

## TAKE THE A TRAIN

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Some eight or nine years ago, Eric and I had an argument (no it was not the first or the last, but the only one related to my topic today). At some point, you see, I had shared with him my theory for why New York is such an enlightened, liberal city. It was, I insisted, because of the subway.

Now, not being from New York, and having grown up in a place with no subway but a number of liberal-minded people, Eric was quick both to point out how utterly ridiculous my theory was. Besides, he told me, there were plenty of unenlightened and not-so-liberal people in New York. They probably don't take the subway every day, I replied.

The aforementioned argument ensued.

Now, I will admit that perhaps I was being a little too simplistic about New York, seeing the city in which I was born and raised through rose-colored glasses. Living in another state, in another region, had reminded me of the many things I love about New York City, though, and made me forget the things I'm not so fond of.

And one of the things I love is the subway.

There are many reasons why I love the New York City subway system. For starters, mass transit in general is a fondness of mine—for its environmental benefits, its low cost, and its speed and efficiency. I am quick to explore new cities via their public transportation systems, and because I grew up on the New York City subway—far more complex a system than you will find elsewhere in this country—I never get lost.

I've taken the Metro in Washington, the Marta in Atlanta, the Max in Portland and the Trax in Salt Lake City. I've explored San Francisco and Berkeley via MUNI and BART, hopped on the monorail in Saint Louis, and, of course taken the El in Chicago and the T in Boston any number of times. And there is just no need to get into buses, at least not today.

But the reasons I love New York City's subway go deeper. They're theological reasons.

I believe that there's something about the New York City subway that forces those who take it to acknowledge the humanity of people who are different from them. Boundaries of privilege and caste that apply aboveground are made ever-so-slightly more permeable when you're packed together like sardines in a tin can hurtling through a subterranean tunnel.

And because the subway in New York City not only goes just about everywhere (or connects to a bus that can get you there), because the streets of New York are narrow and congested and hazardous to drive on, and because the fare is the same no matter where you get on or off, the subway is, in New York, a fact of life for people of pretty much every background.

Every race, every nationality, every class and occupation, every gender and gender expression, people of all sexual orientations. They all take the subway. Together.

Now, it's true that most people, when faced with a crowded subway car, do their best to keep to themselves. We leave open every other seat until it becomes too crowded to make that tenable. We occupy our eyes and ears with distractions—anything to avoid making eye contact with those around us.

But I believe that despite our tendencies to try to make that trip in our own little bubble—our crisply and expertly folded newspapers, our iPods, our best “I can't hear you” vacant stares—the experience of riding the subway forces us, at some point, to see one another.

We see the mother hurrying home from work, small child in tow fresh from day care, anxious to have some peace and quiet but knowing that none awaits her at her destination.

We see the gaggle of high school students, a little too loud, a little too self-assured, flirting and fighting and growing up together.

We see the businessman with his starched white collar and striped tie, scanning the market reports to prepare himself for the day.

We see the construction worker, dusty and grimy from a hard day of manual labor.

We see the two old friends, now retired together, making their way to an exhibit at the Met.

We see the drag queen and the dry cleaner, the homeless veteran and the buttoned-up preppie, the noisy child and the recent immigrant.

On the subway, we are forced to see one another, and to recognize each others' humanity.

All of us are on that subway car together.

And that is the simple lesson I want us to learn from the New York City subway. We're all on the subway together.

This past year, I had the privilege of teaching a brand-new curriculum to both a small group and also the Midweek Minister's Class lunch gathering. Written by my colleague the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway, “Spirit of Life” parallels the hymn we sang as a meditation today. Each session includes a story on which participants are asked to reflect.

In the session entitled “Giving Life the Shape of Justice,” the story begins with something heard from Robert Thurman, Professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia. Told and re-told through several people, here's the way it ended up in the curriculum:

*Imagine you are on the subway. In your subway car are all sorts of people, the kinds of people who would normally ride on the subway in a big city. A mix of working class, wealthy, and middle class people. People speaking many different languages, people of many skin colors and cultures, people of many ages. Some people who are clean and polished looking, others who*

*are smelly and unkempt. Some who are quiet, some who talk too loud, some who talk to themselves. Some who annoy you terribly and some who you find attractive. All sorts of people are on this subway car, heading to their destination.*

*All of a sudden, Martians come and zap the subway car. And soon you figure out that as a result of this zap, everyone on the subway car is going to be together—forever.*

*How does that change the way you act? Think about it.*

*If they're freaking out, you're going to try to calm them.*

*If they're hungry, you're going to try to feed them.*

*If they're arguing, you're going to try to figure out what's going on and seek resolution.*

*If there's injustice, your going to try to make it just.*

*You do it because suddenly, these assorted people on the subway are your people. The ones you will dwell with forever. You care about them in a whole different way. What we do and what we care about matters. When we allow ourselves to see the bigger picture, we can see that we are all already on that subway car—Earth.*

*We are absolutely interconnected and interdependent.*

*How we are, what we do, they ripple out.*

*What ever happens "over there," happens "over here," too.*

*Because these people are your people. My people. Our people.*

(Barbara Hamilton-Holway, "Spirit of Life,"

<http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/spiritlife/workshop6/workshopplan/handouts/43529.shtml>)

In the classes I taught—both of them—participants expressed dismay that the teacher needed to have Martians come and zap the train into space (or wherever) in order for people to have this realization. We were dismayed because, well, it's so very unlikely to happen. We were dismayed because we got what Dr. Thurman was trying to say, but were at a loss for how to make it reality.

I have one idea, taken from the ancient practices of the people of Southern Asia. Allow me to share it with you, to commend it to you for future use, whether formally or informally.

*Namaste* is a word taken from the ancient Sanskrit language that may be familiar to some of you here. It is commonly used as a greeting and farewell, along with a bow with hands in front of the chest, in India and Nepal, by those who study yoga, and by those who practice the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh religions. It has become so familiar in many cultures that the bow itself is the only thing necessary—the word is implied.

*Namaste* comes from the words *nama*, to bow, *ma*, I, and *ste*, you, and literally means, "I bow to you."

(<http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/822>)

The spiritual meaning of *namaste* goes deeper.

There are many different translations and interpretations of what is meant by *namaste*, but for our purposes, I like Deepak Chopra's interpretation: "I honor the Spirit in you which is also in me."

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namaste>)

In saying this word and making the gesture of bowing, we are acknowledging one another on a meaningful, intimate, spiritual level. We acknowledge that the other is made of the same stuff we are.

Whether that stuff is physical or metaphysical, a spark of the divine or the electricity of atoms, the Spirit of Life or the breath of the lungs, the stuff that is in you is also the stuff that is in me.

And so, I invite you to engage in this practice with one another. When I sound the chime, I invite you, if you feel comfortable doing so, to turn to your neighbors, one at a time, to place your hands in front of the center of your chest, palms together, and to give a slight bow to one another, saying quietly and simply, "*namaste*."

And as you do so, I would like to you think, with every fiber of your being, "I honor the Spirit in you which is also in me." I recognize that you and I are both human, that we are made of the same stuff, that we are here, together, on this Earth. I acknowledge you, and in doing so, I honor you.

(sounds chime)

Whether we're on the A train, in line at the supermarket, frustrated with our children, at the bedside of a sick relative, or alone, looking in the mirror, trying to summon up some self-worth, the practice of *namaste* calls us to acknowledge the humanity in others, to acknowledge the humanity in ourselves.

We are called to remember that the other person—no matter what are feelings are for them in that moment—is a person. A person with the same stuff inside that we have.

And, most of all, we are called to remember that we are all in this together. We are called to treat ourselves and each other with compassion, with respect, with dignity.

And sometimes, we need to remind ourselves to do that.

*Namaste.*