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Travel essay: Guided by a gentle hand, N.Y. brings us all together

By Marianne Mersereau
Special to The Seattle Times

Editor's note: The Travel Essay is written by our readers about a travel adventure or insight.

At age 7, my daughter enters The Big Apple
A bit differently than her ancestors
From the Netherlands, France, and Ireland
Pennsylvania Station is crowded, and a National Guardsman greets us.
"Hold tightly to her hand," he admonishes
"there are crazy people here who might try to grab her."
I take him seriously since he's a big guy with a big gun.
Small-town trust evaporates into big-city fear
And I imagine her ancestors entering nearby ports,
Clutching their children's hands,
Bringing with them their fears and their faith.

We're waiting in line for a taxi
A young man wearing a hospital bracelet approaches us
Hands outstretched; he shows us a few coins
"I was just discharged" he tells us
"been battling depression and just need a little change
to pay my fare to Long Island."
Cynicism becomes compassion
And my husband finds something in his pocket
To help this guy reach his Isle of Safety
Encouraged by this generosity, the man with the outstretched hand
Tells his story to the well-dressed couple in front of us
"We are from New York" is the reply
The man with the bracelet asks, "What does that mean?"

And I have some more questions:
Does it really matter where you're from?
Aren't we all on the same journey here?
Don't we all need a helping hand every now and then?

Our taxi enters Manhattan right in the middle of
The Dominican Day Parade
"A parade!" my daughter squeals with delight
This is New York, New York, and she wants to be a part of it.
The streets are more crowded than the train station we left
All the front seats are taken
And then it happens just as the Guardsman predicted
A stranger grabs my daughter's hand!
Sweet Latina grandmother
Leads my little girl to the front of the crowd
Where she can fully appreciate this loud, proud party
Gives my daughter a kiss and a gift:
A pair of socks with the Dominican flag on them

Small gift from a Big Heart representing Big Ideas:
The beauty of diversity, the common threads that bind us,
The soul of a Great City
The triumph of Faith over fear.

(Marianne Mersereau lives in Lake Forest Park.)

The Travel Essay runs each Sunday in The Seattle Times and online at www.seattletimes.com. To submit an essay, make sure it's typed and no longer than 700 words. Essays are unpaid, and may be edited for length. E-mail to travel@seattletimes.com or send to Travel, The Seattle Times, P.O. Box 70, Seattle, WA 98111.

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