

Bill Rea ? Another summer?s come and gone

There was a cartoon strip I saw more than 40 years ago.

If memory serves, it was in Mad magazine. It depicted a young boy and girl engaged in that time-honoured summer vacation activity of doing nothing (having been a kid once, I spent many summer hours in that pursuit). The girl was complaining that summer vacation was nothing but a bore, and she could hardly wait for school to start again. The boy, being a typical boy of his time (I ought to know), naturally wondered if the girl was out of her mind. She pointed out that at least while they were in school, kids had something to look forward to.

?Like what?? the boy demanded.

?Summer vacation,? was the reply.

School kids are back in school this week.

I've never been a parent. So speaking as an adult, I can only come at this annual happening from two ways.

As a community newspaper editor, I look forward to getting back to the regular routine. As monotonous as they can sometimes be, I do miss the regular regime of council meetings and other political events that always wind down during July and August.

But there is also the point of view of a big person with a good memory of what it was like to be a kid. And I do remember many of the things that happened during the 19 years that the system was trying to educate me at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels. There are lots of good memories, and plenty of bad ones too. And there are the vast majority of recollections of things that are just routine. Some of the teachers were pure inspirations, and others one would prefer to forget. And others have grown in my estimation as time has gone on.

I still remember returning from lunch one afternoon in Grade 1, and Miss Late spending part of the afternoon drilling into her charges the nuances of the words ?could,? ?would? and ?should,? with particular emphasis on making sure we didn't forget about the ?L.? And I remember the day in Grade 8 when Mr. Hocevar hammered into us the difference between the words ?stationary? and ?stationery? (as lousy a speller as I am, I can't recall any time I've messed up on either of those two words).

There are lots of other examples, like the day the same Mr. Hocevar strolled about the classroom brandishing a wooden cubic-foot box that had been sitting on his desk for some weeks, outlining various geometric facts (math was the man's specialty). I'll bet you didn't know that a cubic foot will hold 6.25 gallons of water (or beer).

Please don't ask me how I remember such stuff. I just do.

Need an anchor for your Trivial Pursuits team?

But I also remember the carefree times of being on summer vacation, even if it involved a lot of doing nothing. I've always counted it as a factor of luck that the first moon landings happened in July, when I was able to watch it all without having to worry about school the next day.

It wasn't all idleness, however. The days of stay-at-home moms were not quite history, and my mother had the time to drag me for swimming lessons. The word ?drag? is only a little appropriate. I rather enjoyed it, and became a pretty good swimmer in the process.

And speaking of things to look forward to, there was the family summer trip. My dad always took his vacation the last two weeks before school started, and we always went to a fishing camp on Lake Nipissing. My old man was heavily into fishing, as were his two sons (at least in their formative years). Mom kind of went along for the ride, although she was no slouch when it came to baiting a hook. She also liked the fact that the leaves would start changing colour while we were up there.

We always used to come home the Sunday of Labour Day weekend, leaving Labour Day itself to go to the Exhibition.

That whole routine, of the long drive north, fishing (occasionally a successful exercise, and there are pictures of me holding the 6.5-pound pike I caught when I was eight to prove it), cruising about the lake in the boat, swimming in the lake, the long drive home (my dad smoked and wouldn't allow any windows to be opened because he didn't like the draft ? fathers were allowed to get away with such things in those days), ordering in Chinese for dinner the night we got home (a vacation tradition my wife and I still observe to this day) and going to the Ex. When I was a kid, these all added up to the end of summer vacation, and the advent of another school year.

Kids dread this time of year, just as I did when I was a kid. Having never been a parent, I can only imagine the feeling of relief I would have at a time like this. Parents don't have to worry about finding things for their kids to do. Mothers don't have to drag their kids to swimming lessons, the way my mother did, any more. But there has been that other time-honoured tradition of mothers going through the stores to buy some of the most God-awful stuff imaginable for their kids to wear to school. I remember some of the God-awful stuff my mother dressed me in.

Like I stated above, I look at this time as an adult who remembers what it was like to be a little kid, and a big kid too.

As I got older, I came to look forward to the start of the school year.

I think I reached the stage that I couldn't wait to get out of the summer jobs and get back to class.

And after university, I spent two years waiting tables before deciding to get into journalism school. Those last two years of learning were probably the happiest I spent in school.

Perhaps the explanation is a matter of simplicity ? the closer the adult responsibilities get, the more attractive school seems. That's probably the main reason why I'm envious at this time of year. It reminds me of a time when I had to answer to dumb teachers rather than dumb bosses, when I didn't have to worry about paying phone and cell phone and hydro bills, when the words ?income tax? were meaningless words my parents spoke to each other at a certain time of the year.

As well, summer vacation is not an easy time for people in my line of work. People who I am normally able to get in touch with easily are sometimes unavailable, because they are away on their own vacations. I don't like bothering people under such circumstances, having received a couple of work related calls on my cell when I was up north early last month (I have to say that without exception, the people calling me were most understanding when they realized they had caught me in my downtime).

So now the kids are back in the regular routine of school, and the rest of us are back in the regular routine of doing what we do to make a living.

Yes, the change is always nice, but so is addressing the stuff we're used to.

But there are always little differences. Remember, we have elections to look forward to next month

