

Our changing culture

By Tabitha Wells

Growing up in Orangeville, I never believed it was a place I would call home as an adult. It was charming, comforting, and carried about it a sense of safety and adoration I knew would always resonate within my soul, but at times I felt it was too small.

There was a part of me that envied those more cultured. Orangeville was, and still in many ways is, quite white-washed and conservative. Though storefronts, buildings, and landscapes changed, much of the general ways of thinking didn't. It was too small and too 'boxed' to ever appeal to someone so far away from 'normal' like myself. If I'm being so honest, leaving wasn't as much about simply not fitting in as it was not wanting to fit in.

I was a reader and a dreamer, someone who wanted to experience the things the world had to offer, rather than remaining sheltered in a bubble.

When I first moved back home in 2008, I believed it was a death sentence. I left Orangeville a church-raised, hard-line Christian conservative, wide-eyed and wanting to understand the world, believing what I would learn would both expand my horizons, all the while strengthening my roots.

But my return saw me a little less sure of that person and more terrified that moving back would mean the questioning and growth would cease. I wasn't a crazy liberal, but I wasn't a conservative anymore. I was beginning to question much of what I had believed about Christianity and life. Instead of welcoming not fitting in, as if it were a badge to encourage my leaving, I began to fear it.

In those nine years I have been home, parts of our humble community have changed. Where before we had little to offer in the ways of culturally influenced cuisine, we now have a number of restaurants offering styles of food one could find in the city.

The church I attend, which at one point was almost entirely white (and predominantly Newfie for a period) is growing into a diverse congregation. Many nationalities, backgrounds, and faiths are represented around Orangeville.

Our culture is growing, changing, and dare I say it, becoming more liberal. But as it does, there also remains a frightening number of people so opposed to change that it makes my heart hurt as much as it makes me fearful.

Social Media has brought to light much of the attitudes that once remained behind closed doors and amidst like-minded friends. It has allowed a platform for the kind of rhetoric perpetuating the idea that anything other than white and conservative is wrong or bad.

On a recent Facebook post announcing the building of a worship centre outside of town, people made comments about how too many of 'those people' are coming to the area and lamenting the loss of whiteness. One of the most Googled phrases regarding Orangeville comes up as 'Is Orangeville Racist?' and one of the results takes you to a white supremacist forum where the growing multiculturalism of our community is talked about negatively.

When The Citizen published an article about the first refugee family arriving in the community, over 20 people immediately wrote GET OUT, and other horrifying things on the post. People I had grown up with or had known for years participated in this. One suggesting we'd all be sorry when the young children of this family blew up our schools.

Minorities of all kinds have suffered locally over the years, not just for racial reasons, as some in our community see change as an affront to their entire being. I've known multiple people who had to leave because they knew, as trans-males/trans-females or any kind of LGBTQA+ they could not be who they were without facing extreme backlash.

But things are changing. The vocality of those opposed to change is proof of it, at least in my opinion. From what I have come to witness in most occasions, the loudest, angriest people in any situation tend to be in the minority. They have to comment about how terrible multiculturalism is on posts because it's the only way people pay attention to them. They have to shout racial slurs and derogatory comments to people who are different on the street, because somehow they feel it gives them power to stop the changes. There's no doubt there is a lot of backwards thinking in this town, but there is also a lot of hope. Forward thinkers and people who desire to see Orangeville flourish and bloom into a community of culture and colour are working to create change and cultivate that kind of atmosphere ? to be a welcoming, safe place, where expression, creativity, and different trains of thought are welcome and encouraged.

Where once I worried about not being able to be open to change publicly or discuss it, I now see a large part of our community encouraging it. Challenging people to step outside their own boxes, challenging me to step further outside of my own.

Our culture is changing. There's nothing that can be done to stop it. You're left with two options ? lament the past and grow as a bitter person, or embrace the future and become part of a thriving, colourful community, where all kinds of people, beliefs, and thinking support, challenge, and help one another grow.