

Much Ado About the City: An Empire State of Mind

In the memoir, Travels with Charley, John Steinbeck narrates, “A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us...I feel better now, having said this, although only those who have experienced it will understand it.” Needless to say, I am one of those quarantined few that understand this notion.

Conversely, I never really had the iron-fisted will to travel and explore as intensely as Steinbeck had until I fully visited the epitome of travel- New York City. Upon noting the sheer beauty of my journey, all my former superstitions and petty technicalities of the trip fell by the wayside. To claim that I had a ‘good’ trip is a gargantuan understatement. After commuting to the city frequently, I am grateful to have had the acquisition of numerous lessons that stake hold relevance in my life. Unfortunately, I can only attempt to verbalize the collective battalion of moments and emotions I was bombarded with during my visits to the Upper East Side of New York City.

In June, my older sister accomplished the feat of relocating out of my house into an apartment in the revered zoo of New York City. Therefore, my family began to venture out of our humble, meek dwelling into the characteristic hustle and bustle of the Big Apple on several occasions. During one particular two-day, one-night trip in August with my cousin, Vidhya, to my older sister’s apartment, we tried to avoid all the stereotypical sightseeing people normally associates with city-goers. Instead, we traipsed through Central Park and the 6 Mile Loop. The 6 Mile Loop encircles a pond whose crystalline waters reflect the symmetrical buildings bordering one of the shores, a narcissistic depiction of the natural beauty of the city and a plagiarized scene that could have been excised from a fairy tale. This section of Central Park boasted many miniature bridges, arches, and leafy greenery. Additionally, we trudged up countless avenues and streets and retraced our steps when my sister realized we were heading in the wrong direction in the merciless, blistering heat of the day and the taunting, harmonic song of the cicadas in the night. For sustainment on these plateaued hikes, we dined at dimly-lit, crowded restaurants, splurged on tapioca malts, browned long, succulent tenders of meat

on spits in a Korean barbeque, and ordered delectable ‘Wafels & Dinges’ secreting speculoos toppings at food trucks. We also watched the hilariously comedic, yet unconventional Broadway play, Kinky Boots in a theater in Times Square. We went to one extremity of Manhattan in South Street Seaport, where we had a panoramic view of Brooklyn and the connecting bridges and watched ship vessels unloading their inventory at docks. I have also previously been to the India Day Parade hosted by New York City, where I experienced a fine cultural rendering of my roots. I attuned to the bright, blaring beats that was ringing in my eardrums and recording alarmingly high seismographs, sensed the spicy aromatic ingredients of Indian cuisine sneakily wafting into every space it could accommodate, gazed at the floats, and clapped along to the echoing steps of classical and folk dance. During another trip of mine, my family and I made like cargo and ferried to Ellis Island, where we sat inches away from the looming Statue of Liberty. At nighttime, we experienced a facsimiled ‘rapture’, zooming up the Empire State Building at an incredible velocity. As we rocketed to progressively lower air pressure, I realized we were climbing layers of the city into its stratosphere that would offer a new kind of resolution of the city. At the summit, we stood on a wraparound balcony that gave us a breathtaking field of view of the city. We fed change to the binoculars, aiming to zoom in to perhaps one pixel of this seemingly manufactured, computerized image. The blinking constellation of lights was laid in a large blanket all around us. It warmed us in the frosty, bitter air with the comfort of the city revealing its vulnerability yet emitting so much charged energy and life in this giant, unyielding orb. Moreover, this wide scope of journeys tapped me into some uncharted insight for not only New York City, but also the world.

Despite the fact that these outings may seem arbitrarily ordinary, especially for a born-and-raised New Yorker, they had a profound impact on me, more so on my cultural and social cues. Emerging from a Long Island suburb of subdivisions and tidy, manicured colonials into an urbanized amorphous, pulsating mass of people is not unlike passing through the twilight zone. Upon the premise of gallivanting and striking poses for photo opportunities on the streets of New York City, I now know by seeing such a rainbow of

people, I inadvertently revealed that the city is a wonder in itself. During my trips, I had a sensory overload, but when recovering afterward from the surprisingly pleasing charms of the city, I was hit with the volume of the experiences I just witnessed. I was enlightened that the city is a socioeconomic hub, a compilation of boroughs, buildings, and idealistic believers. It has hidden gems, like the aforementioned 6 Mile Loop, that may have pollution and skyscrapers superimposed on them and conceal them from the public eye. But, if you look hard enough, you never know what you may find. I am glad I have stood in the presence of the literally coppery but green Statue of Liberty, who has the difficult task of both holding high the standard of America's hospitality and living up to the expectations of everyone who emigrates to America. New York, being a coastal state and naturally a sprawling port for foreign immigrants, is a heterogeneous place that is eternally proliferating and evolving as its citizens practically multiply tenfold yearly. This is demonstrated by many cultural galas that parade the streets of the city.

New York City shouldn't be categorized or discriminated as a ghetto, slum, or even a residence for high-rise, lofty penthouses with overly indulged people. It contains the trappings of a palette of personalities and imaginations. Due to the influx of foreigners, travelers, and ethnicities, it is a supernova of eclecticism and intelligence. People from all walks of life find their niche in this acropolis of fame. Language barriers are demolished, street smarts are fostered, and new frontiers are pioneered. The polarizing soot and plethora of lights are overwhelming, but is merely a physicality that makes the city, the city. From my premature perspective, getting rejected or dismissed in the city without a backwards glance is stigmatizing because no matter how many nooks, crannies, or crevices you peruse, there is a place you rightfully belong in. The city has a very high population density, so relationships are conceived at every twist and turn you encounter. The city is alive, virtually thrumming with vibrancy. The city is complex with subterranean transportation and stray, rampant mice scampering to and fro. I couldn't agree more with the ideologies, notions, and idioms thousands have remarked about the city. New Yorkers definitely have the utmost state of mind, with optimism, exuberance, and aspiration clouting and permeating the city's aura. The sights and sounds emanating

from the city almost asphyxiate me and I essentially feel a magnetic tug in that direction. This is why people stand on the terrace of the Empire State Building- to have an unhinged view of the city and know that although a city might not seem so intellectually loud, it certainly can be. The Empire State Building exemplifies just how surreal the city can be. This local, metropolitan area is the place to be. I have realized that the most rectified place is the city because what with all the variety, there is no apparent bigotry or prejudice. It is probably the only place you can find that has the celebrities, the commoners, and the destitute mingling. As per to the song and colloquially referenced as, the city essentially is a concrete jungle, teeming with a multitude of ecosystems, habitats, and environments that congeal to the mold of the people they encompass.

New York City is adjacent to my birthplace, Brooklyn. Yet, I have never wholly noticed how apathetic I was about New York and life in general, but now I know how narrow-minded and ignorant I previously was. When I visited Ellis Island and South Street Seaport, I stood rooted to the ground in disbelief and gratitude that my family has come from living in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn to living here in Jericho. I used to be nonchalant and indifferent about the city, desisting from any excursions there due to the long drives, obnoxious honking, and hasty, impatient mentality that the city is known for having. I am proud to say that this misconception has segued into utter adoration. Sure, the city has its lurking dangers and stereotypes, but those givens shouldn't impair or blight your vision. Primarily, I am awaiting independence and that dizzying rush of euphoria when all is left is yourself and the need to accept ownership of your actions. This lurch of independence is an intimidating, subjugating concept and quite truthfully, I suppose it must be very liberating and relieving. Correspondingly, the city encourages independence and has the capacity to accommodate all hopes, aspirations, and wishes. Admittedly, I am a former homebody, perhaps a borderline recluse. Now, I have an insatiable hunger to scale the world and devour the knowledge you simply cannot thrive on by typing a key phrase in a search engine, or concocting a new, exotic recipe. I must also say that I am intoxicated with the appeal of the city, that I have an addiction that can only be staunched by my continuing to visit it. By traveling to

a place that is just a hop, skip, and a jump away, I have a changed ego and personality. Furthermore, the city harbors many pull factors and has triggered countless nerves in my mindset and outlook on life.

Alluding to Steinbeck once again, he postulated, “A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness...In this a journey is like marriage.” Nevertheless, I have unequivocally established a union with the city. What used to be a callous acquaintanceship has evolved into a genuine, foolproof bond. Hence, my experience with the city has personified itself into a philosophical, omnipresent muse and will forever be etched into my memory and conscience.