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Guest column: There's something to be said about elbow room

By Suzie ZQ Taylor

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In the wake of the Summer Olympics held in China, a country more populated than any other on the planet, I am reminded of one of the things I love about living in Astoria—personal space in public places.

As we who live in Astoria can attest, it is possible to find a good parking spot near the store or restaurant we're patronizing, we don't have to plan our entire day around running what should be a quick errand, and we can literally stretch our arms and hear our breath as we exhale on the street. This is not to imply that our city isn't vibrant or that residents aren't busy. But here, we can still find elbow room when we're out and about.

Having traveled and lived in some very crowded destinations, I believe elbow room is a precious commodity, a currency that might even be worth more than the sagging US dollar in recent years.

My fascination with travel began as a teenager at Epcot's China exhibit, where a 360-degree movie pavilion revealed larger-than-life glimpses of an exotic land: the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, rickshaws, dragon parades, and bustling food markets.

Ten years later, the first stamps in my passport were for China and Hong Kong. Asia's cities, for me, were a whirl of vivid Crayola colors, nostril-smoldering aromas, and deafening noise. Oh, the palpable hum of traveling abroad!

While exploring the manic streets of Hong Kong, I collided head-on with the immediate, jolting loss of elbow room. You know the crush of procrastination when grocery shopping the day before Thanksgiving or the rush of being propelled forward at a rock concert by music lovers trying to get closer to stage? Multiply that exponentially.

Those first days abroad, I was so bewildered by the countless masses of humans whisking every which way, that I would occasionally press into small nooks along the streets, just to confirm that I was still breathing and capable of stretching my limbs.

Who knew it would be preparation for moving to California, home to notorious traffic jams? My work commute was no more or less horrendous than anyone's—an oppressive crunch of five lanes simulating the screeching and halting of bumper cars. Exit lanes

sport a hierarchy of communal behaviors, from follow-the-rules drivers who put on their blinkers and obediently trail to the end of the line, nearly two miles before the exit ramp, to the brash NASCAR imposters who race to a more fashionable spot and careen into the lane just before the ramp exits, raising the collective blood pressure—and fingers—of the exit lane crowd.

But back to elbows. Living in Astoria, the allowance for elbow room is ample enough to find quiet moments on a hectic day for mental ruminations without being bombarded by surroundings. Unless you're east of Safeway between August and April, when the male sea lions are bellowing on the docks!

As a former elbow-room have-not, I can say that we craved social interaction as much as the next person. But there were calculations to consider before accepting an invitation, such as: the time necessary to drive home from work (48 minutes if no accidents); to walk the dog and freshen up from the bedraggling commute (17 minutes if not having a bad hair day and the dog's not finicky); and get up town, catch public transit, and then a taxi to the destination (52 minutes, if the train comes on time).

Nowadays, when the need for a “palpable hum” arises, I already know that I'm going to be part of the human squish at the airport, that I'm in for some math problems, and that I'll be looking forward to coming home. Ahhh, elbow room.

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