The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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It's been a busy week out here in the 14052, where Routes 16, 20A and 78 come together for about nine blocks, then hurry out of town east, west, north and south, as if they realize they have someplace important they need to get to. It's also happens to be the town where I turn not only five and 15, but where I will turn 75 by the time this edition of the world's best hometown newspaper shows up in your mailbox, inbox, telephone screen or local library. In this 523rd "View From Right Field," I thought I would share some of the extensive wisdom I've garnered in three-quarters of a century.

Hmm. Nothing comes to mind. That didn't take long. Might be a short column this week.

What I *have* learned is that everyone has a story to tell and listening is a lot more rewarding that flapping one's gums. Elbert Hubbard liked to claim that he authored the famous quote, "Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt." Of course, Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain have also been credited with that pithy advice. And the actual author is most likely the hopelessly obscure, turn of the (last) century Canadian writer, Maurice Switzer. Who? But then the Fra never met a clever quip he did not want to add to his ever-lengthening list of epigrams. Regardless of the author, it's good counsel.

You'll remember that two weeks ago, I invited myself to others' breakfast-hour coffee klatches. Well, within a week I received six invitations. Four asked me to attend their usual convocations at local diners and restaurants. Two, however, were for gatherings at private homes, one a ladies-only matinee that I was allowed to crash and the other a family coffee session where I was the only person not related to the rest of the coffee drinkers, but where I was made to feel like an honorary family member.

That doesn't include my weekly session at The Body Shop, the physical therapy office in the former Dunkin' Donuts/former Bach's Service and Deli/former Brook's gas station and Arlotta's convenience store. Hardly a coffee klatch, it's still a place where, after a while, you see the same mostly older faces and bodies. In between the grunting and oomphing and attempting the contortions the decades-younger therapists demand—I bet they laugh about us at their happy hours—we exchange, if not exactly pleasantries, then shared agonies on our way to recovering, or at least learning to act our ages.

Nor does it include the decidedly un-klatchy visits to the Right Field Satellite Office, southeast corner Oskwood and Elm, where reservations are never accepted, attendance is optional and the absence of bar stools makes sliding into a variety of conversations easy and inevitable.

The invitees at my coffee klatches ranged from some guys I had known as far back as elementary school in the 1950s to a handful I was meeting for the first time. The various cohorts were comprised of lifetime townies, transplants and apprenticing townies.

I tried to keep a list of the topics, all discussed agreeably, that were broached over the course of the week's coffee drink-ups, tavern and Body Shop seminars. It was impossible to remember them all, but I'll take a run at it: gardening, birdwatching and bluebird house monitoring, travel, local history, tree trimming versus high-speed internet, potholes, sale of and the attempted painting of the Roycroft by Douglas Jemal, croquet, Music Fest's successor Heart of Music Fest, the (lack of) open container law, trees, World War II, World War I, Vietnam, Korea, the unceremonious dismissal of a popular restaurant manager, the new football stadium, cars, the Knox family and farm, fishing, geography, cruises, children and grandchildren, why so many franchise eateries are allowed in town putting mom & pop places in jeopardy, construction projects, concerts, the War of 1812, the Erie Canal, memoirs,

zoning regulations, great new books, school taxes, some politics both local and national, fairly universal concern for our country and its current direction—well, you get the idea. People have stuff on their mind and a thirst for knowledge and information and a rare chance to express their opinions to a polite, attentive audience. When we meet face to face, as opposed to in the maelstrom (RIP Snake) of cyberspace, real conversation happens.

A couple of highlights from my Tour de Café.

When I arrived at Elm Street Bakery for one klatch, I bellied up to the counter and ordered my coffee. I was told by the Karen at the cash register that my coffee had been paid for. Not only that, but I was to order breakfast, anything I wanted, paid for by my host. As Mark Twain (not Elbert Hubbard, in this case) said, call me anything you want, but never call me late for breakfast. Those breakfast sandwiches brighten any morning, even a cold and miserable one.

Whereas in some groups, I simply melted into the table, without the regulars missing a beat, at Elm Street I was introduced to each of the participants. A few I knew well; several I knew only in that East Aurora way of being pretty sure of the name but happy to have it spoken out loud, so I won't mess it up. That group has been meeting once a week for more than 40 years at various diners in the village.

I was heartened to learn that three of the groups had arranged transportation for a member who doesn't drive, and one takes care to include a fellow who has a tough time with verbal communication these days, but so enjoys the fellowship that an hour spent around a table with the warmth of conversation buzzing around him inspires. I love that.