

Step aside or face escalator rage

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Montreal Gazette

Thursday, May 09, 2002

When he was a wee one, Werner von Braun set a big goal for himself: shoot for the stars. Alas, as pundits have pointed out, before von Braun found refuge in the U.S. and became a pioneer of that country's space program, he often hit London instead during those dark days of World War II - with the V-2 rockets he helped develop for Hitler's Third Reich.

Darryl Levine, by contrast, has set his sights on a much smaller goal. He simply wants civic authorities here to implement some escalator etiquette.

Is it too much to ask that stationary folks on the escalator stay to the right in order that those in a hurry can pass on the left? Evidently, yes.

Since undertaking this cause, Levine, 27, a normally mild-mannered copywriter for a computer-based health-care education company, has found himself in the crossfire. Hundreds of Montrealers have responded to his call and have signed his online escalator-passing petition. However, others believe that if Levine or other like-minded folk are so pressed for time, they should take the bloody stairs instead.

In a perfect world, the latter could be a solution. But as Star Wars sage Yoda might note: perfect, this world ain't.

Who among us has not found ourselves stuck behind a babbling twosome on an escalator as our métro pulls into the station, and we are late for an appointment, and the next train won't come for another 10 minutes, and we're so desperate that we contemplate hurdling the babbling twosome in front of us or even sliding down the railing like they do in the movies, except that all those bolts imbedded on the railing would make the ride down about as enjoyable as a visit to the proctologist ... if you catch my drift?

Hindsight is 20/20. If we only knew how events could transpire, we probably would take the bloody stairs.

Levine has been on this crusade for the last nine years, after an unfortunate encounter on a métro escalator. Still, he feels a little sheepish. He recognizes that this mission doesn't rank up there with bashing the atom, finding a cure for cancer, thwarting terrorism or deciphering the plethora of cable configurations in the TV Times.

"This is probably one of the least important issues in the world - except when you're stuck on an escalator. Then there's nothing more important," opines the 27-year-old N.D.G. resident.

He only wants to eliminate escalator-induced stress to avert an outbreak of escalator rage - all for the greater good.

A little background is in order: Levine, who has a degree in philosophy from McGill and a degree in journalism from Concordia, takes the métro to work every day. He invariably stands, but on the right side. His favourite West Wing character is Sam's prostitute girlfriend - which has absolutely nothing to do with anything, other than to illustrate what kind of compassionate human he really is.

The issue for Levine all boils down to sharing public space, be it escalators or highways. His immediate target is the Société de Transport de Montréal. He wants the STM to post "Stand Right, Walk Left" signs, or pictograms suggesting the same, along the escalators of the city's 65 métro stations, as is the case in the London, Tokyo, Toronto and Edmonton undergrounds.

But the STM is not biting. Rather, it prefers riders to remain immobile in order to avoid escalator imbalance which triggers accidents. Evidently, this is in accordance with the instructions from escalator makers.

Yet Levine states that in the course of his research he hasn't heard of any major calamities where the "Stand Right, Walk Left" rule is in effect.

"If the STM - which is conscious of etiquette in other areas - is so concerned about accidents on escalators, then they should post some sign stipulating riders not to move," Levine says.

But Levine believes it all boils down to an age-old dilemma: "There are two kinds of people in this world: those who like to stand and can't understand why others are in such a rush, and there are those who like to get places faster and can't understand why others don't want to share the escalator."

If this issue seems utterly Seinfeld-ian - as in much ado about nothing - it's no surprise that Levine has a Jerry Seinfeld quote at the ready that sums up his views as well: "The other people I hate (apart from those who ride through airports in golf carts) are those who get on to the moving walkway and just stand there. Like it's a ride. 'Excuse me, there are no animated pirates or bears along the way here. Do your legs work at all?' "

Cruel, but fair.

- Sign Levine's online petition at www.petitiononline.com/stm2002/
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