

WHILE RIDING THE METRO

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Paris

March 16, 2014

Mark D. Morrison-Reed

I look for the red *Art Nouveau* sign that reads the *Métropolitain, Métro de Paris*, or just plain *Métro*. Opened in 1900 during the *Exposition Universelle*, it is 214 kilometers long, and has 303 stations, 62 of those have transfers to another line. There are 16 lines, numbered 1 to 14 plus two minor lines. After Moscow it is the second-busiest metro in Europe. It is said there haunted places under Paris. I know. I've seen the Phantom of the Opera, and back in 1987 I toured the Catacombs but neither was as intimidating as the crowds at Chatelet Les Halles.

Stairs lead me underground. We funnel into the maze of corridors, then more stairs and more people whisking pass one another, then pour onto the platforms of the Metro which moves masses of humanity from place to place. I stand there facing a wall of strangers when all I want is get to Dorcy's.

The train stops. I take the 5 two stops to *Jaurès* and exit. Shuffling along I follow the crowd toward the 2 in the direction of *Nation*. The train pulls up. It is 6 pm. People are going home. The car is packed but we press in anyway. Crushed against them I'm closer to these people than I've been to anyone that day. My head is cocked. I loom above a short woman. Peering over her head I can read the magazine of the man standing next to me, but my French is abysmal. As the train slows I bump the man in front of me. *Pardon*. I can't help myself: there is nothing to hold on to. The train stops, and I have to back out, and then in again as the surge behind me moves me deeper into the car. It is growing warm. I scan their faces. Most stare straight ahead, blank and inscrutable behind their Metro masks. Some read a Kindle, others real books, some play games on their smart phones, others wear earphones. Most are unreachable. They look through me. Their bodies are there their minds and souls are elsewhere.

"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

I muse: Who is this man standing next to me? This woman? What worlds do they inhabit? All seem off in their own mysterious realms. Suppose I raise my hands to get their attention? Suppose I address them? "Hello, Hello!" "*Bonsoir. Comment allez-vous*" "Listen to me! *S'il vous plait*. You know this is not the way it has to be. We could recognize one another! We could smile! We could celebrate being alive!" -- Celebrate? Smile? They'll think I'm crazy if I intrude on their private, inner space. If I was an accordion playing gypsy they would ignore me but my invitation would horrify them and mark me as mad as Jean Paul Marat.

I am growing hot. I take a deep breath, and *do* nothing but look and wonder.

Think of it: each of these individuals is unique, a person with an entire life outside of this car - family and friends, joys and burdens. Is that what I see etched on their faces? The joyous memories are hidden, and being packed together in the *Métro* isn't one of them.

"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

I scan their faces. There is a self-centered *enfant* within me that is affronted by the fact that they don't see me. I can't imagine why they won't wave, or say hello, or smile, or say ootchy kootchy koo.

Perhaps I am going crazy. I move deeper into the car.

At such moments if I don't shut out my surroundings, a sense of isolation sometimes emerges; when I have flown across the Atlantic and not exchanged a word with the person seated next to me; when I see a family traveling together and I wish I was home already; when I squeeze my way into the Tube or CTA or TTC or MTA or *Métro* and peer down the aisle at the wooden faces. I know that everyone there has a life; a life that has known tragedy and glory, and that human condition connects us. But then, it dawns on me that probably no one else there sees we are bound together nor feels connected. All these people so near and yet so far away, so much like me and yet?

Novelist Thomas Wolfe asks: "Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?" Alone! Isolated! Adrift and unconnected? Do you know those feelings? You must! When do they come? In a crowd? When by yourself? And when-do-you-feel-connected? When do you feel you belong?

The *Métro* rushes from station to station, and the others come from wherever they come from, and go to wherever they go. I find myself standing near the end of the compartment where the door leads into the car behind. The window is open. Stale damp air is rushing in. What a relief. I see a not--quite--yet teenage girl her head is in front of the window. Her hair is blowing wildly about. She is happy. Her eyes shine when she looks up. The man next to me has been looking at her, too. Our eyes meet. We smiled at one another.

What I stumbled upon that evening as I rode the Metro was a yearning to be connected. Standing there scanning faces and seeking a sign that my intuition that we, all of us, already are connected was correct. Something in me, seeing that we weren't the strangers we pretend to be, despaired at being in the presence of other people, and powerless to find a way of establishing an affirming, meaningful interaction. Was I crazy to want this? Or is it crazier to interact with others as if they are objects, little more than obstacles to be stepped around but otherwise actively ignored. I felt isolated because I had become a *thing*, an *it*, an *object* - an object to be moved about from place to place with so many other objects; each in his or her own world with no recognition that ours is a shared world, no hint even that we shared the discomfort of the commute. We were all objects to be glanced at with less interest than we gave the billboards on the station wall. There was no sense of communion, or zest, or wonder, or curiosity that could be discerned from our faces. Perhaps I was crazy to let this bother me, but to me it seemed like heresy: a rejection of the reality of our common humanity; a denial that there is an interdependent web of all existence in which we are inextricably, if imperceptibly, entwined. It seemed blasphemous that we couldn't at least let our eyes meet. That day as I spiritually suffocated in the Metro, it was the girl with her hair blowing, and that man's smile that saved me from despair and gave me hope.

"No man [or woman] is an island, entire of itself," must be John Donne's most quoted line. I was never alone but until the moment our eyes met did I feel I wasn't alone. The aloneness we feel is a dream, a fiction but not reality itself. Of course, we experience barriers between ourselves and others. We feel that no one quite understands or fathoms what life has been like for us; and that is true for how could anyone know but from within. Of course, we experience estrangement from life because we live uneasily with the knowledge that we live and someday will die. This knowledge that we are and one day will not be, or at least to be as we are now, come to us unbidden. Because we are human beings we share a perspective on life, that as far as we know, no other being has. We stand back and watch life as a panorama - life before we were and life after we are gone. Standing before this we experience awe; awe that we exist at all. We have distance and a sense of our limits. The price we pay is knowing the feeling separation, of estrangement sometimes even despair. These feelings, notwithstanding, we are

never alone, never apart from the great flux of life and being, never divorced from an ancestry that set the scene for our arrival, never free from our shared human condition: each of us lives, feels, acts and will die, but the notion that each of us stands alone is an illusion.

Yes, each and every one of us standing in the *Métro* was—one of a kind. But we also only exist as persons who participate in the environment in which we live. We live in one world, yet it is a world that each of us experiences uniquely as an individual. To be at all means to engage that world and life. No individual exists without participating, and no person can come into being as person apart from community, that is being-in-relationship.

The illusion of separation is rooted in our earliest experience of consciousness. A child's sense of self-consciousness comes in relationship to its mother when the child discovers that mother is a separate and independent being the child cannot control, and indeed, is someone who inevitably resists the infant's boundless will. In the emotional cauldron of the child's frustration the self begins to emerge as it encounters limits. How do we begin to know ourselves except in such interactions? My fury and fear when my mother took me to nursery school and then, from my perspective, abandoned me. How do we become socialized save through pleasing and displeasing those about us? How do we know what we are capable of except that we participate in the give and take of life? How do we know we are lovable save in that we are loved? How do we become an individuated, centered person? In interaction with others discovering themselves, and in those relationships experiencing resistance and communion?

The ordinary, simple, everyday experience of riding the Metro can stand as a reminder of what we seek. What does rapid transit do? It is a network that enables us to connect; the irony being that in the process we do not connect to our fellow travelers who are seeking the same thing we are.

I was riding on the Metro toward Dorcy's. The 5 took me to Gare d' Austerlitz and the 10 to Cambronne. It could have been Chicago where the Hyde Park Express takes me from here I teach at Meadville Lombard Theological School at Balbo and Michigan, to my father's at 52nd and University. It could have been London. There riding in the Tube, like riding the Metro, it seems as if we are hermetically sealed selves stacked upright in a gray rectangular tin can on wheels heading toward our real lives. There, too, I have scanned the weary, wary faces. I'm on the Piccadilly Line headed north. I exit at Turnpike Lane and walk to my friend's house on Avenue Road. When Donna, my wife, came with me to London and then Paris two years ago we stayed with Jack and Jill. I've known Jack since he was 15 and I 13. We lived together in Switzerland and later in Austria; in between for a while in Wisconsin he was just an hour drive away. We've been through the deaths of both his parents and my mother. We went to school and worked together, hiked and skied and drank too much together, had misunderstandings and arguments. Forty-seven years ago when I told him I was thinking about entering the ministry he laughed until he cried. I raged at him for not being more forthright with me when he was in turmoil after having discovered, at the age of forty, that he was adopted. Two year ago when I left he held me tighter than he ever had before. Who would I be without him, or he without me? We are what we are because the companionship and resistance of the other. Therein we found communion.

Religious community is never simply a matter of believe; it has always been about community, as well. To enter into community it to embrace our interdependence rather than deny it - as is the norm in the Metro. Gathering together is an antidote to the emptiness, isolation and drabness that sometimes haunts our lives. When I am with you I feel our connection - to you and to Neil Smith and to our religious movement. Connection is implicit in everything we do. The connections we forge with one another are sacred and life giving. In bread broken together, in laughter shared, in hymns sung, in stories told, in

anger expressed, in friends mourned we break through our isolation. Our worlds touch, merge, and blend. There we find communion. We find that unity which binds us forever together. What this religious community offers is not an instant or perfect communion with others but rather the possibility of participation, and therein of becoming and belonging. This is the essence of living. What more precious could be offered?

Go in the spirit of love,
Never knowing when
Or where you may find the divine.
Be conscious that its spark is within each of us,
And its beauty surrounds us
Even in the *Métro*