Editor's Notebook

William C. Levin
Bridgewater State University
Editor’s Notebook

William C. Levin

Getting Out

My wife and I recently drove to Canada and wound our way through Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Prince Edward Island and back home through New Brunswick and Maine. (Watch out! Here comes the travelogue part.) The Canadians we met were, as advertized, friendly and laid back compared with your average Bostonian. In Truro, one young man even stopped his car when he saw us fussing with a map and insisted on leading us right to our destination. We were sure it was well out of his way. Be sure to visit Hopewell Rocks at the tip of the Bay of Fundy for the huge (forty-foot) tidal show. The Cabot Trail at the northern end of Cape Breton is jaw-droppingly beautiful. Prince Edward Island’s farmland is picture book lovely, and in the town of Cavendish, fans of *Anne of Green Gables* can relive their childhood fantasies. (We were startled by the busloads of Japanese women who came halfway across the globe to see where the redhead Ann defied convention but still came to be beloved.) Oh, by the way, eat the Poutine, (French fries with brown gravy and melted cheese curds on top), at your own risk. Even Canadians consider it “heart attack on a plate.” My wife contends that adding chunks of lobster to Poutine, as they do in Nova Scotia, does not turn it into a seafood dish.

Sounds like your garden variety vacation drive, right? It turned out to be anything but. You see, this was our first trip since Jeanne and I retired this summer, she after 20 years as a librarian and me after 38 years professing at Bridgewater. Once home, as we sorted our pictures and wrote a trip narrative, we realized that
this trip felt clearly different than our previous vacations. Namely, this was not a vacation at all.

Sociologists who study social roles, aging, and work and leisure all agree that a vacation is something people do to get away from everyday responsibilities so that they can return to them afterwards, supposedly with greater energy and enthusiasm. In short, vacations have utility. The trip my wife and I took was an end in itself. No recharging, renewing or rejuvenating. No re-anythinging. Man, was it novel, and (as our grandson says) “so fun.”

This trip also reinforced for me a sociological fact that I have been emphasizing to my students throughout my career. When we try to make sense of our experiences we spend way too much effort examining what people are like as individuals and way too little understanding the situations in which they find themselves. My wife and I are still essentially the same people as we were when, over the years, we vacationed in Spain, Italy, England, Florida, California or the Berkshires, Jeanne still loves the unexpected, last-minute, side trip to a place she has discovered in an obscure pamphlet or web site. I still am pretty much fed up with travel after ten days, no matter where we are or how much fun we are having. What has changed is that now we are retired folks, and that means everything we do needs a new reading to fit our new lives.

Here’s another example of this idea of “looking to the situation rather than the individual,” this one not from the world of the somewhat old. In the summer between your high school and college years you did not change. Your situation did. You were no longer a high school student (wise and experienced as a graduating senior). Rather, you were about to be a lowly freshmen again, though this time at a place whose rules and routines you had not yet learned. Anticipating these changes forced you to open yourself to new understandings of the world, to put your old ones away (or, at least, in mothballs) and get ready to change. Notice the direction of these forces. Changes in your situation make for changes in what you are like as an individual. It’s what we have been pushing in sociology forever, and it’s what is going to make retirement “so fun.” We get a fresh start on the whole deal. Redo!