

Homes Away from Home

by BROCK WEIR

Taking a leaf out of some of our historic documents in the past, I'm writing this in two parts.

It rarely fails to bring a smile to my face when I come across an old postcard or letter where the writer has settled down to jot down their thoughts to the intended recipient, only to a break for one reason or another, and, noting with a simple 'later,' picks up where they left off after a day or two before hitting the post office.

Sometimes they are simple postcards back home to check in, catch relatives up on what they have been up to; other times, they can be a bit more exciting, like a missive from a more exotic part of the world or from a swanky ocean liner or train like the Orient Express.

What comes after the 'later' often picks up directly where the writer left off, but other times the break in writing sessions can serve as evidence of 'sober second thought,' perhaps showing some additional perspective on the events in question, written a bit removed from the heat of the moment.

I'm starting this week's column about 10 days prior to when it's due to arrive at your door - setting fingers to keyboard just a few days before heading to the airport to spend some time on the west coast with friends.

It hasn't been all that long since I last saw them. I was in Los Angeles last November to celebrate the milestone of a dear, long-time friend. At that time, however, said milestone was the predominant focus of the trip, including extensive preparation for the big event. As valued as the reunion was - the first one we've had since the start of the global pandemic - it was nothing short of a whirlwind and, before too long, we all agreed that we deserved a bit more of a leisurely time to catch up, particularly after 27 years of friendship.

The concept of 'home' means different things to different people. It always has, but perhaps these concepts have either been augmented, enhanced, or redefined in the midst of a housing crisis.

Given my own experiences with housing transition over the past few months, I've come to see that as much as dwellings can be defined by their four-plus walls, for some 'home' can mean the people you're with.

That's very much how I feel about the people I'm due to visit. They, and their environments, are homes away from home - despite the geographic and political border that separates us.

I feel the same way about a city in upstate New York that has been the destination of our annual family vacation for almost a quarter-of-a-century now. Although I don't have permanent roots there, the experiences we've had and the friendships made along the way, feel like the next best thing.

And yet, as excited as I am about this trip, and all the opportunities it will afford to renew connections, I have to admit there is a degree of trepidation.

Given how divided and heated the political climate is for our neighbours to the south at the moment ahead of what promises to be a federal election unlike anything we've seen before on either side of our parallels, there is a sense of urgency amid this trepidation.

Will this be a grand finale of sorts?

Will there be more opportunities to get back to a place that will bear a resemblance to what's known and loved as it is?

If there are, will it be under the same circumstances or in an environment radically different from the one we know now?

Will future visits still have the sense of being a homecoming, or will the tables turn, making the GTA a new home-away-from-home destination for them, pending the fickle finger of fate that is the American electorate?

Only time will tell.

Later?

Back on home turf after 10 days south of the border, I'm not sure if I came back any further enlightened on what the future might hold.

Interacting with friends in various parts of California, ride share drivers, and other assorted strangers, there seems to be a sense of trepidation over what's ahead. While I had a marvellous time catching up with well-loved friends and the unifying drive of renewing bonds that had slightly atrophied during, and were tested by the global pandemic, there was the sense of entering a tinderbox with a book of unlit matches just on the horizon with plenty of striking surfaces strewn on the road between said horizon and the here and now.

Indeed, and perhaps jokingly, were conversations of how to come north if things turn, well, south ? questions of just how many people we might be able to accommodate if needed.

During previous trips, there were few topics off-limits and there felt to be both a reluctance to talk about politics this time around, coupled with the sense that there was so much to be said if only someone asked.

One ride share driver, for instance, was a very pleasant middle-aged woman who self-deprecatingly described herself as an 'old bat' when she was anything but. Settling in to her back seat, it took only a few minutes for her to segue from her monologue on Barbra Streisand's 48-hour-long audio book to another audio book by US politician Liz Cheney and all thing related to the events of January 6, 2021.

Passionate about singer and Senator alike, the daughter of the former US Vice President had the edge, leading to a further monologue on the Biden administration, the Trump trials, and the upcoming election. There was a sense that she was blessedly relieved to get a lot off her chest in what she presumably felt was a safe environment.

I felt this same relief as well.

Not knowing just what kind of environment we would be walking into, I was heartened that the pressures from all directions had not diminished the generally warm and welcoming environment I've always experienced in California. With all they've had to endure over the last few years, no matter what 'side' you're on, one might expect their collective light to have dimmed just a little bit.

Not so.

There was a sense of perseverance all around, the determination to do what they can to foster the future they want, and be a either a part of change or preservation.

But, in the good sense of pragmatism, they're still open to having a Plan B in their back pockets.

It might, therefore, do us some good to give our collective guest rooms a once-over before too long, just in case!