

# Training for train-ing

My train ride the other day reminded me of one of my psychology classes in college. Not because I was sound asleep, nor entertaining thoughts of a romantic encounter with my mother. The train reminded me of environmental psychology, the study of how our physical environment affects behavior. The behavior I was trying to affect was that of a brown-eyed beauty at the Belmont stop. Translation: I wanted her to sit next to me (this is where my love life is these days).



## THE HIGH ROAD

By Joseph D'Eramo

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Time was of the essence. I had to make this seat as inviting as possible in short order. Sit up straight. Good start. Briefcase off the chair and underneath the seat? Check. Get the newspaper off the seat. Didn't buy one today. Superb. Now, the killer blow: make the dreaded eye contact.

Would you believe it worked to perfection, with one slight defect? The 300lb man entering the train in front of her intercepted the eye contact and plunked his rotund frame next to me. In the crack that remained of the space between us, he placed his travel bag/briefcase. After unbuttoning his oversized down winter coat, he pulled out his laptop and began typing. I inhaled, took out my pad and jotted down my thoughts; also not unlike my psych class where I used to write song lyrics to the love of my life on that particular day.

Since writing was difficult with my elbow permanently lodged into the window, I decided to observe instead. Talk about a field study. I witnessed more examples of territoriality than I did in one semester.

First, I saw the briefcase routine. You know, put your briefcase on the seat next to you so that boarding passengers aren't as likely to sit next to you. There are two reasons for this strategy. Not only has your marker made the seat look occupied, but the potential seat mate has to wonder where that bag has been. Did you put it down at the station stop? Was there any type of precipitation this morning? The risk of a wet butt is far too troublesome for most, so they usually move on.

Second, I noted the fake sleepers. Spread out like modern-day hoboes, these passengers confuse public transportation for a hotel bed, taking up an entire seat. Sure, they might actually sleep for part of the ride. They're just a little more asleep when others are looking for a place to sit.

Then there's the plight of the three seater. You know, those seats with two high backs and one short one on the trains that run on the Fitchburg Line. Sit in one of those and it's not unrealistic to believe that one other person will join you. The goal is to prevent that third person from infiltrating your seat. In hockey, the third man in a fight gets thrown out of the game. The third person in a commuter rail seat should be that lucky.

As the prospective third occupant approaches, neither person looks them in the eye. So, you have to ask. "Excuse me, please. Can I sit there?" Now every four years, three things happen: we elect a president; we go to the summer Olympics; and the per-

son sitting on the aisle will actually move into the middle so that someone else can sit down.

What usually happens is that the person sitting in the aisle seat, still miffed at not being able to find a window seat, gets out of the seat and lets the offending party squeeze into the middle. But the fun doesn't end there. The window and aisle occupants have to make life as miserable as possible for the middle. "Sure, sit with us will you. Just for that, we won't take our large winter coats off, even though we have coat hooks and overhead storage from one end of the coach to the other."

Then there's the High-Tech/T'm Working on Something Important technique. Boarding passengers are less likely to disturb those using laptops than those reading a Boston Herald. Do they really think those people are working on a cure for cancer or the next program that will put Bill Gates out of business? More than likely, those techie patrons are playing solitaire or sound clips of Austin Powers (guilty, as charged).

Before I could observe anymore, the train pulled into North Station. So, I asked my favorite train conductor, Sally (not her real name) of other techniques she's seen over the years.

"There was this guy who used to take off his clothes. Nobody wanted to sit next to him."

That's where this column ends. I never took abnormal psychology. But I'll be thinking about that one the next time I'm sandwiched between two techies with laptops and winter coats.

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