

The joys of public transportation

OK, so I know that living here in Baltimore, the words “joy” and “public transportation” aren’t usually found in the same sentence or even the same breath. As a frequent user of the MTA, I have often found the opposite attitude on a daily basis. The reasons are obvious: lack of consistency, a complicated system, no cohesive way to understand how the entire system works, timeliness, and, of course, the people.

Mass transit exists to serve the people of a given community. Some organizations do it better than others, but I assure you, it could be much worse. Many people are worried about safety at certain stops after dark, crime on the transit lines, and just the amount of extra time it takes to get from one place to another.

Four years ago, my Jeep died. I mourned the loss quickly and moved on to catching the MTA. I didn’t think four years would go by before seeing another car in my possession (I still don’t have one), but I found some surprisingly good things over the years that I don’t want to miss when and if I do get another vehicle.

You have to understand that much of taking mass transit is a very social thing. And even for an ambivert (half introvert, half extrovert) such as myself, I don’t always enjoy being social. Some days I just want to put on my earphones and listen to some music, the Divine Office (I have an app for that), or an audio book. I’ll admit to tuning people out.



Light rail pictured in Baltimore (Flickr, James Willamor)

But then there are those special days when you get to connect with people on a level that would not have been possible if you had been zooming through town in a car. You may not have even met that person. These are the people we meet through our travels on mass transit who have stories to share, praise to give, complaints to be heard, or who are on their first journey. There are workers, disabled people like myself, school kids, college students, and everyone else you can think of. Mass transit is a great equalizer. If we are all traveling together, we can have a great ride together or we can complain together (I’m in favor of the first one).

And because there is so much diversity on public transit, you just can’t find the same drama and hilarity but on a public form of transport. Just when you think you’ve seen it all, you see and experience something new – good or bad. That is how life is; we have to take the good with bad. But what do we learn from this?

I used the word “joy” in the title of this post because there are days when I know I’m privileged to be able to leave the house and get anything done. To see another person on the bus stop sweating it out in the hot summer morning can be a relief.

I'm not alone. But it's so much more than that. It's knowing that I get to be a part of someone's life in a good way or a bad way with every decision I make. I mean, we all know that somewhere deep inside, right? We know our interactions with people are important, as we want people to see God and not us.

So think about this for a minute: how many people do we miss as we go about our days in cars, with our heads down, just trying to get through the day? What if we had to slow down, wait, and, sometimes, engage with the kind of people we've never talked to before? How would our lives change? Could we, then, truly start to see the love of God in each person and truly feel compassion and the need to be faithful to our fellow man?

These may sound like lofty goals for some people, but I think, if we allow ourselves to see others as God sees them, what I mentioned above might be a little easier and give us a new perspective on the world.

Try this: if you normally commute to work by car, take a day or two and plan a way to get there all or part of the way by public transit. If you normally work from home, venture out to a new spot but you have to at least walk to get there if you don't take public transit to a new spot.

I promise you'll be surprised at what you'll learn about our city and each other.



In the meantime, if you need help figuring out how the whole transit thing works, check out the following links:

Maryland Transit Administration (MTA which includes local busses, commuter busses, light rail, subway, and MARC train)

Charm City Circulator

Next Bus (College Town Shuttle, Circulator, Howard County Transit)

Commuter Choice Maryland

Bike Maryland