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The people you meet in your neighbourhood

by JAMES MATTHEWS

Perspective is relative.

How one person sees a situation, emotionally digests circumstances, and responds might be a thousand ways different from how a thousand other people would react. And perception informs perspective, which holds sway over your interpretation that dictates your reaction.

I often take long walks to get outside my head. I may stroll for an hour or three hours, depending on the time of day and what joy or misery is coming from the sky. Joy or misery: The fruits of perception.

There's a bench along the main drag in the town in which I live. It's a comfortable bench, and I like to sit there for a spell before I retrace my steps home.

That last time out and about, I saw a man I call Harold. That's not his name. It's how I refer to him to myself and when I'm telling the missus about my interactions with him. He's a nice enough fella and always interesting.

A Saturday afternoon, this was. People clotted the sidewalk and crosswalk, waiting to get into a nearby farmers' market.

I saw Harold, and he looked around and mumbled something I couldn't hear. He didn't look bothered until one of those loud motorcycles tore by the bench. One of those motorcycles that the louder they are, the more people seem to fancy them. He seemed distracted. And he stopped at the bench where I was.

Harold told me about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. He said it's a practice. He said it's all about ways and exercises to influence the actions that dictate thoughts that are at the bottom of anxiety and the unhappy way he thinks about himself.

It's true: You never really know what somebody feels, how they're getting on.

Harold said he visits a therapist. One of the exercises the therapist has him do in moments he's troubled is to look for five things he can see, four things he can hear, three things he can touch, two things he can smell, and something he can taste.

?You don't go around licking stuff, do you??

Of course not, he said.

He told me it's a means to change his mind, to push his attention away from negative thoughts about himself and the world. Seemed to be that it's as if he's diverting his train of thought. Changing tracks, even if it's only for a short time, like rolling onto a rail siding, he said.

?A siding,? I said. Afterwards I Googled rail siding. A siding is a piece of track that a train can slowly move on to allow another train to pass. Or park a boxcar to be picked up later by another train.

Five things seen: that fountain over there, he said. The clock tower that's been repaired. Nice. The library. A storefront. Car. Then I found four things I can hear. That motorcycle, laughter from that pub patio. I hear a child crying and that dog barking. That's four. Among three things I can touch, he said, are the smooth metal of the bench we're sitting on, the rough bricks of the building there, and a petal of that tulip. Two things I smell are food from that pub patio and cigarette smoke. And something that can be tasted is one of those cold pints. Would be nice, he said, in this heat. So would the cigarette, he said, but he quit smoking four years ago.

?Harold aren't you worried people will think you're talking to yourself? Maybe you see people who aren't there??

He said his therapist went so far as to suggest that he sing the items on his list. She even suggested he sing the items with a silly voice.

?That'll project quite an impression that you're well put together,? I said.

Harold laughed, abruptly stopped, and then he said, Does what you said mean you can see them too?

?Now you're messing with me,? I said. ?Right??