



Having fun is not always easy. We might be in a situation where we would think it should come easy, and it might even be expected of us. But if it's not working out, what should one do?

line In the Flin Flon part of the world the winter starts early and lasts an eternity, at least for some. I don't ever recall feeling unhappy about the long winter in the Canadian north, but it was good to see spring finally arrive. Until then I typically kept myself occupied. But that was not so different than the other parts of the year.

5 During my university years the winter was dedicated to my studies as well as the bulk of the seasons on either side of it. And usually the rest of the time was working in the mines up north, well, more specifically, in the smelter. I lived in two worlds – the industrial one and the academic one, and the two accompanying lifestyles were as different as the contrast of the two major seasons.

10 I felt at home with both, although they each needed some adapting to at first. One year I was faced with the fact that the wages earned wouldn't be enough to keep up with the rising costs. So I took a year off university to build up some leeway for the remaining time I had in my future studies.

15 During that sabbatical I was still learning a lot of things, but they weren't university-related. It was a good feeling to be free for a while, away from pending exams and assignments. I was back in the smelter, replenishing my bank account and my resolve to finish my studies the following year. My lifestyle was different and as I got to know some of the guys at work better, some new friendships blossomed. And I started getting invitations.

20 One fellow promised to take me fishing in the Maritimes if I took a week's vacation in April or May. Another hailed from the west coast and told me if I could manage to take a couple of months off in the summer time he would show me a unique experience every week, from four-wheeling up and down the mountainside and valleys, working on a farm, helping him build his cabin as well as living in inner-city Vancouver. Both those offers were wonderful, almost too good to pass up on, and if the winds had been blowing a little differently, I would have taken them up on their generous offers.

25 I didn't make it to either coast that year but I did make it to Quebec, to take in Carnival at the end of January. As I hadn't worked a full 12 months in the smelter by the calendar year's end, I was only entitled to a week or so of holidays in the new year. Short as they were, they were going to be well spent. The original plans were to go with my best friend but at the last minute he backed out. And that put me in the position of not knowing what to do.

30 Much of the appeal of the anticipated adventure was sharing the experience with my friend. I had never travelled on my own before and it didn't seem like it would be much of a holiday with no-one at my side. I was tempted to give up on the whole idea but before I did that I tried asking around, to see if anyone else might be interested in accompanying me. Most of them couldn't see the reasoning for it – why go somewhere cold when it's already cold here and you don't have to pay to experience that!

35 In the end I got my ticket anyway. I wasn't so keen on going on my own, but I convinced myself that it was an event I wanted to see firsthand and that I should go. I had no idea that it would turn out to be a much more intense and even educational experience than what I had imagined.

I booked a hotel in Quebec City and off I went to see this French cultural event. It was kind of exciting to see the ice sculptures, especially the ice castle with the floodlights at night. There were dog-sled races, and people singing and partying in the streets. I couldn't believe the police allowed open liquor in the streets but in Quebec, at least for the carnival, it was perfectly accepted. You could even buy wine and beer, perhaps spirits too in little local grocery shops on the corners as well as in the supermarkets. Completely unheard of in (much) more conservative Manitoba.

It was fun, listening to the music, being part of the crowd for different events, even singing along to some tunes that became popular over the carnival. But I also wanted to share it all with somebody, and sometimes I felt really alone. It made me feel a little depressed and closed. I would go back to my hotel room from time to time, but each time became more difficult. The feeling of loneliness contrasted greatly with the party spirit all around me and I started to think of returning back to Flin Flon early. I decided to give it a last shot. I have always been shy and that has closed some doors for me, but perhaps it was good in some unknown ways too. I don't know. But I was tired of being stuck in my shyness, in my shell, however safe it immediately appeared to me.

Then I had the bright idea of taking a timeout from all the festivities, and head out to Montreal. There I wouldn't feel the obligation to be 'happy' and could look around at my own pace. The more I thought about it, the more the idea appealed to me, and in the end I opted to give it a try. If I still wasn't enjoying myself, then I would return home. If it worked out, then maybe I'd come back to Quebec City to check out some more of the festival with my batteries recharged and my perspectives refreshed.

Montreal was also a fascinating city. Many of the older buildings seemed to have personalities, seasoned and knowing, to have stories they had witnessed but would never tell. They were full of many nooks & crannies, surprises of detail, shades of colouring, a strong presence inviting me to walk along its streets to meet new discoveries. On one such journey I walked down some stairs leading off a sidewalk into a basement type of bar where they served you a great sandwich with a huge tall bottle of beer.

I walked into the famous Notre Dame Cathedral, and had a long look inside. With nothing to hurry for I was able to take my time, sitting in a pew and simply taking in the volume and the presence of the space. I imagine it was just a coincidence, but I seemed to be all alone. No services, no cleaning staff, no tourists, no-one else occupying the pews and the space but me at that moment. So I took my time. I walked around. I stopped and looked closely at the detail. I looked back at what I had seen but from different perspectives. It was good in there.

I came across a stairwell and ventured my way upward. Beyond the top I met the man who played the pipe organ. I apologized for barging in on him but he didn't mind the intrusion and welcomed me over. We started talking and soon discovered we got on well, leading to a very long and varied chat that afternoon. He told me of his work, in and out of the cathedral, and his love of playing that magnificent instrument. He showed me how it worked, demonstrating his versatility with its many components occupying the space before him. Different compositions required different approaches and he proudly performed many a good example. It was like having a private concert accompanied by a first-hand commentary. The time passed both quickly and slowly but eventually it was time to part and we wished each other well in the new adventures awaiting us.

When the evening rolled into the night I could feel some of the electricity in the air as the activity picked up in the streets. People leaving the theatre, going into restaurants & bars and taxicabs, all classes and types of people brushing past each other, covertly glancing at each other, laughing, thinking, speaking, listening, looking, moving – the currents in the street always changing.

Somehow, I don't know how, one fellow attached himself to me and I felt responsible for him. It could have begun with an innocent question to see if I had any spare change but it shortly developed into a series of conversations. Perhaps I felt encouraged by my earlier experience that afternoon and didn't want to shrug somebody off so easily just because he was a vagrant. Perhaps too I didn't have any special plans,

85 people to meet or even ways I had to conduct myself. I didn't feel threatened by him, so I went along with the flow. This flow led us to a restaurant where I bought the two of us some good hot food to take the chill out of the winter air. This was followed with a new responsibility, of finding him some place to sleep. Of course he probably could have managed quite well without me, as he had done countless other nights, but I now felt responsible for him.

90 I asked around, people in the street, phoned up missions and the like. Nobody knew or the places were closed with their early curfews. It was now getting quite late and I felt I couldn't abandon him, coming this far already. So I invited him to come to my place. I'm sure the hotel management wouldn't be too pleased, and not only from a financial perspective, but I didn't intend to ask them.

95 We entered the cozy warm room and we talked a while longer. By now it was very late and all I wanted to do was to get some sleep but as he was still quite active, I thought it better to humour him for a while before more strongly suggesting that we get some shuteye. The conversations, interesting at first, eventually deteriorated into frequent repetition, but they didn't become scary until some time later. Perhaps one of the turning points was the increasing references from the Bible, becoming more intense on each occasion.

100 It may appear obvious to you that there was more than a little likelihood that this fellow was not all that stable, given his circumstances. I admit to having a certain naivete, but the time we spent before, talking, eating, walking the streets assured me to some extent that the fellow who was now in my hotel room was basically fine, just down on his luck. The Biblical references now being freely shouted aloud, filling the room with his strong convictions and accusations made me question that earlier assessment. I did what I could to disarm his intense feelings and redirect the conversation to calmer waters. Fortunately that and a little assertiveness eventually brought him around.

105 I 'generously' offered my bed for him to sleep in while I took the chair. At this point there was nothing altruistic at all in the offer. I just wanted him to safely sleep and while I wanted the same for myself, I prudently decided to keep myself awake until sunrise which wasn't all that far away. Then I would have no qualms in escorting him out of the hotel after which we could both begin the new day. Separately.

110 The sun did rise and I was able to coax him out of his comfortable bed. When I saw him leaving I was filled with relief and a greater need to catch a few hours sleep before embarking on any new adventures.

115 My experiences with the vagrant and the man in the Cathedral helped break me out of my shell a little bit. While not necessarily any wiser, I did feel a little more seasoned and braver. It wasn't a big change but enough to return to Quebec City and try it again. When I arrived, I interacted a little more with the people around me, at least occasionally. Sometimes I teamed up with a few people, not actually becoming friends, but more like temporary companions. Other times I just went with the crowd, joining in the festivities with them. And even when I was on my own, I didn't feel lonely. That second turn of the Carnival helped make it a memorable trip and I later returned to Flin Flon, the smelter, my regular world of turning events with a slightly different perspective. I didn't know it at the time, but it also helped me immensely when almost seven years later I was to meet even greater challenges during my first weeks of travelling on my own on the longest journey of my life.

AFTERWORD:

I'm not a person who seeks change, but it often finds me. And, I suppose, a tendency to put myself in situations where changes can occur more easily has contributed to many an adventure I've experienced. You would think that after a lifetime of dealing with numerous changes, it would get easier. But it doesn't. Only the knowledge that a willingness to explore new fields when the time is right can soften the blow and open a few doors. Then the changes become more welcomed.