

The joy of the bread aisle

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I love the simple rhythms of life as a rural doctor. As I go through my routine day, I feel connected to everyone I meet. The ‘Hi Chris’ I offered this morning was to a colleague at the hospital, but it equally could apply to a nurse, a patient or a community member.

None of this is unique to the rural situation, to be sure. Like many things, there is a spectrum of connectivity. Even in the city you will be connected. It is just that the amount, the breadth and depth of connection depends on your character, the ethos of the community, and dilutes with the number of strangers that you interact with.

I did my medical degree at Queens University in Kingston. They claimed they were a small intimate school (and in comparison to Toronto perhaps they still are). However, I considered the university and the city to be the small end of urban because, when I lived in the city of Kingston, there was a community of patients, colleagues, teachers, classmates and friends. Any other social interactions were minimal. You avoided eye contact in public.

I experienced quite a change when I moved to Blind River. At the small end of rural, in the summer, I drove with the windows down because I was always waving hello. If you avoided eye contact in public, you were either pre-occupied or (perhaps) being rude.

When the web of connectivity is this tight, it does get complicated. People start having multiple layers of identity. At first, this was new and I was uncomfortable about the boundaries that I had to drop in social interactions. After being in practice for decades now, I am comfortable about being able to compartmentalise my role as a physician, away from the other roles of friend, client, patient, sailor and so on. It is not that I ignore the other aspects of my relationships; they inform me, when I am being the doctor.

This is the joy of the bread aisle: simple day-to-day life choices where you can take your time and it does not matter, but also where you can meet someone, amongst the rolls and the loaves, and have a layer of conversation that does matter. Living life with continuities of practice and life, interwoven, is a rural joy. You might just be a little late for home.

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