

Moncton Tourism photo

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go? Your economic status is one of many variables that limits your world-view. For one underprivileged child in Saint John, N.B., nearby Moncton would be her destination.

So close and yet so far

I met three Grade 4 students at an urban elementary school in Saint John, N.B. This was a very successful elementary school with an impressive 100 per cent high school graduation rate, but it was afflicted by generational poverty.

The principal informed me in the staff room that the majority of parents did not own a home or a vehicle.

Through corporate and community support, the children in the school were provided with a daily hot lunch. Each student also had a community reading buddy who visited regularly.

The classroom was well-equipped, with circular tables, up-to-date technology and comfortable chairs.

I noticed a fancy Smart Board attached to the Internet, so I showed the children a Google map of Canada.

I asked Allen to locate the Okanagan. He struggled, but after a few moments carefully pointed it out. Then, I expanded the map to include the entire world.

"If you could go anywhere, anywhere you want, where would you go?" I asked.

Red-haired Roberta scrunched up her face. Tall Lyla put her chin in her hands.

Allen raised his hand and said, "Edmonton. Because my grampa works there."

"Me, I'd like to go to Paris," said Roberta.

"Why do you want to visit Paris?"

"Cause it's real far."

The kids laughed.

Lyla put her hand up finally.

"So, where would you like to go, Lyla?"

"Moncton."

"Lyla, Moncton is only a few hours away. You can pick any place in the entire world."

"Moncton. I was there when I was small, so I don't remember it."

When I asked the principal about Lyla afterward, she told me that the tall girl had struggled at home and at school.

"Why Moncton?" I asked. "It's only 155 kilometres away."

"It may be a lifetime away for Lyla," the principal said. "Her world may be pretty limited."

I think about Lyla from New Brunswick quite often. I remember holding her hand on the way to our hot lunch.

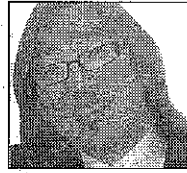
We sat huddled together chatting. We ate chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy. I remember talking about my own little girl, who is nearly the same age.

We might have talked about books and dreams and far away places, but we didn't.

We drank our cold milk, made little indentations in our potatoes for gravy and we grinned a lot about nothing.

This girl's smile was so beautiful and open. For some reason, she brings tears to my eyes.

In Moncton, a few days later, my group ate



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dinner with the lieutenant governor of New Brunswick and his partner, who was a theatre professor who produced locally developed plays written in French.

I talked about Lyla because I couldn't get her off my mind.

"Her ambition was very modest," the lieutenant governor said. "What can we do to help broaden her horizons?"

"Aren't all of us somehow limited by our world-view?" said the drama professor. "Our world-view is the product of our upbringing, our education, but most of all it is limited by our own imaginations."

"Ah, you are talking about the role of art," said the erudite lieutenant governor.

Art remains a controversial subject. Some view art as essentially useless, especially when governments spend money supporting public art or emerging artists. Others view art as essentially the core of our economic and social life, linking art to design, creativity, innovation and values.

The culture that we live in, the one that establishes our values and beliefs, is derived from the imaginations of our creative class, which includes our novelists, painters, directors, architects, musicians and many other kinds of creative people.

Businesses, too, prize the employee with the ability to hone new ideas into marketable products and services.

Those who question the impact of art and artists on our culture generally hold a limited world-view concerning the transformative power of art.

When I view myself as an artist, I realize how much I am being held back by my own world-view. The way I write, the way I think, the way I imagine - in a strange way, I am no different than Lyla from New Brunswick.

I cannot see beyond Moncton in so many ways. When I push the boundaries of my creativity, I realize how difficult it is to see with fresh eyes, and I treasure and value the artist even more.

For example, there is an artist (Elizabeth Demaray) who has designed and manufactured "Hand-Up," a plastic shell, for hermit crabs to use as prefab homes. This ecologi-

cal art not only raises awareness about the environmental pressures facing hermit crabs that can't find housing, but also demonstrates how art can be life-saving and life-affirming.

There are many visual artists who find themselves resisting traditional ideas of what art means: artists like Robert Smithson (whose earthworks I find shockingly interesting) don't show their work in galleries because galleries can't hold a work like Spiral Jetty, which was built on Rozel Point in Great Salt Lake, Utah.

Some artists do not use existing materials, so they spend years devising special fabrications and technologies. Others use only found materials. Some create art out of snow or ice or even the voices of starlings, reminding us of the power and beauty of nature.

These artists challenge the frontiers of our expectations about the value of art, which invites the reflective person to rethink, re-imagine and re-experience the world.

Although I am a writer and choose to make my contribution with words, I cannot over-estimate what I have gained from confronting the world of experimental, conceptual and environmental art.

The Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle, for example, has changed the way I see the relationship between art and urbanity. Proving that a gallery is not the only place to discover art, the Olympic Sculpture Park is placed in a beautiful outdoor space that was once industrial land.

Lyla from New Brunswick transformed my own world-view about the nature of generational poverty.

She taught me to think of my own poverty, which is, of course, nothing like hers. My own poverty is one that is connected to my world-view.

A world-view is shaped by our experiences, learning, travel and relationships. If your world-view is not constantly shifting, adapting and growing, then it can be linked to a kind of creative dormancy. To see yourself and the world anew should be our constant challenge.

Art teaches us not to frame others by our own experience. Art inspires us to challenge the way we experience life. Art humbles us, shakes our foundations and tells us that the most significant journey we ever take is the one that points us to a place we've never been.

"Lyla, why do you really want to go to Moncton?" I asked her at the end of our time together.

"Because I was born there," she said.

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