

## **Gordon Lightfoot vs. Stompin' Tom**

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Driving down the highway smilin', Stompin' Tom Connors drives home the saga of Bud the Spud. From PEI, through New Brunswick; past Montreal and into Toronto, the eastern-Canadian trek gets documented in a toe-tappin', foot-stompin', hand-clappin' anthem to the journey of the illustrious potato, from the bright red mud of Prince Edward Island to the grandiose gray concrete of the Torontarian metropolis. Surely, the best example of Canadian folk music!

Until I hear the legendary account of the SS Edmund Fitzgerald's disastrous last sailing, recounted by Gordon Lightfoot in a haunting ballad that evokes the most reverent memory of the sailors' troubled journey. Its psalmish lamentation provoking a silent, respectful contemplation—for human tragedy, for honoured memories, and for the awe brought on by the great forces of nature.

Ah! but Stompin' Tom has that thing about narrative rhythm that makes a gratifying tall tale about the silent triumphs that come with simply going about life in Canada, watching the best game you can name—when it's not locked out—or going out to bingo on a Sudbury Saturday Night. Surely to him belongs the title of Canadian folk music icon?

Except when compared to Gordon Lightfoot's trademark sound, the one that defines Canadian folk music, with half a century's worth of output chronicling the soul of the individual living in Canada, framing that feeling of standing in the early morning rain, with little more than a dollar in your hand. And with what he considers his greatest work, Gordon Lightfoot turned the sinking of an American ship into the flagship song of Canadiana.

There's something telling about that... that a defining song in Canadian folk music is about an American ship, one that sailed a lake shared by two countries, each with strong proud traditions of their own, so often overlapping and still the sources of odd pieces of contention.

Perhaps a most illustrative place where this bi-national dynamic carries on is amid the natural beauty and tacky commercialism that straddles the Niagara River, hosted by the twin towns of Niagara Falls, Ontario, and Niagara Falls, New York.

When I first moved to Canada as a child, the trek from London, Ontario to Niagara Falls was just long enough to make it a worthy family trip *and* short enough to make it feasible and economical. Whenever we had visitors from Mexico, the place to show off was the Falls—it was a familiar journey, and one that still managed to be different every single time.

I remember in one of these trips that one of our companions commented on how shrewd the American side had been, clever enough to hang on to Goat Island, right between the Canadian Horseshoe Falls and the American set. They sure know how to do business those Americans, was my guest's quip.

And while having snagged Goat Island seemed like a pretty enviable triumph for the other side of the border, I remember thinking this side had it pretty good.

Still, whenever I drop by the Falls, I seek when possible, to take that walk down the Rainbow Bridge, tip my hat to the plaque that marks the international boundary line, stroll into Niagara Falls, New York, and then spend some time on that spot of land suspended in the middle of the Niagara river, Goat Island, straddling the border and overlooking the tranquil thunder of water gushing down through two nations.

It is in that setting that I find myself on Labour Day weekend, sitting on Goat Island State Park, with Canada flowing down on my left and the United States streaming down on my right. I find myself looking at the daunting chasm of the Horseshoe Falls from the next country over, enjoying the shade at a table in the island's only restaurant. The server brings me a beverage to accompany me in my contemplation. She asks me where I'm from. Toronto, I answer. She gives me the respectful nod given to a foreign visitor and then throws me an odd question: Which one's your favourite side? she asks.

I'm taken by surprise and I almost choose a side, perhaps she expects me to say "The Canadian one, of course," but I give the answer that makes the most sense to me: if your passport allows it, the best view is from all the angles. The full view from Ontario, the postcard framing from the Rainbow Bridge, and the close access of the New York State park that lets you be immersed in the mist coming from both sides.

She seems disappointed by my answer and with a grudging resignation, tells me I'm lucky to hail from the "good side" of the Niagara River and about how the US got a raw deal, getting the boring end of the waterfall arrangement.

I'm blindsided, trying to process how the water could be bluer on the other side no matter which Niagara Falls town you viewed it from.

And yes, only the Canadian side offers that all-encompassing panoramic view of all the waterfalls, allowing a broad vista of the American Falls and their sister Bridal Veil cataract, separated by the natural resilience of Goat Island from the majestic mist of the Horseshoe Falls, with a view that seems to envelop you into the roaring waters themselves. But only the view from Niagara Falls, New York allows a closer view of the American side, with a side angle that offers a deeper appreciation for the extra dimension that the American Falls don't exhibit when seen from Ontario. Their nuanced curves can only be appreciated from the New York State park, and the modest dignity of the Bridal Veil Falls becomes much more intimate from the viewpoint of Luna Island, just a small foot-bridge down from Goat.

And yet, my friendly American server finds herself shortchanged by the cross-border arrangement. How odd, having heard the same lament when watching the Falls from the other side of the border.

It is a powerful spell, the one that can bring one to believe that those precious gifts at our feet could be any less valuable than their incredible beauty really merits.

Or, perhaps worse still, it is scary to realize that we can cast that powerful spell on others by minimizing the value of other sides when looking to justify ours by our speech.

You might remember those days in 2005, when the *Jyllands-Posten* magazine in Denmark published certain cartoons of the prophet Mohammed that depicted him, and the tradition he represents in, well, unflattering light. Barely last month, when the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* published similar material, with similar backlash, the spectre of that spell hovered over us.

It is impossible for me to evaluate the intentions of the cartoonists and of the publishers involved, or of those who reacted in kind. Whether the cartoons were intended to offend or not, or to what extent, the fact remains that they were not well received by many Muslim communities around the world and I wonder to what extent the artists and publishers took time to consider their intentions and the effect they would have on other fellow human beings.

Many commentators at the time are also documented expressing the viewpoint that, whatever the intentions of these publications, the published cartoons had been justified as an exercise in free speech, and that restraint in that matter would have amounted to self-censorship, weakening the state of that cherished free speech.

I am moved to evaluate what the meaning of this right to free speech is all about. And I do so now with inspiration from the wisdom of several traditions that take their viewpoint on speech very seriously.

Our faithful kindred, the Spiritual Society of Friends—Quakers—make it part of their spiritual testimony to strive toward simplicity in their speech. Often this is expressed by refraining from speech that is false or with hurtful intention: lying, gossip, language that magnifies social and economic divides. Their ethical approach draws from biblical sources ...and they are remarkably similar to what Buddhist wisdom has to say on the matter. The Buddhist teaching of Right Speech has it in its precepts that it is more wholesome to abstain from lying, from speech that is divisive, speech that is abusive, idle chatter—gossip: the kinds of speech that lend themselves to impeding better understanding and deeper awareness of our wider reality.

The value of these teachings becomes more evident to me when I consider the way they are outlined by Toltec wisdom, as explained by Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*. His version of the Toltec ways suggests four commitments one can make with oneself, of which the single most important agreement is this: Be impeccable with your word. How? By speaking with integrity—truth; saying only what one means—simplicity in speech; avoiding speaking against self or others—gossip; speaking for the sake of truth and love—and so avoiding divisive or abusive speech.

But Miguel Ruiz goes a bit deeper in explaining these teachings, by explaining what he means by that troublesome word: impeccable... impeccable speech—to speak without sin. Yikes! And then he brings his definition of sin, as actions that go against oneself.

It is perhaps one of those truths that seem contradictory. It sounds like quite a self-serving definition. Except when factoring in that actions and words against others, which inevitably go against oneself, all come from the same source and injure all.

Divisive speech, misleading speech, abusive speech—those careless words and expressions that cause hatred, confusion, that devalue the inherent worth of others and of the beauty of the earth which we inhabit. These can only reflect harmfully back to ourselves, bouncing hatred upon us, confusing our intentions, devaluing the very speech that we hold so dearly.

I wonder if a responsible use of the right to free speech is the one guided by a right speech that frees? That frees us from the shackles that come from divisive and abusive speech. From the burdens that breed from speech with feeble consideration for its effects on others. From speech that injures us by injuring those who surround us.

The way we express ourselves becomes something larger than the words themselves, they reflect a vision of reality, one where careless speech obscures that vision, and becomes a constructed worldview with powerful effects from the utterings of our words—a spell. A spell that can bring unnecessary loss to our lives.

A spell that would force us to choose from Gordon Lightfoot or Stompin' Tom and that would lead us to miss out on the fuller experience of the pure iconic Canadian folk awesomeness that they both can bring. A spell that would deprive us of the subtle beauty of the American side of the Falls. A spell where free speech would blind us to respectful appreciation that comes with right speech.

Breaking this spell is a key that allows us to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom... to serve life.

Breaking this spell means inviting a compassionate vision, by which the question of consideration for others—and the value that they are—makes other questions seem odd. In this new vision, questions like Gordon Lightfoot versus Stompin' Tom, Canadian versus American Falls, or Free Speech versus Right speech all seem oddly irrelevant, and we may see each other for the beautiful flowing streams that we are, coming from the same source, sharing the same land, and playing the same harmonies to the melody of life's stream.