

The subway incident

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

A couple of weeks ago I rode the subway to the Atlanta airport. It is not a proper subway, since much of the track lies above ground. But now that I live in the country the subway is my favorite mode of transport when I go to town--in the first place, because I have lost the nerve required to drive a car in the city, and in the second place, because I like to look at people.

More than that, I like to be with them--to sit shoulder to shoulder with a woman in a printed silk sari, even if we never acknowledge each other's presence; to listen to the pounding rhythms that escape the headset of the black teenager in front of me; to watch the baby in the pink pantsuit hanging over her mother's shoulder, making eyes at the hungover man whom everyone else pretends not to see.

There is a shortage of such people in the rural county where I live, which increases my appetite for them. Riding the subway, I belong to a larger body for a while. I see more, hear more, feel more, sense more. To be honest, this is at least partly because of the fear that heightens my alertness.

I read the news, after all. Every now and then someone gets robbed on the subway. Fights break out and people get shot. Plus, anyone who wants to may sit down beside me, no matter how drunk, how fragrant, how talkative or disturbed. For all of these reasons, at least one metro Atlanta county has declined to be part of the subway system (the same county that has publicly advised homosexuals to live elsewhere). While I deplore those decisions, I own up to the fears. Without windows to roll up or doors to lock, my own defense on the subway is to remain exquisitely aware of the people around me.

A couple of weeks ago, as I waited on the platform for the train to arrive, I saw a man with a boy's haircut walking toward me on the arm of a pale woman in a sundress. He moved like a loosely strung puppet; all of his actions were exaggerated. So was the volume of his voice. When he walked past me, I could see that he wore hearing aids in both of his ears. As he exclaimed loudly about something or another, the pale woman gazed straight ahead with half a smile on her

lips. She was clearly used to the routine and phased most of it out.

The train arrived. We boarded through different doors and it was not until we were under way that I realized the man and I had ended up in the same car. "All aboard!" he shouted, not just once but every time the train stopped and started again. After the third stop, he let go of the woman and began moving down the aisle toward my end of the car. Along the way, he dove between people's legs and rummaged around on the floor under their feet, talking the whole time. His speech was loud but indistinct. It was not until he was halfway down the aisle that I heard what he was saying.

"Picking up trash!" he shouted. "I'm cleaning this place up!" The remarkable thing was how kind everyone was to him. Like a friendly conductor, he greeted people as he went, and the majority responded to him. "You're doing a great job," one woman said. The man sitting next to me held up an empty pretzel bag. "You missed this," he said, waving it in the air.

Whatever I expected, it was not that. I thought people would ignore him, or tell him to shut up. I thought I would witness something cruel. I read the news, as I said. I know that the world is a dangerous place, in which an irate motorist may point a gun in my face, or some drug-crazed teenager may run into me and take off with my purse. None of these things has ever happened to me, but I read about them. What this recent subway incident did, however, was to make me question the world I have constructed in my mind on the basis of the news.

Several years ago I met a clergyman from Belfast. "Oh," I said to him, "what a hard place to live."

"Not as hard as you would think," he said. "Every time a bomb goes off the television cameras are there. It's really all they ever show, but there are long stretches between bombs where most of the living is done."

We hear a lot about the effect of violence-as-entertainment on children, but what about the effect of violence-as-news on adults? Our perception of the world is shaped by the reports we read and hear. Our behavior, in turn, is shaped by our perception. If enough of us walk around expecting violence to erupt at any moment, don't we increase the energy available for that to occur?

Terrible things really do happen. Plenty of people, many of them living with fewer privileges than I do, have suffered cruelties beyond my imagination. There remain a number of us who have never experienced anything worse than losing our wallets to a pickpocket, and yet we carry such a wad of fear inside of us that we see potential assailants everywhere. We expect the worst of other people, from whom we withhold the best of ourselves.

I wonder what would happen if we responded to the real people in the real places where we live instead of to the stories we have heard about what has happened to other people somewhere else. I wonder what would happen if we looked into each other's faces expecting to see allies instead of threats. I suppose it would be a dangerous way to live. Then again, what do I know? I am the one who was afraid of the strange man lurching toward me on the subway, when all he wanted was my pretzel bag.