

Getting back into the groove

Brock's Banter

By Brock Weir

I don't know about you, but the more times we have to return to being social animals again after each successive lockdown, or after adapting to new rules or expectations, the harder it becomes.

Maybe it's an age thing. Maybe the last two-years-plus has exacerbated the aging process, at least from a mental perspective. Either way, this apparently older dog is finding it harder to re-learn tricks that are far from new.

As we continue to return to normal, or some degree of what we had before, I'll freely admit to feeling a bit trepidatious. Walking into a large room filled with an equally large crowd, I find myself taking a deep breath ? don't worry, I'm still wearing a mask, so I'm not quite as trepidatious with what is catching a ride on my oxygen wave ? just to get into the proper mindset.

In small groups, bemasked or not, small talk doesn't come as easy as it once did.

?How are you?? used to be a pretty easy conversation starter before the pandemic. Then, after March 2020 and for a good year-and-a-half after that, a simple ?How are you?? took on a new immediacy. It wasn't just a conversation starter, it was now a check-in on everyone's wellbeing. And it was needed.

I'm not sure how we stand on ?How are you?? these days.

In theory, it should be a polite greeting once again, but (a) everyone's in a very different place right now and (b) chances are you and whoever you're speaking to have a hell of a lot to catch up on.

Don't get me wrong, I love the fact that events are starting up again, but I think it will take a bit longer to get those social muscles back in shape.

We have home shows galore chock full of fresh ideas to brighten up and renew your space and give it the proper makeover your refuge of the last 24 months deserves. We have events like the Run for Southlake bringing thousands of people back together again to raise thousands of dollars for their local hospitals. We have scores more who aren't content to let their soles get cold and are set to lace up to support any number of organizations from Big Brothers Big Sisters, Hospice, and other groups who do more than their fair share of community-building.

There are some that are throwing themselves back into their communities with the same verve and energy they had before, content to renew old acquaintances and further their work. There are others who still feel they need a bit more time to find their way before they feel they have enough to give of themselves. Then there are still more who are jumping back into whatever drove them before the pandemic both feet first?when maybe it would have been better if they took or had the opportunity to take it one step at a time.

Over the weekend, for instance, I was standing in line waiting for my turn to scan my card at the gym when someone ahead of me, a member of another location, was trying to purchase a day pass to use the facilities. What was once a pretty simple process from the perspective of someone looking on became almost a case study on human interaction.

It wasn't a tall order, the patron wanted to pay cash to get in there ? \$5.01, to be precise, that extra cent apparently important in this conversation ? but things became a bit sticky when it was very clear the person at the computer was less than thrilled at the prospect of handling a blue picture of Wilfrid Laurier that had already been handled by untold numbers of people.

Every manner of alternative was offered to exchange the electronic equivalent of \$5.01 for a spin on a recumbent before the cash was reluctantly accepted.

The next day, a similar vignette unfolded before my eyes, but this time I was a featured player.

During a trip to a north Toronto shopping mall on Sunday to pick up a gift for two back-to-back milestone birthdays* in my family, I was standing in line waiting to pay for them.

With nothing else to do in line after pondering why blackhead removal strips were placed next to chewing gum on the way to the checkout counter, I observed three customers ahead of me as I placed a non-existent mental bet on which cashier would soon ask me for my email address.

Nothing seemed to be out-of-the-ordinary with the three transactions ahead, but my time ultimately came and the cashier stationed closest to the front of the line gestured for me to come forward.

"How are you?" I asked, with what I hope was a smile under my mask.

I sure got an answer.

It was not a, "Great, thanks," or a "Good, thank you!" or an, "I'm fine. How are you?"

They told me exactly how they were and it wasn't great, good or fine.

They had two-and a-half hours left on their shift and the time to get out of the store couldn't come soon enough.

A particularly busy day at the store, they were less than thrilled and considerably uncomfortable with the number of customers they to serve that day. They weren't best pleased at the number of customers who forewent their masks before coming in. They were terrified over the war on Ukraine, they had firm thoughts about Alberta's oil sands and the number of well-known financial institutions that support the industry, and opinions on this spring's Provincial election were many.

Not only was I amazed that in the amount of ground covered in this five-minute conversation they had the wherewithal to, of course, ask for my email address, I was struck by the distinct impression that this might have been the very first time they had heard, "How are you?" in several hours.

Maybe we've lost the niceties that were once so instinctive and, in the effort to get back up and running as quickly as possible, simple empathy and the nuances of human interaction have become something of an afterthought.

We're all at different places right now, it really doesn't need to be said again, but maybe we can get each other up to speed by taking a deep breath wherever possible, asking, "How are you?", making the time to listen to what the answer is and provide thoughtful answers of your own.

We might re-discover something about ourselves and the people around us.

*And, on the subject of gifts, I would like to close by wishing my mother and my father very happy milestone ? and yes, back-to-back birthdays this week.