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The Barber as Listener

BY DAN BERGGREN

During the COVID-19 pandemic, did you resort to cutting your partner's hair—or your own? I did, and some of my friends did, too. Following in the footsteps of priests and men of medicine in ancient Egypt, I have cut hair and trimmed beards.

Unlike Roman tradition, sharing news and gossip while getting a daily trim was never part of my routine, yet I do remember the coming of age ceremony of going to the barber.

When I was a kid in Brooklyn, my dad and I would walk to the barbershop every few weeks, where I could enjoy a stack of comic books next to the hat rack, as the fragrance of hair tonics and colognes made the hum of adult conversation more mysterious. Men told stories, joked, bragged, and argued over the Dodgers and the Yankees. Finally, it was my turn to sit in the big chair, be wrapped in a cape, becoming hypnotized by clipper buzz, and marvel at the hand-comb coordination, the scissor action, and wait for that exquisite finish: warm shaving cream on the nape of my neck, the sound of a straight razor being sharpened on a leather strop, then the shave. It was finished off by a bracing splash of bay rum and a dusting of talc. Walking home, I felt ten feet tall.

Time for a confession: I've been operating without a license for a long time. Maybe "operating" is misleading—I wouldn't want you to think that I've been practicing minor surgery like barbers of old. No, my foray into haircutting began one summer when my dad asked me to trim his hair. He was retired, and I was approaching my second year of college. With a kitchen chair in the backyard under the lilacs and a towel over his shoulders, my dad told me stories while I carefully snipped away. It didn't turn out half bad and that gave me the courage to buy a kit from Montgomery Ward, which featured scissors, a comb, an electric clipper, and a big plastic bib to put around any willing person's neck. For the rest of that summer, I practiced on my dad so that I'd



The author in action, providing a pre-holiday trim in a dormitory bathroom at St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, 1968. Photo courtesy of the author.

be ready to offer my services to fellow dormitory dwellers upon my return to campus.

To supplement a scholarship, I already had several odd jobs: yard work for professors, typing papers for fellow students, and addressing envelopes at the alumni office. Now I could add barber to that list. There weren't too many dorm mates interested, since these were the days of longer hair—*Sgt. Pepper's* was a year old and Woodstock was a year away—but the day before Thanksgiving break, someone saw me in the residence hall bathroom trimming the hair on a friend's neck. Word spread quickly, and by evening I had over a dozen clients. I didn't charge, but when they came back to me before Christmas break, I did make a little gas money. What really struck me was their willingness to talk and tell tales of past holidays with family, as they anticipated the upcoming one.

After college, the US Army was waiting for me, and in basic training, one of the first stops was the barbershop. Since we were going to be wearing uniforms, you can bet our hair had to be uniform, too. The barber

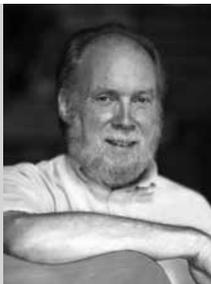
asked each one of us raw recruits, "How would you like your hair?" Then no matter what the answer, he shaved our heads as bald as cue balls. It was in the Army, stationed overseas as a broadcaster, that I put my scissors and spare time to use—once again giving haircuts for gas money. One morning I received a call from the office of the building commander: "Specialist Berggren? The general would like to see you. And he asked that you bring your barber tools." I entered his office and saluted. "At ease, Berggren. I understand you've been cutting the hair of some of my troops." (Oh, I thought, I was in for it now!) "I've got a meeting this morning and need a trim—just the neck and around the ears." In the few moments that it took, he relaxed and reminisced about his older brother who had just passed away. I finished and handed him my pocket mirror. "Outstanding, Berggren!," the general said. "Now listen, here's the deal. Take this key—it's for a room on the next floor. You're free to use it whenever you like—leave your tools there, too. What you charge is your

business, just keep the troops looking sharp, alright? That'll be all, Berggren. Oh, what do I owe you for the trim?" he asked. "It's on the house, sir—and thank you, sir," I responded.

Along my irregular path of unlawful barbering, I've noticed that people speak freely about whatever's on their mind: from sports trivia and jokes to impending problems or family stories. The summer I practiced on my dad, he told me of a coworker who played the horses and was always pestering him to place a bet. Finally, my dad gave in and said, "Alright, here—put two dollars on that horse you're so keen on." The man said, "No, Red, I can't. I just like to tease you. You're the only fella here who doesn't gamble." The next Monday the man came to work and said, "Oh, Red, I really shoulda taken your money—that horse won, he paid off big!" My dad ended the story by telling me he was so glad that he hadn't placed the bet and won that money. "I might've become addicted to gambling." That was his lesson to me, my first tip.

Over the years, I've learned a broader lesson: barbers (and hairdressers, too, no doubt) are good listeners. Like psychiatrists beside a couch or priests on the other side of a confessional screen, barbers are unseen—a voice from behind, out of sight, asking open-ended questions, prompting you to think aloud. They're professional listeners, and I'll bet they're chock-full of stories. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolk.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



The Call—Youth Leading Social Justice

Urban Explorers: An Education Initiative with City Lore BY RAQUEL ALMAZAN

I was introduced to the eclectic organization that is City Lore through the position of directing a new youth development program, which I have had the honor to initiate and curate for the past three years. The youth of the program are reframing their identities—in the United States during the current civil rights struggle—through art that fosters critical thinking and solidarity that unites several communities.

Urban Explorers is a summer and after-school program that serves high school students.¹ The program introduces students to a variety of art mediums (documentation skills, dance, music, oral history, drumming, hip hop art practices, and visual art mediums) through the social inquiry of the Lower East Side, while being responsive to the interests of students. The program engages young people in exploring, documenting, interpreting, and advocating for people and places in their communities and city. Students gain skills in using documentary tools, including audio and video recording, photography, and interviewing. Working in small groups, they have created documentaries or interpretive artworks about their chosen subjects.

We created an alternative space that focuses on the specific cultural, gender, and racial identities of the students, who are primarily students of color. The major pillars of the program are based on exploration of self-identifying, community, and advocacy.

As a newly developing program, Urban Explorers is in its third year of programming in 2021. In the two prior semesters during the pandemic, themes of the student's work were based on identity, social justice, and political uncertainty. A need for advocacy arose as major connective tools for young people in the development of the program.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, was a second shock for the students

#ExploreMe – exploring the identity of young people through exercises and art making tools.

#ExploreWe – exploring the identity of a community—its cultures and its societal conditions, including responding to the coronavirus pandemic.

#ExploreAdvocacy – exploring the intersection of arts and activism and how their work, serves as a tool for social awareness and change.

while experiencing the pandemic, as it was for the entire world. It was essential to create an open forum for the students and teaching artists to discuss their feelings, experiences, and possibilities for change. For some students, it was an intensely personal experience; they had lost family members to police violence. One student had witnessed the destruction of her neighborhood during the Black Lives Matter movement. I programmed the Racial Injustice Series to process the Black Lives Matter movement, so that students could address their concerns and reframe the experience as a form of empowerment through art-making.

Visual Arts

According to the artist, Felicia Conduah:

In this image, I wanted to catch the importance of the idea of America. When we look at America, we are made up of immigrants. This isn't said enough. We have Columbus Day, on which we celebrate a false story, and honestly, a tragedy. We need to celebrate our Indigenous lives, the people who are here. What would America be without its immigrants and Indigenous people? In this image, there are three layers of photos: the first being part of my home, the next being the American Flag, and then the America with a Black woman

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