

 parents

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## My Family's Encounters With An Often Shirtless, Longboarding Opera Singer

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**PHOTO © KESHA31132/TWENTY20**

Every day in the late afternoon, when weather permits, we can hear his voice. Faintly at first, it rises from the north and increases in volume until we are flooded with a full-voiced tenor coming from a dude (this really is the best term) drifting down our street on a longboard.

In downtown Toronto, where we live, our kids often encounter eccentric characters like this. When this happens, my partner and I try to turn interactions with strangers into opportunities for our kids to exercise their empathy muscles.

Our longboarding friend is often festooned with ribbons. He is rarely wearing a shirt and his skin is dark from the constant sun except where he's painted lines and figures on his skin like an extra from *Mad Max*.

“Good acoustics here!” he yells as he circles the tiny park across from our house. Last month he saw birthday balloons on our porch and sang *Happy Birthday* to our middle daughter.

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## **A Vibrant Neighbourhood**

When people find out that we live in the heart of the city they often express concern about homeless people, the mentally ill or some vaguely defined “inner-city” menace. It’s true that there can be some unsettling moments on the subway when someone is experiencing a mental health crisis, and more than once I have placed myself physically between my kids and a person who wasn’t acting in accordance with social norms.

But those encounters have led to some interesting conversations with our kids about mental health and about diversity: not the racial or ethnic kind we’re used to talking about, but about neurodiversity, and why it’s important to try and interact with compassion and without judgment.

Most Friday evenings we go swimming at the community centre in our neighbourhood. There is a woman that comes every week who talks to herself constantly, both in the pool and in the change room afterward.

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"They often express concern about homeless people, the mentally ill or some vaguely defined 'inner-city' menace."

“Who is she talking to?” asked one of our daughters one night, feeling uncomfortable. “I’m not sure,” answered my wife. “Some people hear voices in their heads and talk to them. Some people have tics that they get stuck on, like words or phrases.”

Most of the parents in the change room just advised their kids to ignore her.

“She hasn’t given us any reason to think she’s dangerous,” said my wife, “so we continue getting changed (without dropping our socks in that puddle).”

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# Not Every Encounter Has Felt Safe

Sometimes, however, people's actions do suggest violence, and compassion gives way to self-preservation.

Once, in an elevator at a subway station, my wife and kids were enclosed with a man and a shopping cart teeming with clothes who started swearing at them.

My wife pulled the kids off the elevator as quickly as possible.

"He was angry," said my wife to the astonished kids, "so we'll leave him alone."

They were shaken by the encounter. It certainly wasn't the pleasant kind of surprise that drifts down the street in song.

To process unsettling encounters, we sometimes try to find volunteer opportunities with organizations in the neighbourhood that work to combat poverty.

A few weeks ago, driving back into the city from a weekend away, our car was approached by what looked to be a homeless man asking for change on the highway off-ramp.

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"Swathed in a Burning Man vibe, it turns out that our longboard visitor really does have an extraordinary voice."

Our middle daughter was upset.

"How desperate do you have to be to risk your life in traffic for some change?" she asked.

She couldn't believe that there are people in our city who don't have homes to go to or can't afford to eat three proper meals a day. So we looked for shifts at the nearest Daily Bread food bank to turn her discomfort into advocacy.

Discomfort, fear and distress are certainly not emotions that I'm eager for my children to experience, especially as they interact with other people.

But experience them they inevitably will, and I'd prefer their first encounters with mental illness and poverty to be with my wife and I so we can talk about how it feels. After all, there can be moments of unexpected delight in experiencing the city's more colourful characters.

Swathed in a Burning Man vibe, it turns out that our longboard visitor really does have an extraordinary voice.

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