

People-watching on public transportation

BY TEDDY WAYNE | Most Americans live in a car culture, and because of that, public transportation has a bad rap: delays, claustrophobic commutes, that one scraggly-haired gentleman discoursing on the heretofore unacknowledged connection between the Pentagon, extraterrestrials, and New Coke.

But public transportation offers one pleasure that the isolation of the automobile cannot: an ever changing gallery of new humans sharing a confined space. And since you're not the one doing the navigating, why not relax, relinquish control, and spend a couple of hours riding the bus or the subway with no particular destination in mind as you watch a bunch of people you've never seen before and will never see again?

How often do you truly study other people—scrutinize faces, analyze mannerisms, eavesdrop on conversations? With our friends and family, we're too busy negotiating the complexities of long-standing relationships, walking the tightrope of our intimacies. At work, we just want to get through that interminable meeting, that awkward conversation with the boss. But when you're trapped in a subway car with 60 strangers and no cell-phone service, your powers of observation are heightened in a way our attention-deficit-addled minds seldom permit.

And very rarely in our overscheduled lives do we ever just drift along, not shortcutting from point A to point B but simply enjoying that unlettered interstice. Try it one day. It's a ride worth the price of admission. Just leave the New Coke at home.

Teddy Wayne is the author of the novel *Kapitoil*, available April 13 from Harper Perennial.



Enjoying a civilized breakfast

Springing the kids from school for the day

BY JONATHAN TROPPER | Every so often, I like to surprise my kids by taking them out of school. I don't keep them home, because half the pleasure is in the act of liberation. I send them off to school, same as always, then show up an hour or two later and march them out like Moses and the Israelites.

I take them out to lunch and, over their toxic fast food of choice, tell them I missed them and that I just wanted to hang out with them. I ask them to name the best and worst things about school this year and what they're most looking forward to. We are all partners in crime here, shirking our responsibilities as one, and it's incredible how a small whiff of the illicit can open up new lines of communication. Every half hour or so, I check my watch and ask them what they'd be doing if they were in school. You'd be amazed at how many times you can do this before it gets old.

As lunch draws to a close, I affect an air of exaggerated nonchalance as I tell them to leave room for snacks at the movie. As I watch their faces light up, it's easy to remember why I became a parent in the first place. I make sure to drive past school on our way to the multiplex, even if it's not exactly on our way; the other direction, actually, but worth the detour. We turn up the radio and sing along loudly, because today we're all too cool for school.

At the theater, they can buy whatever snacks they want. Today there are no rules. No penny-pinching, no sugar-monitoring. I hold their hands (my son is 11, and I know one day soon he won't let me), pat their backs, refrain from correcting grammar or indulging in any form of parental instruction. My kids are not the only ones on break today.

Family life is built around routine. It has to be, to some extent. But the danger of routine is that it often becomes, well, routine, and we all run the risk of becoming part of the furniture. Torching the script every now and then shows my kids that I love them for the people who they are while at the same time pulling back the parental curtain to reveal the big kid pulling the strings. Something as quotidian as sharing the simple joy of an empty movie theater in the middle of the day can go a long way toward reminding parent and child alike that even though we're all supposed to be someplace else, there's no place we belong more.

Jonathan Tropper is the author of *This Is Where I Leave You* (Dutton Adult), which is being developed for the screen.

Putting down the box and baking a cake from scratch. Fifteen measly minutes is really all the time you save when you opt for your average old boxed variety instead of one you make from scratch. And the only thing sweeter than the first crumbly bite of a homemade cake is the pride you can take in saying, "Yes, I made it from scratch." Go to [realsimple.com](http://realsimple.com/chocolatecake) for a deliciously decadent recipe.

Holding the door open. Yes, even when the other person is 10 steps away and you're in a hurry.

Enjoying a civilized breakfast. Philadelphia-based photographer Jennifer Rakowski spent a year snapping pictures of her morning meal and turned the results into *Breakfast* (Blurb.com, \$26), a gorgeous coffee-table book. "Taking the time to sit down and focus on the moment definitely helps you have a good day," says Rakowski. "I noticed I was much more relaxed in general." (Her meal of choice: one egg over easy on a toasted English muffin, a side of blueberries, and tea.) Want inspiration for breaking the fast with class? Go to realsimple.com/breakfasts.