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Brightening the gloom

I've never been asked to complete a Proust questionnaire ? you know, one of those surveys of the great and good that typically lands near the back of each month's edition of Vanity Fair magazine.

Popularized by French novelist Marcel Proust, it's often been used as a quick and concise way to get to know someone. Think of it as one of our earliest of the dreaded ?ice-breaker? activities that few have come to love! But, all in all, it's effective and can indeed shed light on what truly makes a person tick.

Among the 20-odd questions that form the basis of the questionnaire popularized by French novelist Marcel Proust, are:

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

What is your greatest fear?

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Which living person do you most admire?

What is your greatest extravagance?

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

What do you most dislike about your appearance?

Which living person do you most despise?

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

When and where were you happiest?

Which talent would you most like to have?

If you could change one thing about yourself, where would it be?

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?

Where would you most like to live?

What is your most treasured possession?

Which historical figure do you most identify with?

Who are your heroes in real life?

What is your greatest regret?

It's a pretty comprehensive list, but I find any time I attempt to mentally tackle the questions, my answers are almost never the same. It often depends on my mood, experiences picked up since the last time answers were attempted, and even sometimes influenced by the time of year. Some questions are hard to answer at any given time, such as, ?What talent would you most like to have?? That's often contingent on whatever hurdles I faced in any particular day.

Answers to three questions, however, often remain the same: #7 ? What do you consider the most overrated virtue? Patience ? if only because mine is usually in short supply, unfortunately; #4 ? What trait do you most deplore in others? Hypocrisy. Oh, and the third? Well, the answer to Question #3 is the same as my answer to Question #4, but I hope that that particular trait exhibits itself only rarely.

Yet, unfortunately, I feel like I have inadvertently been indulging in that more frequently these days.

In this space, and indeed in my day-to-day life, I try to accentuate the positive. Anyone who read this column during the height of the Global Pandemic, for instance, probably got sick of me grasping for silver linings amidst all that chaos, but, hey, somebody had to do it.

But lately, as much as I've been accentuating, I've been feeling gloomy about the state of the world.

We have wars raging in several parts of the globe, with reports coming out of those war zones increasingly dire with each passing day. We're grappling with the double-blow of rampant inflation and a housing crisis, both of which are working overtime to keep many of us from getting ahead in the world, despite our best efforts. We're seeing an environment where discourse over just about any subject is increasingly fraught with metaphorical landmines and rhetoric that, previously heated, is now scalding. We're living in a time where more and more people seem quicker to anger, keener to narrow their perspectives, and hungry to seek out validation for better and, all too often, for worse.

There are few silver linings to grasp there. Yet, last week our communities served up a wonderful tonic.

National Volunteer Week is a chance to highlight all those people who have stepped up to the plate to simply give their time to a cause close to their heart or foster the change they would like to see ? and there's plenty of overlap here.

Here in the newsroom, it always brightens the day when we have the chance to shine a light on person or persons doing good in the community ? whether it's the simple act of shovelling a driveway for someone who can't, or going all in and building the resource to establish a foundation where giving is specialized and can potentially take place in perpetuity.

Last Thursday, for instance, I had the privilege of attending a presentation ceremony for the 2024 Give Back Awards, an initiative of Magna International that presents scholarships to upcoming graduates in York Region recognizing not their academic prowess but rather the ways they have given back to their communities ? whether within the school or much further afield.

This outstanding crop of 20 students have done some herculean lifting in the places they call home, tackling issues ranging from: food insecurity; to period poverty; to international philanthropy; to knowledge-sharing; to fostering invaluable ? and sometimes intergenerational ? human connections at the community, national and international levels; to just lending a hand wherever and whenever it is needed.

Therein was the silver lining: tireless people motivated to make that all-important difference.

As so many problems plague our world, these students have been propelled to step up and foster change wherever they see the need, and in many cases those needs go well beyond our borders.

The 20 students honoured last week is just a small sample of the countless individuals of all ages who are working overtime ? often on their own time and dime ? to build better communities. Having the privilege to learn of and cover all their accomplishments certainly helped lift the gloom I was feeling ? and hopefully derailed future encounters with that unfortunate answer to Question #3.

To all of our volunteers, thank you for all that you do.