

# Cautiously grasping optimistic straws

BROCK'S BANTER

**By Brock Weir**

It is hard not to feel hopeful these days.

Sure, there are many challenges we collectively need to overcome, and there's no use in enumerating them here, but the arrival of this new season has all but made optimism unavoidable.

At this time last year, all our best laid plans for spring were upended. Some of our mainstays, such as the spring home shows which are particularly important for our local businesses, were postponed as organizers looked to retool them for the fall. You know, the autumn of 2020 when we were sure to have squashed the curve by working together in the same direction. Needless to say, that particular kind of autumn never happened.

At this time last year, we were beginning to settle in to what was going to be our state of affairs for what we thought would only be a couple of further weeks, already getting bored with our indoor surroundings, surroundings which some of us failed to give a second thought before, looking for things to do.

As we looked for things to do without going out our front doors, we did so mired in uncertainty: uncertainty over just what we were facing, uncertainty over our jobs and livelihoods, and, of course, uncertainty on whether or not we would wake up the next morning to news that a loved one was embarking on a terrifying health journey, the end of which was equally uncertain and, at worst, unspeakable.

For many of us, it was a matter of living week to week, crossing the days off on the calendar, each day down without a calamity counted as a win.

Now, we have different goalposts.

Although no method is foolproof, we more or less know the basics of what we need to do to stay safe and healthy in our present environment. Job security might still, sadly, be a concern for many of us, but the chances of things changing at a dime without any sort of notice seem much slimmer today. We know what the enemy is ? and, most importantly, know much more about it. With each passing day, we have more and more tools in our respective arsenals to fight the fight, each injection given another stone on the road to a better future.

These thoughts rolled through my mind on a particularly reflective moment on Sunday afternoon.

Walking along a woodsy trail, with green moss underfoot, it was hard not to bask in the renewal all around us. People were coming out of their homes to walk, jog or cycle with smiles wider than I had seen in quite some time. In my pre-COVID, perhaps more jaded days, these beaming grins may have been a cause for alarm, but it has been a long 12 months and quarantine changes a guy. But, I digress.

Gulping in the warm, fresh air, I took a moment to sit down on a weather-beaten log to soak it all in.

A few cyclists passed; a family came by, leaves crunching underfoot while simultaneously camouflaging the slippery and treacherous mud underneath, chattering around what seemed to be an inside joke shared between parents and children, and there were plenty of dogs to coo at as they went by with their owners ? you know, in a way that isn't as weird as it sounds.

And then along came Lyra.

I didn't know her name at the time, but I could hear her coming. Off-leash but well-behaved, with a huff and a puff that might have been an indicator of the number of turns she had taken around the sun, she sidled up with what could only be described as a grin.

Clamoring around my feet, she got herself into prime position for a few gentle pets on the head and, as she did so and I felt her warm fur under my hand, the thought struck that it might also be a year since there was any opportunity to pet a new ?dog friend? encountered on a neighbourhood stroll.

Although I admit I was probably caught off-guard and wasn't completely COVID-conscious in that instance, it was a moment of becoming re-acquainted with a simple pleasure that I had come to miss.

I was buoyed by the experience ? until Lyra revealed her true intentions and, following a few pets, absconded with a fallen branch I had been using for a few kilometres as a makeshift walking stick in the mud, bolting like lightning with it clenched in her mouth and leaving me feeling used. Well, not really, but it was still rude ? and, again, I digress.

For an hour or so with feet meeting the damp earth, there seemed to be, if only for that time, a return to normalcy. We've had similar glimmers over the last few months, but this time a true return to some degree of it seems within reach.

To say that, however, almost feels like tempting fate ? again, it has been a long 12 months ? but we must remain vigilant, one off those words that has become a COVID catch-all, until we're at the finish line.

Despite hope the arrival of spring and an unseasonable weekend warm spell has brought us, the reality is that we're in a third wave and how we rise to the occasion is completely up to us.

In fact, it is incumbent upon us to give this some serious thought.

A recent survey from the Ontario Nurses' Association has revealed troubling statistics from the frontlines, with many nurses and health care workers entering this third wave still reeling from the first and, in many cases, dealing on their own time with PTSD stemming from what they have experienced over the past year.

There is no rest for them as much as we enjoyed the sun over the weekend, feeling gloriously close to the finish line. With the arrival of a third wave any respites that might have been in sight for them recently have moved a bit further out of reach and we must do our part to ensure the finish line isn't moved any further.

Even if it means putting one's guard up to passing pups. Particularly those four-leggers pretending to be your new friends, but are actually brazen and unconscionable confidence tricksters who only had one thing in mind. Give me twelve months. By that time I'll be over my late, lamented walking stick.