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**"Come Away Home": Thank You, Canada**

[\*The Huffington Post\*](#)

**By David Harris, AJC CEO**

**March 16, 2017**

I've had a few varied jobs in my life, including postal worker and waterskiing counselor, but theater critic never figured among them. Nor do I plan to embark on a new career anytime soon. But I have to say that rarely have I been as moved by a Broadway play as I was by seeing the new show, "Come Away Home."

It tells the story of the people of Gander, Newfoundland, a rather remote town of nine thousand inhabitants in northeastern Canada, in the immediate aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Following the four terrorist attacks that killed nearly three thousand people, American air space was immediately closed to all commercial flights. For 39 planes already in the air from overseas and headed for U.S. airports, that meant immediate rerouting to the large airport in Gander, which had once served as a refueling station for transatlantic flights when they couldn't make the ocean crossing on "one tank of gas."

Within hours, some seven thousand passengers on those 39 planes found themselves in Gander, uncertain where they were, what was in store for them, or what the future held. Anyone who lived through that period will remember the widespread fear that more attacks were coming, that it was only a question of time, methodology, and place.

The play takes a look at what happened to the thousands of unexpected arrivals who nearly doubled the town's population overnight. It does so in a brilliantly creative, energizing, and poignant way, improbably using song and dance to tell the story, but without ever losing sight of the very human actions that inspired it.

The play offers a powerful counter-narrative to the maniacal hatred that led 19 terrorists – and their sponsors – to kill blindly and voraciously. Ultimately, "Come Away Home" reveals the human capacity for down-to-earth, unadorned kindness and compassion. And at a time when both traits seem to be in relatively short supply in our world, it is heartwarming and uplifting. Best of all, it's true, not an embellished or sweetened account.

The people of Gander and the surrounding towns responded to the thousands of passengers coming from many different countries, cultures, languages, and faith (and culinary!) traditions with an immediate outpouring of concern, empathy, and help. Quickly, they organized themselves to find food and shelter for the newcomers. Homes were opened, meals were cooked, the hockey rink became a food refrigeration space, medical care was provided, babies were cared for, and even the animals in the planes' cargo holds were looked after.

It was an amazing outpouring of honest-to-goodness humanity. Some of the passengers couldn't believe what their own eyes were telling them. Instead, they were suspicious of underlying motives, fearful of theft, and worried about having to pay the bill. But it didn't take long to figure out that this was the real deal, the Golden Rule being played out as it was meant to be.

Leaving the theater, I was on an emotional high, taking away three thoughts in particular.

First, too many Americans take our neighbor, Canada, for granted. We never should.

We're blessed beyond words to have this country, now celebrating 150 years since the Confederation that brought the nation together, on our northern border. What the people of Gander did expressed the highest ideals of a nation that always ranks near the very top on the Human Development Index and on rankings of best places in the world in which to live.

Second, we are rarely given the chance to prepare in advance our reaction to out-of-the-ordinary situations. The moment arrives, it lingers briefly, and then it passes. But when that moment arrived in Gander, the residents responded in a magnificent way. They could have tried to ignore the newcomers, or isolate them, or deny them shared space and food, but they did the exact opposite. This is, if you will, true religion. Our ultimate ethical test is not what we say, but what we do, not how we pray with our words, but how we act with our deeds.

And third, when it was all over and the seven thousand people boarded planes and headed for their final destinations, the people of Gander resumed their lives just as they had before September 11.

They didn't seek to commercialize or exploit their random acts of kindness, but, thankfully, they did allow a play to be shown on Broadway about them 16 years later – and for permitting their magnificent story to be shared, I am grateful.

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