

Sunset on the second Elizabethan Age

by BROCK WEIR

Memories are funny things. Depending on how old you are, time can play tricks on you. You might remember things a little differently from how they happened. The added perspective that years bring might shed a different light on things. The importance of such memories, in turn, might ebb over time as well.

Some memories, however, are very different. They can be indelibly etched in your brain no matter the circumstance.

And so it was on June 29, 1997 when my mother and I left Newmarket early in the morning bound for Toronto. A bouquet of flowers purchased the night before were held precariously in my lap, teetering in a jug of water to keep them as fresh as possible until they were needed.

The sun had barely come until full force when we found our place outside St. James' Cathedral, intent on seeing The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh start their day before carrying out a series of engagements in Toronto.

As an eleven-year-old with a budding interest in the monarchy, this was a chance not to be missed. In addition to hoping the peach-coloured flowers would catch Her Majesty's eye as she went into the church, I was also wearing a tie-died Tasmanian Devil t-shirt for a little extra pop from the crowd. It's a sartorial choice that makes me cringe today, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

The excitement in the air was palpable when the Royal Couple arrived at the church around 11 a.m. The Queen was the first to emerge from the car, with Prince Philip following just a few steps behind. After greeting members of the clergy, they made their way towards the entrance of the cathedral, smiling at the hundreds who were waiting to catch a glimpse.

Unaware of the proper protocols, I reached out as far as I could over the crowd barrier to give the bouquet to our Head of State. She glanced over in my direction and made what I felt was eye contact, before turning back to the path and entering the church.

My chance had passed. It was the first time I felt truly deflated.

But the feeling was only temporary.

Moments later, a member of Her Majesty's entourage came back out of the church, made a bee-line for me and said in hushed tones that the Queen had asked him to come out to assure me she had seen me and promised she would come my way after the service after meeting members of the choir. I guess the deflation showed on my face.

That deflated feeling evaporated instantly and was replaced with a nearly unbearable excitement.

The Queen emerged once again about an hour later to the toll of bells. The entourage-member was standing beside the monarch as he gestured with his arm for she and Prince Philip to walk through the line of choristers and then conduct a walkabout.

Without saying a word, I could see The Queen frown ever so slightly and firmly shake her head. The walkabout was to begin immediately and she walked directly over to my side of the barricades.

The excitement was too much by the time she got to me and I have no recollection of any exchange we might have had ? but the feeling was unforgettable, and I think it's a testament to her character that she made the time to make one little kid in the crowd feel just a little bit special that day.

Over the subsequent years, I was fortunate enough to meet The Queen on three more occasions, each time unique and special, but that very first time stands above the others. And the memories made me smile over the past week as we prepared to see the curtain fall on the second Elizabethan Age and a woman who had, over her 70-year reign, become an inextricable part of our everyday lives.

The week that was seems almost surreal.

On Tuesday, September 6, the Queen received her latest British Prime Minister, Liz Truss. Slight and leaning on a cane, Her Majesty's frailty was clear, as was her dedication to the job – one to which she pledged her unstinting devotion five years before her accession in 1952.

The next day, she issued what was to be her last public statement – this time to Canadians upon the tragic stabbings this month in Saskatchewan.

"I would like to extend my condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the attacks that occurred this past weekend in Saskatchewan," she said. "My thoughts and prayers are with those recovering from injuries, and grieving such horrific losses. I mourn with all Canadians at this tragic time."

Little more than 24 hours later, Canadians were mourning with King Charles III as well, and with the loved ones she left behind.

Committing her "whole life, whether it be long or short" to our service in 1947 was a promise she made in a different age, a world which no longer really exists. It could have been mere lip service. It could have been a vow we would have forgiven her for hanging up in her nineties, for handing things over to a different generation.

But it was a vow made to us and it was a vow she kept literally until the very end.

As we look towards a post-Elizabethan world in Canada and across the Commonwealth, I think we can all be heartened by the legacy she has left us, as well as the timely reminder of what true service and dedication to something larger than ourselves actually means.

In contrast to many leaders, Elizabeth II never struck me as a public servant who was in it for herself or her own personal glory.

Many of her closest friends and acquaintances underscored the point that she much rather would have spent her life quietly on a farm with her beloved horses and dogs, far away from the pomp and circumstance that defined her life. But fate had other plans.

After unexpectedly becoming Heiress Apparent to the throne at the age of 10 upon the abdication of her uncle, Edward VIII, her life was no longer really her own. She had a destiny to fulfil and that destiny was a role she felt duty bound to take anything but lightly.

She was conscious of her role as monarch, yes, and took the role extremely seriously, but there was also the facet that she was, above and beyond being Queen, a custodian of the Crown and a representation of something much larger: a public servant like no other.

How well she served us – and how grateful we are, and should be, for that service.

As tiny as the Queen was in physical stature, King Charles III has exceptionally large shoes to fill. But the lives, legacies and lessons from his exceptional parents will serve him well during his reign – and, in my view, the new monarch's reign is already off to a promising start.

"I speak to you today with feelings of profound sorrow," the King said in his first public broadcast as Monarch on Friday. "Her Majesty the Queen – my beloved mother – was an inspiration and example to me and to all my family, and we owe her the most heartfelt debt any family can owe to their mother; for her love, affection, guidance, understanding, and example. Queen Elizabeth's

was a life well-lived; a promise with destiny kept and she is mourned deeply in her passing. That promise of lifelong service I renew to you today.

?In 1947, on her 21st birthday, she pledged in a broadcast from Cape Town to the Commonwealth to devote her life, whether it be short or long, to the service of her peoples. That was more than a promise; it was a profound personal commitment which defined her whole life. She made sacrifices for duty. Her dedication and devotion as sovereign never waived; through times of change and progress, through times of joy and celebration, and through times of sadness and loss.?

His Majesty drew his speech to a close with, ?In our sorrow, let us remember and draw strength from the light of her example.?

This is not just sound advice for King Charles III; her example is something we learn from as perhaps the greatest of the so-called ?Greatest Generation? transitions from being an inextricable part of the lives of every generation living today to the realm of history; history which she so brilliantly helped define.