

SEATTLE FREEZE

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The term “Seattle Freeze” refers to a widely held belief that it is hard for newcomers to make friends in this city. People are usually friendly in their own circle but are a bit standoffish when they encounter people they don’t know. This may be true to some extent, but I would like to give some examples of just the opposite.

Most recently, I was walking to my grocery store in Ballard in a Seattle drizzle, wearing my Gore-Tex rain jacket with the hood pulled up, and carrying two empty shopping bags. I just missed the traffic light at 15th Ave and was waiting for the next ‘walk’ signal when I noticed a woman standing some distance from me. She didn’t seem to be waiting for the light. She then walked over, gave me a little hug and asked how I was doing. She mentioned “brew day” (it was St. Patrick’s Day) and said that she was going to wear some blue and yellow colors for Ukraine. I immediately tried to think if I knew her (neither of us were wearing masks) but I didn’t know anyone like her in my neighborhood. The light turned green and I started across the street rather than waiting for another cycle in the rain. As I puzzled over who she was, I realized that I probably looked a little pitiful standing in the rain on my way to shop for groceries. She just wanted to cheer me up. I really appreciated that hug as it brightened the rest of my rainy day. Everyone needs at least one hug a day!

A few weeks earlier, I was coming back from a walk, a block or so from my condo, when I saw a woman standing ahead of me at the edge of the sidewalk. Perhaps she was waiting for me to pass. As I came up to her, she moved over and said that it was good to see me, and asked how I was doing, as if she knew me. Again, I had no idea who she was – she had grey hair, looked a bit older, and was wearing a mask over her face. I guess she just wanted to greet someone since there were no other people out at that time.

A month ago I was walking home on the street to my condo when a woman walked up behind me and said, “isn’t it hard being old?” She was about my age, or maybe a bit younger, well dressed, with white hair, and walking her little dog. We chatted for a minute and then she walked on past me. When I came to my condo, I caught up to her and mentioned that this is where I lived. She said that she remembered when it was built, and had considered moving there herself – she was obviously an old-timer in the neighborhood. The next time I saw her, she came up behind me and said again, “isn’t it hard being old?” We had the same little chat and she moved on. The third time, or maybe the fourth, I came up behind her and said, “isn’t it hard being old?” When she said yes, I replied, “but it’s better than the alternative.” She answered “no, it isn’t.” I was surprised and asked her why. She said that she was going to heaven where everything would be beautiful and nice, and she couldn’t wait. She then asked me if I believed in

God. When I said no, she told me I should believe. The next time I saw her, we approached from opposite directions. She asked how I was doing. Before we parted I asked her how old she thought I was. After she said she couldn't guess, I told her I was 84. She then said she was 87, three years older. She didn't look that old and was in good shape as she walked much faster than I. The next time I see her, I will introduce myself by name and hopefully learn her name. This little saga seems like it will go on for some time.

Then some years ago, on a beautiful summer day, I walked out of my gym in downtown Ballard as a woman walked out of the bank next door. She opened her arms wide, ran up and gave me a big hug. Surprised as I was, I couldn't think who she might be. She then explained that I looked so happy with a big smile, and she just had to hug me. She was a newcomer to Seattle (from Arizona, I think) and said she had never seen many happy people on the streets here. We then chatted for a while. Hugs are great!

Then it was my turn to give back. A few days ago, on the first day of spring, I went for a walk around Ballard. The weather wasn't too bad, no rain, cloudy, and a little warmer than usual. The cherry trees had just come into bloom and other flowers were beginning to show. I passed a large bush with hundreds of red flowers with yellow stamens. I snatched a couple flowers. As I neared my condo, I saw an elderly woman sitting in front of the senior housing complex next door. I handed her the flowers and said, "these are for you." She was quite surprised and delighted to receive them. That was my small act of kindness for the day. It felt good.

Stopping to talk to strangers, even hugging, is not unheard of here but it is still not that common. It is a good thing to do. Perhaps the term "Seattle Freeze" is not a good description of Seattle.