

Accentuating the positive in now-unexpected places

Sometimes I can be a bit negative about certain topics in this space.

Over the last 12 years or so writing this column, I've registered my fair share of dismay on various issues municipal, provincial, and federal.

There have been a few pieces of constructive criticism levelled at various leaders at all three levels of government over the last decade-plus. I've bemoaned the seemingly inescapable growth of echo chambers and their inexplicable yet still somehow explicable popularity over the same time period. The same can be said of the growth in the anti-populations when it comes to social movements that were, at the start of this writing period, seen as relatively benign, and now the subject of purely performative protest theatre in aid of a larger cause.

As much as I have spoken of my dismay on some municipal, provincial, and federal decisions, as well as the individual decisions taken by elected leaders and members, I've always tried to strike a balance between warranted criticism and giving credit where credit is due.

The credit has been spread to all levels of government, where applicable, as well as the leaders that made it happen.

This week, as much as I have bemoaned the seeds of negativity that social media has helped nurture into full bloom, regardless of platform, I want to take this opportunity to once again give credit where credit is due.

During the month of June, for example, we have been bombarded with negative messages related to Pride, most of which have no root in reality. Residents, regardless of age, have been attacked for who they are, and for their efforts to create inclusive spaces for themselves and their peers. They have been on the receiving end of slurs, disparagement and, in the case of some York Catholic School Board students this month protesting the denial of the Progress Flag in their places of education, had, according to recent letters to the editor from protest organizers, even experienced physical violence.

Pride does not have the exclusive monopoly on being at the wrong end of the barrage.

Anyone who has the courage to fly their political stripe online as high as a Pride flag do so at their peril these days. Even those who dare to ask an innocuous question on an innocuous subject are subject to the same treatment, either mocked for asking something that appears obvious to the reader, given oh-so-helpful suggestions on how to use Google, or otherwise abused for having the temerity of curiosity.

So, as I waited for a flight to New York on Thursday, I approached one thread from a 'What's Happening?' Facebook group serving a neighbouring community, which popped up on my feed with little to no explanation.

'What's the best park to sleep in?' was the question that kick-started the thread.

Now, as far as questions go, it was fairly open-ended, but, like so many issues, the simplest of answers could cause the entire works to slip a gear.

There's the process the reader has to go through to determine whether or not it is a genuine question or one simply posted to stir debate and bring out the best and worst in people.

There's the question of whether the original poster was unhoused (most likely) or perhaps looking for some camping recommendations in a way that should be worded clearer. (less likely)

Given the ongoing debates in our communities (and, indeed, in cities like Toronto during its most recent mayoral election campaign which swept Olivia Chow into the city's top job) on the survival or removal of encampments, their necessity, and how they might impact the most ironic of all factors, property values, you also need to consider whether you or not you actually want to wade in to all the muck that might be ahead of you.

With about 40 minutes to chill before the flight, I braced myself and waded into the anticipated muck.

But what I found within was not what I had expected.

One of the first responses out of the gate was a suggestion of the gazebo of a popular area green space which was not only obviously sheltered but close to public washrooms. A great suggestion for someone who is unhoused, particularly in the short-term.

Another poster, a former resident of the community in question, tagged a number of their friends who still live there asking for suggestions on where they could be, noting in their post that had they still lived nearby they would offer the use of their couch.

One of those innocuous questions led to a brief barrage, but all was not as it appeared.

?Why do you need a park to sleep in?? asked the apparent offender, prompting the original poster to reply, ?Cause I have no where to go,? and a further explanation that their question was not a criticism but trying to find out whether they would be in need of housing, shelter, and even to clarify whether posters were missing the point of the original question.

Some branded that initial question as out-of-line, rightly pointing out that the whys and the wherefores are really nobody's business, but that too eventually evolved into a wave of support.

So, as much as social media's ills have made themselves known in recent years, I was pleasantly thrilled that a question such as this, especially in the middle of an inarguable housing and affordability crisis was met with fellowship, understanding and warmth.

Perhaps it's a comment on the state of social media overall that reading messages like these, positive in the face of an extreme negative and responding as one would like to be responded to was surprising. Looking back, it was much more of the norm rather than an exception so relatively recently.

And it was heartening that people of different circumstances could still speak to each other with kindness, understanding and, above all, respect.

More of that, please.