

The Concept of Joy in Toronto 2007

You get mean-spirited when you feel left out of joy. Somebody else's joy raises envy when you ain't had joy in a long time. Cities are like that, jealously eyeing other cities as if there were more fun and delight and yes, buzz, to be had elsewhere. In fact it's an illusion that the party is going on somewhere else. The action is where you make it, and in a city you have lots of help doing it. (In fact that's what justifies city life.) But it's the nature of mean-spiritedness, it supposes someone else is getting the action. It doesn't take into account that the party begins by a simple civic statement of self-rejoicing, the signature of any great city.

Self-rejoicing. It's something more than plain pride, or confidence or superiority, or a call for "buzz", excitement, or (yech) prosperity.

Joy is what Toronto doesn't do too well. New Canadians help to teach us. They have a spontaneity, a zeal, a natural gusto for life; until they get hooked on the regulation and protocol that define the city's ethic. Perhaps because they initially come from less affluent locales, impoverished places. Deprivation, (for all its unseemliness in a climate of entitlement) has a way of instructing people in reliance upon family and community. People need each other in dire straits. Without dire straits, Torontonians seem to not need each other. Let's face it, our national fetish for privacy aside, there's something about having to rub closely against another human being that gets on our nerves. I somehow don't think that all the talk of "densification" in affluent Toronto will quite manufacture that alchemy of inter-civic dependence.

Who has joy? Young Torontonians have joy. They revel in the town that has fallen between the cracks; they love the alleyways, the ravines, the bike trails, places spared from gentrification; they seem untortured by the cubic cubes of identity and gender politics—the debates of a tired generation of feminists, and ideologues and ecological doomsday prophets. They won't let political correctness get in the way of their appetite for life. And political correctness is the ultimate regime for contradicting joy. It seeks to eliminate risk, and there is no risk as scary as taking joy in life. After all, you might be let down, or be disappointed, or worse, you might find out your eyes for adventure was bigger than your appetite.

To be fair, this town is beginning to wake up to something like joy, at least in lip service to notions like "buzz", "excitement", "renewal", "creativity". There's been a steady erosion of the puritan ethic that says "don't do this" "don't do that" (check out the public signs; there are caveats and prohibitions and limits on everything, except for billboards where advertisers are free to tease you with the fantasy of permissiveness in a climate of regulation. There are prohibitions against parking, loitering, lingering, lingering in parks after 11pm., trespassing, (notice how many signs say "private" regardless of trendy discourse about public space) We have bylaws for everything with concomitant policing and a bureaucratic industry of injunctions and disallowance. Add to that a contemporary feel for the wisdom of surveillance, neighborhood watch and reporting of suspicious

behavior, and you have a self-consciousness that is global, but somehow perfected in Toronto.

We come, after all, from a colonial tradition of shopkeepers, whose ethic was that of good business. And we still have something of a shopkeeper's mentality; after all didn't the Hudson's Bay Company send people here who were good at minding the franchise? Oh yes, add to that the "family compact", loyalism, and strains of unmentionably parsimonious theologies (notions that God has a ledger instead of a horn of plenty) and this typology became a model for Ontario. Maybe we tend to revert to historical type. It's evident in the dedication of bureaucrats and civil servants, churning proceduralism out into the streets, as if a sanitized city were a substitute for a creative and playful city. This nano-bog of caution and circumspections threatens to oppress the spirit of liveliness generated by the young and smuggled in by the new Canadians.

Then there are the richer and the gentrified that confuse joy with the exuberance of amenities, of more bistros and lattes, design carnivals and fashion holes and esplanades. But they're the same ones who confuse the conveniences of life with the point of life—"enjoyment" (but they skip the middle syllable).

Nonetheless, we've come along way with the business of joy, or the business of getting away from business as a way of celebrating the good and the lively. And we don't miss the dour years, when stores and playgrounds were closed on Sunday and we ran off to Buffalo for a night on the town, when the vocal zest of immigrants on College St. was cause for the police to "break things up". There were rules against everything in those days. But even now you hear planners and developers bitching about useless prohibitions where building codes are concerned—those policy glitches that make for safe cities and not imaginative cities – so many little no-no's—all hearkening back to the spinster that was Toronto, afraid of too much make-up.

The spinster is still around – the parking regulations, the lack of leniency and flexibility about regulations – the licensing mayhem that anyone wanting to start a small business must face.

There is nothing casual about what the city permits. Fortunately there are people that take permission before it is given, that seduce the city by plain buck value. Things are changing. Ventures like the new waterfront design bode well for civic initiative and civic enthusiasm.

All to say, there is a tendency to put the breaks on joy--the natural expression of exuberance, the desire to build and affect something simply because spontaneity must have its way. And spontaneity is the casualty of the global city—scared as it is by security issues, the notion that the next guy is in it for himself, the loss of a general ethic that encourage the citizen to civic sacrifice – many are the inhibiting forces of globalization. We're in danger of being regulated out of life.

Let's not be too hard on Toronto's fetish for regulation. It may be the very thing that

attracts the world weary pilgrim; it may be what keeps all these fabulous diversities in line. That's cynical, but who can avoid the suspicion that folks are drawn to T.O. because it is safe and a workable and working town. The tradition of restraint might even explain the hitherto lack of violence in Toronto. Isn't it after all why we Torontonians came here? Because Toronto the good (or the Toronto of protocol) was antidote to the tyranny of origins? Possibly.

The only conviction Toronto boasted for many years was that it believed itself to be a place of social and financial order. But now, it is 2007; and Toronto is called to be more than that, much more than that. It is called to be a city of delight.

Delight is the passport to joy. The global citizen seeks to be delighted, demands it. The global citizen has arrived here. The recent creativity craze seems to have persuaded the innovation industry that the delighting of citizens is good for business. Sounds like the old Toronto; i.e. fun is useful if it has practical benefits. Counter the Chinese with a knowledge economy and know that a knowledge economy needs ideas that won't happen unless people are delighted into the manufacture of ideas. Crude psychology – but it won't do for what we need to be a player among global cities.

All cities will have a functional role on the circuit board of global economy; and what will shuffle money to one city as opposed to another is something as simple as city spirit. Beyond the question of amenities, opera houses and waterfronts, tourist attractions, a city's enthusiasm for itself is its only drawing card. What will define a city in the future is the nature of its enthusiasm, the ultimate mother lode of branding and the first resource of civic prosperity. And an enthusiasm is based on self-love, self-rejoicing and plain gusto for the banquet of life. An enthusiasm is based not just on self-congratulation but on mutual encouragement. This translates into joy.

How do you manufacture joy? First you get rid of the mean-spiritedness. You do that by commending each other for the work attempted, if not well done. You do it by putting a lid on the smug and expert posturing that passes for media criticism. You curb the self-appointed gurus of art, politics and broadcasting that stutter the same judicious and stinting pose of expertise. You stop brandishing the familiar Toronto style of "circumspection"; you give up the fetish of the "well-considered" in favor of the spontaneous expression of mutual congratulation.

Toronto was a "no" town; it is becoming a "yes, but" town. It will have to become a "yes" town if it wants to achieve greatness.

The shift has to go from criticizing what could have been done better, to the sheer encouragement of what was plainly and valiantly attempted. This is means turning to a kind of generosity, and turning the town into a dynamo of generosity. Generosity – a word we will have to be literate with in Toronto – generosity about ourselves and about each other, and about this place, a capitol of opportunities, for which we are grateful, and a city in which we not only enjoy ourselves, but a city in which we enjoy each other.

We do not need to catalogue our reputation as a civil and polite people. We need now to insist on the generous expression of civic joy, done with generosity – with the ability to respond to civic effort as a brave statement against what might otherwise have never been attempted. That is what makes a city great. That is what we want as Toronto legacy. That is what the new citizen of Toronto calls out for – the joy of co-habitation.

Caution be damned.

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