

Stop, look and listen

by BROCK WEIR

In the grand scheme of things, there are worse places to be 'stranded' in.

Despite planning a mini-holiday in New York City in the last week of June so as to be home in time to put last week's newspapers together, the airline tasked with helping make this goal a reality had other ideas.

Due to a threat of thunderstorms in Toronto on June 27, the return trip was cancelled and rebooked firstly for a full six days after the cancellation and then, after some negotiations with customer service into the early hours of the original flight date, a much more palatable return on June 30 was ultimately found.

It was nice to have a few extra days to explore previously unexplored parts of The Big Apple, but I was never fully relaxed for the unexpected extension to the holiday; although the threat of thunderstorms, which scuttled plans for the original flight, seemed minimal for the new return date, skies along the Hudson River and the harbour were becoming hazier by the day, with the air smelling more and more like the Canadian smoke that plagued the city just a couple of weeks before.

Would the plane ultimately arrive in Newark to bring those of us cooling our heels home, or would the impact of our ongoing forest fire situation keep us 'cancel-ees' grounded until the spring thaw? Well, as much as I love New York and everything it has to offer, I was never happier to have landing gear touch down in Toronto than on Friday morning.

It was an early day and, as such, I was not feeling my most energetic self, so the next leg of the trip, by airport shuttle, was relatively quiet on my part. Intending to get a few winks on the way back, that was all but lost when two couples on the bus - one from the United States and one just returning to Canada - got to talking.

I try not to be one to eavesdrop on other people's conversations, but their proximity and sheer volume made it unavoidable. What followed was one of the most 'Canadian' conversations I had ever heard.

The two couples who had never met before traded notes about the Toronto Blue Jays - one of the couples flew in specifically for a game and to check out the latest renovations at the Dome - and the Maple Leafs, a seemingly comprehensive review of every single NHL game three of them had attended, and how each of them had a child 'living in Whistler.' (Is it me, or does it seem like everybody has a child, aunt or uncle, a cousin of varying distance, or a friend who has some ties to Whistler and its environs?)

If I wanted to be back in Canada, I couldn't have asked for a more immersive experience - particularly on the eve of Canada Day, a Canada Day where, much like my unavoidable eavesdropping, was all about the simple act of listening.

In Canada Day seasons where I am not covering any number of wonderful local events commemorating our nation's birthday, I try my best to catch the Canada Day noon show from Parliament Hill - or, as was the case this year due to restoration work, on the Lebreton Flats. It's a great chance to see the best that the country has to offer, as well as to hear from our leaders on what the day means to them and their thoughts on moving forward collectively.

What struck me this year were not the remarks made by Governor General Mary Simon or Prime Minister Trudeau but the words from Indigenous leaders.

Over the last few years, we've become accustomed to public events being opened respectfully with land acknowledgement ceremonies, some of which are more respectful than others (if you're delivering one, the least you can do is learn how to pronounce the First Nations you're referencing) but this one was different.

Led by First Nations, Inuit and Metis Elders, theirs was not a simple acknowledgement; rather, it was a call to action ? and that action was to simply listen.

Referencing Mother Earth and her gifts of life, shelter, food and medicines, First Nations Elder Debbie Sampson said, ?the mountains, the water, the air, they are our calm, they are our peace, they are our healing and our medicine. Without them we become lost. Our hearts harden and our spirits and our ancestors cry. I have a responsibility to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.?

?There once was a time where my relatives of the natural life were plentiful and healthy,? she continued. ?Global warming, clear cut mountains, natural gas, oil wells, mines on the land and the seas ? the contaminants are destroying and poisoning the air, the waters, the land. The affects to our ecosystem are astronomical? If we don't do things differently, as a government, as individuals, as people, we will not survive?. Listen to the land, our life-giver? she cries as she burns from global warming, from fires. She burns as she falls apart from earthquakes, floods and slides. Listen, love and care for this land.?

This was a theme shared by Metis Elder Lorelei Lanz who said they have ?learned to live in harmony with nature, respecting the land's rhythm and bounty.?

?The land is not something to conquer or exploit, but to respect and nurture,? she continued. ?We understand the delicate balance of taking from the land and giving back to it. We listen to the land ? the whispers, the echoes, the melody, and sometimes the silence?. By caring for and nurturing the land, we show gratitude and respect for Mother Earth. We know that our wellbeing is tied to the health and strength of the land. In today's world, as our Earth faces unprecedented environmental challenges, we can all learn from the Metis teaching and wisdom. We should listen, observe and connect with the land, understanding its sacredness and our responsibility to protect it.

?Consider reflecting on your own connection to the land you walk upon and how you can become a guardian of the earth. Let us work together to protect, honour? for the wellbeing of all and for future generations.?

I hope this message was heard as loud and clear by the politicians of all stripes in attendance that Canada Day, and indeed by ears coast to coast to coast, as clear and present as I was engulfed by the conversation of the airport shuttle quartet.

Theirs was not the quintessential Canadian conversation I thought it was; that honour instead goes to the three women, including Pauktutit Inuit Elder Charlotte Wolfrey, who opened Saturday's ceremonies in Ottawa, putting any inconvenience I experienced last week, although somewhat related to the ills they drove home to all of us, into much-needed perspective.

Let's listen together.