

Where were you when?



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By Nate Smelle

As one year ends and another begins, we find ourselves in that unique window of time where we are both looking back on the year behind us, and looking forward to the year ahead. Conducting this annual flexing of the hindsight and foresight muscles has become something I start doing earlier and earlier each year.

Usually it begins with a significant newsworthy happening that strikes my attention with enough force that it provokes me to create the year in review file. Often now, this provocation occurs in late April as the snow melts and the 100-year floods return to North Hastings. In 2020, however, that was not the case. As we are all aware, in almost every way possible, the year to our rear broke us free from the monotony of our routines. Although tragically proving fatal in its delivery for millions of us around the globe, to the advantage of future generations the pandemic continues to unseat us from our previously disastrous state of complacency with the status quo. By the end of January, there were already two stories worthy enough for the annual review. First, it was teachers and education workers who led the way on our path to progress, by calling on the Ford government to invest in education instead of cutting it. For many of us, we initially noticed the necessary shift in our routines when teachers and education workers organized a series of province-wide rotating strikes in an attempt to compel the government to shrink class sizes, and provide students with the safest and best quality education possible.

The next significant event of 2020 to demand our attention was the closure of the homeless shelter that St. Paul's United Church had been operating in its basement with the assistance of community volunteers. Despite the frigid temperatures outdoors, and the obvious level of need for such a shelter in the community by the number of people using it, the shelter shut its doors to the public earlier than expected, when the complexity of the homelessness crisis was highlighted by its intersection with another ongoing crisis of addictions and mental health. Unfortunately for those without a place to call home, without sufficient resources and the proper training for its volunteers and staff, the Church was unable to ensure the facility could operate safely, and had to close.

The winds of change kept blowing strong in February, when a wave of blockades and protests by land defenders sprung up across the country in solidarity with the Wet'suet'en Hereditary Chiefs' fight to protect their traditional territory from the inevitable environmental destruction that comes with the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline. With several blockades taking place in the path of a major shipping route, this peaceful act of civil disobedience garnered attention and support from Indigenous people, communities, and non-Indigenous allies worldwide. Then, in early March, before serious action could be taken to resolve any of these crises, the game changed for everyone when the first cases of COVID-19 started appearing in Canada. Having heard whispers

of this strange and deadly virus coming out of the international news for several months, it became a harsh reality for us in Canada when we started adding the names of Canadians to the fast rising number of cases and death toll around the world.

Reminiscing on this period of uncertainty, whether focusing on our first experience of coming across empty shelves at the grocery store, wearing a mask, struggling to find toilet paper and sanitizer, closing the doors to a business, losing your job, or realizing that professional sports are not, in the government's mind, an essential business, everyone of us alive today now has a "where were you when moment." These moments, like all "where were you when moments," are now a part of us; a defining element in the shaping of who we are as individuals, a community, a country, and a species.

To anyone paying attention to how the pandemic has shone a light on the dangerous intersection of crises, such as food insecurity, homelessness, affordability, income inequality, racism, and the climate crisis, it has now become clear that to deal with any one of these issues, we must understand how they connect with other crises. Through this illuminated truth, it has also become evident that we are nowhere close to returning to the state of normalcy we once knew. This may sound depressing to some, but not to me. I see this newfound awareness as a much-needed eye-opener, allowing us to move forward with clearer vision, and a better understanding of where we as humans fit into the big picture we help this world paint.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are all interconnected by the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil that feeds us. Similarly, witnessing, as everyone of us should have by now, George Floyd breathe his last breath under the knee of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, has also shown us how precious and valuable our life breath is. This heinous crime, yet another "where were you when moment" of 2020 spotlighted the ugliness and inhumanity of racism. In turn, the subsequent uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement provided us with additional insight into our complacency with turning a blind eye to the devastating impact discrimination and racial injustice has on our society. Thanks to COVID-19 our days of burying our heads in the sand like a flock of frightened ostriches are over. We have lost the opportunity to plead ignorance. That in my mind is a big step forward.

Fortunately, with this loss of our ignorance, we now gain the opportunity to strive for true progress as we redesign and rebuild our social structure. To achieve this goal, we all must contribute. In acknowledgment of how much I appreciate what I learn about myself and the world we share from the weekly exercise in reflection I get from writing this column, I urge others to take a moment during the current lockdown to think and write down what their personal "where were you when moments" have been in the past year. Then, before putting down your pen or taking off your thinking cap, ask what it was about these moments that made them noteworthy in your eyes. Surely, after a year like 2020, anything that ends up on the page or in your mind has the potential to become a piece of history worth sharing, and a valuable tool in the redesigning of our future.