

BROCK'S BANTER: Going Back & Letting Go

By Brock Weir

That sense of belonging was always just out of reach.

I was never a trendsetter when it being a trendsetter was of utmost importance.

My tastes when it came to movies, music and television were always at least a couple of decades behind the times. Recess was always a particularly daunting time when I invariably met my peers' lyrical waxations on whatever YTV show tickled their fancy with little more than a blank stare.

While I shortly thereafter learned the importance of having a basic knowledge of such things in maintaining the art of conversation, I rarely felt in my comfort zone. I knew in my heart it was all a facade and I was, in the dreaded term of the time, really nothing more than a poseur.

I had my Simpsons t-shirts, a genuine and enduring interest, to be sure. And they were trotted out of my closet until they were largely threadbare, but my garments paying tribute to I Love Lucy, The Beverley Hillbillies and more were always tucked away. People just didn't understand and the possibility of fielding the invariable mix of questions and presumption were enough to fill me with anxiety and dread.

The good news is I outgrew it ? that is, I outgrew the anxiety that came with being true to myself and, by Grade 10, I fully embraced it. By then, most people were mature enough to appreciate difference. There was always a degree of teasing, of course, but my own particular brand of me-ness, not to mention my particular quirks when it came to pop culture, seemed to be veering close to the endearing. There was laughter, of course, but I was in on the joke.

As students head back to school this week, I can't help but feel the need to send all good vibes their way.

I considered this over the weekend while wandering through the sea of humanity at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. There, I had to pause a few times to spare a thought for all the kids around me who were just days away from being packed off with their bagged lunches, new ensembles, fresh backpacks, and armed with all the school supplies they needed to ensure their new academic season got off on the right foot.

They were all around me, each in varying states of ecstasy.

Some were walking around with their parents, who seemed to be experiencing a similar level of euphoria. Others were exploring with their peers, and others still were flying solo.

They were totally content at that particular point; comfortable in their own skin, excited-yet-zen, and sharing their passions with like-minded individuals.

It was Fan Expo, a four-day extravaganza dedicated to all things, as the name suggests, that attracts a certain ?fandom.? Just about every kind of interest is represented in some way on the floor of the Convention Centre during this event. The event normally skews towards science fiction, comics, and horror, but there's a place for fans of video games, fantasy, anime, steampunk, cosplay, various forms of original art, and much more.

For some people, the idea of navigating through a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd populated with dozens of people dressed as Batman and Superman, Luke Skywalkers, Star Wars stormtroopers, Sailor Moons (Sailors Moon?), and more is the stuff of nightmares.

Indeed, it was the stuff of my own nightmares the very first time I threw caution to the wind and decided to head down.

My objective that first time around might seem like an unusual one: to meet the late Academy Award-winning actor Ernest Borgnine, of whom I had been a fan since my first of many subsequent viewings of the disaster movie The Poseidon Adventure. I was quite focused on my mission, but the road to my success meeting the Borgnine objective put me in the path of people like Carrie Fisher, Adam West, and Julie Newmar and I thought, ?Okay, this might be worth it after all.?

Becoming start struck is one thing, but, in the end, it is a fleeting thing.

What struck me almost immediately, and has stayed with me ever since, was how comfortable everyone there was in their own skin. Granted, their skin might be covered in layers upon layers of makeup, costuming and, in the cases of the stormtroopers, hard plastic which can't be anything but sweltering, but they were happy to ?let their freak flag fly,? as the saying goes, and everyone else was happy to let them do so.

Kids dressed as their favourite superheroes and fantasy characters ? in many cases, costuming that does not align with our so-called gender norms ? intermingled with others who were walking around in anything from a head-to-toe Thor costume, complete with hammer, to handfuls of Princess Leias in their own takes on the iconic metal bikinis, to one woman who appeared to be dressed in nothing but strategically-placed white duct tape.

No one batted an eye, happy to be themselves.

As for myself, I'm not a costume type, but I did decide to put on my Golden Girls t-shirt featuring pictures of the four women and emblazoned with a simple "SQUAD" which garnered many a compliment that would not have been heard in any other venue, but I digress.

As I surveyed the crowd of kids and teens, I couldn't help but hope this sense of comfort carried with them throughout the school year ahead.

Over the years in this job, I have been struck by the efforts today's teachers have gone through to create safe spaces in their classrooms and schools, places where students can feel safe not only being themselves but also find a warm sense of belonging. It was something sorely missing for many of my peers when I was of a similar age, and kids seem to be flourishing.

As I write this, I'm awaiting an announcement from the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario outlining their next steps in combatting the Provincial Government's efforts to repeal the 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum, a lesson plan that not only teaches the very valuable concept of consent to some of our most vulnerable society members, but equips kids with the knowledge that whatever they might be feeling is normal, that others are feeling the same things, and that they ultimately belong. Whether or not the teachers' and parents' efforts will have an impact remains to be seen, but it can only be hoped that the start of the school year this week is not a step backward to a point where kids feel less comfortable embracing who they are and that differences are less celebrated.