

I recently had the renewed pleasure of riding a subway.

The smell of oil, machinery, and steel overwhelm the senses. The grime of the station sticks to your feet, making each subsequent step echo off of chipped mosaic walls. The rumble of moving cars deadens any sound that threatens to escape your throat, and the rush of wind that follows them leaves you shivering in their wake. You step onto the car and sit down, the plastic orange seat digging into your back. Your foot anxiously bounces as you peer at the strangers whose paths you have crossed for a moment. You wonder what their stories are and if you will ever see them again, but most stare at their phones or listen to music. The train begins to move and you lurch sideways from the momentum; you quickly recover. No one beside you has even flinched. The silence is deafening. As you hurtle approximately 50 miles per hour in the darkness you cannot help but ponder all of the tasks you need to accomplish, people you need to contact, and places you need to be. These thoughts quickly accumulate and occupy your mind until they are too much to process. You catch a glimpse of yourself in the reflection of a window. Worry lines frame your face, and the bags under your eyes seem more prominent than they were a few minutes ago.

In solitude, it is easy to forget to breathe. It is easy to become lost within your own thoughts, anxiously thinking about the future. Sometimes the brain is your deadliest foe. Solitude fosters identity and independence, but the cerebrum is powerful. Too powerful. Where does the line between a constructive inner monologue and doubt lie? At what point does worry hinder your ability to function? My experience on the subway was a microcosm of life on earth in 2020. Humankind was on a train heading towards some unknown destination, in the dark, and there was no returning to the platform. The fear inspired by current events created mass hysteria, and people became hyper-focused on personal matters. They threw themselves into their tasks, trying to remain productive, and those who could not suffered alone. Anxiety levels rose and trust fell, while passage of time seemed to slow. Perhaps we are still on the subway. However, there is one important thing to remember: every train has a terminus.

Trains may be rerouted and delayed, but once you step onto the car, you will get off. There is hope. Focus on things you can control. Reach out to someone else and ask them how they are. Create a positive environment that makes the journey bearable. Sometimes the smallest comments can create the largest smiles. You do not need to be alone. In an age where stopping the spread is the focus of communities across the world, kindness should not be included. 2020 was a frightening year for many strong individuals, but it taught us to be there for one another. Even the strongest walls need support.

The subway is not pleasant, and the atmosphere certainly does not add any glamour. Rather, it is the people you meet on the journey that can inspire you to take each passing day and make the most of it. The earth contains 7.6 billion different souls; just one can make a difference. A conversation can be the beginning of a lifelong friendship. A piece of advice can change the course of someone's life. You simply need to take the necessary action to escape the isolation caused by such an environment. If everyone could escape the constraints of fear and take these opportunities to unify, then it is possible riding the subway could truly be a pleasurable experience.

