

A Century of Care by Michael Leclair

*An essay on appreciating basic human interaction & simple pleasures*

It's been a tough day as I drive west in heavy, rush-hour traffic. I'm exhausted from a long week of mind-numbing meetings, grumpy colleagues, and never-ending work-related problems. Video-conferences, emails and texts often replace basic face-to-face interaction. The negative news on the radio does not ease my disillusionment. Intolerance. Terror. Corruption. Environmental havoc. Even the local sports team is mired in a terrible losing streak.

I change the station and a familiar song plays. Don Henley pours his heart out, searching for meaning and soulfully lamenting "the more I know, the less I understand". I can relate.

I'm not sure what's come over me lately. I'm tired, listless, uninspired. Something is missing. The weather matches my mood. Storm clouds have gathered and a light rain begins to fall.

Then I see it. Even from a distance it's hard to miss. At the narrow, western tip of the island of Montreal - whether you're on autoroute 20 to the south or autoroute 40 to the north - a nondescript grey tower stands out in stark contrast to the colourful pastoral setting surrounding it. Looking strangely out of place, it has nevertheless become an unmistakable and enduring part of the landscape.

I arrive at my destination - a hospital. But not just any hospital.

I'm at St. Anne's Hospital, a unique, sprawling complex that has been providing care for Canadian veterans since 1917.

Originally established for the many veterans of World War I, the hospital was conveniently built on the Canadian National and Canadian Pacific train lines where rail cars transporting sick and injured soldiers could literally drop them off right at the hospital doors.

World War II and the Korean War saw significant expansion to St. Anne's Hospital, with more beds, a recreation hall, and a lodge built to accommodate visiting family and friends. By 1945, the hospital had grown from 352 beds to 1,022 beds – 95% of which were occupied.

During the post-war years, St. Anne's Hospital continued to care for the men and women who had valiantly fought for their country by providing high quality medical and psycho-geriatric care. But the hospital also played a leading role in groundbreaking areas to treat mental illness, as well as provide a variety of therapeutic services to help veterans retain autonomy and prevent or delay institutionalization.

St. Anne's Hospital continued to modernize into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by creating a new wing to accommodate residents with cognitive impairments, and also played a pioneering role in identifying and treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In doing so, the hospital established a unique outpatient clinic to provide mental health care to the younger generation of veterans.

At the same time however, the hospital began to face an uncertain future as the number of aging veterans from World War II and the Korean War continued to decline. Beds and even entire floors were now empty. Given the overall aging population and related health care concerns, this last remaining hospital administered by the federal government was transferred over to the Quebec government in April 2016.

Soon afterwards and for the first time in its storied history, civilian geriatric patients began to fill the empty beds at St. Anne's. It was now a hospital open to anyone.

Back to the present and I'm still in a funk as I'm greeted by the good-natured security guard who recognizes me from previous visits. Both my mother and father are residents at St. Anne's and I have to admit, the prospect of visiting them adds to my already high degree of angst. I first visit my mom, who suffers from Alzheimer's, in a wing ironically called *le Pavillon du Souvenir (Remembrance Pavilion)*. This is usually a difficult visit because of my mother's rapidly declining mental health. I arrive and an orderly is helping my mom with her meal. A nurse has already lovingly brushed her hair, washed her hands and applied moisturizer. We have a nice visit together. When I say good-bye and tell my mom I'll be back in a few days, she becomes sad and agitated. Boy, that tugs on the heart-strings. But another young nurse arrives, bends down to hold my mom's hand and meet her eyes, reassuring her that everything's going to be okay. Despite a not-so-pleasant environment where they must be constantly vigilant and look after everyone's needs, the support staff working there are incredible. Friendly. Positive. Dedicated. Compassionate. It's very reassuring.

I go visit my dad on the other side of the hospital. Despite the transition to provincial jurisdiction, vestiges of previous federal ownership remain: a large portrait of Roméo Dallaire hangs near the entrance; a vibrant mural of poppy fields is affixed next to the elevator bank on the main floor; military portraits and war-themed displays are still evident everywhere.

Although confined to a wheelchair after a debilitating stroke and a well-used 91 year-old body, my dad is still mentally sharp and thinks he's an 18 year-old teenager. I wheel him down to the main auditorium for one of the weekly social events. On the stage, a performer and his keyboard belt out a string of musical standards aimed specifically at the rapt geriatric audience. The place is packed, the large room now resembling a parking lot jam-packed with wheelchairs and other motorized devices. Volunteers young

and old weave around the vehicles to distribute beverages and snacks. My dad's left foot almost involuntarily begins to tap to the music and he is in heaven.

I grab a chair and look around. It's really an incredible sight.

Many, like my dad, whose bodies are no longer able to boogie, sit with wide smiles and obvious contentment, moving whatever body parts they can to the rhythm. Some wave their arms like a frenzied orchestra conductor; others clap out of time but with a joy and excitement so pure that it's contagious. Whether hunched, bent-over or somewhat incapacitated, those who have even a bare minimum of ability to strut their stuff happily do so with the support of a spouse or dedicated volunteer, their enthusiasm clearly uncontained. One fragile-looking chap always seems to find a new partner, with whom he ambles around the entire perimeter of the dance floor – unabashedly mouthing the words to all the songs and randomly winking and pointing to everyone he passes - as if he's the most popular celebrity in the room. Frankly it's adorable.

One the most touching sights to behold are those in wheelchairs dancing with their able-bodied partners on the dance floor. Although their legs and feet cannot move, they nevertheless still remember the moves and know the rhythm so that using their arms and an impeccable sense of timing, they gracefully guide their partners around their mobile chairs and across the floor without missing a beat.

Like me - doctors, nurses, orderlies, cleaning staff, volunteers and visitors are there, in awe, taking it all in.

There, in a hospital of all places, is where I find what I've been missing. These people are in the final stages of their lives yet the room is alive. Truly alive.

In addition to a cutting-edge philosophy of care at St. Anne's Hospital, there is joy from the simple things in life. There is a palpable tenderness. Humanness. Togetherness. Tolerance. Respect. Dignity.

And what is transmitted to visitors like me, watching and marvelling to this pure, unfettered joy, is gratitude for the simple things - like an able body and a sound mind.

Thank you for helping me find meaning and peace in the most unlikely of places. And thank you St. Anne's, for one hundred remarkable years of giving help to those in need, be they under your care or not.

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