

October 10, 2011

A few weeks ago my computer was struck by lightning, (no kidding), and I lost a lot of data, including my email lists. I've tried to reconstruct my newsletter list based on old ones I've sent out. My apologies if you have received this letter against your wishes. If you reply to this message with the word "remove" in the subject or body I'll remove you name from this list.

This may also be a good time to mention that old issues of Sunnyside Life and North Country News are available on the Internet at: <http://feltemp.com/publications.htm> .

After two months in NYC, Michele and I are starting to get to know our way around. We've been making it a point of getting out and exploring the area whenever we have an opportunity. Since moving up here we've gone swimming in the ocean at Coney Island and Rockaway Beach, taken a ferry past the Statue of Liberty to Staten Island, seen the ruins of the 1964 World's Fair at Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, spent an afternoon in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, my old home town, and seen "Avenue Q" on off-Broadway. We've also bought a collection of 25 walking tours around the city, and we're working our way through them. My favorite so far has been the tour of Greenwich Village and the lower west side. It included a walk along the High Line, an elevated walkway build on the remains of an old elevated train track that was abandoned back in the 1970s.

Since I take the subway to work every day, I buy month-long unlimited transit passes. For a little over a hundred dollars a month (ouch!) I can go anywhere in New York City whenever I want. So an afternoon excursion to Lower Manhattan or Coney Island or Central Park is free for me. (Michele still has to pay about \$4.50 for round trip transportation). Since our apartment is so small—by our standards, reasonably roomy by most New Yorkers'—we tend to get out a lot on weekends, especially now when the fall weather is so beautiful.

So far the only disappointing tour has been of the United Nations complex; it was pretty depressing. The architecture is grand and adventurous, and it's obvious how much hope and optimism went into the construction. But the entire place is in serious disrepair—walls cracked, paint peeling and flaking, areas roped off or barricaded, junk piled in front of art work or displays, leaking plumbing—disgraceful. The ideals that that inspired the UN's original construction are no longer taken seriously; it's no longer a funding priority. It's an embarrassment, and it doesn't speak well of us that we would let such an eyesore be surrounded by such extreme wealth, which is displayed ostentatiously in the insurance offices and government buildings that surround it.

But the tour was not a complete loss. As we walked toward the UN we discovered a parade celebrating Nigeria's Independence Day. It was pretty low-tech as far as parades go, but the energy level was really high, and the many of the costumes were gaudy and flamboyant. One of the highlights was at the end: a group of children, probably between 7 and 13 years old, dancing around on 4-foot high stilts. Quite a talented group.

This is one of the great things about New York City: there is always something unexpected going on, and just walking around Manhattan you are almost guaranteed to stumble upon something extraordinary, whether it's a peak into the lobby of an previously undiscovered architectural masterpiece like the Woolworth Building, or finding a small park filled with Occupy Wall Street protesters (great hats, guys!), or an amazing performance by street acrobats.

Of course, moving to NYC hasn't all been wonderful, and I'm still trying to get used to some of the changes. Surprisingly, one of the hardest for me has been renting an apartment after owning my own home for so long. It's tough on me not being able to make any changes or additions. I miss putting. Plus, we don't own any of the appliances and have no say in selecting them. For example: our refrigerator is brand new, certainly less than a year old. But it's a bottom-of-the-line model, not very efficient, and with the freezer at the top rather than at the bottom. I would never have chosen that model refrigerator, but now I'm stuck with it. The same for the gas stove: we can't upgrade to something we like. And there are other issues: none of the doors close completely. If this were my house I'd pull all the doors off and plane them down; it would probably take me an afternoon to do, and then it would no longer be an issue. But I don't have a plane anymore, and even if I did I wouldn't feel right using it on someone else's doors without their permission.

The other issue is the sheer volume of people: it hardens you. It's strange that the more people there are around you the more difficult it is to make friends. I don't like how, as I walk to work, I view slower-walking people as an inconvenience, as if, by walking slowly and forcing me to adjust my pace, they are doing something fundamentally wrong or ignorant. I've learned to not make eye contact with beggars, to ignore the ugliness of some of the industrial and commercial areas that border Sunnyside, to pretend that litter doesn't bother me, and to look past people standing 18 inches away from me on a crowded subway. In short, I've learned to embrace selective awareness of my environment, which seems vaguely inhuman, or at least non-human, to me.

As long as I experience New York City through the eyes of a tourist, I really like it, and I'm excited to be here. But when I think about it being my home—and the type of steely attitude I need to thrive here—I become trepidacious; I'm not sure I want to go this route.

This dilemma increases when I think about my work. I'm really happy teaching at the Dalton School. I like my colleagues, and I love my kids. Imagine taking the satisfaction you get from teaching children and combining that with the respect and support you get teaching at a college. That's what Dalton is like: it's the best of both worlds. Nobody accuses you of being lazy, overpaid or incompetent. Parents respect and appreciate you, and there are no bureaucrats or politicians trying to acquire more power by staring over your shoulder and complaining that everything you do is wrong. Of course, it's still an elementary teacher's schedule—I spent most of yesterday (Sunday) grading lab reports—but I expected that when I took the job.

So I have an ideal job in a less-than-ideal environment. I can imagine working at Dalton for the next 10 or 15 years, until I retire, but I can't imagine living in New York City that long. Of course, I can look for a teaching position in a rural area, but working at Dalton is seriously spoiling me; I'm not sure I can go back to teaching in a public school after working here: the political environment currently undermining our public schools is just too discouraging.

Pop-cultural wisdom says that you should follow your dreams, that you shouldn't let your fears compromise your goals. But how many people can honestly say that they have done that? It seems to me that life is not about blindly, stubbornly following some dream; it's about negotiating the interplay between aspirations and reality, elbowing your way through small obstacles and around big ones, and coming up with a comfortable compromise between wishes and obligations. Even working at Dalton is a compromise: the classes are age-grouped, and there's a formalized curriculum—two terrible ideas that just about every school in this country has embraced uncritically, (terrible because the student's interests and abilities are secondary to the convenience of administrators and the fears of parents). Does that make me metaphysically impure for working there? Or am I a coward for living in NYC just so I can do work that I love? I don't know. But I do know that I'm not likely to find a "dream" school in a "dream" environment—certainly not in this country—and I don't intend to feel unfulfilled or spiritually dishonest because of this. You make the best hand you can with the cards you're dealt. So I try to appreciate all that I like about my current situation, make whatever changes I can to improve it, few or small as they may be, and try to overlook what is unpleasant and beyond my control.

Does this work? Usually.

Do I get down sometimes? Of course.

Do I bounce back eventually? So far, yes.

I think we all need a few failures and disappointments to appreciate our successes. So all in all, I think moving here has been a success. We'll see what the rest of the year brings.

I hope your fall is a gorgeous where you are as our fall is here.

Best wishes,  
Glenn