

The People & Things that Bring Us Together

by BROCK WEIR

"You're a terrorist!?" she exclaimed through the window of her car, directed at someone I couldn't see from my vantage point.

The sound of her voice reverberated through me on Monday night as we approached Los Angeles International Airport bound for Toronto.

Screeching tires ahead gave an indication that the shocking exclamation above was spurred by some sort of traffic tiff, but let's face it, nothing warrants nonsense like that ? particularly not a minor traffic fracas.

It was enough to snap me out of a near-week-long reverie that had followed since temporarily vacating the area to attend a celebration in honour of a long-time family friend.

Ordinarily when I venture west to visit this particular branch of the "chosen" family tree, it's time for an excitement that builds until its crescendo right at take-off and holds on for the duration of the trip. This time around, as has been the case during my most recent trips to the United States, my excitement was tempered by that seemingly age-old question of "just what environment am I about to step into?"

It's no news that our political environment, in just about every realm and locale around the world, is more divided now than ever before.

Truths that were once held universal, truths that we all agreed on, have been battered and bruised, creating what can sometimes make different people of different political stripes and outlooks on life feel that they or we are living on different plains of reality at the same time.

Depending on your destination, you can sometimes find yourself at least toe-deep into these realms.

Our annual family trip to Jamestown, NY, for the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival is a prime example. The drive offers almost a thoroughfare into a cross-section of communities deemed either red or blue ? and it's become clear, in each successive year, the number and content of the invariable cacophony of lawn signs differs wildly and is dependant on which way the winds happen to be blowing.

"Okay, what are appropriate subjects for polite conversations this time around?" is a thought that is never far away from my mind, not wanting to get the dander of anyone of any stripe up higher than it needs to be.

And, so it was in the early hours of November 13, when I was going through a mental checklist before zipping up my suitcase.

Granted, the destination this time around was California, a generally "blue" state, so a few "safe" topics of conversation likely had some longevity from my last visit in the "before times," but it's so hard to tell anymore. It is, after all, the start of an election year in the United States (but, then again, when isn't an election cycle of some kind grinding its gears?) and people are getting all hot and bothered over those same pesky truths.

After a few days of rest and relaxation upon landing, the busy part of the trip kicked off on Thursday when, as it happens, plans for the celebration in honour of the afore-mentioned long-time family friend also kicked into high gear.

There were a few details that needed to be finalized and a few organizational things that needed a few extra hands, and there was nothing but celebration in the air as the event grew nearer.

The event, as it happens, was called 'Moments in Time,' a photographic exhibition hosted by Malibu City Hall in honour of my friend, photographer Laura Johansen, and a man who has been her muse for many years, legendary entertainer Dick Van Dyke.

When we arrived at seat of government early-ish on Sunday morning, the energy even outside the building was electric as hundreds of fans of the star of 'Mary Poppins', 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang', and, of course 'The Dick Van Dyke Show', camped out for the chance to see their favourite actor in person and on stage for a conversation between photographer and subject.

Many came dressed as Poppins' cockney chimney-sweeping friend Bert. Others, Caractacus Pott of 'Chitty, Chitty' fame.

Scores came dressed as Mary Poppins herself, others accessorized with representations of penguins from the same film. Others, Mrs. Banks complete with her Sister Suffragette gear.

One was dressed head-to-toe in four-year-old presidential swag, apparently keen to make statement of some sort, but we'll come back to him.

What's important is they were young, they were old, they were everything in between.

Some shared the stage or the screen with the man of the hour.

Others had been fans long before their memories were recorded. Still more were fans newer to the party but no less happy to be there.

When the guest of honour arrived, the electricity that was already in the air surged and, if one measured the level of emotion that was in the air, it's safe to say the only appropriate adjective would be 'euphoric.'

All that mattered were the artists on that stage.

Although the Q&A was set to be about 20 minutes or so, the icon held court for a full hour, sharing insights on his life, his career, and his family life with an energy and zest that belied his 97 years.

Admittedly, I held my breath for any reaction from the statement-dresser when Dick Van Dyke's mutual admiration society with Dr. Anthony Fauci, or the actor's interactions with presidents over the decades, including his receipt of the Kennedy Center Honour from President Biden, and impromptu warm words over Rosalynn Carter when news of her death broke moments before the exhibition opening.

In the moment, none of that mattered.

The political walls that certain operators have been working overtime to erect were suddenly 'even if it was only temporary' bulldozed.

No matter what their beliefs, all that mattered in that moment was Dick Van Dyke and the love the room of more than 300 people had from him. They were united, they were overjoyed, and they were reverent 'something I sadly haven't seen since the pandemic.

Chalk it up to the unifying factor of Dick Van Dyke.

For more than 70 years, Van Dyke has brought the world together in laughter, not to mention in awe of his prodigious talents. It was clear that he thrived on the energy from the assembled just as much as we were thriving from his seemingly endless well of the same.

As sorry as it is to say, there aren't many people on whom everyone can agree on in near unanimity.

Dick Van Dyke, however, is definitely among the selected few.

What a privilege it was to see it in action ? and how buoyant I felt afterwards.

Not even that unwelcome snap-back to reality at the airport on the way home was enough to bring me quite back down to earth.

Let's chalk that one up to Dick Van Dyke as well.