

Smoking in Manhattan: Observations

by Russell Clay

I was on my back in the hospital on September 11, 2001, so when the nurse came in, pale and tearful, to tell me about the attack on the World Trade Center, I turned to the wall and thought my beloved New York City was dying along with me. But like the city, I have recovered from my ordeal and begun to thrive. In many ways the travail of the city and my personal battle for health are parallel journeys. New York and I are up and about, breathing the cold winter winds, basking in the avenue-bathing sunlight, and enjoying a new appreciation for life and liberty.

One of the fairest and most pleasant liberties I enjoy is walking the city streets with a lit briar. In my neighborhood on the Upper West Side, it is not uncommon to see a few people smoking pipes. One man in particular comes to mind: bearded, broad of shoulder, grey of eye, he looks like a sea captain standing on the deck of a Hudson River steamer, even when he sits at Riverside park smoking his calabash and feeding the pigeons. Sometimes we nod to one another, but we never speak because the camaraderie of our smoke is more eloquent than whatever words we could exchange.

New York is a city of diversity, and it is no surprise that this applies to the pipe smoking community as well as all other aspects of city life. The quiet British neighbor who smokes an old Dunhill is likely to pass the time with the young Wall Street guy who has just purchased the finest briar in one of the city's legendary tobacco shops, but has no clue how to light his new toy.

There is a pipe club in New York, with members that seem to be characters in a wonderful, quirky novel. I am fond of the older man who brings boxes of pipes that he sells at very reasonable prices, as long as you'll allow him to tell you the entire history of every briar. The club meets in the upper floor of an old restaurant, and within an hour or two the entire place smells like twenty blends of tobacco all burning at once.

On a recent trip to the airport, the cab driver allowed me to light a pipe of Greg Pease's "Haddo's Delight," and commented that his favorite blend is Balkan Sasieni. When I noted the driver's accent, he told me he was from the Balkans, "before there was war." It seems that most people in Manhattan relate their lives and histories to some sort of war, some conflict of political or cultural basis. Maybe war and peace are mile markers on the road of life; maybe they are just a way to start a conversation. For me, pipe smoking in my city is a way of celebrating and affirming something a poet once wrote:

*We are alive! Life lies quietly on the hearth rug
Like a contented setter, ready to leap at the master's voice.
Evening comes, the fire is lit, and all is well.*

Today I walked down West End Avenue in the deepening afternoon, reflecting on the tragedy and triumph of my recent ordeal, and the city's passionate revival. People on the street make eye contact these days, and every so often the smell of pipe tobacco wafts through the air, bringing a sense of safety and contentment. Life is good because we know that it is a gift, like fine smoke and the joy of walking in a city that refuses to bow to fear.