

## Spice Up Salem With a Dash of Novelty

Boo! Did I surprise you? It's not Halloween. Usually we don't see or hear that word at other times.

If you felt a little jolt, that's your brain's novelty detector at work. It promotes memory. Tomorrow the word you likely will remember most from this column is "Boo!"

Unexpected experiences make life more interesting. Bathing in novelty produces pleasurable sensations of strangeness.

Yet when weird is commonplace, the mind becomes habituated to what once set off bells in the mind's novelty detector. So here's a plus for Salem: we're nicely positioned to display the unusual within a frame of commonplace.

Recently I visited my granddaughter and her family in southern California. I took my longboard and land paddle, because I've had a dream of cruising the Venice Beach boardwalk.

Here in Salem, my senior citizen skateboarding gets a lot of attention. Often people say "That's cool" as I roll by.

But at Venice Beach the novelty bar is set so high, I barely registered. On a Saturday afternoon the boardwalk overflowed with carnival'ish sights and sounds. An old guy on a longboard, pushing himself along with a pole... yawn.

I still had a lot of fun. As did my seven-year-old granddaughter on her scooter. We weaved through the crowds quite expertly. The only person I ran into was my wife, who yelled "Hey, dude, watch where you're going!"

The Los Angeles area abounds with outlandish creativity and eccentric characters. Most of the people on the boardwalk were locals. To them, Venice Beach is pretty much more-of-the-same.

To me, a visitor from sleepy Salem, I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Which shows that novelty is in the eye of the beholder.

I've been to India twice. Reminiscing about my visits with a friend who is more familiar with the country than I am, I said, "The streets are filled with so much that is amazing — sacred cows, garishly painted buses, holy people, push carts — how do Indians go about their business without being dumbstruck by it all?"

"Because their way of living is normal to them," he told me. "From their perspective, a string of American strip malls with deserted sidewalks would appear strange."

True.

Salem, like most American cities, lacks a vibrant street life. Public spaces are almost entirely empty of anything captivating. Our autocentric lifestyle leaves us encased much of the time within our own car-worlds.

On to the good news: Salemians who express themselves in novel ways have a ready audience. Downtown is not Venice Beach. Commercial Street is not an Indian bazaar.

Our town's blandness can be viewed as a creative strength. A dash of color in a black-and-white world dazzles the eye. Imagine trying to stand out as a moviemaker in Hollywood.

As the saying goes, in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king. Let loose your novelty powers. Salem will bow down in gratitude.

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Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at [hinesblog.com](http://hinesblog.com)