



## Am I Wrong?

column by Roger Varley

### An abrupt halt to a conversation

I sat in the *Cosmos* office last Friday, talking with my editor, Lisha. She and Sue, her right-hand gal there at the office, are with only two people in my bubble and it has been that way for months.

Lisha and I talked about a variety of subjects: COVID-19 and the shutdown, the people who defiantly break government protocols surrounding the coronavirus, the Brock Street culvert, the Gong Show south of the border and so on. After a while, I asked: "Is there anything happy we can talk about?"

Lisha sat and looked at me, rather perplexed, and for the longest time neither of us said another word. That was a sobering moment. Neither of us could think of anything happy to talk about.

Is this where we ended up? Has this year-long (and counting) shutdown of society brought us to the point where we can't even think of anything happy? As a devourer of news, I am hard-pressed to think of any happy stories I have read in months. Everything seems to be doom and gloom.

Maybe it's because it is February, the dreariest month of the year, and a sustained cold snap has settled in. That could be part of it, but I believe we, as a society, have just about reached our breaking point.

In England during the Second World War, despite the ravages and tribulations, there was always an underlying humour. It might have been dark humour, but at least people as a whole didn't sink into the depths of despair. I see no humour in the current situation. Not only that, but with the wearing of face masks it's hard to tell whether someone is smiling.

We miss the contact with our friends and family; we miss the once-normal day-to-day interactions with neighbours and fellow residents; we miss the coffee shop chats; we miss the handshakes and hugs. We are basically a social species and being bereft of all the things that are part of being social is anathema to us. What chance does happiness have?

We had a glimmer of hope at the end of last year when the production of COVID-19 vaccines was announced, but that quickly dimmed when we realized that there were glitches and hold-ups and the roll-out of

vaccinations proceeded at a snail's pace. We are continually told things are getting better, but the number of Canadians vaccinated so far is basically slow.

There's an old saying that misery loves company, but those of us who have been miserable living (existing?) through this pandemic don't even have the small satisfaction of seeing the flagrant rules-breakers join us in our misery. Instead of being sent to jail or being slapped with massive fines, most of the more egregious offenders merely get what amounts to a slap on the wrist.

For the past year, a whole bunch of events which are generally designed to make us happy turned into stories that were not happy: Huck Finn Day cancelled; Canada Day cancelled; Fall Fair cancelled; Christmas concerts cancelled; and so on. The result is we're all turning into Wednesday's child.

Of course, there have been those among us who have tried hard to bring a little joy into our lives. The residents of Campbell Drive who treated us with their inflatable Santa Claus, the Optimists' Fantasy of Lights and the drive-by parade to honour local veterans in Elgin Park are a few examples. While much appreciated, however, they really were fleeting moments of happiness, following which we were dumped back into the gloom.

When (if) this is all behind us, I hope our local leaders will recognize what we have all been through and stop making it difficult for residents to enjoy their lives. For example, let's lift some of the overly restrictive rules imposed on backyard family fires. Let's start removing a lot of the signs that control us everywhere we go. When we enter a trail or a park, about the first thing we see is a sign telling us Don't do this and Do that. Surely we are not children who have to be reminded every day. Let's not worry about people taking their time to stroll aimlessly about town or singing on the street at night. Right now, I'd give a month's pension to hear someone singing outside my window.

It seems to me there are times when we must have some governmental controls on our behaviour, such as during this pandemic, but for the most part government should back off and let us live our lives - happily. Tell me, am I wrong?



## The Barris Beat

column by Ted Barris

### Music filling the distance

Until about a year ago, it sat there, unused. It was just a piece of furniture filling a corner of my office, covered in dust and unopened. Its knobs, glass dials and chrome corners pretty much untouched for years. Then, shortly after Trudeau and Ford locked things down, the result of the pandemic, I unlocked it, turned the dial to "phone," and got reacquainted with an old friend - my record player.

I should say friends. In the opposite - and equally dusty - corner of my office, I pulled out some of my favourite vinyl. And I got lost in the leisure of pulling discs from their cardboard jackets and paper sleeves, sliding them onto my turntable, dropping the stylus in the groove and turning up the volume.

Masking, isolating, cutting off the world with social distancing, being alone (or nearly) requires something to fill the void, right? For some, it's food, and too much of that can really be a bad thing. For others, and I do it every day, it's long walks. But a full stomach or oxygenated lungs only brings a certain degree of satisfaction or distracted fulfillment. So, I've turned to the turntable and all its sonic pleasures, because every piece of music I enjoy brings a person, a story, or a feeling to mind. Playing anything by Sting brings back memories of a magical summer evening concert by Lake Ontario. I could listen to Laura Nyro's *Somed Soul Piece* until the record wore through. And jazz pianist Dave Frishberg's *Blizzard of Lies* makes me fall over laughing with its irony and brilliance.

Back in the 1950s, when my family owned a small cottage on the west shore of Lake Simcoe, recorded music had a special place. After swimming, fishing, golfing on hot summer days, in the cool of the evenings, my sister, grandparents, Mom, Dad and I slowed into individual activities around the tiny bungalow. Grandmother sewed, my grandfather read his *Grand* newspapers. I worked on my stamp collection and Dad chose music for the record player. That's how I discovered Jean Sibelius, Aram Khachaturian and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. On Dad's disc of the 1812 Overture, cannons actually fired on cue and massive church bells chimed out the Russian victory over Napoleon. But I also learned what 5/4 time meant when Dad played Paul Desmond's *Take Five* by the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

For something completely different, I've rediscovered Frank Zappa during the pandemic. I have a well-worn edition of his *Hot Rats* album, a mostly instrumental album he

recorded in 1969 after the breakup of his famous Mothers of Invention band. So, I listen to such titles as *Willie The Pimp*, *I Must Be A Camel* and *Peaches En Regalia* (which earned him a Grammy). Why he dedicated the album to his newborn son Dweezil, I'll never know. But what I always remember when I play the vinyl is the night I met and interviewed the inventive jazzman and political activist.

It was a stormy autumn night in 1970. With the aid of a media pass, I'd managed to talk my way into Zappa's concert at what was then known as "The Rock Pit" (a.k.a. the Masonic temple at Yonge and Davenport in Toronto). Between sets I climbed stairs to the tiny, third-floor green room. I arrived at the back of a gaggle of reporters. Frank sat sweating profusely from his first set, in a wingback chair, smoking a cigar in a terry-cloth robe. The brash, satirical, anti-establishment band leader was clearly bored with the questions us silly reporters had to offer.

"How do you like Toronto, Frank," one asked. "Fine," and he took a long drag on his cigar. "Where'd you go next?"

"Detroit." Zappa couldn't wait for this press conference to end. But having studied Frank's strong anti-fact politics and outspokenness, I took the opportunity to try to get something memorable from him.

"Frank!" I piped up with all the courage I could muster. "Why do you think Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were railroaded to the electric chair?" (In 1921, the two anarchists were tried by judge, convicted and executed for murder, that the two Italian immigrants claimed their anarchist politics had provoked). He put his cigar down, looked up at me, stroked his goatee and said, "Well, let me tell you, young man..." and I got the interview of a lifetime.

All that from just listening to *Hot Rats*. But that barely scratches the surface of my vinyl collection and the memories associated with some of those discs. So, provided the turntable in the corner of my office continues to spin and my record-player needle doesn't wear out, the music and the memories, I hope, should fill the distancing between here and that elusive anti-COVID vaccine.

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## Am I Wrong?

column by Roger Varley

### By-law is at it again

This column will not come as a surprise to Mayor Dave Barton. In fact, during Monday's council meeting, the mayor jokingly suggested he could write the column for me. That's because he had already guessed that was coming, given that council had just finished discussing a proposed new nuisance by-law offered up by our municipal enforcement department.

Regular readers of this column will know that just about every time our by-law department comes up with a new or amended by-law, it raises my hackles. Some might remember the by-law passed a few years ago that made it an offence to disturb worms in Elgin Park (don't laugh, this does exist. Check for yourself).

Top of the list of things that irk me about the proposed nuisance by-law is the prohibition against loitering. According to the definition of loitering contained in the by-law's preamble, I could be ticketed every time I left my apartment. That preamble describes loitering as "lingering on the way or travelling idly with frequent pauses without any apparent destination." That defines my daily perambulations to a T. Since when was it necessary to have a pre-determined destination before being allowed to walk the streets of Uxbridge? And if we are not allowed to make "frequent pauses," why do we have benches set out along the streets? But more than that, that decides who is loitering? It is absolutely unenforceable. The proposed by-law says it is an offence not to move along when told to do so by an officer. Any officer who tries to tell me to move along when I'm enjoying my daily constitutional - with frequent rests - is going to receive an earful from me.

Then there is the ban on producing objectionable odours. I know some people who do not like the odours coming out of the *Saxon Du Bois* shop - (now The Bridge Social) - when they were making their unique products. Others objected to the smell of onions cooking at The Passionate Cook. Still others protest against the smells that emanate from the Hela Spice facility. Should these locations be made to desist their operations just because someone doesn't like the smell? For my part, I love the smell of cooked onions. Am I to be denied that small pleasure because someone else objects? And, although we are talking about producing objectionable

odours, I refrain from mentioning a certain body function that is common among our old farts.

There would also be a ban on "nuisance parties." I could get no clear answer when I asked how people are supposed to know when their parties have become a nuisance.

Unreasonable noise is something else on the by-law's hit list. But when I asked whether the by-law department would be out on the street with a sound monitor to catch all those pick-up trucks and cars that roar around the downtown with deafening, modified engines and mufflers, I was told that people who want to complain about them should first obtain the vehicle's licence plate number and a determination of whether the vehicle had, in fact, been modified before making a complaint. Once again, practically unenforceable.

Oh, yes, you also wouldn't be allowed to "scream" or "yell." Now go out in the garden and tell the youngsters to keep the noise down while they are playing outside. And no obscene language is to be tolerated. I'm not proud of it, but my conversations often contain a few juicy expletives and there is no power on Earth that is going to tell me what I can say, where and when. And besides, once again it is unenforceable.

Now, one might say it is reasonable to ban fighting in public, but this by-law takes it even further. Under its provisions, you could be charged just for observing a fight.

There are a number of other prohibited behaviours, such as spitting or loud music, but just in case they have missed something, they have covered it off by banning "any other activity or conduct that is disorderly or obnoxious."

When are governments - of any stripe - going to learn that you cannot legislate behaviour? They might just as well pass a law saying everyone must always say "please" and "thank you." It would be just as futile.

Of course, should anyone run afoul of this by-law - (if it gets passed) - it will only be because the municipal enforcement department received a complaint from the public. In other words, it only works if everyone becomes a snitch. It seems to me that alone is reason enough to ditch this proposed by-law.

Tell me, am I wrong?



## The Barris Beat

column by Ted Barris

### What's missing this year

I picked up the phone this week and called a friend. We hadn't spoken since early in the pandemic. We've focused so much on the walls or masks between us and the rest of the world, that we've forgotten to reach out to close friends. So, I apologized for being so long out of touch. She asked how our family's doing. I asked about hers. There was a pause. "You know the toughest part of all this is?" she said. "No spontaneity. You can't do anything spur of the moment."

The fact was, that's partly why I'd called. If nothing else, the ease of calling, texting, emailing (and Zooming), during these lockdowns, has helped replace that lost "spontaneity" when you suddenly decide to catch up. She was absolutely right. She went on to explain that this time of year she really enjoys bringing special foods to friends, and inviting her grandchildren over for visits. She and her husband also enjoy a night or two out over the holidays - going to a movie, a restaurant, a Christmas parade - just on a whim. But not this year.

"Kind of takes the good cheer out of things," she said.

I had to agree. As I've written periodically these past months, some of the slowdown, some of the quiet time, some of the forced reclusiveness has been therapeutic. Over these many weeks, I've written about the renaissance in gardening, birding, enjoying your family bubble, doing more reading (and in my case writing). But we're also conditioned - especially during holidays such as New Year's, Thanksgiving and Christmas - to drop everything and right out of the blue to connect with those who are important to us. It's human.

It's interesting too, because doing things spur of the moment is also part of the charm of this time of year. Whether it's paying a surprise visit to a friend, dashing off to get that last-minute present, joining a group of carollers, or (for some of us) getting a call for an impromptu game of pick-up or shiny hockey, this time of year is made for things like that. Case in point - I don't normally get our tree until a few days before Christmas. I don't know why. The closer we get to Christmas generally means colder weather, more snow and the excitement of packing the kids in the car, grabbing a saw and some rope, leisurely driving out to a tree farm and making the tree hunt an outing.

"They're all closed, Dad," one daughter told

me last week.

"Closed? But it's still two weeks to Christmas," I protested.

"They've been overrun by a lot of people. They're sold out of trees."

So much for the joy of spontaneity. Now I was in panic mode. I didn't have time to pack up any kids. Just enough time for the saw, and a mad dash to some of my favourite tree farms. I got to my regular spot. "Closed for the season," the sign said. It was Dec. 9! Then, overland to another of my haunts for cutting my own. It too was boarded up. They tried to make me feel better about the bolted gates with a sign that read, "Happy holidays! See you next year." Happy? I was furious (at them and myself). Fortunately, I was third choice lucky. They were open. I just about kissed the young woman doing the tree sales. Wait! Can't do that! Keep your distance. See what I mean? No spontaneity.

Then, it happened again the other day. Remember when they announced that a couple more of the regions around the city would be locking down because of rising COVID numbers? It struck me that night. One of the places we like to shop for children's gifts happened to fall inside that zone. My reflex was the same as all those people lining up the next day at the malls in red zone trying to beat the clock. Quick. Get there and shop before the lockdown. Wrong! That's exactly what they don't want me to do. That kind of spontaneity in a lockdown is illegal and will exacerbate the problem.

I remember one Christmas that required more spontaneity than just about any other. It was 1982 or '83, I think. Remember those soft little dolls called Cabbage Patch Kids? You didn't just buy a Cabbage Patch doll, you adopted it ... if you could find one. Our daughters, you won't be surprised, just had to have them. Well, no store within 200 miles of where we lived had any. So, I spent days calling friends from coast to coast to search every possible outlet for an un-adopted Cabbage Patch Kid. We finally tracked two down, in Victoria. And there were two very happy kids, that Christmas.

Not to mention their spontaneous shopper dad.

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### The death of civility

It must be wonderful to be perfect. Imagine going through life without ever making a mistake or setting a foot wrong. However, I doubt any of us can imagine such an existence, being the imperfect human beings that we are.

My imperfection showed last week in the *Cosmos* story about the federal election when I incorrectly identified Patricia Conlin as the People's Party of Canada candidate in Pickering-Uxbridge. The simple explanation - though not an excuse - is that I misread an email.

The mistake was brought to our attention and, as do whenever we make a mistake, we announced the necessary correction on page 3 of this week's newspaper. It was corrected immediately on our website last week.

Now, I hate making mistakes and my editor can attest to the self-flagellation I impose on myself whenever it happens.

That said, the tone of an email we received pointing out my error was, to say the least, unsettling. The writer asked for "a headline correction on the front page." The writer did say "please," but it was still clearly a demand. What the heck is a "headline correction"? Did that mean the letter writer wanted the *Cosmos* front page headline this week to read "*Cosmos* Makes Mistake, Names Wrong Candidate"?

The letter writer then went on to ask the *Cosmos* to "please ensure that Roger Varley apologizes to your readers for spreading misinformation and have someone check his 'facts' before you print his articles."

While the information printed was incorrect and, therefore, by strict definition, "misinformation," with the current mania for labelling everything "fake news," it is fairly obvious what the letter writer meant by using that word, especially by including the word facts in quotation marks. In a follow-up email, the same writer labelled the mistake "very serious political meddling."

So arrest me, already.

As I said, we hate making mistakes, but we know they are going to happen from time to time. Heaven knows I've made some real boneheaded errors in the past. Having written around one million words for the *Cosmos* over the last 16 years, that's no surprise. In this case, the letter writer could simply have pointed out the error. But that's not the way the world works nowadays. Instead, it was apparently necessary to belittle me, boss the publisher around, and practically accuse us of

criminal behaviour. Civility, it seems, has died.

Anyone who ventures onto social media sites knows what I am talking about. God forbid anyone should misspell a word in their posts: the grammar Nazis will be all over them in a second. Offer a thought or suggestion that doesn't quite fit someone else's view and the vitriol spews forth and, more often than not, the legion of people that populate these sites will all join in.

The death of civility has been spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us are feeling confused, uncertain and anxious, and the constant battling between those who believe in vaccinations and those who don't has shortened tempers to the point that there can be no longer be a shred of dialogue between the two camps.

The death of civility also results from the change in the political atmosphere over the past couple of decades. There was a time when political differences were just that. But now we see those who are on the opposite end of the political spectrum as enemies - and not just political enemies. Other than to do anything, we want nothing to do with anyone who doesn't vote the way we do.

As I have said many times in the past, I can't think of too many professions where people put their names on their work for all to see and take responsibility via public corrections when they make a mistake. Apparently, however, that is no longer good enough for some people: these self-appointed guardians of the public good believe the miscreant responsible for the mistake must be thoroughly chastised and humbled before the masses.

Other parties kindly advised us of the error we had made, including the person who most suffered from it, Pickering-Uxbridge's PPC candidate Cornelia Chisu. In the voice message he left at the *Cosmos* office, he was gentle, pleasant, and simply pointed out the facts. No accusations, no finger-pointing.

According to the dictionary, synonyms for civility include consideration, politeness, good manners, etc. Whatever synonym you choose, there appears to be a dearth of it in today's society. Just as good citizenship comes with responsibilities, so does pointing out someone's errors or mistakes. It seems to me that if you can't do it with good grace, it's best to just keep quiet.

Tell me, am I wrong?



## The Barris Beat

column by Ted Barris

### For want of bats in my belfry

I sat on our back porch after sunset one evening this week. I was looking for them. The light was dying fast, which was why I was there. I kept scanning the skies over our backyard and our neighbours' yards, looking. One of my grandchildren was with me and wondered what I was doing, why I was so intent.

"They should be here by now," I said softly. "Why should they be here?" he asked.

"The bats," I said. "I haven't seen them this year."

After my evening stint scanning the skies, I did a bit of research. And I've learned some of the reasons why I haven't seen many bats around Uxbridge the past few years. I was surprised to read on one park service website as many as 45 different species of bats frequent the U.S. and Canada. Many of those species have suffered massive losses from a fungus known as *Geomyces destructans* (white-nose syndrome). By massive, I mean millions of bats killed across Ontario, Quebec and New York State.

"We stopped counting at five to seven million," biologist Craig Willis told the *Ottawa Citizen* in 2019. "Now it's millions and millions and millions."

But what scientists quickly point out - not surprisingly - is that interaction with people accounts for nearly as much of the bat demise as disease. Most bat varieties in North America try to roost in cliffs, caves, tree trunk crevices, bridges, barns or even abandoned mines. Well, we don't have many cliffs, caves or abandoned mines in these parts. But thanks to a strip-mining approach to urban planning and housing development in the GTA over the past 30 years, old-growth trees and abandoned barn lofts are in short supply. Indeed, a small livestock barn just a couple of lots away from ours was demolished in recent years, the same period when I watched bats vanish from the skies over my backyard.

*The coup de grace* for bat species surviving in North America, however, may well come from that other side-effect of the environment - climate change. To be fair, there is no evidence linking climate change to white-nose syndrome. But by just about every other yardstick of human contact with the wild, humans are guilty of snuffing out bat populations every day. Our elimination of carbon-reducing rainforests and increased generation of greenhouse gases have clearly destroyed habitat, created erratic winters, and raised the temperature of the planet.

"So what?" says the climate-change deniers.

According to bat scientists, bats migrate short distances from summer roosts where they rear their pups, to winter ones where they hibernate. The more we alter the Earth's temperature, the more we affect the migration and breeding patterns of the bats detrimentally. Again, the experts say hibernating bats prepare for winter by accumulating fat reserves; but if the temperature rises suddenly - because of an abnormally warming climate - the bats awaken, consume more energy, and run the risk of starving. The upset also delays fertilization, and reduces the survivability of the offspring.

So, what does having fewer bats swooping over our yards mean? The most obvious impact is higher insect populations. According to the American Wildlife Federation, bats are Nature's best pest controllers - consuming vast quantities of moths, house flies and mosquitoes. U.S. agriculture experts say that bats save the industry between \$3.7 and \$5.1 billion in pest-control services. The Scatology website says a single bat will eat hundreds of mosquitoes in a single night. In so doing, bats have also become *Naturapops* - reducing the potential spread of lethal diseases such as West Nile virus, Zika, malaria and other deadly pathogens. Bats also turn out to be great pollinators. Like bees they collect nectar from flowers (as well as insects) and thus pollinate over 700 different plants - including bananas, breadfruit, avocados, dates, figs, peaches and mangoes.

Maybe we need to change that old yardstick of life to, "The birds and the bees and the bats!"

Amid all the doom and gloom about human detrimental effects on bat populations, there is some positive news. Scientists around the National Capital Region have decided that a happy bat is a fat bat. So, they've begun to build and install "bat boxes," or portable roosts, near existing wetlands where the bats regularly feed. In addition to replenishing bat habitats when the bats take up residence, naturalists regularly check and clean the boxes of traces of white-nose syndrome fungus.

I know it sounds absurd - about as absurd as any politician this election denying climate change or anti-climate-change policies - but I'll put a bat box in my backyard, if only to be able to show my grandchildren that bats - like the environment - are worth saving.

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