

My Dysfunctional Relationship With Salem

Hopefully I don't have a brain tumor that's making me lose touch with reality to a greater degree than I already am.

I've been having some inexplicable sensations. They're coming more often. Out of the blue I'll be somewhere in Salem and have an unfamiliar feeling.

"Hey, this town is pretty damn cool. Maybe my wife and I should live here for the rest of our lives."

Weird! Freaky!

I'll check to make sure my mind is still inhabiting the body which has been so critical of this town for so long. Yes, the guy who is having warm fuzzy thoughts about Salem sure looks like the dude who is out to strange it up.

Reminds me of Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

There's a lot to like about Salem. Everyone has their favorites. I love downtown, Minto Brown Park, coffeehouses and brewpubs, Capitol Mall, the Willamette River, Progressive Film series. Plus so many likable people.

There's also a lot not to like. A minimally vibrant urban core. Lack of mass transit and decent bike lanes. Clueless city leaders. Ugly strip mall sprawl.

After 37 years of living in or near Salem, I seem to be settling into a pleasantly dysfunctional relationship with this town. Like Sharon Stone's character in "Basic Instinct," Salem allures me. Even when she is out to destroy me.

Salem and I, we're becoming like those charming elderly couples who gripe at each other constantly.

"I would have been better off never getting married to this old coot. Should have gotten hooked to my high school boyfriend and saved myself from fifty years of grief."

Then they smile, hug, kiss with wrinkled lips. These lovers always will be together. Bitching and complaining about their partner's faults all the way.

The plain truth is, there's no such thing as "Salem."

This word is an abstraction, a place-holder for stuff that actually does exist. Salem's reality lives within the awareness of everyone who is conscious of this place, just as the love of an old married couple is within themselves, not anywhere outside.

So there are as many Salems as the people living here, 160,000 or so. And inside each of them are, as Whitman said, multitudinous viewpoints of this town.

I've been asked, "Since you hate Salem so much, why do you still live here?" To which I reply, "Because I love Salem." If they say, "Then why do you criticize this town?" the answer is easy. "Because I hate Salem."

Imagine yourself without your flaws, shortcomings, foibles, weaknesses, paradoxes, quirks, dark side. You wouldn't be you. You'd be someone else.

Same with Salem. The good comes with the bad, the enticing with the bland.

How about celebrating our uncool side with an annual So-Lame Festival? Let's embrace our putdown nickname. Salem's lameness is an attraction as well as a turnoff.

I'll be the first to enter a watching paint dry contest.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com