

Have our collective wells run dry?

by BROCK WEIR

Progress can mean many things to many people.

To our forebears, things that we often take for granted today, were game-changers to how they lived, work and played. If you enjoy a nice cup of tea at any point in your day, for instance, you probably take little notice of the steam coming out of your kettle beyond listening for the tell-tale whistle when the water is ready to boil, but when our ancestors figured out how to harness the power of steam, their world was changed forever.

On the flipside, however, in the quest to address the double-barrelled crises of housing and affordability, we've often had to raze what has previously existed to make way for intensification and, depending on your political stripe, turn Ontario's lauded Greenbelt into something more akin to Swiss cheese rather than a solid barrier against encroachment ? all in the name of progress.

Here, the word ?progress? is bandied about somewhat derisively, if not sarcastically, rather than as a harbinger of positive change. ?All in the name of progress,? is often more of a snort than a statement these days.

When the Internet came into common usage, the majority of us thought that we'd make collective leaps and bounds as a society as more information than ever before would be at our fingertips. Similarly, as the march of connectivity continued unabated, social media platforms proliferated and this development was seen as a boon to fostering an interconnected society.

Well, we don't have to look far to see that, in many cases, it has had the exact opposite effect, one that has instead fostered a society that is, at ?best? more divided than ever before. Or, at worst, a tinderbox that has wreaked havoc, potentially laying the groundwork for something worse.

As strange as it might sound, I often think back to my time in Grade 6 when a Federal Election campaign was underway. As was, and is, often the case, candidates descended on our schools to make our pitch on why ?we? should vote for them. Given the fact we were tweens, the message was more about why our parents should vote for them, but these visits did wonders to engage us in the civic process.

Of course, when the time came to cast our votes within the classroom for the candidates of our choice, the winning candidate was the gentleman who came equipped with the most swag to pass around. That aside, however, it was an invaluable exercise in getting us thinking to the future and, without any exceptions I can think of, we were engaged with what the candidates had to say and were respectful of their time.

I often wonder, when the next Federal or Provincial election cycle rolls around, whether today's crop of future voters will be as respectful and receptive given the heated rhetoric I suspect so many are hearing at home, amplified by social media, and the associated rise of misinformation.

In light of this, I was particularly interested to listen to a speech delivered by the King last week at a belated event to mark the Coronation.

?Every generation lives with its own set of hopes and fears, as if caught in a perpetual tussle between optimism and pessimism, promise and peril,? he said. ?After decades of debate, our television screens, or increasingly, mobile phone screens confront us each day with the stark realities of climate change [and] the devastating scenes of communities scarred by fire and flood, not to mention migration of people fleeing those terrifying phenomena? to persuade us to take the action that is needed to make the sacrifices needed to secure our planet for generations yet unborn.?

He later went on to weigh in on how social media has impacted the way we interact with each other.

The instinct to cooperate whenever and wherever possible is deep within us, even in the most fractious of times when disagreements are polished, paraded and asserted. There is in our land (the United Kingdom in this context) a kind of muscle memory in that it does not need to be like this; that the temptation to turn us into a shouting or recriminating society must be resisted or, at the very least, heavily mitigated whenever possible, especially in the digital sphere where civilized debate often gives way to rancour and acrimony.?

Helping equip us in doing this, he opined, were drawing on a few collective wells we share that can raise hope, shared purpose, and a genuine togetherness that will see us through good times and bad.?

These wells included Civility & Tolerance on which our political life and wider national conversation depends; Breathing Space We Afford One Another, leaving us able to think and speak freely [including] the politeness and respect we owe to one another, the willingness to put others first and treat them as we wished them to treat us; the Duty of Care We Feel For Others in Sickness and Misfortune; the Cataract of Science, Innovation and Scholarship; and The Cherished Well from Which the Sound of Laughter Can Be Heard.

These are virtues for all seasons, he concluded. They carry our hopes, our kindness, and our duties to one another. They make us what we are and they shape what we aspire to be when moving over the cusp of what is to become of us, as we live and breathe on these islands that we share, cherish, and, crucially, sustain.?

This, in my view, is a powerful message regardless of which side of the Atlantic we happen to be living on, but personally, and from what I sense from others, it sometimes feels like these collective wells have come perilously close to running dry.

So, what do we want to do about it?

What can we do, as a society, to make sure these wells are properly irrigated, replenished and even more importantly, respected and cherished?

It might feel like a tall order, but amidst all the important conversations we're having globally at the moment, it is certainly a conversation worth having without talking over one another, without political stripes and machinations, without looking for the next opportunity to get ahead of someone else, and with respect.

In many instances, it seems like the genie might already be out of the bottle, or the proverbial toothpaste permanently ousted from its tube, but it's worth a try to get back on track.

That, in my view, is progress towards maintaining a shared common ground.