

Hello From The Ottawa River - And Reflections On City Life

So Friday I decided to head out on a kayaking weekend with my friend Leslie. This was the first time in about 8 years that I went camping again, and I had a ball sleeping under the stars. A fabulous weekend in nature makes you think about life a little bit, so here are a few snapshots of what's been going through my head in the last few days. In particular, I have been thinking about our lifestyles in the city and some of the stark contrasts with the experiences of this weekend.

City snapshot number 1:

Thursday night I linked up with a friend of mine who works for a big international bank in finance. He was telling me how his employer was sending around a survey to find out what tasks people were spending time on at work, all for the purpose of efficiency and downsizing the workforce. In his employee newsletter he read that his company was proud that the annual turnover rate among employees is now below 30% (!), and this was a big story in the newsletter. We were wondering why a turnover of almost 1/3 of the entire staff in a year would be considered a good thing, considering the recruitment, training and outplacement costs as well as the disruptions caused by a constantly fluctuating workforce. But on a few days of the year his company gives away free icecream cones to their employees....

City snapshot number 2:

Leslie and I left to go on our kayaking excursion at 3 pm Friday. We left in mid-town, just north of the 401, Toronto's major cross-town highway. It took us about an hour and a half, to get to Toronto's eastern suburbs, from about Pickering onwards we were stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic until I had enough and headed northwards to a local road where at least we were moving in between being stopped at red lights.

City snapshot number 3:

At the outdoor adventure camp I actually talked to another weekend traveller who told me that he worked for many years for a major international paper manufacturer until he got unceremoniously laid off a few years ago. He had been living and working in Toronto's east end. After his lay-off he finally found a job in Toronto's west end and he ended up commuting probably about 2 hours in rush hour traffic on a daily basis between his house in the east end to his new workplace in Toronto's west end. He figures there is no point in moving since he doesn't know when he's going to get laid off again and where his next job might be.

City snapshot number 4:

This same person told me that one of the travellers in his group was trying to use her cell phone in the middle of the wilderness on Calumet Island in the Ottawa River. She even tried to get up on a picnic table and lifted the cell phone up in the air to try to get better reception. He found it rather ridiculous that someone would need to make a cell phone call during an 2-day weekend outing into nature. I guess we need to be wired all the time these days.

City snapshot number 5:

Life is speeding up all around us. To meet a friend for coffee you now need at least 3 weeks notice and set up an appointment. People work on the weekend, according to official statistics, many Canadians don't even manage to take advantage of their full 2 weeks of vacation since they can't get away from work. I was talking to a client recently who works for a major international retailer. I asked her why she doesn't work from home since she receives all her documents electronically from head office anyways. She said the head office people just don't trust people working from home, so she continues to spend 2.5 hours a day in traffic (on a good day, way more during a snowstorm...)

Country snapshot number 1:

After getting out of rush hour traffic my friend and I thoroughly enjoyed the drive into Eastern Ontario, particularly once we headed north of Belleville into the rolling hills, past tiny country towns and provincial parks. Saturday morning we were woken up by the mooing sounds of cows who were announcing day break. The sounds of crickets and cicadas filled the air in the campground.

Country snapshot number 2:

The facilities at the Equinox river rafting camp are extremely basic. We realize that we can get by on 2 toilets in tiny plywood cubicles and 4 co-ed shower stalls that are located in a wooden shed. We sleep in a tent on a mat, I forgot my pillow and I borrow Leslie's mini-pillow. There is no Internet, no cell phones, no appointments, no fancy clothes, no make-up.

Country snapshot number 3:

Evening in the campground. About 60 city folks are letting out their inner child, they are partying, shouting, playing music, having fun. That's what it looks like when city people let loose. The next night is a lot quieter, after a full day of paddling the rafters and kayakers are tired and Saturday night was a much tamer affair.

Country snapshot number 4:

I am doing my interview with Krista, the spunky young intern at Equinox' river camp. I ask her if it would be possible to borrow one of the bicycles that were leaning against the shed. "Sure", she says, "just help yourself, my bike is the silver-coloured one. Just grab it whenever you feel like it". You don't see this easy-going generosity in the city.

Country snapshot number 5:

During the interview, Krista tells me that a number of her rafting/kayaking guide colleagues are living in tents, in a tree house or in a cobbled-together shack during the summer. During the winter they go off to teach English as a Second Language, study theatre, teach skiing or plant trees and do horticulture in the spring. Krista mentions a key phrase several times: "It's amazing how little you need to live." And this morcel of wisdom is coming from a 25-year old woman! The guides are young adults that co-exist without a lot of structure, very few rules, and they are just having fun doing sports they love and interacting with the clients. And somehow they manage to feed the clients and safely get them down the river. Everybody, the guides and the clients, feels like a kid again.....

Makes you think, doesn't it?

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