

Contemplating the essential



By Nate Smelle

Whether found in a notebook, on a beer coaster, in the margins of a newspaper, on a wall, or a piece of wood, whenever I come across words I've scrawled down in random places, my mind drifts back to explore a different time and place.

While working on a few renovations over the weekend in attempt to make sense of the chaos that is my office/library/studio space, I found myself amid a series of these forest-induced flashbacks.

When I started this home improvement project, my intention was to simply enhance the functionality of the room by moving a few pieces of furniture and organizing the maze of papers and books lining the meandering path to the pile of most recently acquired information on my desk.

During the pandemic, I have noticed how this usually ever-increasing stack of fibre has significantly shrunk. As I arranged the papers into a single clump on the desk, my eye caught the word "ESSENTIAL" followed by a question mark scribbled boldly on the corner of the page peeking out from the bottom of the pile.

Vaguely recalling when I penned the mysterious single-word question, I removed the paper from its hiding place to investigate what led me to invest so much ink into it at the time.

Intrigued to find a press release about the forestry industry from the provincial government issued sometime last winter, I read through it right away in hope of remembering why I considered the question an important contribution to the page.

Delving into the material a little deeper, I discovered that I had written the question in relation to a sentence in which both levels of government deemed the forestry industry to be an essential sector due to its "vital role in supplying essential forest products for hygiene, medical supplies, food packaging and shipping materials."

Since the pandemic first flared up, governments around the world have been forced - for the sake of public health and safety - to designate specific goods and services as "essential" or "non-essential."

Ugly a task as this may be, it has delivered us with a more accurate understanding of our needs and wants."

Zigzagging my way out of the room while reading the rest of the press release, I realized that the question on the page was meant to

remind me of an ongoing theme in several articles I have written over the past 16 months.

Under this list we found a limited number of professions that our governments consider to be essential to our survival and basic quality of life.

Keenly investigating this list and uncovering its deeper meaning, requires an analysis of the messages it sends between the lines.

In between the lines, one discovers that everything our governments consider to be "essential" has to do with health-care; education; transportation; and food production and distribution.

Observing and honouring this accidentally unearthed fundamental truth as we continue to trudge forward towards a future beyond COVID-19, we now face the task of incorporating it into how we govern ourselves.

Recognizing how transformational this simple observation truly is, implementing it into our new "normal" will certainly be an incredibly demanding and rewarding experience for every one of us to look forward to.

Given the alternative - a return to our self-destructive complacency with business as usual - we all would benefit from contemplating what it means to be considered "essential" as we reshape and reset our society.