.

?In order to protect our province, it's imperative that we continue to train a strong, highly-skilled workforce for Ontario for decades to come,? said Ontario Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence, and Security Nolan Quinn. ?Through these changes, including \$6.4 billion in new funding for the post-secondary sector, our government is not only ensuring the sustainability of our colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes, but also preparing our graduates with the in-demand skills they need to meaningfully find good-paying, rewarding careers, while continuing to keep education accessible and keep costs down for students and their families.?

Changes, they say, will help prepare students for in-demand careers that meet labour market needs, preserve students' ability to ?access high-quality post-secondary education, while supporting their ability to appropriately invest in their education and success,? and provide long-term sustainability for the post-secondary sector.

?Federal changes have significantly reduced international student revenues and the Province is also facing increased domestic demand for higher-cost programs and a financial aid program (OSAP) that is dramatically out of line with other jurisdictions,? the Province said. ?To ensure the Province's world-class institutions continue to produce one of the most competitive world-class

institutions continue producing one of the most competitive workforces in the G7 for generations to come? a stronger, more sustainable OSAP system will ensure financial assistance remains available for future generations while supporting students' appropriate investment in their education and success.

?To strengthen the long-term sustainability of OSAP and bring it in line with other provinces, Ontario students will be eligible to receive a maximum of 25 per cent of their OSAP funding as grants and a minimum of 75 per cent of their funding as loans. OSAP will no longer offer grants to students at private career colleges, in alignment with changes made by the federal government to its own student support funding.?

Opposition pushback to the plan was swift and continued into this week, with Opposition Leader Marit Stiles stating the cuts will make it harder for students and families to get by and further marginalize students that are already facing barriers.

Pushback to the pushback was also swift from Premier Ford.

?You have to invest in your future, to in-demand jobs,? he said. ?I'm not one to say, ?You're picking basket-weaving courses and there's not too many baskets being sold out there.' Go into healthcare, go into the trades, go into the jobs of the future. Focus on STEM ? Science, Technology, Engineering and Math ? those are where the jobs are.?

Now, basket-weaving has always been low-hanging fruit for people who want to make a point as the occupation and hobby has certain connotations that are thankfully largely outmoded, but the fact basket-weaving once again found itself in the crosshairs of politics is part of what I believe is a larger issue.

Careers in STEM ? outlined by Ford as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math ? are, of course, key in our collective futures, but I much prefer the acronym STEAM as it includes Arts in the equation.

Whenever education funding comes into question, it almost always seems like the Arts and related subjects are the first on the chopping block, or, at the very least, the first subjects mooted to me less impactful and less valuable than the others ? and that's far from the case.

One only has to look at the outpouring of love that followed the sudden passing of Catherine O'Hara recently for just one example of how the arts have significant impacts on our lives, and impact us all in different ways ? especially when homegrown artists are given the opportunities to flourish, no matter what their chosen media might be.

It is, of course, vitally important to support students choosing to go into those in-demand jobs, that's just common sense, but we also have to keep in mind that in our rapidly evolving world and the alarming proliferation of Artificial Intelligence in just about every facet of our lives, what might be an in-demand job today could be among the once-hot occupations advertised by Sally Struthers in the 1990s on behalf of International Correspondence Schools. Think VCR Repair, Learning the Personal Computer, and Gun Repair.

Many examples of existing art have been used to feed the beast and ?teach? AI how to create. But what comes out the other side is by no means a matter of creativity.

There will be no substitute for the creative human minds around us, and the beauty and joy they bring to the world.

Are they in-demand jobs today? Maybe, maybe not. But tomorrow, in the next year, and in the next decade, it might be a very different story.