

Practical skills and practical regrets

by BROCK WEIR

I consider myself lucky to have spent my formative years in a time where what we consider to be 'gender norms' were losing their foothold in our everyday lives.

Both of my parents worked outside the home, albeit in very different sectors. For a time, my father's business partner was a woman who was a power in the industry. On the flipside of the coin, in my mother's profession, in the dental realm, it wasn't too far out of the ordinary to have roles that were, and perhaps still are, rightly or wrongly, viewed as female jobs - dental assistants, hygienists, etc. - filled by someone of another gender.

My brother, who is ten years my senior, went through elementary school and high school where jobs, occupations, and professions, were still sometimes gendered and it was still considered a bit unusual if a female student aspired to be, for the sake of argument, a lawyer or doctor, with more domestic goals somewhat secondary.

In short, a lot changed in the decade between us.

In my elementary and secondary school experience, this gender divide seemed almost non-existent, at least on the surface. Regardless of gender, people often had the same hopes and dreams when it came to their lives and careers. One of the few things that could get between them and their dreams was themselves.

Possibilities were practically endless, but early on in my high school experience I was quickly brought down to earth with the realization that reports of the divide's demise had been greatly exaggerated.

I consider myself, in most cases, to be a practical and pragmatic person so, when looking at different courses and electives I could take at a time, family studies, previously known as home economics, seemed to dovetail perfectly.

Not necessarily living with a paternal instinct, carrying around a sack of flour at all hours as if it was a child, or one of those strange humanoid baby dolls that monitor how well (or not) you take care of it to get a taste of the realities of hands-on fatherhood was not necessarily on my radar. Rather, I thought some time learning the ins and outs on how to prepare meals, repair things around the home, and so forth, were both well worth my time and valuable transferable skills.

Unfortunately, my dad didn't share my point of view and was just short of aghast at my choice.

Why would I take a family studies course, he asked in just about as many words, when there were a bevy of more 'practical' choices out there that would help me get ahead in business?

Despite this conversation, which happened more than once, I held my ground as the start of the school year approached.

And then it arrived.

When I confidently went into my first Family Studies class, I was greeted by a room of my female peers, punctuated by just one other male in the room.

Maybe the seeds of doubt planted at home finally germinated when I strode into that environment, maybe it was another factor, but I felt very out of place and ultimately came up with a few excuses to switch out of that class in favour of the oh-so-exciting world of Information Technology.

So, instead of practical skills I would likely use in my everyday life, I learned how to use a web-browser (it was a different time), a word processor, and touch-typing ? all things that feel, in retrospect, skills we pick up by doing anyway, particularly in world where such skills are necessary, unavoidable, and picked up by people younger and younger with each passing year.

Somehow, I think the gentleman who was brave enough to stay in the Family Studies class came out ahead.

Take, for instance, a story published by the CBC on January 1 by Brandie Weikle called, 'Loss of cooking skills has hurt our ability to adapt to rising food prices, experts say.'

Cooking skills, its argued, while not a magic bullet, would go a long way to make the cost-of-living crisis a bit less of a challenge ? and every little bit helps.

'We are less able to cook than we were 30 or 40 years ago, and so it's much more difficult for us to adapt our diet,' Mike von Massow, an associated professor at the University of Guelph, told the reporter. 'If I am not able to prepare beans or lentils, then it is difficult for me to make that adjustment.'

'During the pandemic, Canadians did more cooking at home, making meals themselves when they couldn't dine out at restaurants or pick up food court meals at work,' the article continues. 'But the question is, did they cook the variety of things they might have?' said von Massow. 'All of us have sort of a core three or four go-to recipes. [But] are you able to adapt those recipes as the ingredients that you use become more expensive?'

A report from Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture in February 2021 found that only 35 per cent of Canadians surveyed learned at least one new recipe between the start of the pandemic and January 2021. Von Massow said it's not just how often we cook that matters. 'It's the ability to expand the range of things we can cook so that we can adjust to some of these high prices.'

'Some schools have excellent culinary programs, but they're optional ? and that's had a big impact on cooking skills, [said Von Massow]. Marilyn Smith, a professional home economist and food writer based in Toronto echoes that sentiment. 'I believe that when they made home ec not mandatory anymore, that cooking literacy started to decline.'

I'd wager it's not just cooking literacy that started to decline, but also home improvement and tailoring skills that gave us the historical wherewithal to save a bit of money everywhere from making quick fixes around the house ourselves to getting an extra mile or two out of a pair of socks through the increasingly lost art of darning.

Much has been made of the Provincial Government's efforts to emphasise more practical math skills in schools, such as budgeting, in addition to but not at the expense of more abstract mathematical concepts ? and rightly so; but, in today's world, literacy extends far beyond the written word and numbers on a page.

Household literacy, particularly during this challenging time for all of us, and even media literacy are just as important and should be emphasized the same way ? regardless of how practical they might seem at the time, or any ridiculous stigma these fields might still weather today.

And if it doesn't happen in the schools, who is willing to step up to help fill the gap ? and pick up the slack?