

Rediscovering the so-called 'social graces'?

By Brock Weir

Over the last 18 months we have often joked about what a return to any kind of normal might look like.

Cooped up in our homes for most of that time, it was thought that some of us, used to just our own company and those in our household or bubbles 'aside, of course, from friends, family, coworkers and others we have become accustomed to seeing within small squares on a screen in a way not quite unlike *The Brady Bunch* ' might forget what was once obnoxiously termed 'the social graces.'

Surely we'll be able to hold our own, I thought. Three weeks, four months, a year, a year-and-a-half is not all that long in the grand scheme of things and it would be an easy adjustment back to however we might come to define 'normal.'

Well, I'm not too proud to say I was quite wrong. It might not be the case for many of you, but I'm speaking strictly personally.

A few weeks ago, when things began opening up once again, I found myself on a patio in downtown Toronto to celebrate a birthday. Not having done so since my own birthday last September, my excitement at having the opportunity to eat al fresco and have a shared experience was tempered by concern for all the obvious reasons.

What health protocols would be in place? Would there be any problem sitting the maximum number of people at the table? If so, who would be voted off the proverbial island ' and how? Would details be taken down upon the point of entry for contact tracing? I sure hoped so, but that led to another question: Is the fellowship of the meal worth the worry of just waiting for a call or a text to arrive as a response to the aforementioned contact tracing?

My worries might have been slightly over-the-top, yes, but we've been living in extraordinary circumstances.

The meal itself turned out to be absolutely delightful ' but I fear at least one of the social graces might have been forgotten. Having interacted face-to-face with such a limited number of people over the preceding year-and-a-half I found myself distracted by everything around me and, unfortunately, was more focused on watching the teeming masses of people going about their business on the other side of the patio fence than on the company.

This is clearly going to be a work in progress.

A couple of weeks later, there was a second patio sit. This time was a one-on-one experience and given the last time around, I was a bit more comfortable with my surroundings and better able to focus. Others on the patio, however, were at various levels of adjustment with not just one person in relatively close proximity at another table letting a belch reverberate through the patio umbrellas before catching himself; the general sentiment from that end of the sidewalk being, 'Oh, you mean I'm not at home having a burger in front of my TV? Oh yeah!'

I couldn't hear his words, but the sheepish look on the guy's face spoke volumes as he tried to casually play it off by taking another determined swig from his pint glass.

We're all in a state of readjustment and I think we should all give each other a bit of breathing room as we settle what was once described by another obnoxious phrase: 'polite society.'

There are, however, some behaviours that should be nipped right in the bud.

At the start of this pandemic, it was clear I needed new eyeglasses. My prescription hadn't drastically changed, but the required

coatings on my lenses ? some which seemed a bit excessive at the last point of sale ? had begun to flake off and the ?transitions? that tiresomely dim if I sit even a few centimetres too close to my office window had begun to retract, making any time I've gone outside over the course of the pandemic akin to looking through a screen door.

Setting out on Saturday to get the gears turning on a new pair of lenses, it was to Toronto to an optical selling a particular brand of frames and lenses that would otherwise only be available online. Their website having helped narrow down the search, I anticipated a pretty painless experience.

This was a bit off the mark.

The optical was set inside a mall and with no controls on capacity at the doors into the mall itself, leaving this tricky matter up to the shops within, it was like walking into a hotbed of everything we have been working to avoid.

The store was thankfully not too far into the bowels of the mall, and even more thankfully, the chap at the entrance was decidedly more diligent about the number of people coming in and out of his establishment, explaining the protocols of touching and trying on the frames, how they should be returned once donned. (Spoiler: Handed back to staff for whatever procedures required to disinfect the product)

Once inside, a frame tried, rejected and removed, a point of clarification on the return process.

?We're in Step 3, everything's good! Just put them back on the shelf,? was the response of another clerk as instructions were duly followed with no small degree of discomfort.

Despite the diligence at the door, it almost seemed if it was an ?anything goes? situation once you passed the first hurdle and, as we have learned over the past 18 months, we are living in a world, a new normal that is far removed from ?anything goes.?

There is a perception in some quarters that Ontario's entry into Step 3 of the Province's reopening plan was essentially firing the starter's pistol for everything to return to how it was, despite a mandate still being in place for masking indoors in many situations. This is a perception that needs to be dispelled ? and fast ? before we are forced to slide back into Step Two or even Step One.

We got to Step 3 not only through the determination of vaccine efforts but the collective efforts of each and every one of us to continue following the rules despite receiving our jabs.

We need to remember where we have been so we conduct ourselves accordingly to make it all for naught.

Some ?social graces? may have been lost through this ordeal, but remembering that despite many re-found freedoms we're still in this fight together is a societal bonus we should still keep top of mind.