Standing on guard

by BROCK WEIR

It's often said that the more you learn the less you know.

In the course of finding, absorbing, and analysing what might be inelegantly described as ?new? knowledge, there's always a chance that the new factoids you're trying to file away somewhere might dislodge or overwrite some other bit of once-useful info that your has, for reasons best known to it, deemed less relevant than something else.

If only there was a rhyme or reason for it all.

Over the course of the holiday season, for instance, CTV and a host of other networks dusted off the holiday staple, The Sound of Music, for eager audiences young and old. A favourite of mine as both a youngster and a non-youngster, I was reminded within just a few minutes that my brain has committed every line of dialogue and lyric contained therein to the extent that I could, if I wanted (and, in the interest of fill disclosure, I never will want to outside the comfort of home) recite the picture in real time along with Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer, and their hearty brood.

Now, ask me about my high school-level Spanish.

Once upon a time, I could have a reasonably decent debate with my Spanish teacher in the language of the classroom whether or not eggs were dairy products (don't ask). Now, simply due to lack of opportunity to use what I gleaned over the last 20-odd years, I'd be lucky if I could string together more than the most rudimentary sentences of the beautiful language.

Yet, we're always learning, always finding out more, having our eyes opened to new perspectives, and new ways of thinking ? and unless you have a photographic memory, the process will lead to a few more things getting nudged to a less-accessible recess of the mind.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing. New learnings and new perspectives might render whatever is fading outmoded or even irrelevant, even when it comes to language ? and a prime example of this cropped up this past week.

Our national anthem has often been a linguistic hot potato.

Its lyrics were first penned in French in 1880 by Adolphe-Basile Routhier before its 1908 translation by Stanley Weir, which made this ditty, first written as a march, accessible to English-speaking Canada.

As it wasn't formally adopted as our anthem until 1980, others, depending on where you lived and the circumstances of the events at hand, may have found other ditties embraced in the hearts and minds of the nation ? The Maple Leaf Forever, anyone? ? and what Routhier and Weir came up with has often been a source of debate.

There have been efforts over the years ? actually, across three distinct centuries ? to get the words just right. Efforts to remove religious language from the lyrics have been largely successful. In the 1990s, a radio station held a contest for a re-written O Canada that everyone could agree on; surprisingly or not, the winning overhaul sounded like an ode to our weather above anything else and failed to set the country on fire.

One drive which did gain traction came following a private member's bill in the House of Commons from late Liberal MP Mauril Belanger to modify the anthem from ?In all thy sons command? to ?In all of us command? to be gender-neutral. A noble effort in my view, but the grammar enthusiast in me rendered my support for this awkward-sounding change slightly grudging?but I adapted.

As did most others whose complaints regarding the change, unfortunately, was seated deeper than mere grammar. But some are still clinging onto ?thy sons? like they were getting ready to leave home for the first time.

Fast forward to Sunday night when Canadian singer Jully Black performed the national anthem at the NBA All-Star Game in Salt Lake City.

As she prepared to take the microphone, Black says she consulted with Indigenous Canadians and other groups about whether taking on what was undoubtedly a nerve-wracking gig already was the best move.

The result was powerful in its simplicity. Just one pointed word.

?Our home and native land? was suddenly ?Our home on native land.?

No muss, no fuss.

?I reached out to some Indigenous friends to say, first of all, ?How do you feel about me doing this anthem?? Black told TSN afterward. ?And I got some feedback, and so I really dissected the lyrics, to really sing it with intention. Now I'm singing it in a whole other meaningful way.?

She certainly is.

In the immediate days after the performance, I was heartened to see that so much of the feedback, at least compared to the last official change to the anthem, was largely received positively.

Who would have thought that changing ?and? to ?on? would have such an impact? Well, anyone who previously bristled at the official lyrics ? and not for reasons unfounded.

Not all reaction was positive, of course; we have, after all, been taught to think that O Canada is etched in stone and is the embodiment of our country ? a remarkable mindset for something that's been enshrined in legislation for only roughly 28 per cent of this country's existence.

But, let's be real: as proud as I am every time I have the opportunity to sing the national anthem when the occasion calls for it, the English version of the song, despite four references to the country in the first verse that we typically sing, is hardly tailor-made to our country beyond the five words of ?True North strong and free.?

With just one simple word change, the lyric might represent an uncomfortable truth to some, but it goes a long way in illustrating the Canadian story thus far and could very well serve as a benchmark for where we need to be.

If we can get used to ?all of us? in place of ?all thy sons,? it's not a huge learning curve.

And it will certainly provide all those in the future whose first encounter with the national anthem is standing up in their classroom and singing it with full heart and voice a gateway to, and foundation of, learning that will only stand the test of time.