

## Walking New York By Jonah Raskin

New York, N.Y. was made for walkers and walking, especially in the spring. The snow and the cold have given way to trees with green leaves and the city comes to life again. Months later, with the coming of the heat, the humidity, and the stink of garbage it will be too uncomfortable for joyful promenades and long rambles. In spring, especially, walking the streets of New York provides a window into the secret life of the city. If you know where to go, and even if you don't, you can see anything and everything, everyone and everybody. I've walked in New York for nearly my whole life, beginning in childhood in the 1940s when I walked – it seemed like a pilgrimage - to the delicatessen with my older brother on Sundays to buy bagels and smoked white fish. Anything and everything can happen on the streets of New York and often does; you have only to keep walking and keep your eyes open to see it. Walking is free and it's democratic; almost everyone does it, and while I walk alone most of the time when I'm in New York I almost never feel lonely. I'm usually surrounded by others who are walking, too.

I go almost anywhere in New York, though not every time of day and night, and sometimes I try to look like one of the locals and not attract attention to myself. I wear jeans, sneakers, a black sweater, a plain black baseball cap without a logo or a symbol that might identify me. I want to be anonymous. I have my backpack, too, but who doesn't in New York? Men in suits mostly don't. Women elegantly attired don't either. But students from New York University, Columbia, and Hunter all have backpacks, and there's hardly a neighborhood in New York where you don't see students walking to classes, or walking to catch a bus or a subway.

The corner of Avenue A and 12<sup>th</sup> Street, where I'm staying for a week, provides my jumping-off point. Walk east and I reach the East River. Walk west for an hour and I reach the Hudson. A few blocks north takes me to Union Square and the farmers' market where I can stroll and look at fruits and vegetables and shoppers and farmers from Upstate New York. From about 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. the streets around Union Square are packed with office workers out for lunch, trying to decide whether to have tapas, pizza, or tacos, whether to eat soup and salad at a table in a café or to buy a plate of chicken and rice from \$5 from a street vendor and eat while standing on the sidewalk.

I smell the aroma of spices and herbs while I walk and I listen to the sounds of the streets, the clatter of manhole covers, and the languages of the walkers and pedestrians who race by me or linger and loiter. There's Spanish, of course, Caribbean Spanish, Castilian Spanish, and Argentinian Spanish. More and more these days, I hear Russian in New York. It's not the Russian I remember my grandparents spoke when I was a boy, but a Russian that sounds faster, harsher, and louder, too, if only to make one's self heard above the roar of the traffic.

Walking in New York means stopping and waiting on street corners for red lights to turn green, or for cars to wait while you cross the pavement. You have to pay attention. You can't walk blind in New York if you want to survive. I like to have a destination – a market, a library, or a museum – to walk to. It could be the Red Rooster, a restaurant in Harlem, just off 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the main thoroughfare that

doesn't seem to have changed much since I was a student in New York in the early 1960s, though whites have moved in and gentrification has taken place.

Walking enables you to slow down and see that New York is a city of neighborhoods – Harlem, the Upper West Side, the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, and Chelsea where I have lunch at the bar of the Cookshop and where I can sit and watch the walkers on the street. Afterwards, I walk to at an exhibit of the war photos of Afghanistan and Liberia by Tim Hetherington, the photographer who was killed in Libya in 2011. Then, I walk above the street on the High Line that once provided space for railroad traffic, and where New Yorkers now walk for the sake of walking itself. The city is surprisingly friendly to walkers and in spring, walking on the High Line with its blooming flowers is like walking through a garden.

I walk around the campus of Columbia, where I was a student, and attend a lecture about New York in 1914, when the homeless and the unemployed marched – that's another kind of walking – in the streets, and battled the police, and were arrested and taken to jail. I have been there and done that, too. I know what it feels like to be in the thick of a crowd of thousands, everyone walking in the middle of the street and not on the sidewalk. I know what it feels like to be inside the Tombs, as the city jail is called, where the cells are far too small and crowded for walking, except in the imagination.

This spring, on my last day in New York, I drove with a friend to Far Rockaway in Queens, to a working class neighborhood of small houses and tiny shops that feels like the 1950s. My friend has work to do. I take to the boardwalk that extends for miles along the ocean – another place designated for walkers and walking. I inhale the salt air and gaze out at the ocean.

I remember my grandfather who came to America from Russia and became a peddler who walked the streets of New York, carrying a backpack, going door-to-door, selling shoe laces, razor blades, mirrors, bars of soap, and more until he made enough money so that he didn't have to walk the streets anymore. He bought a store and stood on his feet all day selling shirts and shoes to immigrants like himself, and at the end of the day walked upstairs to the apartment where he lived with my grandmother. On the boardwalk in Far Rockaway, I have my grandfather, Benjamin, for company. He talks to me in English, his third fourth language after Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. He remembers the Russia of his boyhood and he tells me how he and my grandmother walked away from their village, walked through Russia and across Poland, found a ship, and came to America.