**Noticing Ordinary Times**

**(Column 101, August 217, 2023)**

By Lucia A. Silecchia

For over thirty years, I have been a *very* frequent traveler on the train between New York City and Washington DC.

In the beginning, it was an adventure. Yet, as the decades passed, it became a mundane journey during which I stopped noticing the scenery pass by and distracted myself with reading, videos and, best of all, napping the hours away. The northeast corridor, after all, has no grand mountain vistas, scenic lakes or dramatic cliffs or canyons to demand my attention. It has been, in my mind, the very definition of ordinary.

Recently, however, as the journey began, I found myself sitting behind a family of tourists taking this journey for the first time. No reading or napping for them! They were fascinated by what they were seeing and spent much of the trip marveling at scenes that I had stopped noticing.

Maybe they were right to marvel and to see, truly, what was passing them by. Maybe they were right to see that in what seems ordinary lies much that is extraordinary.

When the train pulls out of New York and leaves the tunnel, I always take a glimpse back to Manhattan. There is the “alabaster city” that gleams and the skyscrapers that exceed the imaginations of those who lived merely a century ago. There is also still the pang I feel after twenty-two years when I see the southern tip of the Manhattan skyline without the twin towers.

There are the often mocked swamps of New Jersey that, in the light of a setting sun, have a wild, underappreciated beauty all their own.

A little further south a proud bold sign lights up a bridge in New Jersey’s capital proclaiming “Trenton Makes the World Takes.” In one iteration or another, that sign has celebrated industrial productivity for over a century of change.

There is the Schuylkill River that flows past Philadelphia. Its waters are filled with canoes and kayaks in the light of day and flanked by the lighted mansions of Boathouse Row during dark nights.

There is the bridge that crosses over the mighty Susquehanna River and the peaceful shoreline of Havre de Grace.

There are the steeples of churches in towns all the way south, proclaiming the faith of generations past and present and standing at the hearts of their neighborhoods. Passing through Baltimore, the train speeds through the hometown of America’s first Catholic cathedral in the nation’s Premier See.

There are deer that fill the woods that line the railroad tracks south of Baltimore and the first glimpse of the Capitol dome as the train pulls into Washington.

There are also sights along the way that bring thoughts of a different kind, too. There are massive hospitals and medical centers in all the large cities along the way, where the dramas of life and death, hope and fear are lived every hour of every day by my sisters and brothers within their walls.

There are buildings whose narrow windows and high fences reveal that they are correctional facilities, also filled with life, death, hope and fear of a different kind.

There are boarded up, crumbling rowhouses on the outskirts of every city along the route, houses where dreams and despair both live. There are also beautiful large homes with perfectly manicured lawns. Dreams and despair both live in those “perfect” houses too.

There are abandoned, silent factories whose brick facades and large windows once enclosed booming, bustling plants where generations of workers sweated and toiled – and supported their families and built lives and communities with what they earned.

It is, truly, 205 miles of human drama, natural beauty and manmade monuments to centuries of change.

I wonder, sometimes, if life can too often be lived like a routine train trip. So much of it is lived in ordinary routines – routines so filled with the things we think we know that we stop noticing them. Routines can also be filled with the people we think we know, so we stop noticing them, too.

Sometimes it takes the eyes of a newcomer – a fellow traveler with a fresh perspective – to draw our attention, once again, to what surrounds us. Sometimes it takes the will to look around and start noticing again.

But, it is worth noticing and bringing it all to prayer and letting it touch our hearts. It is worth seeing the people God has placed in our path. It is worth seeing the beauty of nature that God has created. It is worth seeing the reflections of the best and worst of the human spirit that are both built and abandoned. It is worth noticing all that fills our ordinary times.

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