

GRAND CENTRAL WINTER

STORIES FROM THE STREET

LEE STRINGER

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Beneath the "right" and "wrong" of issues and the "pro" and "con" of our positions, however, lies the vital matter of our relationship to the events behind them, and to the people involved in them. So I have always tried to get to the *why*, as it were, beneath the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* that drives our actions... Anger, resentment, envy, fear, frustration and so forth.

Manhattan has only two seasons: shiver and swelter.

Digging ourselves out from a crippling crust of snow, as we did many times this winter, we long for the bright, balmy days of summer, conveniently forgetting about the *b* word. It's not the heat, as they say, it's the humidity. But heat, humidity, whatever, it always seems worse in the city than anywhere else.

That's because it is. There is something called an inversion layer hovering just above our skyscrapers. It has to do with all the hot air being propelled out the back end of millions of city air conditioners, acting together with other atmospheric phenomena and forming a "ceiling" which traps in all the sweaty weather. The worse it gets, the more air conditioners pop on or notch up, creating the infamous "vicious cycle."

This sets off other v-cycles. When it's hot, New Yorkers get hot under the collar. What pisses us off the most is being robbed of our urban cool. Step out of doors on any Manhattan dog day and no matter who or what you are, everything crisp and businesslike about you soon becomes damp, limp, and clingy.

The ultimate place for this meltdown is underground in the sub-

ways, where everything is cranked up yet another notch. Down there it's shiver and swelter all in one place. Because, to be precise, the air conditioners that refrigerate the trains don't actually cool the air. What they do is remove heat—by way of the low evaporation threshold of freon gas—and all that hot air ends up in the tunnels and platforms, turning it all into an underground sauna.

What's truly amazing is that despite the chronic and recurring failures of every other aspect of the transit system, the air-conditioning seems to be the one thing that's just about always working. Station repairs can go wanting for years, service may be killed on whole lines at a time, carloads of commuters can be trapped in tunnels for twenty minutes, but they never, ever kill the chill.

You can't convince me this is a fluke. The Transit Authority is fully aware of what a dangerous proposition it is to cram hundreds of edgy New Yorkers cheek to cheek into a narrow car while the mercury is peaking. Cut off the ice streaming from the vents and you might have such carnage that the Long Island Railroad disaster would seem like a bad-hair day by comparison. It just goes to show you what the MTA is capable of when their very lives depend on it.

Summer is for T-shirts.

And underground they take on particular significance.

Veteran straphangers seldom speak to strangers on the subway. We let our clothes do the talking. We do this sort of thing year-round, and not only on the subway—most often to convey something about

status. You might have twenty, thirty grand in the bank, or an eight-hundred-dollar wad riding on your hip, but only you will know it. If you have real money, however, the cut of your suit and your Hermès attaché will discreetly inform all who come near that they are approaching rarefied air.

But most of us are left to jockey for position with status symbols that are woefully entry-level. We can't afford the name-designer power suit, but the designer name itself—emblazoned on a T-shirt—tucks neatly into the declining blue-collar budget.

Once summer has descended and almost everyone, from proletariat to modern-day robber baron, strips down to a T in their more casual moments, the crush of sloganed torsos makes for a riotous, voiceless cacophony on the subway. Scrawled across one man's chest is *DONT ASK ME 4 SHIT* in bold block letters. One glimpse into his eyes and you know he means it.

Brrr.

You're elbowing your way into a packed subway car and suddenly you're staring down the barrel of a .45 printed on the back of some misanthrope's sleeveless muscle shirt, accompanied by a cautionary *BACK OFF!* caption, and you do precisely that. *The air-conditioning is definitely working*, you think to yourself. *There's a serious chill in this car.*

And the miracle of the daily cold war of traveling mass transit is how, when we walk away from it unscathed, we are reinforced some-

how. It makes us more of everything we are than if we had kept ourselves isolated altogether from the great underground stewpot of summer in the subway.

There is a sleek silver train with a big gray-and-white *S* for an eye that hustles passengers east and west across Forty-second Street.

In the middle of Brooklyn you have a different kind of shuttle, one that transports a far different crowd than its sister midtown line.

It's the Prospect Park–Franklin Avenue shuttle. And though you may have never heard of it, it has been ferrying straphangers back and forth since the 1800s, long before the more familiar version started making its crosstown runs in the thirties. It may be hard for us to imagine a subway system without these intermediate-route services, but the fact is that neither was part of the system's original plan. Both were pressed into service, ad hoc, as additional routes came on line. And in 1981 the Brooklyn shuttle was shuttered altogether for a time. It turns out that for nearly a century, "not a single dime" had been allocated to upgrading it, according to an MTA spokesperson, leaving it in such disrepair that officials deemed it unsafe. When \$60 billion became available for rebuilding the subways, a lot of passengers talked about renovating the Franklin line. But the MTA talked about keeping it permanently closed.

They argued that with only ten thousand daily riders—the lowest in the system—it was a money loser (a cardinal sin in the eight-

ies). But ten thousand people are ten thousand people. And for these ten thousand, typically lower-income passengers, the Franklin shuttle is more essential to them than is the other shuttle to their counterparts in midtown, who enjoy other options. For that reason advocates for the Franklin shuttle riders argued that money should be allocated for capital repairs to structural deterioration and replacement of the antiquated wooden platforms.

Neither side prevailed completely.

The MTA reluctantly shored up the shuttle's crumbling retaining walls and reopened the line. But they stopped short of a full renovation. Talk continues, however—about rebuilding and about shutting down. So, besides hustling people back and forth between the A/C and D/Q lines, the Franklin shuttle also provides a bit of grist for the political mill. Councilwoman Mary Pinkett did a little public grandstanding on its behalf but fell short on follow-through. Mayors Dinkins and Giuliani have together cut a total of \$750 million from the city's share of subway-reconstruction funds, which doesn't help. But the bottom line seems to be that, coming from the borough of Brooklyn, the voices of ten thousand subway riders are cries in the wilderness.

My guess is that the Franklin shuttle will go on traversing squeaky track beds to wobbly stations until it is no longer physically viable, and then it will be unceremoniously—and permanently—padlocked.

The image of street people has always been associated with an unnatural devotion to some substance. In the old, skid-row-bum, rail-riding-hobo incarnation, the liquor bottle was an emblem as indispensable as Mulligan stew. But booze-ravaged as these souls were, they made handy naysayers against a complacent, material world. So we tended to afford them a measure of folk-icon deference and allow them a wee bit of turf.

But when street people's substance of choice changed, so did their once-benign image. It's hard to say to what extent the Reagan era and subsequent policies would have altered the homeless picture had there not been a concurrent explosion of crack-cocaine use—though there's little doubt the one had an impact on the other. And there is no denying that, this time around, crack has been a major factor in the cascade of people landing penniless on the streets.

In the mid eighties, when homelessness first emerged as an urgent national crisis, we were prepared to address it in the traditional way, with compassion and human interest, what I call the "sandwiches and sympathy" approach. However, once the crack connection became common knowledge—implying that homeless people might be complicit in their own destitution—a lot of people began to feel they had squandered their compassion on less-than-worthy subjects, and public sentiment soon began to turn.

Today you hear people branded "homeless huggers" with the same contempt once reserved for "nigger lovers." While "legitimate" home-

less people might yet be considered "unfortunates" by a lingering few, druggies, particularly those hoveling on city streets, are deemed morally bankrupt "lowlifes" beneath human consideration.

In the ten years I spent on the street, also abusing drugs, I've met just about every type of junkie out there. And I'll tell you this: Though some of them, myself included, might be perfectly capable of immoral acts while using—as would you and nearly anyone—I cannot say of any of them that they were immoral people.

Sure, a druggie may mug you for a fix. A boozer might even kill you in a drunken rage. But this has little to do with their morality. It's a clinically proven fact that psychoactive chemicals, such as alcohol and drugs, actually shut down the brain's moral center. Be it a priest or a child molester, the effect is always the same, to put you beyond the rule of conscience, and it gets progressively worse over time.

Of course no one puts a gun to anyone's head and forces him to indulge in the stuff. And a common assumption is that drinking and drugging are activities moral people eschew by nature and immoral people readily take to. Boozers and druggies routinely concur on this point.

But it is simply not so. The truth of the matter is that so long as an addict believes this is the case, there is little hope for turnaround. Addicts—and I include alcoholics in the term—are absolutists. It's all-or-nothing with them. Indeed, their principal flaw is an inability to

cope with a world that refuses to comply with the picture of order or perfection toward which we basically all aspire. For an addict, it's Eden or nothing.

The pathology of an addict is that once he has had a taste of "heaven"—chemically induced or otherwise—he relentlessly mines the source of it for more, determined to maintain the sensation all the time. It is the thing that hooks him because it is a metaphysical impossibility, so that each diminishing return only inspires him to try again all the harder.

Nonaddictive personalities contain the requisite pragmatism to negotiate the inconsistencies of an imperfect world. They possess a capacity for middling convictions, to put it another way. Even in matters of morality. When a nonaddictive personality is harmed—whether physically, psychically, materially, or morally—he seeks closure by settling the matter one way or the other. The addictive personality will demand nothing less than absolute moral justice as he understands it. Since absolutes are ever elusive in this world, these demands pile up unsatisfied.

You may have seen bag ladies or winos walking down the street roaring drunk, screaming at buildings, accusing everyone in sight of all manner of evil and intrigue. These modern-day Don Quixotes represent one striking example of people who may have endured, as have we all, some injustice, real or imagined, but who, unlike most of us, find that injustice unconscionable to accept. Alcohol may have come

into play as the salve for their anguish, but since alcohol doesn't do anything to help them deal with the matter, when its effects wear off, the anguish looms even larger, driving them back to drink. From there on, the cycle progresses beyond the bounds of their control.

This is the pattern for addictive personalities whether they are using or not. When they do use—and there are any number of things besides drugs and alcohol that addicts use—the deficit they incur is not moral in nature but spiritual.

This is amply borne out by the fact that twelve-step programs, which are the only treatment universally recognized as effective against all forms of addiction, stress spirituality as the essential element.

The object of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), NA (Narcotics Anonymous), CA (Cocaine Anonymous), and other step programs is for members to help each other establish a relationship with a higher power (as each is able understand that). Not in order that they achieve moral perfection but so that they might achieve spiritual growth. This is the unique thing an all-or-nothing personality can latch onto that, so long as it is earnestly pursued, offers no prospect of self-destruction. It simply takes all the relentless machinery that creates the addictive personality and sets it on "reverse."

To one degree or another we all want essentially the same things out of life: love, respect, happiness, a sense of fairness and justice, a sense of well-being, a sense of purpose and value, and the feeling of being connected to something substantial, lasting, and secure. And

as certain as it is that none of us will get what we perceive to be our rightful share of these things all the time, it is just as certain that we all balk at accepting this fact.

It's called the human condition.

The characteristic of absolute, unwavering devotion to something—common in those whom we might in error consider “lowlifes”—may well be, when directed toward spiritual growth, the essential element we readily assume drunks and druggies are by nature missing.

No, drugs and booze are not the route to paradise. But man's natural inclination toward the spiritual has been taken over by the ubiquitous belief that it is more important to concern himself with material and physical things. And in the increasing busyness and clutter of modern life, it often takes an extreme blow—not unlike the ravages bought on by active addiction—to snap us out of it.

I do not know anyone who considers himself a hardworking, moral, churchgoing, nonaddicted American who would go to the lengths to which recovering addicts and alcoholics go for the sake of spiritual growth.

The urgency is just not there.

So, frightful and miserable as active addiction may be, presuming to scorn the prospects of those caught in its grip is our folly. For the addict is being propelled toward a point of decision that the rest of us find time and reason to avoid indefinitely.

As they say in the rooms of AA, religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell, spirituality is for those who have already been there.

In its May 11th issue, under the unfortunate title “Street News,” the *Village Voice* published a report on what would seem to be a rash of homeless people run amok. At the center of the story: Jeffrey Rose, a homeless, mentally ill man who, one night on the Upper East Side, snatched a two-year-old from his mother and began to stab him with a pen. It was a nightmare crime, tailor-made to arouse the kind of bold-faced headlines and hysterical community reaction in evidence throughout the piece.

Early on, the writer suggests that homelessness is at the root of the problem, when he cites it as being at “the top of the list” of modern urban complaints. Yet even the mother of the attacked child disputes this. “There was no purse-snatching or panhandling involved,” she was quoted as saying. “He was not interested in me or my money. He wanted to stab my child.” *Clearly, then, the imperatives of living on the streets are not the issue.* But to read the *Voice*, you would think they are. The word *homeless* appears no less than fourteen times in the brief article.

The assault was unarguably a crime. But there is only one reference to crime. And at the bottom of the crime, unarguably, lies one man's mental illness. Yet mental illness is mentioned half as often as—and is always attached to—the word *homeless*.

It's ironic that if Jeffrey Rose were a typical homeless person, both

child and mother might have been spared their horror. And doubtless the mother would have preferred the relatively benign attentions of a panhandler—or even a purse-snatching for that matter—to a deadly attack on her child.

The *Voice's* carelessness is harmful. For how is she, or her community, to pursue an effective solution when at the outset the problem is misdiagnosed? Already the imprudent skew on the Jeffrey Rose story has incited citizens to anger. And already they are proposing actions that, if they are carried out, are likely to guarantee that the same thing will happen again.

"If they can't guarantee our safety," the East Seventy-seventh Street Block Association proposes, shut down the neighborhood outreach center where Rose occasionally went for referrals. Putting aside the fact that no one can guarantee anyone's safety in this or any other city, what exactly would shutting the facility down accomplish? Mr. Rose's illness has driven him to such attacks and will continue to do so with or without a referral center on the Upper East Side. But sever even this minimal thread to treatment and he and guys like him will be even more prone to psychotic outbursts. *The referral center is not the issue either.*

The convoluted logic inherent in making it the issue is that if there were no center around in the first place, Jeffrey Rose might not have been in that neighborhood and therefore might not have attacked that particular child. Here we get to the crux of what block associa-

tions are essentially about. They are about turf. *Close the center*, their logic runs, *and at least those people won't be in our neighborhood*. But however reasonable may be the desire to feel safe around one's home, the turf approach to the problem is, in essence, self-defeating.

The pain, anger, and frustration of this woman whose child was so senselessly abused is real and human and inevitable. But when organizations act in anger, or out of fear and frustration, they become little more than mobs, the group equivalent of Jeffrey Rose. When Seventy-seventh Street Block Association co-chair Marge Sweeny proclaims to "serve notice," that "Jeffrey Rose types will not be tolerated," her voice becomes kin to the one in Rose's misfiring brain that told him a swaddling infant was a threat to be reckoned with.

We all wish nothing more for that mother, her stricken child, and all New Yorkers for that matter, than that their health and security go untroubled. But that can't happen unless the same applies for the health and security of people like Jeffrey Rose as well. This is not "liberal crap," as quoted in the *Voice*. It is practical reality. Jeffrey Rose's lack of health and security is precisely what led to the attack in the first place. *This is the issue*. And if we ignore it, we ignore his victims—past present and future—as well.

Whatever it takes to relieve the plight of street people, it should not be pursued at the expense of other people's well-being. This we understand. But neither should the prerogatives of turf be so blindly and supremely pursued. And during times of crisis, journalists and com-

munity leaders have in particular a special responsibility to unwaveringly defer to reason. In our anguish over a city that seems on the verge of crumbling around us, reason tells us that closing ranks only represents that much more fragmentation. Reason cautions that we fail in our impulse to protect our own unless we seek to protect us all.

His name is Marvin. He's twelve years old. He lives in a Brooklyn project. He's "strapped" with a nine-millimeter. And he's out "to get a body on it." Chances are the first excuse he gets, he'll blow someone away with the thing. Not for the sake of larceny necessarily. Not even for the sake of crime. But to buy himself some leverage. He knows, as do most of the kids in the hood his age, that if he establishes a rep for being tough, the bad guys will cut him some slack.

So he is primed to kill.

For the sake of perception.

If this scares you, take heart. There's a new governor in Albany and he has made it clear that he intends to be the new sheriff in town as well. In fact, George Pataki's election relied, in great part, on his ability to establish a rep for being tough.

"As governor of New York State," said he, "I will bring back the death penalty."

Unless Pataki is a complete idiot—and even among politicians *complete* idiots are rare—he knows that the death penalty has a negligible impact on the rate of crime. This has been exhaustively demon-