

Going Places

By CAREN HALBFINGER

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The bar is set pretty low for a good commute.

Most of us consider it a good ride if we get to work uneventfully, without delays caused by breakdowns, road work or bad weather.

Not Stewart Bitkoff, a former Yorktown Heights resident, who wrote "How to Attain Enlightenment on the Major Deegan Expressway."

The self-published book aspires to help commuters transform the daily grind of navigating potholes and poor drivers into a spiritual journey or, at least, a less stressful trip. If you didn't get one Monday when volunteers gave out copies to commuters during rush hour outside Grand Central Terminal, you can download one for free on his Web site.

<http://thedeeganproject.com/the%20book%201720stewartbitkoff.rtf>

Bitkoff, 58, wants to help commuters transcend the aggravation of stop-and-go traffic, late trains and rush-hour snarls. A mental health administrator who drove for 20 years from Yorktown Heights to psychiatric hospitals in the Bronx and on Wards Island, he had plenty of experience with crazy commutes. His interest in mysticism and meditation led him to look beneath the surface of the routine. He began to take notes on the things that irked him, as well as those moments of wonder and beauty he found during his 45-mile ride.

Those notes became the book, which is filled with bite-size thoughts that range from frustration over a motorist tying up traffic with a flat tire to reminiscences about places he passed that reminded him of moments from childhood.

"I've gone crazy any number of times on the Deegan," Bitkoff said in a telephone interview this week. "Somehow, I managed to make something else out of this ride. I found a nice, quiet place inside of me where I would go."

That's not to say the commute didn't get to him. It did, and he wrote of the wearing effect it had over time and how the stress showed on his face and was noticed by his daughter. Bitkoff took an early retirement package offered several years ago and left the suburbs for the exurbs, where he now faces the prospect of a similarly long commute from Bartonsville, PA to a job in southern New Jersey.

But Bitkoff was able to rise above the monotony. He meditated when the road opened up and traffic was moving. But even in a bumper to bumper crawl, moments of awareness were possible, he said.

"I would get into a comfortable middle lane and focus on the license plate in front of me, until I rejuvenated," he said. "Even for a moment, it changes your whole outlook."

Although he hadn't yet read the book, Donald Hayes, 59, an accountant who lives in Pond Ridge, listed as several passages were read to him Monday and admired Bitkoff's ability to transcend the daily grind. Hayes, who commutes 41 miles to Orangeburg, said he could relate to Bitkoff's description of feeling trapped in traffic.

"On the Tappan Zee Bridge that's exactly how you feel," Hayes said, "Why me? Why now? He's a wordsmith. It's never that romantic."

Hayes/ methods for avoiding road rage during tedious commutes range from thinking happy thoughts to blowing off steam.

“I try to think about the happy parts of my life,” he said. I’m an avid cyclist, so I think about part of a ride or a good day in the summer. You try to put yourself in that happy place. Sometimes, it’s not easy. Sometimes, I have to admit, I’m the worst. Someone will cut me off and I’ll flip them the bird.”

Thoughts for the road:

Stewart Bitkoff’s book is designed to help lessen stress on commutes while encouraging the act of giving to make the road through life more manageable. Recipients are asked to read the book, pass it on, and do a charitable act or make a charitable contribution. Here are some excerpts:

- “Sooner or later, we all are victims of the potholes of life. . . Perhaps, in part, they exist to test our view of our importance?”
- “If you have ever wondered at the interrelatedness of man, consider the effect of one stalled car on the highway at rush hour.”
- Some mornings, the monotony of the drive and routine of working each day makes me weary. I begin thinking about all my problems and I am trapped. This is the snare of yesterday and expectations; it is no longer living in the moment.”
- “Sometimes, when caught in stop-and-go traffic, I feel like I am in a cage. I can’t wait for the traffic to open up and be free of the entanglement.”

“Going Places,” appears on Wednesdays in **The Journal News**. Send your ideas for future columns or comments to Caren Halbfinger at chalbfin@thejournalnews.com or 914-694-5004.