

27 June 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I dimly remember the last time the Toronto Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup. They defeated the Montreal Canadiens.

**“The Maple Leaf, our emblem dear”**

I remember it mostly because my grandfather gave me a colouring book that commemorated their victory. The photo on the cover showed three rows of men in dark blue uniforms, each with a large, white maple leaf emblazoned on his chest, as if this were their class photo in school dress.

George Armstrong was the team captain back then, and Johnny Bower tended the goal. Bower wore no face mask (the kind that stops pucks, I mean, not the kind that stops Covid). He’d been goaltending since the mid-1940s, so he resembled a veteran boxer by the time this photo was taken.

No one wore a helmet back then either. They probably drove to the arena without seatbelts and smoked in the dressing room between periods. The fans certainly did.

Tim Horton stood in the second row, but he must have been made to put down his donut and coffee for the photo. Eddy Shack stood behind him, leaning to one side and grinning. (“Clear the track, here comes Shack!”) You could almost see a cartoonish thought bubble floating over his head. “Maybe I’ll grow a huge moustache this summer!”

Men in black suits, white shirts, and narrow ties, looking like they’d just stepped from the set of *Mad Men*, sat front and centre. At their feet sat the Stanley Cup.

Two months later, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Canada turned 100. Montreal had Expo, but Toronto had the Cup. It was the Centennial Year, 1967.

But it’s hard to pinpoint a *precise* birthdate for the political entity we call Canada. The Canadas, both Upper and Lower, had already been there for a while, inland from the Maritime colonies, hugging the St Lawrence and the shores of Lakes Ontario and Erie. Our unlikely Nation evolved slowly from these disparate, irritable colonies that had, somehow, stumbled their way into ‘responsible government’, though not all at once.

(Things rarely happen ‘fast’ in Canada, do they? I’m still waiting for those potholes to be filled on Wellington Street. Fat chance.)

Then, in 1867, by an act of the British Parliament, duly signed by Queen Victoria, Canada became a ‘Dominion’ comprising just four provinces. It was a century before the Toronto Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup for the very last time. (You know I’m right about that.)

But Canada didn’t secure full, legislative autonomy until 1931, when the British Parliament passed the Statute of Westminster. Even so, Canada couldn’t legally amend its own constitution until that same Parliament passed the Constitution Act of 1982. It was the last, little step to full autonomy.

That document, signed by the Queen in Ottawa on a sunny but cold day in April of that year, enshrines a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Indigenous Treaty Rights, and the Institutions of the Crown.

By then, Canada had been for some time flying a flag that resembled the Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, only it wasn’t dark blue but deep red, the colour of the Montreal Canadiens. The Habs hoisted the Cup in the same year that flag was first hoisted.

So, the Canadian constitution is now amendable by Canada itself. This is what *adulthood* requires. “I can change if I want to!” Canada has changed. It took a long time to grow up. And I suspect there’s still more growing up to do.

### **“...it’s the best game you can name...”**

In the last few weeks, for some reason, I began to watch the playoffs. The last time I followed hockey games with any regularity, I was a young man wondering if, like Eddy Shack, I shouldn’t try to grow a big moustache. The game has changed a lot since then. So have I.

The players are larger, heavier, faster, and stronger in every way. Their slap shots resound with a much louder thwack. Every player wears a helmet, usually a mouth guard, and often a clear plastic face shield.

The goalies look like Darth Vader, but Darth in vacation wear, not his Death Star work clothes. The other players look more like Robocop than a village policeman. The comparison is apt. Police gear has been militarised since the 1970s. A policeman’s appearance is more intimidating now. You almost expect to carry bazookas and flamethrowers. Over the same period, hockey gear became bulkier and thicker as well. The game is louder, too, in every way.

But the biggest change I notice is the explosion of advertising. For many decades the boards were blank and painted white. Then a marketing whiz-kid, angling for promotion, said, "Hey boss, we could *sell* that space, you know."

"Hey kid, *now* you're thinking!"

Corporate logos deface the boards now, also the ice surface, even the players' uniforms, but more discreetly. You know I'm a grumpy man who revels in complaint, so you know I don't like this.

The same thing happened to hockey broadcasts. There had always been pauses for 'commercial breaks' promoting Labatt Blue and Ford Pickups. But now 'mini-commercials' dart on and off the screen with fierce rapidity, obscuring the view of the ice after almost every whistle.

The ascendancy of advertising in sports broadcasts puts me in mind of Super Bowl Games in the United States. The purchase of advertising time on those annual broadcasts is insanely expensive, but the huge opportunity the Super Bowl spectacle provides for propagandizing tens of millions of viewers is potent and lucrative.

The most innovative and 'creative' TV advertisements appear there now. The Super Bowl has become as much a showcase for the advertising industry as it is for NFL football.

And yet, in a smaller way, this was always so, wasn't it? Was the Stanley Cup playoff game meant for our enjoyment? Yes, maybe. But wasn't our enjoyment of a hockey game the lure, all along, to hook and convert us into an audience for advertising? Wasn't *that* the bigger game being played all along?

Whenever we watch a game, or play one ourselves, other games are always going on above and below us. For example: a game of competition must always be nested within a larger game of cooperation, otherwise it can't happen.

What do I mean?

Something like this. "Let's play tennis!" you say. Sounds like fun! To play tennis well, we must each expend our energy and talent, while honestly aiming to *win*, to compete, to try our best to beat each other. That's where the fun lies. This is the 'game of competition'. We *see* it happen as the tennis ball flies back and forth across the net.

But this game can only happen because it's nested inside a larger 'game of co-operation'. This game we can't see. But it's there. We're playing that game too. We have agreed to follow rules of tennis, not skeet shooting. We have agreed to

lob a tennis ball back and forth, not a grenade. And we have agreed to follow an equitable system of scoring, not Mafia rules.

The competitive game is nested within this larger game of cooperation. It *depends* upon it. But we may notice it. We've just assumed it, unconsciously perhaps.

Something similar happens when I watch a playoff hockey game. I have turned on the television to be entertained by a sports competition played at the highest possible level of expertise. Wonderful!

But I have also, largely unconsciously, embedded myself in a much bigger game in which corporations have bought and lured the attention of passive consumers. Including me.

### **The Great One**

Rarely but truly, another game may reveal itself.

It's not the chronic game of commercial advertising that's meant to stimulate our desire to purchase and consume. That game is always going on; but it goes on 'beneath' a hockey broadcast.

I'm thinking about something more authentic than that. It's a different kind of game, one more aligned with hockey's 'inner' design. This game, too, is always going on, but from 'above'.

When Wayne Gretzky played his very last game of hockey, something happened. I'd never seen it before, and I've never seen it since. In the dying minutes of that game, the 'competitive drive' and 'controlled aggression' that characterises competitive hockey, *slackened*.

The players stopped chasing for the puck, racing for the net, or checking each other aggressively into the boards. They began passing the puck back and forth in desultory fashion, as if it were a game of Shinny and they hadn't even decided on teams yet.

They skated slowly now, almost in circles. The sense of team identity began to evaporate, as though the jersey they wore hardly mattered anymore.

Gretzky's face was contorted. He was fighting back tears. Players from every side began to encircle *him*. He had the puck, but no one wanted to receive a pass. No one was trying to score. Not now.

"Last minute of play in this period," said the announcer. And everyone knew it was the last minute of play in the hockey-playing life of one of the greatest players who ever lived.

They tapped their sticks on the ice in tribute to him. Still the clock ticked down. The crowd stood, clapping and cheering. Gretzky wept, but in a hockey player way.

Finally, the buzzer sounded, signalling the end of the game. All the players surrounded him, taking turns to shake his hand, hug him, and slap him on the back.

What had just happened? I think another game revealed itself in that moment, one that the competitive, rough-and-tumble game of hockey had been nested in all along.

It was the game we all must play, the game of being human: striving, competing, co-operating, following the rules, changing them when we must, testing ourselves against each other, seeing what we can achieve in the way of goodness in this life, and finding how far can we go in doing it.

And then honouring each other when we do it well.

When I gaze into the future and contemplate the changes Canada must make, and what we will become of this country long after I'm dead, I pray that *this* game will reveal itself in our midst, from above.

### **Break Time**

This will be my last letter for a while. I've indulged my whims here. I don't know what purpose these letters may have served beyond that, but whatever it may have been, I sense its completion for now.

I don't know when we'll return to sanctuary. Maybe by the end of the summer we'll know. I'll still send you worship material, and I'll do my best to keep you apprised of updates and practical matters.

You're always free to 'delete' or 'unsubscribe' too.

Yours in the faith,

Andrew