

Making the most out of a challenging time of year

by BROCK WEIR

At the risk of sounding like Ebenezer Scrooge, he of oft-told A Christmas Carol fame, when I try to visualize what the Ghost of Christmas Past might want to show me if I needed a good, swift kick in the pants, I like to think most of it would be a pleasant experience ? regardless of the reason for the needed kick in the first place.

Over the course of my life thus far, I have been very blessed to receive wonderful, thoughtful gifts; some years more extravagant than others and that is something I look back on with gratitude and love.

There have been years where resources have been leaner than others, yet around this time of year we've been lucky enough to always have a nice meal on the table on the big day, with plenty of leftovers to sustain us through Boxing Week.

I don't recall there ever being trips to exotic locales to celebrate Christmas week; but plenty of chances to enjoy the fun the Canadian winters have to offer. A green Christmas has always been anathema to this Canuck ? although, with Climate Change coming faster and more furious every year, that's going to be something the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and I will have to work through together ? so that has always been a good thing to me.

Don't get me wrong, not all of my Christmas experiences have been fantastic.

My parents having split when I wasn't quite through half of my first decade, the holiday season for me was always spread over an extra day or two, leaving that much of a wider berth for things to go sideways.

When I was in my teens and my paternal grandmother's dementia reached a new level, at the last minute our plans were thrown for a loop when, sadly, she was unable to leave the house despite the best efforts of my grandfather, who was then her primary caregiver.

A year or two later, my maternal grandmother, who had lived for the better part of a decade with diabetes, went into shock at the Christmas dinner table, resulting in a call to first responders and an evening for all of us in hospital.

Those are holidays I would prefer the Ghost of Christmas Past to leave off the itinerary but, at the same time, they are all part of the yuletide tapestry.

That first instance brought some emotional extremes, for sure, from the anticipation of the excitement that was coming to the sudden turn that brought devastation ? but, you know what? My overriding memory of that experience was our family pivoting pretty deftly to pack up the dinner, freshly finished, in just about every plastic container we had and bringing Christmas to my grandfather who tried so valiantly to get there. It was all-hands-on-deck and, once we unpacked it, dinner might have tasted just a little bit sweeter.

In the second instance, as traumatic as the experience was, I prefer to ? and often ? remember individuals going the extra mile to put a temporary pin in the festivities so they could be picked up relatively smoothly after the emergency was well and truly in the rear-view mirror.

Not all of these memories are of celebrations turning into calamities and back again, some are just plain silly fun over things that have gone awry.

My maternal grandmother, for all of her many culinary attributes, could never quite master the art of making Yorkshire Pudding. It was always a disappointment to her they never rose to the occasion and ultimately turned out to be, as she described them, more akin to ?hockey pucks,? but they still tasted great and the memories are even more delicious.

In another instance, when I was quite young, my mom suddenly had one last gift to get for me ? a tin sign that has personal significance to me and my family. It wasn't on the original Christmas list, mind you, but a last-minute plot twist when it happened to arrive at a store in the middle of a snowstorm? and in the middle of making mashed potatoes for the next day's dinner.

As much as I love the sign, and still have it, memories of the harrowing trek in near-zero visibility any and the surprise when we arrived back home to discover the boiled-and-drained-and-to-that-point-still-unmashed potatoes had turned a very unappetizing dark grey are the gifts that keep on giving.

As does the memory of one Christmas much more recent when our artificial tree, which comes in three sections, decided to give up the proverbial ghost on the afternoon of Christmas Eve ? the middle section bit the dust leaving the top and bottom twinkling on their own. This minor disaster necessitated a 90-minute wintery excursion to the one Home Depot store in the GTA that had what was needed to restore the glow to my tree's waistline.

Did it put a damper on the festivities? No. The laughs far outweighed the trouble.

But not everyone is in the same boat ? or should it be the same sleigh at this time of year?

The Christmas and Holiday Season are supposed to be times of joy and togetherness, but it is not the same for everybody.

As we all know, this season can be one of stress, struggle and loneliness for many, whether it is the first without a loved one, yet another where it is a season of want, or a time where bad memories can sometimes crowd out the good ones.

Yet, each season I am heartened by how many community members step up to the plate to make things just a little bit easier ? and warmer ? for those who are not faring as well at this time of year.

Whether you made a donation to a toy drive or a food bank, a lift to a senior looking to do a little shopping, wrapping gifts for people who couldn't, have plans to visit others who might not have families of their own, or will be volunteering at a dinner for community members who might otherwise not be able to have one, thank you from all of us.

If this Christmas is an especially difficult one, I hope moments of warmth and light come to the surface, whether readily or where you least expect ?em, and are able to make the most of it.

I wish you all a safe, happy and healthy holiday season ? and see you in 2024!