

Time to embrace the discomfort

By Brock Weir

One of my earliest memories is reaching for a pen. Not an ordinary blue or black Bic, mind you, but one of those snazzy four-pronged pens that offered not only the standard blue or black, but red and green as well.

We all know the ones. They were once a hot commodity among students of all ages before snazzy electronic gizmos were more commonplace and, in turn, affordable.

On this particular day, I woke up on a sunny summer morning, reached for the pen but couldn't find it. Before even opening up the blinds to fully greet the day, I clamored out of bed to find out where it went, rifling through the drawer of my bedside table (nothing), ripping open the top drawer of my dresser where anything but clothing was kept (nothing), before flinging open the doors of my double-decker Fisher Price cupboard set that made me feel like a peewee hotshot.

Aha! There it was ? and just below that was the other thing I was looking for: a piece of creamy-white construction paper.

Three or four years old on this particular July 1, I felt I couldn't truly start that momentous day without scratching out a few half-baked thoughts on the paper with the red prong of that four-way pen which, if truth be told, also made me feel like a hot shot at my Montessori school.

While I can't remember exactly what I wrote, I remember the sentiments expressed beside a crudely-drawn maple leaf, which, in retrospect, probably more resembled Bullwinkle than the Canadian icon known the world over: giving thanks for the true north strong and free.

I guess it was in the blood because my own personal love for Canada Day never really wavered.

Maybe as a youngster, before I fully knew what it meant, I was drawn to donning the colours of our two-tone flag, belting out a rousing rendition of O Canada despite my clear lack of any kind of singing prowess, learning more about the heroes and heroines that made our country what it was and, as I got older, learning more about the cultures that came together to make Canada what it is today.

We were fed a steady biographical diet of men and women who displayed unparalleled acts of courage during battles at home and abroad, of the men (and, alas, we did learn primarily about the men) who drafted key pieces of legislation that paved the way for our Constitution and our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, learned folk songs handed down from generation to generation from province to province, and had cursory lessons on Indigenous art and culture from people who by and large, given the benefit of hindsight, really had no business teaching these things to us.

Okay, I'll get right to the point: taught to us almost exclusively by settlers who took their cues from textbooks researched, written and published by almost exclusively the same demographic.

There were a few bumps along this road paved with patriotism, however. With each passing year, new tidbits of information came forward suggesting that there was more to our shared history than what was presented to us in textbooks and by well-meaning elementary and secondary school teachers of the 90s and early aughts. But, like many of us, I forged ahead, content to celebrate this vague notion of ?Canada?.

As passionate student of history in elementary and high school, I was heartened by seeing more and more of the culture of our Indigenous peoples rightly playing an increasingly prominent role and redefining what Canada Day means to the nation writ large.

Now, here we are with another Canada Day behind us; one which has arguably, more than any before it, been about redefining what the day ? and the nation behind it ? means to us all, and what it should mean in the future.

For those of us who previously revelled in the occasion, it was undoubtedly an unusual experience as many people struggled not only with the meaning of the day itself but almost every minute detail of the day we previously hadn't afforded a second thought.

The idea of donning red and white, once a given, was seen as insensitive in light of recent tragic national events and, in my opinion, rightly so. Instead, we were respectfully asked to wear orange, or black at the very least, in solidarity with our Indigenous peoples and people of all backgrounds collectively grieving for the same reason.

Many communities cancelled whatever celebratory events they were able to plan in consideration of present public health restrictions, particularly fireworks, lest it minimize the solemnity being felt from coast to coast to coast. Again, rightfully so, in my opinion.

I wish I could count on one hand the number of friends and acquaintances on social media who thought it appropriate to vent their spleens over the last few days through their social media channel of choice about how they felt ?uncomfortable? with how uncomfortable they felt celebrating Canada Day. But, unfortunately, I would have to have a few more sets of hands and feet to innumerate them all.

And that, to me, is a rather sad state of affairs.

We settlers had every reason to feel uncomfortable celebrating Canada Day as if it was business as usual. This Canada Day was anything but business as usual. Those of us who had some idea of the horrors that went on behind the walls of residential schools were still grappling with the gut punch that the true extent was beyond what many of us feared. Those who were content to consign the impacts of residential schools to the scrapheap of history had the rug pulled out from under them when they were forced to confront the reality that it is still very much a part of our present, a reality that needs to be fully addressed by the Canada of today. And those previously ignorant of residential schools? Well, the less said the better.

There is a prevailing notion these days, particularly as so many seek out digital echo chambers, that experiencing discomfort is necessarily a bad thing. It's not. For many, comfort can also lead to complacency.

Discomfort is a feeling that action of some kind, however small or personal it might seem, is necessary to right the ship in the hopes of feeling that comfort once again.

We should all be feeling discomfort right now and we should all be looking at ways to make things right.