

Losses

By Tony Pearson

?Don't it always seem to go/
That you don't know what you've got till it's gone??

So sang Joni Mitchell in ?Big Yellow Taxi? ? and she spoke the truth.

In this week's issue, there's a story on the people who lost their homes in a flash fire in Coe Hill. What to me is most poignant is the loss of memories ? the old photos and the souvenirs of the times that make up our lives. You can replace a house, you can replace furniture ? but you can't replace the physical echoes of people and times past.

When you glance at an old photo, it's as if the pilot light of times past is re-lit. I have an old steamer trunk, which I have hauled from house to house for decades. In it are contained the moments I can still recall of good times and bad, souvenirs of places I have been and people I have known. This trunk contains who I have been, ?for better or for worse.?

There are regrets as well as joys in the collection. Along with what we have done, we are constantly reminded of what we didn't do. As I type this, I'm looking at my dog. I've mentioned him before ? Bear, the border collie who didn't want to admit he could no longer play fetch. Unfortunately, he's running out of room to manoeuvre. His legs are getting weaker and weaker. When he walks, his legs bow out, as if they can no longer support his weight (even though he's lost weight). He now slips and falls down on a hardwood floor ? a lot. And he can't manage stairs any more.

In addition, his sight is gradually fading; often he has to look sidewise to see something. Sometimes he hardly eats. And his mind ? never his strong point, despite what they say about the breed ? is increasingly going ?walk-about.?. He wanders the house, totally unsure of what he's looking for, unable to figure out if he's found it.

What he does mostly is sleep.

My wife and I have to admit that his remaining time is very limited. So the task is now clear. We have to make sure that he just doesn't slip away, tired and lonely. We have to give him our attention, and let him know that whatever his condition, he is loved. For when the inevitable loss comes, we don't want to regret lost opportunities to reward him for a life of great companionship. My favourite poet, T.S. Eliot, once wrote:

?Footfalls echo in the memory/
Down the passage which we did not take/
Towards the door we never opened?

This feeling too is quite familiar. Last week, someone I knew died. I hadn't known him long, but in the time that I did know him, I was impressed. His name was John van Bakel; I met him through the Lions club. I was aware that he had a long history in town, having served as postmaster and in other roles.

And he had an eventful past. At the club's summer barbecue, he pointed to Cec McAlpine, one of the founding club members, now in his 90s. In the Second World War, Cec had been in the RCAF. When he joined the club, John shared memories of his boyhood in Holland with him. ?I told Cec that when he was dropping bombs and paratroopers, I was on the ground watching them come down.?. John had a jolly soul; he made you feel happy. When he celebrated his 80th birthday this year at his daughter's house, I said I would sit down with him to go over his memories and put together an article. He agreed. We set a date.

What I didn't know was that John lived at the end on an unserviced and treacherous drive. When I drove to the rendezvous, the road was coated in ice. I looked down at a steep hill, which had an equally steep ascent on the other side. Being a chickens**t driver, I backed off. I called later, and promised I'd be back when all the ice and mud were gone.

The mud hasn't completely gone. But John has. I waited too long. The moment has passed, and will not return. The chance was lost. We should never neglect to pay attention to the people and other endearing creatures that populate and enhance our lives. All too soon, we have only our memories.