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Through Others Eyes

“Most people are mirrors, reflecting the moods and emotions of the times; few are windows, bringing light to bear on the dark corners where troubles fester. The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.”

The words of Sydney J. Harris, a journalist AND a visionary – although I’m sure many would find that notion oxymoronic!!

But his words seemed a fitting beginning in any discussion about what it means to be visionary... to see clearly and to be willing to act on what we see- that is what makes us more window than mirror – a participant, not a by-stander.

It is said that each person’s life is lived as a series of conversations. For me that is quite literally true. I’ve had thousands of those exchanges professionally – in the glare of the TV lights. Now those conversations happen –discreetly – and mostly behind closed doors.

Regardless of setting or intent, those as conversations are “negotiations for closeness” – a phrase coined by Deborah Tannen.

From each conversation I’ve gleaned some insight about the instinctive curiosity and generosity of the human spirit.

There was the late Al Purdy, the poet who announced that I, as a broadcaster, had the best job in the world – except.... for that of the poet.

“How could “poet” be the best job,” I asked. “You make no money, there’s little respect or fame in literary circles – and your books are seldom bestsellers?”

Poets, he said, are observers who see with their eyes and their hearts –and this allowed him to live by his mantra, which was simply to “STAY STUPID” – which, he explained, meant “keeping your mind open.”

Then there was the conversation with the late scientist Stephen Jay Gould who evoked the words of the British writer G.K. Chesterton. Gould was talking about science as art.

Roughly paraphrased, Chesterton had argued that the most important part of any painting is its frame –it tells us what we are looking at and which side is up.

His point: that the essence of art is limitation.

We must learn to recognize that there are boundaries to what we can do in life too and know our limits. It's not about backing away from challenges; it's about putting your effort into what matters most.

Framing your world – then focusing on where you can make a difference.

Where I choose to try to make a difference is on the frontline of the largest economic relationship in the world

The Canada/US “relationship” is the frame for my world.

Diplomacy is - very much like politics – the art of the possible. But only if we deal in *both* facts and truths.

We as a culture are obsessed with immediacy and are too often distracted by the trivial. And the relentless onslaught of information means we are inundated with facts, that we too often lose sight of the truth.

It is the task of the journalist – simply put – to without fear or favour, inform minds and provide perspective so that others can choose wisely.

That, as it turns out, is precisely the job of the diplomat.

Because without perspective, context, a sense of history and a knowledge of the present – how can we have an accurate and informed picture of ourselves or our neighbours ?

Without a true picture, diplomacy becomes difficult, if not impossible.

In journalism, you always hit the ground running, becoming the “instant expert”, filing reports based on a quick study, a gut reaction and a daily deadline.

The diplomat's job is the reporter's unrequited dream: the chance to live, and breathe another place – to come to know it – it's nuance, it's nature...

Thomas Paine, an American philosopher and journalist, who lived and wrote in the 1700's, said that we must all learn to think thoughts other than those we are used to thinking –to hear with other's ears - and to try to see the world through the eyes of others.

I have this extraordinary opportunity to *see* a different country - one that is still healing and grieving; and to *hear* it debate the balance between hard won civil liberties with the need for security in the wake of 9/11; and to *watch* it decide the fundamental question of who is best arbitrate that debate.

America is also a country at war; we know that crisis tests - and often defines character...Americans and America itself are being tested. And so are it's friends.

So I have been afforded the chance to witness history on the run – to see it through other's eyes, and to think quite a few new thoughts.

What is rarer still, however, is the privilege of seeing my own country –Canada – not just through the eyes of others (and that's quite a view!) but through my own – yet, from a very different vantage point. And this time, more as participant than observer.

You know I feel a little like Dr. Phil these days. I'm forever talking about "the relationship."

But we know this from our own lives, that all relationships –between husbands, wives, siblings or friends, need maintenance and that the most important tool is an ability to listen – and actually HEAR what's being said by the other.

This is no less true for countries so closely connected. And no less difficult.

Historian Bartlett Brebner was on to something with his assessment of the challenge at hand:

"Americans are benevolently ignorant about Canada, while Canadians are malevolently well informed about the US."

It's true that 9 out of 10 of us live within a few hundred miles of the border – the opposite ratio would be true for Americans.

But proximity is no guarantee of understanding.

We need a dispassionate understanding of how Americans think and work and feel and see the world and see us.

So that brings us back to the question of diplomacy – and how we are to go about influencing our powerful neighbour to the south - - - well, how about the obvious?

To win influence in the U.S., why not try understanding the place?

Historically, Canada has sought to change America by proclaiming Canadian values as superior.

This strategy, not surprisingly, doesn't work. In the first place, Americans are proud of who and what they are and the values that represent that. They don't want to be us. And it begs the question - why do we want them to be just like us when we don't want to be just like them –and why do we think our system is inherently superior –rather than simply different.

Some make an even finer point: To influence the U.S., Canadians are going to have to understand the U. S. as a whole –and not just those Americans that we agree with.

And there is no better time than now –post-election – where the Americans themselves are taking stock of what the result means.

They have their regional and cultural and demographic differences – Red states, blue states; the rural/urban divide; moral versus intellectual arguments

Sound familiar? We are facing many of the very same cultural contradictions

Of course we are different – and independent -countries with different political systems - try explaining the latest US Electoral college system to a Canadian or minority government or separatist federalists to an American!

But if I have gleaned something during my short tenure that is useful to begin the process of understanding, it is that the guiding principles of America are: patriotism, faith and traditional family ties.

91% of Americans describe themselves as “very patriotic” and a slightly higher number

believe that given the opportunity, anybody regardless of race, religion, creed or colour would move to the USA if given a chance.”

Many envy that pride and patriotism –others, of course, see it as arrogance.

Religiosity offers perhaps one of the starkest contrasts between “us and them.”

Seldom would you hear a political speech in the US without a reference to faith – seldom would you hear one here ...

In the 2000 election for example, 63% of those who went to church more than once a week voted for George Bush while 61% of those who never went to church, voted for Al Gore. Roughly the same thing happened last week, even though both Gore and Kerry are church going men!

Over 80% of our American neighbours say they believe in God and 39% describe themselves as “born-again” Christians.

Canadians are much less likely to believe in God or go to church – only 30% of Canadians say religion is important.

That’s a profound change in both countries in the last several decades.

But it wasn’t just evangelicals who elected President Bush –so too did Catholics, Hispanics, married women, people who do not go to church, those who favour gay marriage or oppose the Iraq war.

September 11th was a turning point – and a profound factor in electoral terms, albeit three years later.

We need to understand the profound and continuing effect of 9/11 – the memory of that heinous act is seared on the collective consciousness and the individual scars have not yet healed...*it is their frame for the world*; the context for decision-making; and it was at the core of last week’s election – your response to terror and to Iraq, in large measure, reflected your partisan stripe.....

In the 4 years before 9/11, more than a third of registered voters called themselves democrats – 28% said they were republican.

After 9/11, Democratic affiliation dropped off and Republican identification continues to edge up.

The 2004 election showed the same trend continuing –the higher turnouts defied conventional political wisdom and did not just go *just* to the Democrats –and the generation who lives on the cell phone –and therefore can’t be polled –also split

between both parties.

In some key ways, the parties are reversing traditional roles –with republicans becoming the party of the working man and woman, the rural and southern heartland and the more religious – the democrats are becoming very urban and very wealthy

And in last week's election, that trend was reinforced.

George Bush was re-elected with the highest popular vote ever and the highest proportion of voters in 25 years – extraordinary given the unpopularity of many of his policies.

This is precisely the kind of thing we must come to learn about our neighbour if we are to truly understand them.

The anti-Americanism that has spread across Europe – and our own country as well – is not a very useful or constructive response.

And we express these views at our peril –not for fear of some punitive American retaliation – but because it is the antithesis of what we purport to be.

And even a fundamental disagreement over the war or disdain for a President, personally or politically, should not blunt our sensitivities to the true nature of the violation Americans have experienced with 9/11 – or to the reality of our own vulnerability.

And while some may be disdainful of the difficult road the Americans are now walking, we should realize that there but for the grace of God go all of us --- Remember Air India, Bali, Madrid, Beslanthe terrorist does not just target the USA.

In the post 9/11 world we can't risk operating in a world of simplistic or ideological reactions, smug moral superiority or outdated stereotypes – there is simply too much at stake.

At best, anti-Americanism is a defence mechanism – at worst, it is prejudice, fuelled by envy or anger or naïve view of the world.

Now lest you think this is some cheerleading effort for American policy vis a vis Iraq or a call to unquestioningly join ranks, let me disabuse you of that quickly.

Getting along doesn't mean going along. And a relationship is not a zero sum game. And "not being Americans" does not qualify as an affirmation of sovereignty.

And it is time for us to look at our responsibilities in the new world, not because the Americans have demanded it of us – but because it is in our own self-interest to define what role we are willing to play on the global stage.

We do not want to be a "spectator" nation.

Poll after poll demonstrates that Canadians have no desire to become Americans. It is also exceedingly clear that Americans certainly have no desire to invade Canada....

But the reality is that our economies are "integrated".

It is also true that the relationship is asymmetric because of the relative size of the two economies, period. That asymmetry does not imply that we are subservient, just smaller.

The fact of the matter is that the US is our largest economic partner - and we theirs. We need to strengthen, not walk away from trade deals because we have an economy to manage and it's easier when there are rules.

We want to run budget surpluses - not to claim our economic superiority --but because running a surplus gives us the freedom and finances to ensure an independent country that can make choices about healthcare, or education or helping the have-nots.

We too want to advance democracy and civil society and ensure our values can one day be shared by those who live in poverty or under tyranny or in failed states.

Sometimes we will choose to advance those causes with America at our side (or we at theirs) and other times we will choose an independent course. Either way, understanding the complexity of the constantly morphing global players – like China or India but particularly the US - is essential.

As Canadians, we have experience with governance and institution building and peaceful co-habitation. We can help train police, teach people how to run elections, create judicial systems or constitutions and offer templates for the protection of human rights and national security. And these are useful, much in demand and meaningful skills.

But the most important tool in our relationship with the US is honesty. Honesty builds trust. And trust is at the core of any relationship.

"To be persuasive.... we must be credible," said Edward R. Murrow. "And to be credible, we must be truthful."

And as Henry Kissinger once told me:

"In diplomacy, you don't want total victory because you have to keep dealing with these people again and again and so your opposite – your counterpart – should feel that he has achieved something as well."

And we also need to get beyond the stereotypes and the myths that persist, despite the proximity –

Americans –the big, brash, arrogant bullies..... Canadians – the timid, but oh so nice Park Rangers, who dwell in the northern wilderness.

As NYT columnist David Brooks put it: Americans love to buy products that shout "I am large – I'm loud –I'm ready for anything." He calls it "getting in touch with your inner longshoreman."

An American, giving a speech stateside about Canada/US relations gave his version of the Canadian stereotype:

Canada, he said, is just like vichyssoise –cold, half-French and hard to stir!

The reality is: We ARE friends and relatives - we play on each other's hockey teams, attend each other's universities, work for one of the thousands of cross border companies;

We invest in each other's entrepreneurship; and vacation in each other's backyards.

Our comedians, songwriters and authors entertain and our journalists deliver the news to American homes and we all – on both sides of the 49th –readily consume the culture that Canadians have helped create.

Now, this is not to say we don't have important and costly differences on everything from security to same sex marriage to softwood lumber, not to mention borders closed to our beef - but we need to be honest about the problems too.

Call it constructive engagement: an ability to confront and challenge one another but without the need to establish moral superiority.

We need our friends to recognize and respect our concerns about sovereignty if we are to help them address their concerns about security.....

Because we both want and need the trade to continue because it is our economic lifeline:

*a truck crosses our shared border every 2 and half seconds as do some 200 million people each year.

*one and a half billion dollars worth of goods and services cross the border everyday.

*there's more two way trade across a single bridge -the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor and Detroit than the US does with any other country.

*Canada buys more from the US than all countries of the EU combined. In fact, 25% of all American exports come to Canada –we are the largest market for 39 of the 50 states.

* Canada sells more of its output (87%) to the US than we consume at home, making us our own second largest trading partner! This trade is generates 38% of our national income.

* And we do more trade with Home Depot head office in Atlanta than we do with the country of FRANCE.

And on energy, it's Canada – not Saudi Arabia or Iraq –that is the largest supplier of oil, natural gas and electricity.

So open borders are crucial – provided those open borders are SECURE ones.

The US Ambassador to Canada Paul Cellucci drew the ire of many –when he delivered his blunt message to Canada post 911 :

SECURITY TRUMPS TRADE

But he was right.

Americans see the border as the line joining our countries – Canadians see it as the last line separating us from them.

And if we cannot help them secure their homeland then our borders may again become an issue.

In the end, it's all about communication and understanding – about a willingness to hear with other's ears, and think thoughts we are not used to thinking

So how do we see our future – as a country and as a global participant.....in the new normal.

Our values, our vision, and our relationships would be well served by the guidance offered by Theodore Roosevelt in a speech given in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1910.....

“It is not the critic that counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better.

The credit belongs to the man who is in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again; whose knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, and who at best knows achievement and who, at the worst ,if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place will never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.”

In other words, participants, not just by-standers ---people who are windows bring light into some of the dark corners we know face.

And what will guide us??

My first words were those of the late great American journalist Sydney Harris and so to will they be my last:

“An idealist,” he said, “ believes the short run doesn’t count.

A cynic believes the long run doesn’t matter.

A realist believes that what is done or left undone in the short run DETERMINES the long run.”

Please join me in doing what needs to be done!

Pamela Wallin

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