

Even a grump can appreciate civility

Let's continue to kindly help each other long after the snowy chaos melts away

BY IAN HAYSOM, TIMES COLONIST DECEMBER 27, 2008

My favourite headline at the end of the year is "Past Imperfect, Future Tense."

Fact is, you could have written that headline at the end of just about every year for the past 100 years. Or a thousand years. To paraphrase Leonardo DiCaprio's character in *Blood Diamond*, when's the last time the world wasn't falling apart?

"Past imperfect, future tense" is particularly appropriate for many of us this year. The economic meltdown caught tens of thousands. And we worry, justifiably, how many more will get caught in the crossfire in 2009.

But let's not, for the purposes of this column, dwell on the past. Or worry too much about the future. Let's look for the silver linings, the hope, the humour, the glass-half-full world out there.

If we're going to get through 2009 relatively intact, then we're going to have to do some things differently. Focus on the positive, what's working rather than what isn't. And we're going to have to start pulling together. Big time.

Which brings me to the snow. Or, more specifically, the spirit of the snow.

OK, it's not quite the spirit of the Blitz, when Londoners pulled together with bombs raining down on them. But the snow this past week has brought out the best in many of us.

Just about everywhere I've gone this week, I've seen neighbours helping neighbours, strangers helping strangers, people committing random acts of kindness.

In the shopping mall parking lots, drivers have actually said "after you," and let others take precious spots. Neighbours have helped one another dig out snow-trapped cars. Drivers have helped push other drivers out of snowdrifts or along ice-packed sidestreets.

People have started nodding "hello" to one another in the street. Or giving people rides when their buses haven't arrived. People have started talking to one another in lineups.

People in stores have been friendlier, more welcoming. More conversational.

There's been a unifying "we're all in this mess together" mood about the time. Part of the niceness may have had something to do with Christmas, sure. But a whole lot of Scrooges turned into Santas without having to be scared half to death by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future.

I've enjoyed the snow. I've enjoyed what it's done to many of us. I've enjoyed the warmth in the cold.

A personal example: My wife and I, heading to a North Saanich farm to pick up our organic, free-range,

happy turkey (well, happy until it got topped) before Christmas, picked up a stranded youngster or two. At one point, I drove past two sketchy-looking young males who had been hitch-hiking.

"We should have picked them up too. They looked cold," she said.

"That's because they were wearing shirts and jeans," I said. "They're probably on their way home from a party. Or a housebreaking."

"They're somebody's sons," she said. There's no answer to that.

So I turned at the next intersection, drove halfway up a hill before I could fully turn around, almost got trapped in a snowdrift, and about five minutes later headed south along the East Saanich Road.

And they'd gone. They'd been at a bus stop. Either the bus had come or someone was much nicer than I.

There was nowhere to turn back, so I went all the way back to Saanichton, and took the Mount Newton X Road. And for my act of (almost) kindness, I got payback.

The road was snow-packed, but the sun had started glinting through the trees and the views across the valley were spectacular. It was magical, memorable. We passed only four cars along what is probably Greater Victoria's most scenic road, but everyone waved, pulled to the side, helped the oncoming vehicle negotiate the conditions.

Two women were out walking in the middle of the road. A mother and a daughter. They were skidding along, and laughing, almost dancing in the snow and waved and smiled at us. Mouthed thank-you's because we'd driven slowly past.

On a rainy day in December, none of this would have happened. Most of us would go about our lives in self-absorbed solitude. Well, I would.

Now, I don't want to be too Pollyanna about this. I don't want us all to join hands and start singing Kumbaya or I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing. A grump has his standards, after all.

But wouldn't the future work out a whole lot better if we started to look out for one another as if it was snowing all the time? Nodded hello a bit more often? Offered to help out? Let others go first?

That's not too much to ask? Even when the snow has finally melted. Something tells me that in 2009 we're going to need all the help we can get.

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