



Each spring, we look forward to welcoming our fans at the Cottage Life Shows across Canada. For obvious reasons, we were unable to do so this year. We're so sorry to miss meeting with you, but we hope to see you at the fall show in October. Until then, keep in touch! It's more important than ever.

Share your cottage stories with us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and email me at mkelly@cottagelife.com.

A healthy fear

As I write this, I'm at home with my family, waiting out COVID-19. Amidst this uncertainty, I'm scared. And thinking about the times in my life when my fears were the greatest.

One moment that stands out is the summer of 1995, when a massive cluster of thunderstorms passed through Ontario overnight, leaving a trail of wrecked buildings and frightened cottagers. I was working as a camp counsellor near Sharbot Lake, Ont., spending blissful days teaching kids how to kayak. It was so hot the day before the storm, we were sweating just standing still. Given that I was away from the news and weather reports, my only concern that night as I tucked in was how I'd fall asleep on my sauna-like top bunk.

Shortly before midnight, just as I was finally drifting off, I heard thunder in the distance and thought, Oh, goody, my favourite summer sound. I'd always loved the safe feeling I'd get inside, hearing the rain pelt the roof while a storm raged above. In those moments, I felt a bit like we humans had conquered nature, so easily able to access her best gifts while avoiding her most fearful tantrums.

Well, until that night in '95. As the thunder got louder, it became clear that this wasn't the kind of storm to enjoy. It was the kind to take shelter from. In a simple plywood cabin perched on cinder blocks, the only shelter available was the bottom bunk. Which was where my fellow counsellor—a Spanish girl, Ana, who had never experienced a Canadian summer thunderstorm—lay, freaking out. Just as I scurried below, I heard a massive crack and saw (and felt, really) a massive flash of light—what I imagine a nuclear blast would be like. My hands still on the ladder, shards of wood fell onto my shoulders and into my hair, and I smelled something burning. Instead of jumping into the bottom bunk, Ana and I, and the other two counsellors in the cabin, ran next door, where

we clutched each other for hours until the storms passed, Ana reciting a series of Spanish Hail Marys the whole time.

At daybreak, we finally emerged to survey the wreckage. As I suspected, a nearby pine had been struck through its centre by lightning, carving the trunk into spears. One came through the roof of our cabin about a metre above my pillow, thankfully on such an angle that it missed my bunk and split the floor.

That night remains the scariest of my life, I think, and the moment I discovered a great truth: respect nature, no matter what. And it's the fear I felt then that I still feel now when I hear a distant rumble of thunder, when I see a moose in the woods, or even when I'm on a hike, keeping an eye out for poison ivy. Nature is often friendly, Michelle, but not necessarily your friend. Be careful. (For more thoughts on crossing paths with wildlife, read Eva Holland's gripping feature, "The Scars We Bear," p. 84, about a Kananaskis, Alta., bear attack.)

We are all being extra careful right now. We are all scared. And we are all learning another great truth: fear is good. It keeps us safe by keeping us aware. And in these times of uncertainty and confusion, it's a feeling we should embrace.

I'm thinking a lot about the gorgeous summer days on the lake that bring me peace. I hope within these pages, where we've taken space to celebrate the many iconic pleasures of cottage living, you'll find some of that peace too.

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Strange days indeed

There are so many myths about cottagers. The biggest one? They are “citiots,” people who come from the city and think they own the place. The kind who might double-park their massive SUV (music blaring) in the middle of main street on a summer Saturday, holding up traffic. There are also a lot of myths about the “locals” too—that they’re uneducated and less sophisticated than city folks.

In the 22 years I’ve worked at *Cottage Life*, I’ve met hundreds of cottagers, from all over Canada. Sure, some I’ve not cared for, mostly those who don’t respect the lake environment and the people who come with it. But the vast majority of cottagers I’ve met are not like that. Although they’ve had advantages in their lives, they aren’t one per centers. They’ve planned carefully to afford their dream of cottage ownership. Of course, many others have inherited their places or gained access to them through the generosity of family, but they too seem to deeply value their good fortune.

I’ve met hundreds of locals as well. In fact, I’m related to many of them: my large Irish family is scattered across several small hamlets in Eastern Ontario. They make their living in various ways; through farming or teaching or in the Armed Forces. While their livelihoods don’t rely directly on cottagers, they recognize the important role that cottagers play in rural communities. And they are certainly not unsophisticated or simple, nowhere close.

While the urban-rural divide in Canada is a real thing (sadly), I sense an understanding between the two populations, in the cottage community at least. Cottagers recognize that full-timers enable the lake life they love. Locals do it all, really: run the grocery stores, launch the boats, ready the waterlines, check the roofs in winter, and fill gas tanks in summer. They settle property line disputes, advocate for regional environmental policy, and remove errant fish hooks from little cottager fingers. These locals see that cottagers provide an important engine for their rural economy, infusing enough money in the short summer months to sustain residents through the off-season. While there are occasional fissures in this co-dependent relationship, by and large it’s one built on mutual respect.

Enter COVID-19. All spring, we’ve heard from cottagers and locals alike, enraged about what the other is doing. (For proof, check out p. 25 for a sampling of comments pulled from recent social media posts and reader letters.) As many Canadians began working from home, some cottagers moved north with the thought that the lake would be a safer place for them and their healthy families to isolate. Some bring food and supplies from the city and never go into town, and some don’t. Others heeded the advice of government officials and public health experts and stayed away. Both camps of cottagers pointed fingers at each other.

Things don’t appear to be any more harmonious on the locals “side” either. Some still welcome the cottagers, concerned about the financial consequences of missing even part of the busy season. Others worry cottagers will overwhelm limited hospital and food resources and traded barbs with their rural neighbours for suggesting the economy was more important than their health.

No matter what you did or where you lived, you were doing it wrong, according to someone.

I believe strongly in public debate, especially now when our action or inaction means life or death. I don’t regard hollow, can’t-we-all-just-get-along plat-

itudes well; crisis calls for solutions, not niceties. But finger-pointing never got anybody anywhere. The COVID crisis is revealing many of our society’s inequities, and the debate around cottaging through the pandemic has exposed a few for cottage communities in particular.

So, how about we have a real and important debate about fair taxation, something that cottager groups such as FOCA (Federation of Ontario Cottagers’ Associations) have been urging for years, decades, even? A good chunk of the frustration that unwanted cottagers feel right now is rooted in the idea that they pay more than their share. Consider that perhaps there’s truth to this point of view, then work from there.

Cottagers, on the other hand, can put some time into thinking about the rural health care system. It faces real and unique challenges right now, with more on the horizon as additional cottagers retreat to the lake for retirement. How can we help shore up the system?

Of course, I’m a magazine editor, not a policy wonk, and these issues are complex for even the most experienced officials. But I love the lake. I’ve seen, over and over, the many ways that cottagers and locals are connected and how working together to solve our problems almost always leads to magic (for a few specific examples, check out “Better Together,” p. 68). Yes, we can all get along, for what it’s worth.

We still don’t know what the summer of 2020 will bring for cottage country. I hope and pray that it brings good health for all, though I know for some that won’t be true. I also hope very much that we will be able to sit on the dock before the dog days are upon us again. We are in a storm right now, but there must be sun after the rain, right? And it’s up to us all to find the silver linings.


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What's your favourite thing to do at the cottage in winter? Tell me at mkelly@cottagelife.com or tweet me @mkonthedock.

Can't go south? Go north instead

In my youth, a winter visit to the cottage was an infrequent adventure. Our place was at the end of a mile-long road that in those days saw no plow. The snow—there was more of it then, right?—came early and stayed late. Visiting meant walking through at least knee-deep drifts. And, since the place wasn't winterized, we never stayed long. Just a look around, really, before we trudged out again, fleeing to my grandparents' farm on the other side of the lake. At the farm, there was always a roaring woodstove and always some sort of delicious pastry on its way out of the oven.

Those winter days in the country offered distinct physical sensations that I've never had in any other place. Farm weekends were typically shared with my many cousins, and us kids were encouraged—in a 1980s sort of way, which is to say we were required—to be outside. I was a city kid, and resisted snow boots, so my grandmother would force me to line my inadequate footwear with milk bags to fight off complaints of wet feet. We would play outside until dark, and then play some more, eventually losing ourselves in a game for long enough to

forget about our impending frostbite and dripping noses.

Where there was a break in the action, I would stop moving and just listen. And it was almost as if the quiet made noise, the whole landscape hushed up so still. It was as if time itself had forgotten what to do.

Canadians are in a constant battle with winter. In late fall, we obsess over its arrival, talking about how we have one more good weekend left, or how we are lucky to get some sunshine in November. (Meanwhile, Scandinavians exalt the concept of *hygge*. Who's the North again?) As each day passes, our shoulders creep up, steeled against the onslaught of frost and ice and general inconvenience. This habit is a drag, since winter itself offers so much relief from the general pace of life, especially in cottage country. Not only is it quiet, it's slower. We allow ourselves more time; since things tend to take a tiny bit longer, and require a little extra effort, we are more deliberate in our actions. We can spend the morning shovelling the lake for a skating session, then spend the afternoon and evening feasting with no guilt—what better exercise

is there than shovelling? We get to see the landscape in a whole new way, the lake a playground of a different kind than in summer, a canvas for snowshoeing, skiing, and sledding.

And yet, I anticipate that this winter will be hard for Canadians. No matter how much we “embrace” the cold season, most of us will have to go without trips south for bouts of sunshine. So, we really have no choice but to accept that winter can be its own escape. We should make the effort to enjoy it.

This issue will inspire you to see winter as something to savour rather than huddle against. Perhaps you'll take this season to get involved more deeply in your local community—there's a whole other life that happens when the cottagers go home, as you'll learn in our story “Portrait of a Small Town in Winter, in Two Parts” on p. 52. And there's life on the lake too, if you are brave enough to look for it, as Paul Rush tells us in his gorgeous essay “Same Old Lake, Fresh New Season,” on p. 72, a flashback that was originally published in our Nov/Dec 1996 issue.

This winter, I wish you continued health and safety, and send you optimism for 2021. And remember, there is no bad weather, only bad clothing. Failing that, there are always milk bags.

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