

Bold steps and asking the right questions

by BROCK WEIR

Early in my career covering politics and politicians, I found myself at the end of a very long phone conversation. Actually, it was more of a lecture than anything else.

Oddly enough, this conversation had little to do with the topics covered within these pages more than a decade ago; rather, it was related to a comment made in the politician's off-duty hours on social media.

It was a post in which they made derisive remarks on a provocatively-named march to draw a line under rape culture, as well as to fight and combat both victim blaming and victim shaming.

The point of the event in their missive was boiled down beyond any form of recognition as one of 'foolish girls' going out in body-bearing outfits 'demanding men look the other way.'

Well, as anyone who has participated in the 'SlutWalk' can attest, that point couldn't have been further from the mark.

The walk itself was established in 2011 following a campus rape at a GTA university where a member of the Toronto Police Service controversially told students at Osgoode Hall Law School that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized' - seeming to place the onus on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The walk was therefore a push-back on this tired trope and gained significant momentum.

However, when I brought up its purpose in our conversation, the politician in question was having none of it.

Perhaps they were a visual learner, but their opinion was formed solely on the basis of how participants were dressed rather than what spurred it, or even the very basic message they were trying to underscore.

Facts played precious little role in their opinion, and it was a position that was reiterated every time a Walk appeared on the horizon.

Myopic as it was, perhaps it was an easier, if unfortunate, attempt to compartmentalize a very heady issue - but, sadly, a learning opportunity was lost because they didn't want to scratch the surface or ask very important questions.

Although this interaction took place more than a decade ago, it feels we've made precious little progress in opening up true lines of dialogue. Enough ink has been spilled in this space bemoaning how, in the realm of the 'social', people revel in echo chambers, either blocking, ignoring, or pushing back any contrary opinions, whether or not said opinions are rooted in fact.

It wasn't all that long ago that when you had questions about something, the first course of action might be to ask them and seek answers, and maybe try to put yourself in their shoes to fully understand. Rather than asking, it seems that the more common course is to seek out information that reaffirms what you feel to be true rather than what is actually true. (It's great when what you feel aligns with facts, but gears, from what I've seen and experienced, are quickly shifted when that alignment is just a little bit off.)

But taking the time to ask questions or walk a mile in the shoes of others is becoming a lost art.

'It's easy for you to say, asking questions is basically your job,' you might say - and, basically, that is true - yet how often have you flexed those muscles recently?

In the last municipal election - or, heck, the last provincial or federal election, for that matter - how many of you took the time to

ask questions about issues that concerned you when candidates came a-knocking?

How about newcomers from other parts of the world? How many make assumptions about why an individual has come to Canada without taking the bold step of enquiring about any part of their life's journey to get to this point?

Once again, a huge opportunity missed for both understanding and perspective.

Recently, I recalled the debate surrounding the construction of a McDonalds restaurant and drive-thru at a plaza that was then under construction. About 100 metres from a subdivision that had been built nearly 10-years before, some opposition at the podium included the view that the iconic arches shouldn't be built so close to a community because 'teens' would 'congregate' there.

As if that was a bad thing in and of itself, and completely discounting the fact that many members of this oft-maligned demographic get their first jobs at these places.

Any questions to your friendly neighbourhood teen on why they might be standing in that Golden glow? Congregation was enough.

In recent months, we've seen the unhoused in the City of Toronto kicked out of encampments by police when they simply have nowhere to go ? a blanket response to an issue without understanding any of the nuances that lead to homelessness ? spending significant tax dollars on policing when an adequate investment in social problems might prove more than a band-aid solution.

Those of us lucky enough not to be in desperate, immediate need of a roof over one's head can often, consciously or otherwise, have a perception of what homelessness is, and how one can find themselves in such a situation.

Some might immediately, and unfortunately, chalk the situation up to mental health issues. Relevant in some instances, but not all. Some might chalk it up to a tangle with the law. While that might be the case with some, chances are they're in the minority. Others might shirk away out of fear that with just a small change of circumstances that too could be 'them'.

So many preconceived, often erroneous notions, that could be dispelled and cleared up with just a few simple questions.

On Saturday, an Ontario Superior Court decided in a case involving the Region of Waterloo that the municipality did not have the right to evict the unhoused from encampments, stating that doing so infringes on the individual's Charter right to security and liberty of the person, and Waterloo's bylaw to clear the space was 'inoperable' while 'the number of homeless individuals in the Region [exceeds] the number of accessible shelter beds.'

Following what could be a precedent-setting decision for municipalities across the Province, it's time to stop painting with such a broad brush and take the steps to really understand the various life-paths, life-changing events, and accumulated small circumstances that can lead to such perilous circumstances.

February is here and our communities are gearing up for Coldest Night of the Year, a family-friendly walk to raise funds for charities serving people 'experiencing hurt, hunger or homelessness' with all proceeds staying local to provide services in the community ? potentially our friends, family, and neighbours past, present and future.

'By walking in the cold, you'll feel a hint of the challenge faced by those experiencing homelessness during winter,' say organizers at CNOY.org.

If questions can be a bit difficult sometimes, how about taking a step in the right direction and walking a mile in their shoes?