



## Go ahead and challenge yourself

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Last December I read that 2007 would be the 50th anniversary of the Canada Council for the Arts. To celebrate, the council challenged Canadians to do 50 arts activities in the year. While the idea had immediate appeal to me, I found the prospect of trying to do so many artsy things in one year a bit daunting.

I go to a lot of cultural things – theatre, dance performances, opera, book readings, etc. – but 50 translates to about one per week, which seemed ambitious. At the same time, I thought that taking up the challenge might motivate me to get out more. So, I decided to go for it.

Because I thought it would be more fun if others would join me for at least some of the 50, I decided to challenge some friends to take part in the quest. To make it more fun and more real, I came up with some rules – like the requirement that an activity should be something the Canada Council could, would or does support. In other words, a Leafs game wouldn't count.

I only asked friends who do a lot of cultural things, figuring they'd be more likely to join me. One friend replied within minutes, a few took some cajoling, and a few never responded, including one who was, in part, my inspiration for even taking up the challenge. I really thought he'd be game because one of his new year's activities is to create a list of things he wants to do in the coming year – things like try a new restaurant, take in a baseball game, etc. Interestingly, a few months later I ran into him and – unprompted – he confessed that the idea of doing 50 things was too overwhelming, so he simply never responded.

That got me thinking a bit more about challenges. It has always seemed to me that challenges fall into one of two categories. The first is where you compete against others, with the intention of winning or at least seeing how your skills stack up against other contestants. I've never been big on contest-type challenges. I can't ever remember succumbing to a dare, and I can't think of any skill-based contest I ever intentionally entered. (The junior high science fair doesn't count, since entering was more or less

expected.)

The other kind of challenge is where you take on a task (or set a goal) just to try to prove to yourself that you can do something. I've taken on more and more of these types of challenges as I've grown older, and I've noticed my friends seem to, as well. To me, the culture challenge clearly fell into this category. (Maybe my friends who didn't respond to my invitation to join the culture challenge were turned off because they saw it as more of a contest-type challenge, given that I set some rules.)

I have to say, the culture challenge turned out to be fun and fascinating in many ways, not the least of which was observing how my friends have responded. I was also surprised at how motivating it's been. There were many cold evenings when, though I would have happily stayed home, I dragged myself out mainly to be able to add to my list. Similarly, there were a few events that sounded just so-so but that I went to just because of the challenge. Every time I did so, I enjoyed myself.

Earlier this month I reached the magic 50 and have since gone past it. Looking back, I'm amazed at the variety of things I went to. There was a terrific exhibit called "Tintin in Peru." I learned a lot about Peru, but even more about the history of Tintin and about Hergé, our intrepid hero's creator. Then there was a textile exhibit called "Colour & Light," which offered a glimpse into life in India and Pakistan through embroidery created over two centuries.

Besides the more or less passive events, I also had some fun, hands-on experiences – things I might never have considered participating in had I not been looking to add to the list. For example, I attended an animation workshop at the National Film Board and took part (with hundreds of others) in a night-time installation piece called "Pulse Front: Relational Architecture 12," which involved gripping a sensor that took your pulse and translated it into a current that was then beamed through the night sky via a search light.

When I set out on the culture challenge, my main goal was to get out more. What I didn't count on was how the different cultural experiences would enrich my life and open my mind to other ideas. Ultimately, maybe the best thing I discovered is that merely by engaging in a challenge you achieve so much more than you set out to.

So go ahead and pick a challenge for yourself for 2008 – I dare you!

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