

Giving yourself a mental vacation

by BROCK WEIR

Despite the cold snap, it was an outdoorsy weekend.

It started off with our first lengthy beach day of the season and despite it still being a bit too chilly to dip more than a foot in a water, the experience always helps recalibrate body and soul after a long and busy week.

Living in a world that's more connected than ever before, it's always a balm to be able to disconnect just for a little bit and take a break from what sometimes feels like a constant bombardment from all angles.

Things aligned just right to finish surprisingly early on Friday, so the beach was an unexpected treat, and not the worst way to set the tone for the rest of the weekend, even if Friday's heat was the last we'll have for a week or two.

Outdoorsiness continued on Sunday with another seasonal first: the inaugural visit to an outdoor antique market in Wellington County that's always been a favourite destination for our family.

It's invariably a great opportunity to get some fresh air while indulging in a bit of? well, not quite retail therapy, but close enough. It's also a fun way to step back in time just a little bit.

The history enthusiast in me is always interested in seeing what has survived the decades, and even the centuries, to entice the customers of 2025. As one might expect, there is plenty of furniture to be found, ranging from rustic-looking tables and benches made for the pioneer homestead, to gold-leafed numbers that would not have been too out of place in some of Versailles' more humble salons.

There are paintings that had been passed down through the generations now just waiting to catch the eye of a new connoisseur. There are jewellery vendors, those who specialise in pottery of all ages and cultures, some who specialise in products and mementos from very specific periods of time, and vinyl vendors galore.

Heck, from a personal perspective, I had a bit of a reality check when the toys and tchotchkes of my own childhood, including some of the more creative toys that were once part and parcel of a 1990s McDonalds Happy Meal, were the focus of a 'vintage' booth? But, time does march on. I guess. A prolonged linger in the booth, however, sadly did not provide any insight on whether their primary customers are people my age looking to recapture an element of youth, or comparative kids for whom our stuff is now their kitsch.

What's always particularly caught my eye, however, is the ephemera ? that is, by definition, things that are intended to be used or enjoyed for just a little while, but have somehow beaten the odds to survive as cherished items.

You can find old pop bottles from long-lost Ontario and Canadian pop and beer companies somebody kept and passed down for reasons known only to them, which now command a hefty price. On the other hand, there are bins and baskets of old photographs spanning a good 150 years, the identities and stories of the sitters now lost to time. This last example always saddens me as, if they had survived until now, they were once cherished mementos of loved ones but became meaningless dust collectors down the line.

Amid these baskets of anonymity, I found one treasure ? a beautiful, but tiny framed hand-tinted snapshot of Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother) taken in Fredericton in 1939 during her coast-to-coast tour with George VI. It was a fitting find given the present King's plans to open Parliament in Ottawa this coming Tuesday, but it also told a story; on the back of the frame was the stamp of a female entrepreneur ? photographer and artist ? who became a consequential figure in Canadian art and a key documentarian of New Brunswick's history through to the late 1970s. Everything has a story if you know where to look!

Scrapbooks of days gone by are another draw. It's always interesting to see what people clipped from their newspapers and magazines and why. Some volumes might simply be a collection of pretty pictures, but others can be perfect time capsules of the era.

This past Sunday there were, for whatever reason, copious time capsules to explore.

Some held clippings from the 1953 Coronation. Others, the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy and the subsequent mourning period. Others still were reasonably comprehensive narratives of Canadian elections in the 1960s and American presidential campaigns of the 1950s and earlier. Some scrapbookers were drawn to glamorous cut-outs of figures from the Golden Age of Hollywood; others, tomes of Sunshine Girls and Sunshine Boys the curators were evidently saving for a rainy day.

As evocative as those last examples may have been, it was the political ones that fascinated me most. While they showcased the victor and their subsequent spoils, they also shed light on the issues of the day, differences of opinion, and how they were handled. Editorials contained therein, of course, were firm in stating their views, particularly if they didn't align with the power(s) that were.

They pulled no punches in skewering their political opponent, but surprisingly enough they did largely give credit where credit is due. It was a peek behind the curtain to our not-so-distant past, and, in some ways, it was a refreshing retrospective.

I always leave the market feeling like I've come away richer from the experience, even if the wallet is almost always a little bit lighter afterwards. That feeling this time around, however, was slightly tempered by the realization how far civility has slipped from our public discourse.

It didn't help that less than an hour after we left, news broke that former U.S. President Joe Biden was living with advanced prostate cancer that had metastasised to his bones.

As much as my first thoughts were of genuine sympathy for Biden and his family, the reality is my second thought was hope his political opponents would put partisanship aside, offer their support and, in short, simply avoid being horrible about it all.

Those hopes were dashed almost immediately online.

I've never been the type to long for what's often described as 'the good old days,' because no matter which time period you're referring to, they were never as 'good' as our rose-coloured memories would tell us.

But maybe there's something to be said for nostalgia.

Perhaps it's a mental vacation from the stressors so many of us experience each and every day, a reminder not necessarily of 'good old days' writ large, but of very personal happy memories, or even the kind of society we can cultivate if we truly put our minds to it.

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