Unlucky with Trains

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2025)

The Tube Station (Cyril E. Power, 1932)

I have not been lucky with trains to or from Milton Keynes, the town built some fifty years ago from scratch fifty miles north of London according to the debased utopianism of modernist architecture and town planning. It is true that I have been on trains through the town on many occasions without incident, but death has marked two occasions, which is more than one might have expected by chance.

In the first of these incidents, in 1996, I was returning home after having examined a murderer in a prison not far from the town, to prepare a report for the courts. While standing on the platform of the station, there was an announcement over the public address system that the train was fifteen minutes delayed. A short time afterwards came a further announcement that it would be half an hour delayed, then three quarters of an hour. Finally, soon afterwards, it was announced that the train was cancelled altogether and that we should catch the next train instead, though there was no certainty as to when that might be.

The bad news had been relayed to us, the passengers, little by little, as a doctor breaks bad news to a delicate or fragile patient. And it is true that there was an outbreak of grumbling on the platform, with the passengers dividing into two schools to account for the inconvenience: those who saw malevolence in it and those who saw only incompetence. Which was worse, malevolence or incompetence, I leave to moral philosophers to determine, and which easier to correct to psychologists and sociologists.

In fact, the delay was caused by the derailment of the train on which we had hoped to travel. The news of this spread among the passengers as wind spreads through a field of wheat. Suddenly, we felt almost fortunate: the train might have derailed *after* we had caught it, and we were fortunate not to have been on it when it *did* derail.

This was a rather odd, almost pagan way of thinking, as if the train were destined by its stars to derail *somewhere*, irrespective of the natural causes of train derailment. We caught the next train when it arrived without anxiety as to its safety: *its* stars we assumed to be favourable.

I learned later that one person had been killed by the derailment and, by unhappy coincidence, it was a woman whom I knew slightly, or with whom I had had telephonic

communication. She was the books editor of the *British Medical Journal*, back in the days when that august publication reviewed books (books are now redundant in the practice of medicine, or in the mental life of doctors). Her name was Ruth Holland, and I had the greatest respect for her. I had written a few reviews for her, and I always looked forward to my conversations with her, though I never met her in person.

She wrote comparatively little, being mainly an editor of the work of others, but when she did write, she could certainly be acerbic. Here, for example, is an extract from her review of the autobiography of John Walton, the eminent neurologist who was born in Newcastle. He:

> *… tells you everything you never wanted to know about the rise and rise of a lad from Spennymoor to the heights of the medical trade (professor of neurology, president of the BMA, twice, chairman of the General Medical Council, warden of Green College, Oxford, etc., etc.), not failing to mention that his mother's mother was well cared for by a companion called Mabel, that he spent much time in the church choir hoping for a glimpse of his future wife's knees as she swung round on the organ stool, that his elder daughter was a wakeful baby, that Dulwich has a splendid picture gallery and Lichtenstein lovely mountain scenery, that Holland is flat, and that in 1963 he and Betty (of the knees) while house hunting in Newcastle found that several "were attractive but had significant disadvantages, even including some in Elmfield and in Graham Park Road"… Although Walton tells you absolutely everything, by the end of the book you really know nothing about him except that he has a colossal memory. If he has hidden depths—or, indeed, hidden shallows—they remain hidden. The undoubted distinction of his career also unfortunately gets obscured in the fog of total recall.*

When I heard that she was the only person killed in the crash, I was prey to irrational and not altogether laudable thoughts. Why her, I asked, when there were probably many persons on the train who would have been missed less than she, certainly by me? Were there no wastrels, undesirables, drones, parasites, criminals, psychopaths, confidence tricksters, etc., that fate might just as well have disposed of by this crash?

Then I started to think about the notion of coincidence. Was it, or was it not, a coincidence that the only person killed in a train crash was the only person on the train (probably) with whom I had any connection? It was rare enough that the train that crashed should be the one I was going to take, given the rarity of train crashes, but surely even more of a peculiarity that the one person killed in it should be known to me.

How would one work out the odds of such a concatenation of circumstances? I had the numerator—the event itself—but not the denominator. And in a life of innumerable events and circumstances such as mine, and indeed such as everyone else's, would it not be odd if there were never any coincidences? What are the odds of a life without coincidence or coincidences? If, in fact, coincidences are to be expected, should we still be surprised when they occur?

I was once asked to produce a report (along with two others) on a spate of murders committed by psychiatric patients from a single hospital. Was there any factor involved in them all that accounted for this spate, which was assumed to be statistically anomalous? (The only factor I found was the stupidity of the staff, not caused by deficient intelligence, but induced rather by the idiocy of the bureaucratic tasks that they were obliged by the management to perform.) Analysis by another statistician, however, suggested that the spate had nothing statistically anomalous about it, that such spates

were bound to occur somewhere, and that therefore there was nothing special about this one, nothing that required special explanation. In other words, the spate of murders was nothing to worry about.

I come now to the second of my train incidents involving Milton Keynes. It was much more recent, last week in fact. I had just returned from France on the train—there had been a blockage in the tunnel and we, my wife and I, were later than scheduled—when all trains in the direction of our connecting train in England were suddenly held up by a suicide on the tracks at Milton Keynes, or at least by a person killed on the tracks there. Why did it have to happen just as we arrived—not before, and not after?

For some people it must have been a tragedy rather than an inconvenience, including for the train driver. It takes little effort of the imagination to realise the horror of being stuck in the cockpit of a locomotive with a clear view of a person on the tracks ahead, and with no ability to prevent to avert the fatal impact.

Why does a suicide choose this horrible method? Other methods, after all, are available. It is certainly certain, provided that the instinct of self-preservation does not supervene at the last moment and cause the person on the tracks to jump aside. Is it not only an act of self-destruction, but one of aggression also? If so, against whom or what? Not against the train driver, presumably, but possibly against the suicide's family, who will have to live with the vision of the appalling death forever. Perhaps it was a protest against the world, with a desire to cause it as much irritation as possible.

I have twice been on the London underground when someone jumped in front of the train, once when I was travelling on it, and once when I was waiting for it. In these circumstances, humanity divides into two. One half is prurient and tries to get a closer view of what happened, forgetting

for a time whatever was the reason for their journey. The other half starts immediately to grumble and complain. Why did the suicide have to do it now, in front of *my* train. Couldn't he have waited for the next one, which after all would arrive in only a minute or two? How inconsiderate, how selfish, of him!

This is rather odd and shows how quickly we become mildly paranoid. We are apt to assume that events occur with reference to us, in this case that the suicide had set out to inconvenience us, though at the same time we know perfectly well that he had no knowledge even of our existence, or we of his. We reconcile the feeling with our rational knowledge by invoking vaguely a notion of fate: we were fated to experience, or be the victim of, this event. Superstition is never far from the human mind.

But to return to the consequences of the suicide on the tracks in Milton Keynes. (Everyone assumed that it must have been a suicide, for who but a suicide would wander on to the tracks along which trains travelled at such speeds? The drunk or the drugged, perhaps?)

The timetables of train networks are now so precise, and trains are so frequent, that any delay has consequences across the whole system. The subsequent services are inevitably disrupted. One forgets (and is not grateful) that in such circumstances, staff work very hard to make up the deficit as soon as possible. One thinks only of what they could have done to prevent the incident in the first place.

Oddly enough, though, an atmosphere of good cheer prevailed in the horribly crowded next train after the line was restored, which had to carry several times its normal complement of passengers. People who might normally have been sullen or even hostile to one another were put in a good mood by the inconvenience that all had suffered equally. Although the train had a final destination four hundred miles away, people

gallantly gave up their seats to one another, to relieve those who had to stand, who were many. People made good-natured jokes: and a delay that normally would have resulted in fury was the object of mirth. The corridors between the seats and those between the carriages were so tightly packed with passengers that no one could pass, whereupon one of them said that he hoped that the drinks trolley would come soon.

The good humour was infectious. I did not hear a single complaint, though everyone was an hour late and the cramped conditions would usually have been considered abominable and unacceptable. It was as if everyone were in a team, accepting of hardship for the achievement of a worthy goal.

Was this absence of querulousness an indication of good underlying national character? The British were once a stoical people, but I would not have described them thus any longer, rather the reverse. But the hardship, albeit mild, drew the passengers together, and if any of them did not feel cheerful, they would have been ashamed to say so or to express complaint. There was social pressure to be both stoical and jolly, and it was surprisingly strong.

How long the good cheer would have survived or continued, I do not know and cannot say. Once, I was stuck in a traffic jam in London in my car. The streets of that city were not designed for heavy traffic, and now I would never dream of driving in them. The traffic did not move by more than a few yards in over an hour. What the obstruction was, no one knew. It was warm and sunny weather and before long people got out of their cars and walked up and down a bit. Towards the end of an hour, tempers began to fray. Why didn't 'they' —whoever 'they' were—do something about it? Some people had young children in their cars, others were thirsty or needed to relieve themselves. I heard a quarrel or two among the people who had got out of their vehicles.

I thought that this might make a good *Lord of the Flies* or

J.G. Ballard type of scenario, in which the people stuck in the traffic jam gradually descended to murder, as the shops that lined the road in which they were stuck ran out of provisions of food and water, and they began to rob one another for the sake of survival. Why do we think that it is only in difficult circumstances that we can find out who we truly are, suspecting all along that actually we are not very good and that good cheer such as was exhibited recently on the train that was due to pass through Milton Keynes is and can only be superficial and unenduring?

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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