

## Longevity Hierarchy

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I strolled into the Galiano library at 10:30 on a busy Wednesday morning in mid-July to print a piece I'd written for the Literary Festival. Three women were shelving books, and I could tell by their demeanor that they were not to be interrupted. I had, after all, snuck in before the library was open. I slid my thumb drive into one of the public laptops, navigated to "Fish Bones" and hit print.

Quickly grabbing my 8 pages as they tumbled from the printer, I headed for the door, waving to whoever might be paying attention. No one was. *Wow*, I thought to myself, *I've become wallpaper! That's fantastic!* I shook my head and laughed. I'd only been there a few minutes, but no one questioned why. They knew I was a desk volunteer and the person who posts social media for the library. So even at an age when us oldsters talk about being invisible, I saw this as a good sign. The lack of acknowledgement indicated I fit into established patterns. I may also have interrupted a private conversation, and if that was the case, I apologize. Human perceptions can be horribly flawed.

In the past, that lack of interaction would have created grave discomfort. Based on a less-evolved sense of self-importance, it would have stung. Ironically, had I been warmly greeted as a known entity, the lack of anonymity would have also plagued me. My particular brand of self-consciousness about fitting in is a natural by-product of an intensely transient life. Aislinn Hunter spoke to me when she wrote in *The Certainties*: "Over the years when other people have said the word 'home,' she felt like they were speaking a foreign language."

Which brings us to that first question most everyone is asked on Galiano: "So, how long have you lived here?" It is so common that we scoot right past it without much thought. I catch myself employing it when meeting someone new. After spending my adult life hearing, "So, what do you do?" and wondering how I stacked up, I now tell people I've lived here six years and wonder the same. I'd utilized my trifling amount of what I call "longevity hierarchy" that day at the library, and I see others use it as well. Sometimes it is subtle and sometimes not.

In many cases, that sense of longevity hierarchy has been bestowed on those who were simply born here. Sometimes it points to being part of a multi-generational "island family." How much personal effort went into that? The struggle to gain advanced education and climb a career path are reflected in asking a person what they do for a living and indicate not only a person's ambitions, but typically, their background, and where they fit in society. It can also reveal their "mettle," signaling a good temperament, endurance, and strong character. But hey, I get it. I understand the pride that is often displayed in the longevity hierarchy here. Because while it might not have taken all that much individual initiative to start life here, it can certainly take some mettle to stay.

There is a moat around this castle and not everyone traverses the drawbridge with ease. The rigors of rural life with limited services aren't for everyone. When one friend left the island after many years, she exclaimed at the wonders of driving to the drug store and back in 20 minutes. To cross the moat, most of us need the ferry. I've been fortunate enough to not use it often, but it can be tiresome for those who want or need life to run on schedule.

Those are only a couple of reasons that moving here can be difficult. The rewards are many for those who acclimatize, but there are hurdles peculiar to small-town rural life. And those hurdles can be more social

than geographical. More about that sense of fitting in, than about power outages or deer in your garden. And while I'm writing from the perspective of an older resident, I have great admiration for those still trying to earn a living or raise children here.

The term "longevity hierarchy" first popped out of my mouth during a conversation with an island friend. She mentioned the word "community" but with a bit of a sneer. That caught me by surprise, because that word points to what I find so enchanting about living here. She's been here longer than my paltry six years, but has had some brushes with controversy that I have avoided. To me, the sense of community feels like a warm embrace. Something to be revered and treasured. That lack of anonymity, after decades of living in big cities, finally feels natural. It may even feel like home, though that word still feels foreign. Perhaps it's the contrast that informs the most; my big city past being so different than my life now. A strong delineation. I imagine my friend's pre-island life was more similar to living here, and so the distinction is less obvious. And yet, she knew exactly what I meant when I said, "I love it here, but I could live to be a very old lady on Galiano, and still be a newcomer."

Moving here in my mid-sixties meant that my personal history happened somewhere else. The places that shaped me the most are not here. Neither are the people. My closest friends live in three different countries, none of them closer than one of those ferry rides away. A single woman on a remote island? One who did not arrive with built-in support or intimate connections? I understand the hesitancy a few people had in thinking I might stay.

Longevity hierarchy creates natural inclusivity for the simple fact that feeling connected to a place and a people takes time. Deep friendships are built on years—often decades—of trust, gained from shared experience. A few days after that first conversation, a close off-island friend joined me for one of our excellent Pilates classes. We were walking back to the car when she asked me about a group of women in a tight huddle, yoga mats and water bottles dangling from their hands.

I said, "I'm sure they are all very cool people, but I'd be surprised if I ever become chummy with any of them." My friend was startled, so I continued. "They built those friendships thirty years ago. Their kids grew up together. We're friendly, and that is enough. I don't expect more." There is no faking deep levels of confidence and influence, so breaking into existing networks requires sustained, long-term effort. And it may not happen at all. Best not to have expectations, but that's a pretty good rule for most things in life.

Once you've built your cadre of close friends, it can also seem a bit revisionist to go through the same motions again. And we only have so many years left to do it. Time plays a big part, but so does having bandwidth in our busy lives for adding more people.

British evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar's research suggests that social networks are structured in concentric circles with increasing size and decreasing intimacy. Five people make up the innermost circle of closest friends and family, representing our deepest emotional support system. Eleven to fifteen people are often referred to as sympathizers or close friends, with whom we have frequent, high-quality contact. Dunbar theorizes that these numbers are cognitively limited by the size of the human neocortex, requiring significant time and emotional investment to maintain each relationship. Many people on Galiano have families that take up the first layer and most of the second. That doesn't leave a lot of room for newbies.

Longevity hierarchy also points to the fact that Galiano self-structures as a fairly traditional society. A sense of collectivism based on shared resources, whether of human muscle or valued skills, brings traditional communities together. When you must rely on others, you learn who fits that bill pretty quickly. Think of Amish men moving an entire barn, shoulder to shoulder, in an antlike form of cooperative transport. That type of kinship plays a big role, and not just by the work that is shared, but by the play, which we have boatloads of here. I often tell friends that WW3 could start and folks on Galiano would be too busy entertaining themselves to take notice.

Statistically, the Southern Gulf Islands region is characterized by deep-rooted residency, another aspect of traditional societies. A defining metric is that over 56% of residents have lived at the same address for ten years or more, and a whopping 78% of the population has resided at their current address for at least five years. This stability weaves a strong social fabric. I'm friendly with a woman older than me who lives in a house built by her grandparents. I'm happy with my life, but can't help but wonder, in a world governed by constant change, what that level of stability might contribute to a person's emotional and financial security.

As an island newcomer, I felt like a person of suspicion until the end of year three. It was only then that a curtain to a friendlier milieu was raised. I thought this might be a personal experience, but I don't think it is. My gambit was to get involved in volunteer work, opportunities which this island is overrun with. Besides the library, I volunteer at the Galiano Club Food Programs and have a seat on the Board of the Garden Club. It also took my garden three years to settle in here. It's my first one, and I've written about the joys of that for other publications.

For the Food Program, I'm a consistent fixture at Soup and Bread, help occasionally at Games Night, and show up for a monthly shift at the Food Bank. These programs are run seamlessly, and I applaud the organization that goes into them. [A July 26th article in the Times Colonist](#) highlights this terrific organization. Most of my effort puts me in or close to the kitchen at the South Hall. A hub of intense activity, with many long-term relationships in evidence, there was a strong "prove yourself" vibe in that kitchen when I started. Ignored in a not-so-friendly way, the hierarchy felt at times like a thick fog you had to find your way through. A couple of people were like castle guards, poised on the drawbridge with halberds for crowd control. At times I found their prickly demeanors a bit harsh, but managed to laugh it off. I'd had a tough career and come up against much worse. I would prove my mettle.

To anyone who might flinch at this, let me tell you one thing: it was worth it. All those hours created a lovely experience. There are days there now when a dozen volunteers move together like a fine ballet. We know our strengths, we have our places, we step in when needed, we don't hover if we can help it. (Okay, I hover, but I do try to keep that in check.) And when the doors open and 85-100 audience members rush in for lunch, we know we've put on a good show. We could all get on stage and take a bow, but we're too busy attending to our guests.

I've met a couple of women here who showed up once or twice, but couldn't infiltrate. One said she'd been asked to wash dishes. I told her, "We have all been in that dish pit at one time or another. It's truly a bonding experience." If she had any idea of the esteemed personages who have stood at that sink, she might feel humbled.

In between those volunteer shifts, I spend luxurious time alone. What could be a greater gift to a writer than that? Naturally introspective, the balance between being "out there" and "in here" feels perfect. If you aren't happy with your own company, it's tricky living anywhere. In a rural situation, that is compounded.

Another factor in creating a social life for the newly arrived has to do with this being a retirement destination. Based on the 2021 Census, Galiano has a median age of 57.6 years compared to British Columbia's median of 42.3 years. The island's population of 1,396 residents (also from the 2021 Census) is characterized by a high proportion of seniors, with 39.1% aged 65 and over. Retired Canadians love to escape winter, making them available here for half the year. When summer comes, many more of them are busy playing innkeeper, with a steady influx of guests. Should I even bother mentioning time with grandchildren? Just try to stack up against them. It can't be done.

And as we age, it is true that nouns go first. Meeting new people includes not only remembering their name, but their partner's, their children, their dog, and in many cases, those treasured grandchildren. The creativity employed in choosing names for this new generation is admittedly a help in remembering what to call them, but it still takes three tries.

All of this creates a unique social dynamic for newcomers. The island's laid-back culture greets strangers with kindness and openness. Outwardly friendly and welcoming, deep social integration and a sense of being accepted often take significantly longer than in more transient urban areas. A polite welcome, but a slow burn for genuine belonging. Integrating with the slow pace, contributing to the arts and culture (there is so much talent here!), and being a good environmental steward go a long way.

Before you know it, you'll rack up some of that longevity hierarchy of your own. Just try to be kind and respectful when wielding it. I try to make life here a bit sweeter for everyone I encounter as a way to show my gratitude. I hope to live here a long time, while being careful with those expectations I warned about earlier. English writer Samuel Johnson's words ring true, even for someone still making sense of that word, "To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition."

Please note that I have not included First Nations longevity here. They are in a league of their own when it comes to time on this land, and whatever I say would be inadequate. We honor those who came before and thank them for their blessings.