

Shining a light into 2023

by BROCK WEIR

It's a good thing we've had the last three years to pivot in ways we've never had to before ? because we all need a little bit more flexibility at this time of year.

Looking back at the last few days of the year that was, I was glad to have been able to metaphorically tuck and roll, brace for impact, and recalculate trajectory over the holidays.

Despite the best laid plans most of us had for the holiday season, a winter wallop forced some to be a bit more flexible than we had anticipated ? to various degrees of frustration, anger, and disappointment.

As Mother Nature unleashed her wrath, many of us were left looking for ways to stage a Great Christmas Redo ? as was the case with my family.

As I alluded to in my last column, these days of newly-minted Christmas past were shaping up to be the busiest in a good long while, certainly since the last holiday of the ?before times.? The dash was set to begin December 23 with an overnight up north, before a sprint to southwestern Ontario on the night of Christmas Eve, and then a running leap to Aurora on Boxing Day morning before a grand finale in Etobicoke. At the eleventh hour, the vague threat of weather nixed any travel plans on December 23 and plans quickly pivoted to condensing the northern dash, a family dinner, and a southwestern sprint in a narrower-than-it-sounds 12-hour window. Somehow the first leg of the trip was pretty uneventful, the meal was delicious, and the warms-and-fuzzies of the first round of family reunions quickly bubbled to the surface.

The second leg of the trip was much of the same ? until it wasn't.

Catching the train in Barrie for Toronto was pretty easy, as was catching the subway to connect with a further two GO Buses to Kitchener. But things shifted quickly on the last round with near invisibility driving into the university city.

Arriving at the Kitchener GO about an hour later than scheduled, I'll freely admit to being a bit cranky. Being on the go for what was, by then, 15 or 16 hours through all manner of weather, I wanted to call it a day as quickly as possible. But the final taxi connection had other ideas.

With some further time to kill in the wee hours of Christmas morning, it seemed logical to actually go inside the station to warm up.

At which point any crankiness I had quickly evaporated.

The station's waiting room was full of tired travellers who had scrambled to catch a 7.15 p.m. train to get back home to celebrate the holidays, a train which had by then been delayed until 2.37 that morning.

There were grumbles from the travellers to be sure, but as I watched some of them wrap themselves up in coats and clothes from their suitcases to rest their weary heads on cheerily-wrapped gifts that, had their plans gone off without a hitch, would have already been opened by their child, partner, parent, it certainly put the marathon to merriment I'd just experienced into perspective.

All in all, we had it pretty easy. The weather held off when it needed to and the connections were largely on time to get us where we needed to go. Compared to people just waiting for the chance to head in the direction of Toronto, there was plenty to be grateful for and the wait for the last taxi didn't seem so bad ? and I decided then and there to simply go with the flow for whatever nature and fate had planned for the days that followed.

The sheer determination of people in the station determined to be with loved ones on that very special day was the overriding image of Christmas Eve for me. In the Christmas favourite 'Love Actually', Hugh Grant waxes lyrically about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport but, at Christmas 2022, there was something to be said about the departures lobby at the Kitchener GO.

On Christmas Day itself, I was grateful to have been able to wake up in a warm bed and partake in at least one tradition that is inextricably part of my holidays: taking a 10-minute pause to hear from the Monarch.

Not only is it a great opportunity to take a bit of a breather amid the hubbub, I found the thoughts shared by Queen Elizabeth II, and now King Charles III, help set the tone for the year ahead and this year was no exception.

Speaking of his late mother's faith, the King said her 'belief in the power of that light [in O Little Town of Bethlehem] was an essential part of her faith in God, but also her faith in people.'

It is a belief in the extraordinary ability of each person to touch with goodness and compassion the lives of others and to share a light in the world around them. This is the essence of our community, and the very foundation of our society. We see it in the selfless dedication of our armed forces and emergency services, who work so tirelessly to keep us all safe; we see it in our health and social care professionals, our teachers, and indeed all those working in public service whose skill and commitment are at the heart of our communities. And at this time of great anxiety and hardship, be it for those around the world facing conflict, famine, or natural disaster, or for those at home finding ways to pay their bills to keep their families fed and warm, we see it in the humanity of people throughout our nations and the Commonwealth, who so readily respond to the plight of others.

I particularly want to pay tribute to all those wonderfully kind people who so generously give food or donations, or that most precious commodity of all, their time, to support those around them in greatest need. Together with the many charitable organizations, which do such extraordinary work in the most difficult circumstances, our churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras have once again united in feeding the hungry, providing love and support throughout the year. Such heartfelt solidarity is the most inspiring expression of loving our neighbour as ourself.

While Christmas is of course a Christian celebration, the power of light overcoming darkness is celebrated across the boundaries of faith and belief. So whatever faith you have, or whether you have none, it is in this life-giving light and with the true humility that lies in our service to others, that I believe we can find hope for the future.

In a world which feels more and more divided with each passing year, I too believe we can foster hope for the future in looking out for one another and finding new, renewed, and creative ways we can add to the light over the next 12 months and beyond.

If one can afford it, it could be a simple donation to the local food bank or the charity of choice. For those whose resources are stretched thin due to inflation and other challenges, it can just be an allocation of time, something of which we all have a bit to spare.

But there's an option that requires no resources and little time: renewing the respect we have traditionally shown to the tireless people who work day in and day out to keep us safe, keep us healthy, and educate the leaders of tomorrow.