

Celebrating Knowledge ? ?Useless? and most likely otherwise

By Brock Weir

Useless knowledge was my stock-in-trade from a very early age.

I'm not sure where it came from; it's just the way it was.

Personally, I blame television.

My early onset passion for ?I Love Lucy?, for instance, resulted in an overabundance of cultural references far beyond my years becoming lodged into my so-called grey cells.

When I was seven or so, while flipping channels, I happened upon Bob Hope's latest self-produced tribute to himself; here, the star-studded cavalcade saluting his 90th birthday kicked things into overdrive and the next day at school I was able to have somewhat fluent conversations with my peers about the likes of Bing Crosby, Dorothy Lamour and Ethel Merman ? except these conversations with my peers were decidedly one-sided. They had no idea who these people were and I got the impression they had no interest in knowing, either. Maybe things have changed!

Nevertheless, the factoids collected along the way remained firmly in place.

As far as knowledge goes, nothing is ever truly useless.

It allowed me to smoke my peers in our elementary school computer lab playing ?Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego??. emerge victorious in our living room during the nightly Jeopardy viewing, and maybe even gain just a little bit more comprehension as a budding news junkie.

Beyond that, however, there was very little outlet to put such ?useless? knowledge to good use.

That is, until high school, when one finally presented itself: our small but hopefully mighty Reach for the Top team!

Finally, I thought, this was my time to shine ? after all, those who regularly competed against me each night in the at-home quiz show stakes were quite often left in the dust. At that first meeting of the team I at last found my people ? and the stark reality that amongst ?my people? the depth of my well of useless knowledge was much shallower than I thought?and was middling at best. Alas!

It was nevertheless wonderful to be amongst fellow youths who somehow picked up along the ensuing decade that iconic musician Louis Armstrong's nickname was ?Satchmo?, that actress Lana Turner was known in her prime as ?The Sweater Girl? (the reasons why she was known as such being apparently too hot for our young minds), and that ?Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again? is the opening line of Daphne Du Maurier's classic novel, ?Rebecca.?

Yet for whatever reason, I found this once-smouldering interest in the seemingly useless cooled over time. I outgrew ?Carmen Sandiego,? my ?Jeopardy? viewing fell by the wayside, and by the time I got to university, the ?trivial? seemed just that.

Mysteriously though, I found the pendulum swinging back to the beginning at the start of the global pandemic.

Housebound just like everyone else, the usual stuff I would do at night after work ? going out for dinner, going to the gym to burn it off, you name it ? was unavailable and with little else to do but turn on the tube almost as soon as I turned off the computer, I found myself stuck in the quicksand of the Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy block ? and, much to my surprise, I couldn't have been happier

about it.

In fact, it happened just in time; not only was I able to catch the last episodes recorded by the late, great Alex Trebek, but I was able to join in the excitement felt by so many viewers when champs like Matt Amodio, Amy Schneider, and our new homegrown champ Mattea Roach hit their strides with their prodigious (and far-from-useless) knowledge and their deceptively cunning game strategies.

We collectively rooted for them as their winnings added up and they broke down barriers, we celebrated their triumphs and, when their time came to pass the torch to another champ, we were sad to see them go but grateful they were part of our lives ? at least for 30 minutes each weekday.

But what was especially heartening, at least for me, was seeing people's joy as they too enjoyed the contestants' respective rides, revelling in individuals who were excelling not on the sports field, not in the political arena, in some sort of intangible celebrity, or even as ?influencers.? It was simply and beautifully a celebration of their knowledge.

Over the last decade or so there has been, in my view, a strange cloud descending over the value of and appreciation for knowledge.

Before I found my middle-road place on Reach for the Top, for instance, I couldn't help but roll my eyes at some of the voters in the 2000 US Presidential Election who proudly said they cast their ballot for ?the guy they'd like to drink a beer with? rather than the guy with the demonstrated know-how.

On home turf a few years after that, a view appeared to rise to the top that if you had a certain level of higher education (often just above high school), had a certain job based on that education, or even lived in a certain part of the country regardless of education, you were somehow ?elitist? and removed from the ?every day.?

Most recently, we have seen a sad pushback against highly educated scientists, doctors, nurses, and other experts helping to safely steer us through a global pandemic in favour of self-described ?experts? in various platforms who did little more than validate rather than inform.

Then, of course, we're seeing more and more individuals who are less inclined to believe what they see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears rather than what their favourite talking heads are telling them.

What a refreshing change it was to see so many people backing the likes of Mr. Amodio, Ms. Schneider, and Ms. Roach and celebrating the incredible knowledge they have to offer.

Is it too much to hope that this trend continues? Probably. But, while it lasts, I'll continue to celebrate it ? and them ? even in 30-minute bites.