

UNDERSTANDING THE LEGACY OF JOE BLADES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

Tony Tremblay

New Brunswick's writing community was shocked and saddened in the spring by the untimely passing of Joe Blades. Joe was a gentle, curious, and inspiring spirit who touched the lives of many people in our province and across the country.

He is perhaps best described as the everyman from an earlier era—a poet, publisher, teacher, environmentalist, filmmaker, student, traveller, labour activist, radio show host, and friend to writers everywhere.¹ Though he was based in Fredericton since 1990, we cannot claim him, for he roamed across North America and Europe as freely as he did across our southern New Brunswick campuses. When you hosted an event, big or small, Joe showed up. That was his mission. At least a head taller than everyone else, he was instantly recognizable with ponytail and ever-present grin. But his notebooks were the real giveaway. Like a nineteenth-century naturalist with his field guides, Joe's notebooks were always brimming with content. Never did he carry one that wasn't overflowing with the miscellany of the curious mind. In that sense, he was our literary conscience, collecting the ephemera that he saw everywhere around him. I hope those notebooks find their way to a library or public archives, for they contain the shouts and whispers of our time.

Joe was best known as owner and publisher of Broken Jaw Press. In that capacity, he did life-changing work, often publishing the first books of authors who would go on to achieve important things. All regions of the country have similar figures, their dedication to bottom-up cultural work—what the radical poet Ezra Pound termed republican enterprise—a compensation for what larger and more self-important publishers will not touch. But, while all regions have such figures, few are as tenacious or accommodating as Joe was. His only peer in Atlantic Canada was the venerable Fred Cogswell, who was as indefatigable as Joe. Each dedicated his life to serving the literary aspirations of others.

Each recognized, too, that cultural work was a hands-on business, an array of practices and dispositions cultivated in community halls, summer writing workshops, and other grassroots locales. Those who were able or more inclined or advanced helped those who were not. The best of the lot, like Joe and Fred, counted service as creation. If they could help others bring work to a larger audience, then they shared in its production. Of course, they never claimed the result of their midwifery as their own but rather accepted responsibility for its larger reception. Only the ego-driven or insecure would cast doubt on their motives, denying them a role in production. Most were happy to acknowledge them as the silent underwriters of their dreams.

What has this to do with COVID-19? you might wonder. Just about everything, I would say, for Joe's way of going about his business was in stark contrast to both what this pandemic demands of us and how those demands have diminished us. Joe held it as gospel, for instance, that it was vital to show up, to be on the ground, and to reach out. Listening and being present were key for him, as was the kind of close, personal rapport that is part of every writer's apprenticeship. Joe did almost nothing virtually. He took the long way around in a world reduced by shortcuts. He jumped on buses and went to Moncton and Saint John for readings. He sat down with people over coffee, eschewing the impersonality of the telephone. And he took endless notes, refusing to let even the smallest trifle fall into insignificance. It was a lot of work.

Those many of us who've had our lives curtailed by the restrictions a pandemic imposes will understand the importance of what he modelled and what that modelling achieved. Even the most private among us have felt the loss of their communities. Even technology's true believers have experienced what McLuhan predicted would be the disorienting sensory aphasia of virtual citizenship. Living as disembodied signifiers in online classrooms and offices is neither fun nor productive. Joe's way of being in the world becomes poignant in that context, and it should become a lesson for us, especially those of us in the humanities and social sciences and the arts generally.

We must remember—and must work to reinstate—what Joe knew and practiced: that our students and colleagues live and thrive and belong in “community” as most people would define it; that mentorship and close personal contact are essential not just to what educators do but especially to the development of the young people who are our charges; that, for all the promises of faster bandwidth and better Zoom, technology is no substitute (not even close) for showing up on a stifling summer night to hear nervous young poets read their first poems. When we come together in groups, we learn how to listen, how to speak, and what the common ground is that connects us. I've seen it happen countless times in my thirty years in the classroom.

Endless if earnest discussions of spotty wi-fi and more responsive networking platforms are mere distractions. In fact, they are cleverly laid traps by those who nibble away at the moorings without end. Look to the anxieties of students, teachers, administrators, and pandemic deniers for a clearer rendering of the problem. Humans are social beings who cannot abide isolation. House arrest was devised for that reason. It is a punishment aimed at what is most fundamental to us as social animals.

If this public health crisis causes us to begin making structural changes to how we operate as universities, schools, and institutions of social service, we will have done ourselves irreparable harm. Of course, we must do what is necessary in the short term to get through the pandemic, but we must also be alert to what the experience of isolation has taught us about who we are and what we did well. That will involve working with our students and colleagues to identify and reassert the hands-on, personal aspects of our many social contracts. Our students crave and need that, even if the younger ones take shelter in the safe anonymity of their pocket technologies. As Cardinal Newman knew, “An academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils is an arctic winter; it will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University, and nothing else.”²

Joe Blades illuminated a path for us, showing us what was important and what worked. He showed up, he took notes, and he listened. He stood by, an embodied presence. It was hard work and there were no shortcuts. I hope we'll remember his legacy as we think about how best we can serve the people who entrust us with their children's futures.

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Notes

¹ For more on the many sides of Joe Blades, see his entry in the *New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia* <https://nble.lib.unb.ca/browse/b/joseph-blades>.

² John Henry Newman, “The Rise and Progress of Universities,” *Historical Sketches, Vol. III* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 76.