

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

'Familiar strangers' are comfort amid the chaos

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Every weekday morning in my South Shore suburb, at exactly 7:24 a.m., a gangly dark-haired man exits from a blue SUV and makes his way to the train platform. He's carrying a pink, steaming cardboard cup of Mary Lou's coffee. He paces near the platform, trying to gauge where the doors might open when the commuter train stops. Sometimes we make eye contact. I think of him as Mr. 7:24.

He races aboard to claim a seat near the stairs to the upper coach each week day. But today, he wasn't there. I didn't see him. I don't go out of my way to look for this gentleman, but since he's a regular fixture of my morning commute, his absence threw me for a loop.

Each of us has a Mr. 7:24. Sociologists call these folks "familiar strangers." We see familiar strangers on the subway, at the same time each day. We pass them in the tollbooth every morning, always in the same lane. We stand with them in elevators and we spot them in the lobby. And often, they spot us too.

In the 1998 movie, "The Truman Show," Jim Carrey's Truman forces his wife to acknowledge some of his familiar strangers. "I predict," he says to her, "that in just a moment, you will see a lady on a red bike, followed by a man with flowers, and a Volkswagen Beetle with a dented fender."

In perfect order, Truman and his wife see them all. "Don't you wanna know how I did that?" he screams. "They're on a loop!"

The familiar strangers that I see on the way to and from work are also on a loop. Their predictable cues are comforting. It reminds me of how much I enjoy routine. I enjoy the expected, especially in my work.

I hop on the train and settle into my regular seat. With Mr. 7:24 gone today, a little chunk of my daily harmony is missing. I'll have to make do with some continuity in the office today: have my morning crackers, make the first pot of coffee.

There's a lot of sad talk in the coffee room about the drudgery and monotony of our work lives. Career counselors and friends encourage us to find an occupation that gives us excitement and provides rich opportunities for spontaneity. Still, not all of us are searching for the wild life, where each moment is different. I remember that whenever Mr. 7:24 doesn't



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show up.

My wife specializes in early childhood education and is a strong advocate of structure and routine at an early age. "So much of the world is mystifying and unknown to a child," she tells me. "Knowing what to expect, like a consistent bedtime, helps kids focus on other things."

Well, that's me in a nutshell. By knowing that the tiny details in my life are worked out and in order, I can afford more energy toward dealing with the disarray that inevitably enters every day.

Spotting Mr. 7:24 along the commute is part of

my daily rhythm. He adds structure to my otherwise chaotic life. It's human nature to create patterns and to make order out of chaos.

Commutes can be chaotic. You're never 100 percent sure that you'll make the train on time, or that you won't run into a traffic nightmare. You're not in control. When my train doesn't arrive on time, but Mr. 7:24 is near me, also waiting impatiently, I look over at him and think, "Well, at least there are some things I can count on."

But Mr. 7:24 let me down this morning. If I can't depend on him, what else will go wrong today?

Work can be chaotic too. Clients surprise us with schedule changes. Photocopiers break at inopportune times. Co-workers call in sick. The uncertainty drives me batty, so I create regularity in my physical environment. My desk space is well-organized, with files in order and books arranged neatly.

German architect Mies van der Rohe said, "God is in the details." He meant that real meaning is found in the seemingly insignificant components all around us. Familiar strangers seem insignificant, at first. Yet, so does the placement of the stapler and pencil mug on my desk. Still, I find joy and comfort in those small things. They bring order to my world.

Mr. 7:24 is just one of many familiar strangers along my commute. I also find stability from the familiar strangers I share with everyone else who passes them. There's Arthur the Great, the elderly keyboard player in the South Station subway entrance. There's the Chess Master in Harvard Square. These folks, recognized by thousands of commuters and workers, are part of the glue that connects us all together daily.

Mr. 7:24 and the other familiar strangers along my commute make me feel connected to the large, bustling city where everyone is rushing from meeting to meeting and from work to home. By definition, a familiar stranger is a person that you encounter repeatedly and without any interaction. You've both agreed to ignore each other. But from a sociological standpoint, it's a real relationship.

Henry David Thoreau defined a city as a place "where millions of people can be alone together." Thoreau's phobia of crowds and strangers is well known, but I disagree with his implication. When I spot the same dozen or so strangers each day, it diminishes my anonymity and makes me feel like we're all kind of working as a team each day.

At the end of my day, I boarded the train and snuggled into my usual seat with a book. I'm hoping that tomorrow at precisely 7:18, I'll roll up to the station on my rusty English bike like I do every day and know that Mr. 7:24 will show up, sipping his coffee and waiting patiently to join me as I take on another chaotic day.

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