

An opportunity for personal and collective reflection

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

The pandemic has been rough on all of us, some being sadly impacted more adversely than others. If we look hard enough, however, there are silver linings to be found.

As the light at the end of the tunnel we've been told so much about continues to grow ever-brighter, we are looking towards what that future might entail.

We will likely be coming into the latest edition of our new normal with a re-discovered appreciation for our entire force of frontline workers ? from doctors and nurses to mail carriers and grocery store employees ? with a very clear idea on what they sacrificed of themselves, and continue to do so, for us.

Those of us who are lucky enough to work from home, although it can feel trying here and there, might emerge with a renewed appreciation of how fortunate we have been with four walls to keep us safe and warm during these challenging times.

As such, we might also emerge with a new understanding of our neighbours.

Where it was once commonplace to have close bonds with the people who live on your street, opportunities to get to know the people around you were once few and far between as we all went about our busy day-to-day lives. Over the last 16 months, they have not just been your neighbours, but the ones who organized neighbourhood food drives to benefit those experiencing food insecurity. They are the ones who have dusted off their sewing machines to churn out incalculable non-medical masks. In my case, there were even some talented teens the next street over who kept their creative muscles flexed by holding distanced driveway concerts to benefit food banks. And I'm sure you each have your own examples in your respective neighbourhoods.

This week would have ordinarily been one of celebration, commemorating the 154th anniversary of Canada's Confederation, but present circumstances have resulted in observances being noticeably muted or cancelled altogether. And, of course, as we know, not just due to COVID.

The fact that Canada Day festivities in many communities across the country are being cancelled altogether speaks not to our health circumstances, but the tragic crossroads we once again find ourselves at as a nation.

Perhaps there's another silver lining coming out of the pandemic: No longer can any of us claim that we don't have time enough to pause, reflect, and focus on how we can move forward together.

The fact that the recent discovery the graves of 215 children at the former Kamloops Residential School underscored an overall lack of education on residential schools as well as the comparative lack of work in fulfilling the 94 Calls to Action coming out of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission, should have been an alarm bell of its own. The even more recent re-discovery of 751 further graves near the former Marieval Indian Residential School in southeast Saskatchewan has served to amplify that bell for anyone who has found comfort in the adage of ignorance being bliss.

?As Indigenous peoples, we knew there would be more ?discoveries' now that we had access to the ground-penetrating radar technology that would help us search the lands where our old ones have told us children were buried,? said Lori Campbell, Associate Vice President of Indigenous Engagement, for the University of Regina. ?Even so, I didn't know that any of us could have prepared ourselves for what was to come with the recent announcement from Chief Cadmus Delorme of Cowessess First Nation.

?Four years ago, I was told by my old ones that things are going to get much more difficult for Indigenous peoples before they will get better. I do not know if this was what they were speaking of, but I do know that Saskatchewan had the largest number of children in residential schools and as the ground penetrating radar searches continue throughout the province and across Turtle Island, it is clear we all are facing a very difficult journey ahead.

?As I keep my smudge burning, my prayers go out to Chief Delorme, members of Cowessess First Nation, others who have close ties with Marieval Residential School, and Indigenous communities and nations across Turtle Island as we collectively grieve and come together to support one another. It is because of the undeniable strength and perseverance of our ancestors that we are here to answer the calls of the children who never stopped calling out.?

Now is our time to call out as well.

As much as there has been inaction on the Calls to Action, one specific call was answered last week with amendments to Canada's Oath of Citizenship to include oaths to the treaty rights of our Indigenous peoples, receiving Royal Assent.

?Canada's Oath of Citizenship is more than mere words. It is a public declaration of belonging,? said Marco Mendicino, Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. ?It is an acknowledgement of newly-gained rights and newly charged responsibilities. It is a commitment to Canada ? past, present and future.?

?The new Oath of Citizenship recognizes that Indigenous rights are both enshrined in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and that they derive from Indigenous peoples' presence on this land since time immemorial.?

The new Oath of Citizenship is as follows:

I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada, including the Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the Aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples, and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen.

A tradition in so many community gatherings to mark an ordinary Canada Day is to stand shoulder to shoulder and take advantage of the opportunity to recite the oath as a reaffirmation of the principles contained within it.

As we stay distanced for yet another July 1, it is a shame that this simple yet all-important change to an oath, which is so important to our national fabric, cannot be stated as a collective ? even in a symbolic gesture of moving forward together on the same path.

Perhaps you will take a moment to reaffirm this Thursday even if there is no one around to watch. I know I will.