

OPINION

Back-to-school is not much fun for some

I recently hung out with a young cousin of mine who just can't wait to go back to school in September to try out Grade 5.

I must say I never shared her enthusiasm for returning to school no matter what grade. Yet, over the years I have become misty-eyed thinking back to how great it is to be at university in the fall — not the actual classes per se, just the colourful setting of the campus in autumn. I attended the picturesque site of the University of Western Ontario in London, a fact of which I was always proud until I moved to Hamilton and saw a T-shirt from McMaster that read, “Western — Isn't that a sandwich?”

Now as fall rolls around, I tend to think of going back to school and sitting in the campus pub contemplating my next essay — not necessarily submitting it on time or “to the fullest of her potential,” a common phrase from my elementary school report cards.

So you might understand the fear I have as this fall approaches and I find myself going back to school not as a student, but as a teacher. (For clarity, the contract actually says “sessional professor” but so



far I've only asked my partner to call me “Professor”. You may imagine how well that's going!)

I have been asked to be part of a teaching team at Mohawk College delivering the new Human Services Foundation Program. (Unfortunately, someone may reconsider that request if they read this column without knowing my sense of humour!) I am truly hoping that I am a better teacher than I was a student.

Many students are anxious about returning to school. Kids who are marginalized because of economics or class will be nervous about returning without the best clothes, accessories or access to food or field trips. Others who long to make sports teams or elite clubs are anxious about their chances.

Still others, little ones who are new to the whole school experience, are just plain worried about where the bathroom is and what to do if they don't quite make it on time.

But some of the students I most empathize with are the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) kids returning to high school or heading there for the first time. They may not know the statistics but they have a sense that they will experience a high rate of verbal and physical harassment, despite the implementation of equity and safe school policies required of every board by the Ministry of Education.

On the other hand, many LGBTQ students will take the opportunity of moving from elementary to high school as their chance to “come out” and be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are well aware of the fact that “being out” is a much healthier place to be, except for those who face very real persecution and abuse from within their own families, cultures or faith communities because of their identities.

Much has been written of late about LGBTQ youth who attend Catholic schools where no formal

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supports exist such as LGBTQ Positive Space Groups, often narrowly called Gay-Straight Alliances. I know there are individual teachers, principals and other support staff within the Catholic system who are amazing, but their efforts can't replace the systemic denial of LGBTQ students and their needs and the systematic change that needs to occur.

Jack Layton, the charismatic leader of the federal NDP, died Monday. He left words of wisdom in his final letter that I think we need to adhere to if we are going to create safe and positive spaces for

all students to achieve success in every way. “Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair.”

What will we do to ensure LGBTQ youth know love, hope and optimism? It is unjust to deny these beautiful kids a chance to flourish in the learning environments we want them to spend so much time in over the next few years. Let us work to end the anger and fear that so many in our community still have toward LGBTQ people, so in turn we can end the despair of isolation and invisibility that so many of our LGBTQ youth end up experiencing.

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Note: In my last column describing “glamorous camping” many noticed the word from my original copy, “glamping,” was accidentally replaced with “glamming.” I didn't want anyone out there using the wrong word to describe this great holiday experience.

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If youth could know; if the old could do

BY THOMAS FROESE

Today, Aug. 27, my father turns 80.

A full decade beyond his biblical allotment of three score and 10, this afternoon he'll be ushered to a reception with photos and memories and sharing in a kind of This Is Your Life. There will be warm smiles and best wishes and gracious blessings.

Now, if you're a city, old age can look good on you. Take North America's two oldest capitals — Quebec City, that charming bridge from New World to Old; and Santa Fe, N.M., vibrant home of the artisans, sitting at the Sangre de Cristo, that is the Blood of Christ mountain range at the Rockies' south tip.

Both cities, which I've visited this summer, are more than 400 years old.

But let's face it. If you're a human walking the earth, getting old is a mixed bag. Writer-theologian Frederick Buechner said it's like living in a house needing more and more repairs: The plumbing needs work; bats are in the attic; windows are cracked and dusty and hard to see through. Then in bad weather, there's that creaking and groaning.

No, old age is not for wimps. We approach it, even from a distance, with trepidation. At least I do.

It's like your second childhood. That's what they say. Maybe. Perhaps any 80-year-old, not just my father, can practise being a young

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THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Guenter Froese, who turns 80 today, with his grandchildren, Elizabeth, left, Jonathan and Hannah. The similarities of the very young and the old may be why they get along so well, says writer Thomas Froese.

often get along so well.

I don't need to tell my father any of this. He knows it. Recently he humbly told me that he hasn't done a good job facing his own mortality. He has assumed one day will always lead to the next. Like we all assume.

Still, my father, a war survivor and immigrant who has always carried a rich accent, has crammed much living into life.

For 50 years, he has practised as a registered massage therapist in the Niagara Region. First trained in Germany, he has been recognized as a guru in a vocation he has always considered, above all, one of healing.

Years ago the Ontario Massage Association formally awarded him for longevity. He just kept at it, keeping longer hours than therapists half his age. Now, with a bad

back himself, he treats clients by sitting and moving his chair around the therapy table. And still, he wants more work.

This, in an old 1870s estate home. With one renovation or another over the decades, Dad Froese has also put his hands on it, a building he ran as a nursing home in the 1970s and 1980s, a big old manor that somehow seems as attached to him as he is to it.

And this all after a hard marital breakup that had my father travel from Canada to Cold War Berlin to lay claim to his kids. One summer day in 1968, the drama landed on the front page of the Toronto Telegram, headlined One Man's Fight for his Two Children.

Dad and I met for the first time in Germany, the day before I turned three. Soon after, back in Canada with his kids, my father became a widower. He remarried more than two decades later. I was his best man.

Mere touchstones. That's what these are. Much more has happened over these years. Like with any family, characters and situations, good times and hard times, have come and gone. Like with any family, there's just too much to write.

But remember is what any of us must do. So we can forget — and then remember again.

Thomas Froese is a Hamilton author and journalist. He can be reached through thomasfroese.com

In life and death, he bridged two solitudes

MONTREAL ♦ NDP leader Jack Layton was not granted enough time to test the affection of his fellow Canadians.

With a position twice removed from power for most of his parliamentary tenure, he was spared the hard choices that earn a prime minister the lasting enmity of many constituents, and spared the unforgiving scrutiny that attends the role of official Opposition leader.

Until recently, Layton rarely had cause to find himself stuck between the rock and the hard place of conflicting Quebec/Rest of Canada aspirations.

Unlike former Tory prime minister Brian Mulroney, he is not taking the responsibility for an unpopular tax and a divisive series of constitutional failures to his grave.

Unlike former Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau, he will not be remembered bitterly by some of his compatriots for his handling of challenges such as the 1970 October crisis or the energy crisis of the early 1980s.

No Charter of Rights and Freedoms, no landmark free-trade agreement with the United States, no Clarity Act endures to give Layton's contribution to federal politics a polarizing edge.

Because the last election turned him into a rising federal star, because he was only 61, because Canadians naturally expected to see a lot more of him over the next few years, his death creates a larger vacuum.



His presence did not have the chance to fade over the years of a normal political retirement.

But that does not mean the extraordinary outpouring of affection that has attended his passing is only about what might have been.

It is also testimony to a unique legacy — one that has been a long time coming in this country.

If that legacy is sustained, it could change the terms of Canada's national conversation.

Saturday's state funeral marks the first time the country's so-called two solitudes wholeheartedly come together to lament the loss of a political figure.

Until this week and Layton's passing, Quebecers had mostly mourned their own.

More often than not, they and other Canadians had been polite spectators of each other's grief.

Think back to Parti Québécois founder René Lévesque's 1987 death.

Or, on the flip side of the coin, to Pierre Trudeau's state funeral in 2000.

While Lévesque and Trudeau's

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imprints on Quebec and Canada were undeniable, they also inspired decisively mixed feelings in some quarters of the country.

Over the course of Canada's repeated constitutional wars, most of the bridges between Quebec and the rest of the country had been burned or damaged beyond repair.

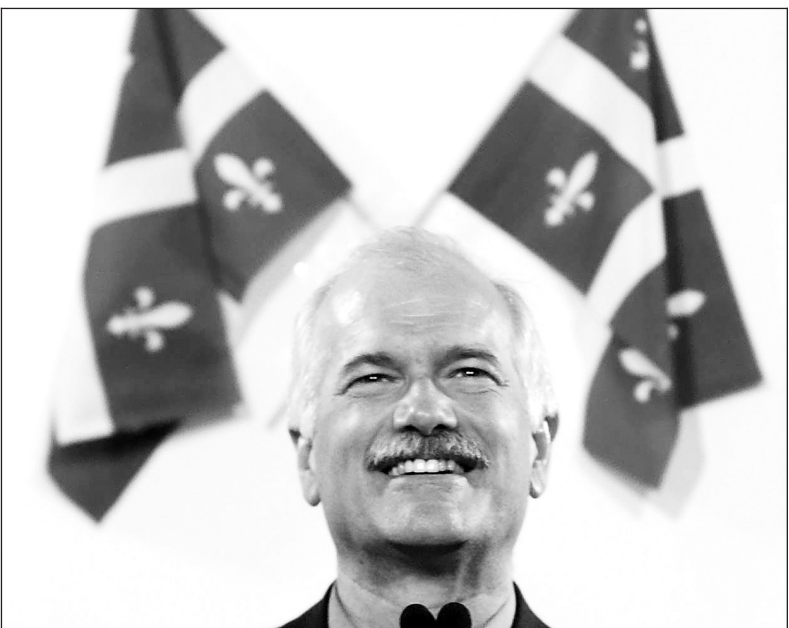
Against all odds, Layton, over his too-short time, managed to erect one whose span has risen above the familiar divides of the past four decades.

That unconsolidated bridge may yet crumble under the weight of conflicting expectations.

It could lead back to a Canada-Quebec dead end. But it need not do so.

Over the past 10 years, Canada has been the scene of a major political realignment — one marked by the emergence of two reconfigured coalitions.

Under Stephen Harper, the Conservative coalition has been more successful — at least when mea-



RICHARD LAUTENS, TORONTO STAR

Jack Layton in Quebec for St-Jean-Baptiste Day in 2004.

sured against the usual standards of influence and power.

But the embryo of the reinvented progressive coalition that Layton leaves behind is more national in scope. At this juncture, it includes Quebec in a way that its Conservative equivalent does not.

Given the country's political dynamics, it could be that Quebec is more essential to the electoral success of a progressive national coalition than to that of a conservative one.

Over time, though, the relative absence of Quebecers from the latter could become its Achilles heel.

At its most healthy, Canada's political life would ideally find strong voices from all regions under the banner of each of its main parties, and the absence of one of those regions would not be considered a virtue.

Layton was the first national leader to overcome the unity travails of the recent past and truly straddle the Quebec-Canada divide — and the first non-Quebec figure to do so in almost half a century.

With a bit of luck or, in this case, collective wisdom, he will not be the last.

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