

## Rediscovering and renewing the ties that bind

by BROCK WEIR

In recent weeks, months, and indeed years, we have often talked about a return to some degree of normalcy.

It's something we all want and, as we inch closer to that goal, before the goal posts are invariably moved again, we get a taste of it.

But just what is normalcy these days?

I think you'd be hard-pressed to find anything that is truly 'normal' when considering our pre-March of 2020 world. Our lifestyles have changed in many ways. Our priorities have changed. Our workplaces have changed. Even our relationships, some that we may have once held dear, have changed as the challenges of the last two-and-a-half years revealed fault lines in what was once pretty tight and, at first blush, durable.

But fault lines have appeared in just about every facet of what we're doing, some of which can be hard to perceive until you're confronted with it face to face.

This past week, we were able to renew our yearly family tradition of travelling from the GTA to the city of Jamestown, NY, about an hour and a half from the Niagara-area border crossings, for the 'annual' Lucille Ball Comedy Festival.

This festival, held in the beloved redhead's hometown, was once a destination for fans to gather and salute the series and the stars and crew members who made everything possible. As the number of available stars and crew members sadly but inevitably dwindled due to the passage of time, the festival itself morphed and its vision has changed.

What was once a weekend of nostalgia has, in many ways, been augmented by just as many opportunities to look forward as its mission is now largely to promote up-and-coming comedy talent.

Ordinarily, it's a time to relax and laugh and reconnect with friends who have also made the pilgrimage an annual event. But this time around, until it was crunch time, I found it difficult to get excited over what was to come.

This was set to be the first time since the start of the global pandemic that I have done any travelling to speak of, save for a day trip here and there in southern Ontario.

It was certainly set to be my first time setting foot in the United States since 2019 and, as we can all appreciate, there is a perception, whether it is true or not, that it's a place that has changed drastically in the intervening years for myriad reasons that don't need to be mentioned in this column space.

But, despite some reservations, the draw of reconnecting with friends, many of whom I have known for a quarter century this year, helped keep any negative thoughts at bay.

By Tuesday night, we were ready to hit the ground early the next morning, forgoing some of the traditional side trips we make along the way in what we considered a bid to get there 'in good time,' but what was equally likely to be a way to rip that Band-Aid off as soon as possible.

The trip to our regular border crossing at the Rainbow Bridge was uneventful. A quick spin on the Niagara Scenic Parkway allowed for a bit of refreshing mist to waft through the windows of our non-air-conditioned car, and we went on our merry way.

Nothing much had changed in regards to the border, nor along the highways of this particular section of Western New York 'aside

from more recent changes in the lineup of personal injury lawyers taking up billboard space along the way, advertising their services just in case!

Getting off the Interstate, however, was a bit of a different story.

The road to Jamestown is, of course, a very modern and well-travelled highway, but the rolling hills and squat green mountains it's carved out of gives the distinct impression that you're stepping back in time.

Yet, road signs are plenty to snap you out of any nostalgic reverie you might have.

?Stop Biden? signs are plenty as a local politico vies for public office on what seemed to be a pretty weak and solitary platform. In some cases where quaint, bought-from-the-corner-store signs with misplaced and abused apostrophes announced you were passing the driveways of ?The Smith's? or ?The Jone's? now encouraged ?Brandon? to get off his duff.

One garage-side display really struck a chord: a one-two punch of a ?F\_\_\_\_ BIDEN? flag, an all too familiar sight on this side of the border with a slight name change (minimal points for creativity), coupled with a Confederate flag on the other side, emblazoned with the legend, ?Come and take it from me.? The irony of this flag flying in a Union stronghold apparently lost upon the property owner.

Much had indeed changed since we were last year, with the vitriol bubbling over into some unexpected places.

What could possibly await us at our destination?

Harmony ? and, of course, a lot of laughs.

It's a testament to the power of Lucille Ball and the legacy of comedy she created and left behind that for a few, all-too-brief days, any political division or discord was able to be folded away and tucked into our respective back pockets in favour of the unifying power of laughter.

As a break from the everyday it was a much-needed balm for the soul and a reminder that as some people work overtime to sow the seeds of division, appreciating what brings us together is never too far away. We just need the opportunities to find them.

And, on a personal note, it was also a potent reminder of what we lost during the pandemic: the chance to gather and share common passions. I'm beginning this week buoyed and re-energized by the experience and heartened by the fact that 25 years of friendship are ties that are as strong and vital as ever before.

If the last several years have taught us anything, it's that the future can be very hard to predict. No matter what we have in store, I'm confident these ties will continue to endure for many years to come.