

020815 Kayaking up the Hudson

As with Philadelphia, my regard for New York City grew during my recent visit. So much of my opinion of the two cities had been based on only limited experiences, or in the case of New York, a little too much of an experience. During my freshman year at Muhlenberg, I would take the train to and from Boston during my holidays. One trip, I took the train to Penn Station and then walked the two blocks to Port Authority to catch a bus to New Jersey. I made the walk with two big bags and was harassed quite a bit during the walk and during my wait at the bus station by people asking for money or after my bags. The area around Penn Station back then was not very nice. I had never experienced that before and the experience of that walk as an eighteen year old formed my opinion of New York. So, as I now returned, I took a deep breath of city air as I left Penn Station and set out for Karen's place in the Garment District. I was not surprised that the walk was not bad at all. First impressions are difficult to dispel, but revisiting the two cities all of these years later has had a large effect for the better.

As I walked, I realized that people walking in the opposite direction rarely made eye contact with me. I could walk down the street looking everyone in the face and if anyone did see me, they usually quickly diverted their eyes. Eyes down and move ahead seems to be the way that most people tackle New York.

I arrived at Karen's apartment on 7th Avenue and we soon set out for the Hudson side of Manhattan. There is a new park all along the west side of Manhattan, extending from 59th St down to Battery Park at the tip of the island. The park is called the Hudson River Park and was created by the city to clean up the west side riverfront in an effort to make it more environmentally clean, attractive and accessible for recreational activities. There are paved walkways for biking, roller blading, running and walking and there were lots of people taking advantage of them. There were also benches and green spaces where people were playing games or just sitting.

We walked to a spot that Karen knew of where you can kayak in the Hudson for free. The kayaks are provided by a boat club and all of the people working there are doing so as volunteers. All of the public kayaks are the sit on variety rather than the ones that you sit inside. I assume that this is so that amateur paddlers can easily get out easily if the boat were to flip since the sit in variety can be difficult to get out of. Plus the sit on variety are very stable, but at a cost of water coming through holes in the seat and soaking the paddlers. But, the wet seats were all part of the fun.

Along with a padlock and locker, we were given life vests to wear. We asked for a tandem kayak so that we could paddle together and since there were lots of boats, we did not need to wait long for a boat to be available. We had both kayaked before, so we did not need instructions. The volunteers just explained that we needed to stay in the area between two piers, but not to get too close to them so that the waves and the current did not throw us into the structures. Going out into the river beyond the piers was forbidden due to the strong current. Plus as a friend later commented, taking the kayak out amongst all the boats in the Hudson would be like sitting in a kayak in the middle of the traffic on Broadway. The volunteer pushed us off and told us to be back in twenty minutes so that the next people could use the boat.

After we returned our kayak, we slogged our way up to Battery Park. We wanted to get a picture together in front of the Statue of Liberty and so we asked a man who was walking past with his two children if he would take our picture. He took Karen's camera and after taking the first shot became a critic of her camera and her choice of 400 speed film. He took another and then moved on to my camera. He still was not happy with my 200 speed film, nor how I had adjusted the focus of my viewfinder to match the vision in my own eye. So, he took out his own camera and took several pictures of us standing in different places. He strongly advised us to get a digital camera while his kids who by now had taken streets across the walkway began to yell out model numbers. "A10!" one yelled while the father replied, "That's a good one". "B200!" yelled the other. "Even better!" the proud father beamed. He took Karen's email address so that he could send us the pictures, but they have not yet showed up. Perhaps the fact that Karen and I kept running into him made him suspect us as stalkers and he decided not to send the pictures on.

At Battery Park we saw a big circle of people banging on drums as a woman with a microphone sang. The drum circle included men, women and children who all banged together in rhythm. From the park we made our way up the streets to the viewing area for Ground Zero. The viewing area was a length of street which they have set aside for people to walk along and to peer through the chain link fence which runs around the perimeter of the site. The building behind the viewing area was draped in black mesh as work continues in an effort to rebuild the structure. In fact, all of Ground Zero is ringed with buildings marked with patches of mesh over them where they are being repaired. At one end of the site is a cross made of two I beams which was discovered in the wreckage. The cross is now set in a base and stands raised above the craters. Dominating the site are two huge craters which descend five or six stories into the earth. The walls of the craters are concrete with steel projections sticking out at an angle at regular intervals. The steel projections must serve to retain the walls. The craters are divided by an expanse of concrete, the width of a city street. A lot of the concrete divider is new as evidenced by the white color of the material. Perhaps it was built as a platform for the cranes during the recovery operation. The concrete divider was also punctuated with the steel knobs as well as a wide, metal pipe that connects the two craters.

Banks of lights still ring the site and there were still work crews and trucks in the depths of the holes. But, only a few cranes and large machinery remain since the craters have been immaculately cleaned. It is almost as if the holes were what was intended since they are perfectly shaped squares with no hint that they were once the ground floors of two buildings.

To be at the site is not to appreciate what Ground Zero signifies. The site is so huge, so unrevealing that it is almost impossible to fathom that two giant towers once protruded forth from the ground. The evidence is before you, but it is just too surreal to imagine that the site was anything more than two holes, let alone a mass of rubble. It is almost easier to accept the craters than that the twin towers once stood there or that someone was able to reduce the towers to nothing more than metal stubs protruding from a concrete basin. It is surreal to think that people were in the Statue of Liberty or crossing the Brooklyn Bridge and looked up to see planes hitting the towers. That any hint of a normal day in New York could have been happening, that time was moving at all prior or during the chain of events that resulted in the craters

before you seems impossible. It is a bit overwhelming to think of it all as you look over the site and far easier not to think at all. The holes themselves are easier to grasp and accept than the reality.

But, time did not stand still and nor should we. Karen and I walked up to the Tribeca neighborhood where we had dinner with some friends of Karen as well as our mutual friend, Elizabeth Rigby. Elizabeth is another Newman person who is now living in New York. She is currently attending Columbia where she is working towards a Ph.D. in Politics and Education. However, as if that were not enough of a challenge, she is also working full time in a research position. Elizabeth is a busy woman. She is also a very good person to speak with if you have any questions regarding school vouchers and if they are a good idea.

After dinner, Karen and I took the subway back up to the garment district and then walked the short distance from Karen's apartment to Times Square. At midnight, Times Square is as much of a bright, dancing mass of neon and video screens as you are led to believe in pictures. The square was a mass of people wandering the sidewalks to watch the ongoing surge of people and lights. The square is definitely brighter and busier than Nanjing Lu in Shanghai, but in a more "in your face" and gaudy sort of way. It is almost as if it were made so over the top just to prove that it could be made that way and in doing so, something so artificial was created that it is almost real.

I wrapped up my visit to the city the next morning by walking through Central Park with Karen as we ate bagels which we purchased from a local shop. After talking with Karen and Elizabeth about New York, I must admit that living there does sound alluring. There is just so much going on right in front of you and so much activity that after living there, I imagine that most other places would seem boring. The way that Karen and Elizabeth still speak with excitement about living in the city, despite having been there for years, is contagious.

Karen spoke about the pace of life in the city. She told me that if for example you go to a shop to get a bagel, the transactions are quick. Pow you make you order, pow money is exchanged and pow you get your order. She explains that with so many people living and working in one place, everything has to be more efficient and run smoothly which is something she enjoys. Being a resident of New York is a world in itself. And why would you want to leave it? At dinner the night before we were speaking about a museum which had moved to a temporary location while its Manhattan site was being renovated. One person suggested going to see the new location, but several people protested at once, "but its in Queens." Across the East River and just a subway ride away. It was funny and they laughed at their own reaction to the suggestion of leaving Manhattan.

I left New York City on Saturday afternoon on a train bound for Albany. The ride up the Hudson River took a few hours and was beautiful. My grandmother lives in Kingston, New York and so all of my life I have been crossing the Hudson at one time or another during our visits to see her. As a child riding in the car as we went across the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge, I would look down from the heights of the bridge and see the train tracks running along the side of the Hudson. I had always wanted to be on those train tracks and finally I was doing so. The train hugs the river for the entire

journey. We passed under the George Washington and then fifteen minutes later, the Tappan Zee Bridge upon which I have driven countless times on my way to Pennsylvania and beyond. The banks of the river were at first home to old industrial buildings, but these eventually gave way to woods or scattered towns. The western bank of the river was actually quite high and covered with green where trees have taken root in the side of the cliffs. Someday it would be fun to take the train higher up the river than Albany.

I traveled to Albany to visit Micah who has just returned from Denmark. There is a lot of confusion amongst my friends about Micah's nationality. Micah is from the US, but was in Denmark for a year as the recipient of a Fulbright. Later this summer, Micah will defend his thesis at the University of Buffalo and will receive his masters degree. He will then be heading west to Colorado where he will stay until the inevitable wanderlust takes root. So, he will not be returning to Copenhagen this fall. I will definitely miss having him there.

Visiting with Micah was a lot of fun since we have not chatted since I left Denmark in June. We even spent an afternoon up at the racetrack in Saratoga Springs where we watched the horse races. I had never been to a horse race before, so it was neat to visit such a famous track. There were only eight races that afternoon and there are about forty minutes between races. To make passing the time more exciting, there are betting windows everywhere. There are automated betting machines, tellers at windows and then tellers scattered outside of the grandstands. There is a lot more to the track than just the grandstands. There were also large areas for people to mill through local craft stores or shaded areas for people to sit. A lot of people would come with the whole family to spend the afternoon sitting in chairs or at picnic tables and socializing. Occasionally races would go and so people would watch the horses on televisions scattered throughout the facility and then go back to socializing once the race was over. This goes on all summer until the last race in September.

I left Burnt Hills (the city where Micah lives) on Monday and took the train back to Boston. I really enjoy traveling by trains. If only they were not so expensive here in the US! What a whirlwind visit the few days were, but a lot of fun.

Iceland is next. Pictures to follow.

Jeff

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