

Don't discount sources of comfort and joy

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

It would be too easy to begin the year on a bum note.

As we still grapple with a global health crisis, it feels like we're becoming overwhelmed in not just a new wave of the virus, but a tsunami. It also feels like many of the powers-that-be who have been tasked with guiding us through to the other side are throwing up their hands.

The latest phase of this plan is if you're not high risk or immunocompromised and exhibit any of the symptoms that have been drilled into us since March of 2020 to simply assume you have the dreaded COVID and isolate accordingly. Formal testing is at its limit ? as is, it seems, formal proof that you have what so many of us have been dreading.

And none of that pesky isolation for 10 days.

New year, new approach: five days is enough. After all, you have a job to get back to and employers want you back on the floor.

No accurate numbers of how many active cases are still out there. No accounting for how many cases might be in our school settings. No accurate data made public to make it clear whether or not we're flattening the curve.

Given what we've all been going through, musing further on this feeling of being set collectively adrift is almost like grabbing low-hanging fruit.

For my first column of the year, I often like to take inspiration from the Queen's Christmas Message. Speaking solely for myself, I often find some of the themes it touches, grounded by a life of experience, stick with me throughout the year. This was certainly the case in 2021 with her poignant, morale-boosting words that were sparked by the pandemic, and it was certainly the case this year. But the words that really struck a chord with me were related to something rather unexpected.

'His sense of service, intellectual curiosity, and capacity to squeeze fun out of any situation were all irrepressible,' the Queen said, reflecting on her late husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. 'We felt his presence as we, like millions around the world, readied ourselves for Christmas. While COVID again means we can't celebrate quite as we may have wished, we can still enjoy the many happy traditions. Be it the singing of carols, as long as the tune is well known; decorating the tree; giving and receiving presents; or watching a favourite film where we already know the ending, it's no surprise that families so often treasure their Christmas routines.'

Personally, I think individuals and families treasure their traditions and routines well beyond the holiday season, and routines don't have to be synonymous with dull.

Life consists of final partings as well as first meetings, indeed, but in many cases these are purely happenstance. We don't know when they might happen, we don't know what they will consist of, and we don't know when that final parting might come, let alone how to prepare for any of these eventualities and inevitabilities. Tradition, however you define and form it, helps to foster a degree of stability in between.

A favourite film, or a book or television show for that matter, where we already know the ending is a source of both fun and comfort.

When so much of our lives are uncertain, opening up a book we live and re-discovering the stories that swept us away to worlds old

and new; becoming engrossed in a film you've seen enough times to quote along with the actors; or, when you've had a tough day, flipping on the TV or logging into a streaming service and laughing just as hard at the jokes you already know and love as if you're just seeing them for the first time?. Well, all of that is an oasis of calm, serenity, and mental recalibration when you need a break, however temporary, from wading through an almost-unending sea of uncertainty.

One of those islands of comfort for me were the collective works left behind by the iconic Betty White when she took her final bow on New Year's Eve, just a few weeks shy of completing her remarkable one-hundredth year.

I don't ever remember not being a fan of hers. Some of my earliest memories are sitting down with my family to watch *The Golden Girls* in the latter half of its first run on television, the series being one of the few shows our entire family could agree on.

From there, I worked my way backwards to her side-splitting turn on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, back further to her once-hard-to-find works from the earliest days of the medium, all the while looking forward to wherever she might pop up next. Of course, in the last couple of decades, those pop-ups came with an ever-increasing frequency that belied her age.

Although I never had the chance to meet her, I did, however, purely by chance, find her on the other end of my phone receiver one night in 2010.

In a fundraiser to benefit autism research, comedian Jon Stewart hosted a telethon featuring a bevy of celebrities operating the phones. For a donation to the cause, you had the chance to get through to one celebrity on the 20-strong panel. My donation made, I was on hold for about 30 minutes just hoping I would get through to someone I would have something to say to, after all, I think it's fair to say that we all would have more to say to the likes of Tom Hanks and George Clooney than the guy from the Dos Equis beer commercials!

But my mind was focused on Betty, who was gamely wielding a couple of phone lines. Through sheer luck, a short while later, there was that unmistakable, "Hello?" on the other end. Then there was a pause. Followed by a, "Hello, this is Betty White!?"

In my awe, I momentarily forgot that conversation was a two-player game and was struck silent. After her prompt, all I could utter was a "I know!?" followed by about 90 seconds blathering on about all she meant to me. I don't remember exactly what I said, but recall the phrase "Thank you!?" coming out of my mouth far too many times to count.

Did I make a fool of myself? Maybe, but as we start a New Year without her I am sure glad I had the chance to thank her for the impact she had not only on me, but the world.

It might sound inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but celebrating the people, places and, in some cases, things that bring us joy in a time where it sometimes feels we're sputtering collectively from one challenge to the next, it is very consequential in giving us a smile, comfort, and even joyous predictability.

As it looks like the light at the end of the COVID tunnel will continue to dim before it blazes bright again, we need these kinds of things ? and let's be thankful for Betty White and the immortal legacy of laughter and joy she leaves us. I know where I will be turning back to her work more and more through whatever COVID throws at us next, and well beyond.