

How basic can back-to-basics get?

by BROCK WEIR

I never truly appreciated summer until I was, well, old enough to enjoy it.

Summer, when I was a kid, was always a bit of a break from the school room grind, of course, which was always welcome, but with two working parents, it was also a time of sampling the smattering of day camps this community had to offer.

There were far fewer options at that time than there are today ? and certainly far fewer options that appealed to those of us who were (and are) less athletically-inclined.

I, for one, am among the group that has never had the interest ? or, let's face it, the innate ability ? to be an athlete, but that didn't stop my parents from valiantly trying to reverse the tide.

The first such place I remember being enrolled was a summer program at a long since redeveloped local golf course. Oddly enough, given the location, I don't remember there being any occasion where we got to swing a club. Instead, for reasons that are still unclear to me, gymnastics and cardio within the club's gym were the order of the day ? with a splash of arts and crafts thrown in here and there. I'm not sure what kind of insurance they had to have for a bunch of kids under the age of eight try their hands (or feet) at treadmills and elliptical machines, but I imagine it must have made for a hefty bill upon registration!

The whole experience didn't come close to striking a chord with me, but I do have some fun memories of sneaking away from the crowd and going back to the gym areas where the assembled wall of TVs treated me to such favourites as I Love Lucy and SCTV ? before they found me and hauled me off to whatever attempted feats of strength were next on the agenda.

The second foray to a day camp was a bit more successful.

Hosted by an independent school, the program was sports-heavy and I never quite found my footing on the soccer pitch, but the other elements of the program were pretty fantastic, ranging from arts and crafts to more tech-minded sessions. The latter, as it happens, was where I sent my very first email ? a few years before at-home dial-up became reasonably standard ? and first experienced the satisfaction that can come with graphic design.

It was time well spent.

The next camp was a bit of a mixed bag.

Still on the apparently futile quest to lay the foundations of, maybe, a sports scholarship in my future, the next camp the following year was focused on golf and tennis ? with golf dominating the mornings and, just in time for the scorching afternoon sun to really hit its full potential, tennis.

While tennis was more in my wheelhouse, truth be told I never really ?got? golf. It's a nice day outside, of course, and I don't begrudge anyone who enjoys their time on the links, but not everyone is cut out for it.

After a season of scorchers out on the court, I longed for the cool and calm days of the fall. It wasn't only the weather that was cool, calm and collected in my view ? but a return to some degree of routine as the school year set in helped. The change of leaves and the dawn of the spooky season that is Halloween was just gravy.

Putting myself into the shoes of those who are returning to school next week, however, I think it's safe to say I'd prefer to put autumn on hiatus in favour of a summer extension.

That's not to say I didn't enjoy the school experience at the time, but, compared to today, we had far fewer things to worry about.

Oh, God, I guess I'm coming up to that age!

It's true though.

Don't get me wrong ? our experience was no bed of roses. Collectively, we navigated the world of shifting expectations, angst, teachers of wildly divergent quality and interest, maybe the odd bully or two, and, in the case of the public school stream I was in, some course material that hadn't been updated or refreshed since the first Trudeau administration. No, the very first.

But students today are getting it from all sides.

In addition to the rapidly evolving nature of student expectations given the rapidly evolving nature of our world today, it can be hard to determine what expectations ultimately are. Going home at the end of the day is not necessarily the escape it once was from whoever is giving you trouble within the school as we're now connected to everyone and everything at all manner of the day. Additionally, with the proliferation of artificial intelligence, there is a far weaker sense of fantasy versus reality, fact versus opinion, and, quite simply, fact versus propaganda.

So, as most students head back to school in the week ahead, I'd like to once again make my annual plea for grace, patience, and a shift in what it means to get ?back to basics.?

Youth sometimes unfairly get a bad rap. It's a tale as old as time, but it doesn't need to be.

Give them some space and a bit of breathing room as they re-adjust not only to the school environment, but a whole set of new expectations and outcomes. It's never an easy process; it can be frustrating and come with a host of issues that might seem unfathomable to many but are, to them, a day-to-day reality.

As much as the Province likes to tout a so-called back-to-basics shift in many parts of the Ontario curriculum, such as an emphasis on practical math skills like budgeting ? and, don't get me wrong, that's a fantastic shift I wish happened when I was in school ? we can only get so ?basic.?

If we want the students of today to be able to navigate the world of tomorrow, the concepts of literacy can't follow the same back-to-basics route. Literacy today is about much more than ?the three Rs? of yore; now more than ever we need schools to focus on civic and media literacy because, without that, the products of the school system now will not be fully able to navigate the waters of tomorrow.

Civics in today's world can't be limited to a short course or a few hours tacked onto wherever there's room. It's essential for youth to come out of school with a working knowledge of how their governments work at all levels, how they are governed, how they can participate and be a part of it, and the rules of the game, however shifting they might be.

This goes hand in hand with media literacy and instilling in students the ability to separate real from fake, the wheat from the chaff, and provide a solid footing for whatever lies ahead.

Without that, we might be headed for a different kind of fall.

Oh, what those early summertime emails hath wrought!