

Christmas Lists and Tall Orders

by BROCK WEIR

If you happen to celebrate Christmas, you'll understand that everybody has their own individual stressors that can sometimes cast a shadow over what is often plugged as 'the most wonderful time of the year.' Thanks for that, by the way, Andy Williams and Staples.

For some, it might be getting everything just right before family arrives for the big, celebratory dinner. For others, it might be a time of trepidation as a family gathers for the first time since the loss of a regular fixture at the table. Still others, a number that is growing at a pace that is nothing short of alarming, are simply concerned about their ability to have something on that table, regardless of who is or who is not there.

When I consider my own stressors at this time of year, particularly in how they figure into the big picture, they are mercifully small potatoes. I'm fortunate enough to have a roof over my head, something warm in my stomach every night, and presently 'although so many things seem precarious these days' have the wherewithal to get or make gifts, or otherwise provide, for my loved ones.

I'm conscious that I'm one of the lucky ones, even though I find my own seasonal frustration with trying to figure out a schedule of when and where I need to be during the season of gathering, hopefully deriving a schedule that works for everyone, causes minimal disruption, and, sometimes more importantly, minimal offence.

Every time Christmas rolls around, I make a pledge that my own personal gift to myself will be to make the holidays as stress-free as possible. I haven't quite been able to achieve that for various factors 'everything from weather to motivation' but there's no harm in dreaming, is there?

I guess you can call it, to borrow a phrase from a flash-in-the-pan holiday song, a 'grown up Christmas list.'

The older I get, the less material my grown-up Christmas list is. Depending on the circumstances of the year, it can include the practical (my childhood self couldn't have imagined how excited my adult self would be to receive a good pair of well-made cozy socks) or the ephemeral, such as gifting an 'experience' that can be just as groovy, if not more so, than a tchotchke that collects dust.

Otherwise, sometimes in a level of dismay with the state of the world, it can be a grown-up Christmas list for the wider world, whether at the community, national, or international levels.

Given the year that was, and the year that continues to be for a little while yet, that is the direction I have found myself leaning this year.

So, herewith, a truncated list for the year ahead:

APPRECIATING LESSONS LEARNED

As our neighbours to the south appear to be heading backwards in many respects 'see: the possible revocation of the time-tested, highly effective polio vaccine after more than 70 years of successfully beating the disease back' it's time to take notice and take stock so our country does not move further in an anti-science, anti-democratic direction.

The incoming administration will be an international game-changer in many respects, and countries like ours need to keep up, but, alas, we have been down this road before.

Premier Ford caused a stir last week suggesting one way of combatting debilitating tariffs threatened by the incoming administration is to withhold energy exports to the United States, particularly in Michigan, Minnesota and New York.

‘We’re sending a message to the US,’ he said. ‘You come and attack Ontario, you attack the livelihoods of Ontario and Canadians, we’re going to use every tool in our toolbox to defend Ontarians and Canadians across the border.’

But the Premiers of Quebec and Alberta were among those pushing back on the idea, with Alberta's Smith suggesting diplomacy is the way to go.

From my perspective, however, it seems Premier Ford was the only one taking notes on negotiation from the incoming administration's first go-round.

MEDIA LITERACY

Teaching media literacy is a frequent flyer in my grown-up Christmas list and it remains so this year, perhaps more importantly than ever in the face of the rapid expansion of Artificial Intelligence in its myriad forms.

In the context of media literacy, I've always believed it's important for students who are growing up in a digital realm to learn how to properly navigate it, use it to its best advantage, and be safe and savvy while doing so in a rapidly-changing environment.

From protecting themselves online at times when parents are unable or unavailable to provide assistance, to being able to recognize the truth in a sea of misinformation or, worse, unadulterated fake news, all generations would benefit from this emphasis and, in my view, it's becoming just as important as Civics and the Provincial curriculum's recent shift towards practical math.

In a time when so many are leaning on apps and platforms like ChatGPT to make their lives easier, it's become more pervasive and harder to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff. Without the means and skills to recognize it as it comes at us, where does that leave us as a society?

A RENAISSANCE FOR COMPASSION AND EMPATHY

At this time of year, it is often a welcome shift to be able to cover the scores of individuals and groups across our communities who are stepping up to have a real positive impact on our residents, whether it is a food or clothing drive to help families make ends meet at this often-trying time of the year, or simply shovelling snow for a neighbour in need.

Yet, in some other instances seen over the course of the year, we see examples of self-centredness or, worse, selfishness in the interest of looking out for Number One to the expense of the whole. This can be seen materially, philosophically, and politically.

While there is nothing wrong with looking out for Number One, all too often these days, spreading the wealth a little bit ? again, materially, philosophically or politically ? can be seen as ‘woke’ (whatever this actually means) or a state of weakness.

Compassion and empathy (and, indeed, grace) unlike the flu, are not seasonal conditions and should be exercised all year round, from lending a hand or simply recognizing that everyone is fighting their own individual battle ? and what we might classify as ‘needs’ versus ‘wants’ in our own circumstances, generations, and life experiences might not be the same for our friends, neighbours, coworkers, and wider community members.

As far as Christmas lists go, I don't think it's too tall of an order.