

Sharing and amplifying necessary stories

by BROCK WEIR

A quick trip by car over our southern border hardly feels like it would have any of the ingredients necessary to whip up a dose of culture shock, but every once in a while, some of the things we take for granted can be received somewhat differently by our American cousins.

Just a few months ago, social media users were all atwitter (pun most certainly intended) at a tiktok video that went viral, showing an American woman gobsmacked by bins bubbling over with all sorts of goodies and staples at Bulk Barn.

?Big deal,? we might have thought ? but there it was, a part of the everyday Canadian experience, seen through fresh eyes.

For more than 20 years now, our family has made an annual trek to Jamestown, NY, a city just over an hour away from the border at Niagara. We meet up with an ever-growing and eclectic group of friends united by a common interest and, over the years, we've come to know one another quite well ? but, in my experience, there's one curious thing that is rarely seen as anything but a novelty down there: our humble dollar.

I first paid attention to this about a decade ago when the Bank of Canada ditched our cotton paper bills to the more durable polymer notes we have now.

Paying for a drink at a bar one evening, the bright blue corner of a fresh fiver poked out of my wallet, prompting a few questions.

I guess for people who have become accustomed to the relatively monochrome nature of the aptly-named greenback, the sky-hued portrait of Wilfrid Laurier's balding pate might seem rather out-of-the-ordinary, but our notes have often been a conversation starter from that point on.

Some years, if I'm lucky to have one on my person, the red \$50 bearing Mackenzie King's image has started a discussion. In 2022, the Platinum Jubilee year, a Green Queen on the \$20 was something that made its way around the table before ending back up in my wallet.

But there was another note that stood out amongst the American crowd this past August: the new-ish portrait of Viola Desmond that is central to the award-winning redesign of our \$10 bill.

Perhaps it was because the previous U.S. administration nixed plans to replace Andrew Jackson's presidential portrait with that of Underground Railroad heroine Harriet Tubman on their \$20 bill, but the broad strokes I was able to provide on Desmond, the Nova Scotia entrepreneur whose stand against a segregated movie theatre in the Province came more than a decade before that of Rosa Parks' courageous actions in Alabama, leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, held rapt my friends' attention, sparking them to want to learn more.

I took particular pride in the fact that something that passes through our hands every day, which we previously didn't give a second thought, could serve as such a potent symbol of so much, and a way to draw attention to our own homegrown stories that are often left in the shadows due to the powerful influence and amplification of stories that come out of the United States.

Sharing ?our? stories has become an important part of Black History Month ? and I use the word ?our? out of deference to the Canadian activists for diversity, equity and inclusion who rightly point out that Black History is Canadian History, our collective history, and several stitches on what is, warts and all, the Canadian tapestry.

?We tell our stories and our stories matter,? said Dr. Jean Augustine, Canada's first female MP of African descent elected to the

House of Commons, and the leading force in passing legislation recognizing Black History Month from coast to coast to coast, at a Black History Month gala on Friday night I was lucky enough to attend.

'This year's (Black History Month) theme is 'Our Stories to Tell' and that theme reminds us of our duty to share a complete story of Canada, but it also alerts us to our own capacity to help write an even greater story today and going forward.?'We must go back to our roots in order to move forward. We need to reach back, we need to gather the best of what our past has to teach us. Black History Month honours the enormous contributions that Black people have made and continue to make. This is our Canada. It's a beautiful place full of wonderful people, but Canada remains a work in progress. We still have to deal with racism, Islamophobia, reconciliation with our indigenous people, the LGBTQ community and I can go on and on. We realize that if we're to have a fair and just and inclusive and diversified society that we all have to ensure we know our past, we honour our past, we honour them?'not just on special days.'

Stories, the history, of what Canadians of African descent have experienced can sometimes be difficult to share, and sometimes difficult to absorb, but share and absorb we must in order to move forward together on the road to creating a better country.

All too often there is the perception that recognizing Canada's flaws is a weakness, that acknowledging that much of our history is not all sunshine and roses is somehow a betrayal against 'Brand Canada' that will bring the whole house of cards tumbling down, but nothing can be further from the truth

In order to continue strengthening who we are as Canadians, we need to acknowledge the wrongs along with the rights because only with a full perspective, or at the very least, as fulsome a perspective as we can, can we light brightly the path ahead towards a better future.

Sharing stories is an important part of that.

From Dr. Augustine who used her unique position in Canadian history to heighten our collective human experience, to business owners of colour who, whether consciously or not, broke down barriers, to the activists and volunteers in our communities who walk the walk and talk the talk every day, to a neighbour who might be the first person in their family to attend college or university, there are stories all around us to share, learn from, and amplify to others.

And not just in February, but all year round. This is what we endeavour to do, and for what we'll continue to strive.