

Street Food for Thought

Written by Jack Sparacino

Wednesday, 17 April 2019 06:06 - Last Updated Wednesday, 17 April 2019 06:21



wanna hang a map of the world in my house. Then I'm gonna put pins into all the locations that I've traveled to. But first, I'm gonna have to travel to the top two corners of the map, so it won't fall down. — Mitch Hedberg (1968-2005)

Comedian Mitchell Lee Hedberg died awfully young. Not me so far, though we share some overlaps. Both somewhat shy for guys who spoke frequently in front of audiences. Both sometimes laughed at their own jokes. Liking to amble about and see what's out there, taking notes along the way. Although in his case, Hedberg joked that he wouldn't write something down if his pen was too far away. He quipped that it probably wasn't funny anyway. I'm too frugal for that.

Getting my sea legs in Boston after years in the Lowcountry strains my brain, back, legs and feet but the rewards keep building. I usually take Dixie and Lady with me on neighborhood walks. We feed the birds along the way, people watch, then get coffee at Pete's Café across the street. They keep treats in a tin on the Capital One counter, probably to lure dogs who need investment advice. 'No bones about it, Miss Dixie, you're going to love this new credit card and lemme tell you about some financial opportunities.' (Smiles warmly and pats her head.) Almost all the staff at Pete's know us. I take a large decaf, the girls take snacks and compliments. The coffee wheels of life grind on.

About that people watching. It's easier in a city because at my geriatric speed we still pass hundreds, maybe thousands of folks every week. A little old lady crosses Berkeley Street in a long dark coat that reaches her ankles, barely clearing her green sneakers. Her backpack a giant paperweight. She hunches over at 45 degrees, about the temperature. The bitter wind howls enough to pull a chain link fence along with its concrete footing a solid yard across the sidewalk. Litter and dirt shrapnel by, sparing precisely no one.

We pass many stores. One says "Come In and Be Inspired." Wow, this must be the place. I can

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always use some inspiration. Must be something terrific, right? Fine art, jewelry, self-help courses, cooking classes, telescopes, maybe a fortune teller? Nope and uh-uh. They sell sliding glass doors.

Another store says "Dogs Welcome on Leash." We come in and wander through aisles of dog toys, food, treats, more toys, vitamins, leashes, collars, training pads. Dogs are even more welcome if they have cash, smile at the sales people and don't mark their territory every ten feet.

On the street, some people look like they need help. A disheveled fellow in army fatigues with overcooked spaghetti hair walks down the sidewalk. Talks to himself. He smells like weed. An older man in a wheelchair yells at no one in particular. He glowers at me as I spot a cane behind him. I hand it to him. He keeps babbling something and then proceeds on his way. You're welcome, sir. A black woman across the street in a brown and white striped coat swears a blistering streak at the man beside her. He tries to get ahead of her, she shrieks all the more. Calling Dr. Phil.

Near my building, the wind blasts. We spot a young woman, attractive, with six foot long legs and killer strapped shoes. She has 4-5 ladies with her, apparently doing a photo shoot. I try to get a picture but the doggies yank at their leashes and the wind tries to drag us away. The boss lady tells me I can't pictures. 'Who, me? A nice old journalist?' Boss lady, unimpressed, tells me to keep moving. I ask, "Who said I can't take pictures?" "The world," she huffs. Not wanting to create an international incident, we move on. A fighter, this gal, she complains to our concierge that "an older man tried to take our picture." I keep looking over my shoulder for the model police.

Hedberg said, *"I find that ducks' opinion of me is very much influenced by whether or not I have bread."*

The girls and I often bring birdseed to feed the sparrows, chickadees, blue jays and their pals. We've got favorite places to drop a handful of seeds. We watch the little guys peck away at the millet. Sometimes a dozen of them gang up on lunch. As they clean their plates, the jays dive bomb in to hammer at the sunflower seeds and corn kernels. Bread works too, but nothing like birdseed. I think about running for mayor. As long as only the birds vote, I'm a shoe-in. Carlolyn Wonderland already wrote my theme song, "Victory of Flying" based on watching a bird struggle for takeoff. If elected, I'll outlaw turkey day, KFC, Chick-fil-A, and Popeyes. Bird dogs get a temporary pass.

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On we go up the sidewalk. Goodwill ambassador Dixie, guard dog Lady (all seven pounds of her) and me. Another elderly woman pushes a baby stroller filled with her property, her bird body mashed down over the push bar. She looks cold and lonely. Ten bucks couldn't hurt anything, right? People constantly smile at us or ask what kind of dogs those are. "Can I pet them?" "Are they friendly?" "They are so cute!" It's lucky the girls aren't spoiled.

The Duncan Doughnuts is always busy. A man in fatigues sits in a window seat jabbering at no one. No ear buds. He looks miserable. My pocket of birdseed is not the solution and I don't want to frustrate my little buddies, uh, base. We can't stand there and stare at him so we move on. There's litter on the sidewalk so I pick up some and toss it out. Maybe Jabber will notice the difference when he leaves the store and smile at the sky.

Motorized wheelchairs buzz up the sidewalk. One guy rolls up the street. You don't need a special license to operate these things in public. I cringe at the thought of one of these men (no ladies so far) smacking a Millennial, face buried in her phone.

We pass a playground on Washington Street, three blocks from home. Three teens are playing pickup basketball. About thirteen or fourteen. Black boy, white boy, white girl. She hustles rebounds, taking shot after shot against their zone defense. Makes a few nice baskets, steals the ball, goes in for a layup. We watch blissfully, absorb the thud thud thud and banter. The aluminum bleacher seats are hard, the sun smiles from a child's drawing, the breeze crisp. My butt gets sore so we march ahead. There's a dog park nearby. We watch Tom and Petey play fetch with a small red rubber toy. Petey is on a mission. Tom kicks the toy 80 feet, Petey bolts after it without bumping into anyone, jumps a stone façade, returns tail flying with the toy in his mouth. Smiles. Offers it up to Tom. They are on autopilot. They are one.

We head for the top of the map.