

Opinion Piece by Robert Kourik

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Fear & Loathing in New York City . . . Let Me Give Thanks *Excerpt from Bob's newsletter*

“Chain, chain, chain. Chain of fools”. So goes an old Motown tune. I was remembering this tune as I wandered through the streets of Brooklyn and New York City in the 1900s. I had traveled east to meet with the staff of *Garbage* magazine. I’m was contributing editor.

One of the editors picked me up at the airport, and we swung by her house in the Prospect Park area of Brooklyn to drop off my luggage. And there, in her “front yard”, a majestic space of eight by twelve feet, were a tree and a shrub chained to the building! I thought perhaps this was just a poetic statement about urban life, bondage, and the struggle of life to survive in an unnatural environment. I was partly right. “We had four other shrubs,” she commented with only a bit of irony in her voice, “but they got ripped off.” Seems real plants in the “front yard” of a Brooklyn brownstone are such a rare commodity, they get stolen the minute they're planted.

She was particularly proud of the chain. “It has welded links for extra protection, is heat-treated to protect from cutters, and has a sturdy brass padlock.” She and her husband had conspicuously laid the chain on top of the mulch, “. . . so that the plant thieves would realize the plants were chained to the building.” After the plants are very well-rooted, they plan to release the tree and shrub from this protective leash and let them grow free—in the shade, the wind-blown clutter, and the random urination of trunks by various neighborhood dogs.

Boy, was I beginning to appreciate good ol’ Fitzpatrick Lane in Occidental, with its towering 200-foot redwoods and Douglas fir- and bay-scented forests.

She, a landscape designer, Lonnie Zamora, from New York City, and I spent the afternoon traveling from rooftop to rooftop. We were on a tour of the safest—in terms of human predators—place to grow a bit of foliage in an urbanaceous setting. I saw some lovely gardens. Yet, I was constantly struck by the effort it takes to grow a garden in New York City. Some rooftop gardens are at the tops of very narrow, twisty, and amazingly steep stairways. I felt like the proper attire should include mountain-climbing ropes and pinions. The effort required to carry potting soil, benches, trees, pottery, and decking three stories up a normal stairwell plus an additional steep flight of a precipitous stairway staggers my imagination.

I was beginning to think terrestrial deer weren’t such a big deal after all. In spite of possible Bambi predation, I could at least work with gravity to use a wheelbarrow to move topsoil [*real* topsoil] around. In my landscape, the roots run free.

Most amazing to me was a series of cab rides. Our first driver turned around while driving and asked, “How long is Manhattan?” Lonnie answered it was 11 or 12 miles long. “No!” barked the cab driver. “It’s 40 miles long.” All of us in the back seat were astonished. In the first place, this was the first time a cab driver had responded to *anything* said; usually they offer all kinds of one-way conversation. Secondly, 40 miles seemed way too long. The cab driver was adamant. “From Wall Street to 45th

Avenue is \$12.50, so Manhattan must be at least 40 miles long.” We laughed at cab fares as the universal measurement of distance. Lonnie stood by his guess.

We took a total of three more cab rides that day. We asked each driver how long Manhattan was. One guy refused to even guess. All seemed to have never been as far as the end of Manhattan. Later, I looked up the answer on a map—13.2 miles.

I was amused and awestruck that these people had either never been as far as the 13-plus miles to the other end of Manhattan, or they had so little concept of geography as to be able to make a guess with less than a 400% error, or they had no desire to even know. I had guessed 10 to 15 miles. Even as a tourist, I came much closer than the people who lived there. Perhaps this is the way human nature is . . . you know less of the “facts” about where you live every day than the special places you visit. Or, perhaps the insular life of a big city adds a new dimension to the word “provincial”.

So, I flew the 2,500 miles home at an altitude of 47,000 feet, took the seventy-plus mile ride to Sonoma County on the Airporter bus, and got into my truck for the 15-mile ride home. Home to the moist, fragrant smells of a deeply mulched forest floor, the dappled sunlight of a tall, mixed-oak-and-fir woodland, and the delightfully chaotic chatter of the birds of field, forest, and sky. I gave thanks all the way home for the special place I live and its richly woven tapestry of life that entices us to join in life’s captivating dance.