

Curiosity, comfort and lack thereof

by BROCK WEIR

Planning ahead was never a strong suit of my grandmother's. In fact, whenever someone asked if she had any commitments for a date in the future, her boiler plate response was, "I don't buy green bananas," despite them regularly serving as an ironic feature on her kitchen counter.

While many of you, I'm sure, spent Super Bowl Sunday watching the football game or counting down the minutes to the half-time show at the very least, I instead spent the bulk of the time staring at a banana that only had a distant memory of the green, green peels of home.

Now, mind you, I wasn't watching a piece of fruit rapidly sprinting in the direction of a banana bread pan in real time; rather I was spending a couple of hours on a GO Train with little escape from an advertisement plugging CBC's Gem streaming service with the sweet, mottled fruitstuff.

Shining a light on a program which, I presume, was shining a further light of its own on some sort of foodie calamity, the ad was anchored by the slogan: "Get Curious. It's a Canada thing."

We've often been told that curiosity killed the proverbial cat or wiping out all nine lives on one fell swoop, but where would we be without it?

It's led to innovation, intellectual breakthroughs, new and changed perspectives, and no end to self-improvement and it's obviously not an exclusively "Canada thing", even though some might like to pretend it is.

As Canadians, we sometimes like to puff ourselves up by highlighting what we aren't rather than what we are. Several of us have watched the political landscape change south of our border from the comfort of our high horse, patting ourselves on the back that such drastic and dramatic shifts certainly couldn't happen here because we're curious enough to ask the tough questions and exercise critical thinking.

We also tend to paint ourselves with a more intellectually curious brush than our neighbours (see: the haw-haw'ing over Rick Mercer's Talking to Americans and no shortage of copycats on TikTok and Instagram).

I'm not here to say there's any particular differences when it comes to curiosity in our respective countries and amongst its citizenry. However, regardless of which side of the border we're talking about, I've noticed what can only be described as something of a decline in curiosity on scales large and small.

On Facebook, for instance, I follow a forum related to a particular pop culture interest and sometimes, for better or worse, wade in on the discussion only if I have something to add. On a recent occasion, I posted what I thought was a pretty funny and on-topic joke. Most people "got it," some people didn't. One person who didn't get it, made that very clear early on, insisted that they did "get it" despite clear evidence to the contrary, and promptly blocked me for reasons known only to them.

Now, mind you, I wasn't overly concerned about being blocked by this fan; I had never interacted with them in my life, so it was no great loss, but I'd love to have some insight on the method of their perturbedness.

Blocking me didn't stop me from seeing their reply; it only blocked me from responding to them or thankfully, there were plenty of other people there to fill in the blanks. It didn't prevent me from seeing the thread. It didn't put a roadblock in the way of numerous other off-shoot discussions that came from the joke's subject matter. It only prevented me, again, from replying to them directly to explain the joke or but I guess that was enough. Explanations were neither wanted or needed; they were content with leaving their

worldview unchallenged.

We're seeing this across all sectors, with business, tech, and political leaders, and even performers and artists, blocking people who disagree with them ? as is their prerogative ? but it doesn't do anything to stop discourse, critical or otherwise, on their product, platform, policy or performance. It merely removes said discourse out of the social media feed of the subject.

Outside of social media, I've observed no end of instances where people are more than willing to bolt, physically or virtually, when experiencing the least amount of discomfort. Wherever you happen to be in the world, pockets of discomfort are all around us. There isn't much room to find comfort when you get into the nitty-gritty of the myriad factors related to the Israel-Hamas war, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or how the upcoming U.S. election is shaping up. And curiously, particularly in a column regarding curiosity, it is seemingly resulting in swathes of people seeking comfort in not knowing, not pursuing answers or, worse, simply seeing out answers and information ? dubious or otherwise ? that reinforces rather than challenges their worldview.

There is nothing wrong necessarily with seeking validation, but it could become a problem when one does so at the expense of keeping a foothold in reality.

The ?business? of news is an environment where this is becoming an increasing challenge as well.

This is an industry where if one is an editor or reporter, you don't hear much when you're doing something right. If you do something that is perceived as wrong, however, you hardly hear the end of it. Several years ago, for example, I had a phone call from a reader who was outraged that I had the gall to refer to the MP of the day as ?Member of Parliament.? Why? Because they didn't vote for the person in question and, therefore, they were offended at? being confronted with reality?

Around that same time I had a call from a reader in one of our communities cancelling their delivery. When I asked why they no longer wished to receive that particular paper, the answer was slightly confounding: ?I'm not interested in local news.? Fast forward a couple of years, this same individual suggested we shine a light on something that had just hit their radar: the use of Strong Mayor powers in York and Peel Regions ? this, despite more than a dozen total articles related to the subject in both geographic areas.

Perhaps, from their perspective, local news didn't matter to them until it did! Thank heavens an issue finally piqued their curiosity! And, if it took that to spur engagement in the issues that matter, I suppose we can chalk that up as a win.

Now, in a world where A.I. is continuing unabated and deepfakes are popping up to further skew our perceptions of reality, maintaining that ?win? will be challenging indeed.

Curiosity and critical thinking are essential for our world but, from my perspective, it's all too often thrown by the wayside in favour of affirmation.

Curiosity may be fatal for cats, but a lack of curiosity could be the death knell of many things we hold dear.

Be curious, ask questions, embrace opportunities to have your worldview challenged and don't shy away from being uncomfortable, if only for a moment.

We'll all be the better for it.