



REEL CULTURE

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“Craigslist Joe”: Technology, Community and Adventure

In anticipation of our trip home to Florida and our subsequent day in the Gulf of Mexico, I decided that my daughter and I truly needed to snorkel. The water is perfectly clear and while there are no coral reefs like those in Mexico, it’s still a stunning sight to see. Thing is, a snorkel, mask and fins are not cheap! Neither am I but, still, a budget is a budget. So I found a set on Craigslist and today will drive to the home of some strange man and buy his very slightly used fun-in-the-sun toys. If I listen to some of the masses, I should fear for my life. Surely he only says that he has a snorkel. In reality he lures people over, under the guise of snorkels, and kills them methodically. That’s the Craigslist community, right?

Nothing will serve to shatter that myth more than the documentary “Craigslist Joe.” This young man, Joe, decides to take 31 days of his life and live completely off of Craigslist. He walks away from his home with no money, no contact with anyone he knows, a new telephone number, new email addresses, a laptop, cell phone and a guy (that he found on Craigslist) to film the experience. He wants to know to what extent, in our indulgence in capitalism and technology, have we lost our sense of community. He wants to connect with people

in the United States, get a snapshot of his country and use technology to do so.

I don’t want to reveal too much about his adventure, as that would ruin your experience of watching the doc. Suffice it to say that he indeed finds a community and they are full of generosity and spirit.

Over the course of the month, and using nothing but Craigslist connections, Joe is given food and a place to “crash.” He volunteers; takes dance classes; works for a bit of money. He goes to Open Mic nights in clubs. Through the “Ride Share” link, he manages to catch a lift from southern California to Portland, Oregon, to Seattle Washington, to Chicago, Illinois, to Vermont; to New York, then south to Florida, Louisiana and, back to California. Maybe you know this and maybe you’ll be just as surprised as I was – people are more than happy to invite you into their car, not so much for help with gas money but for the companionship on a long ride.

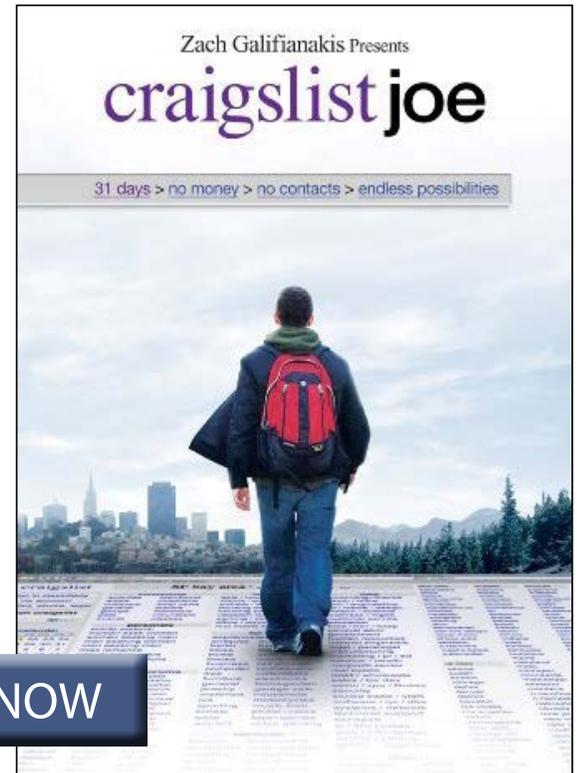
As a sociologist, I was struck by the “types” of people that Joe encountered. With one or two slight exceptions, all of the folk that help him out are working class or lower-middle class. We don’t see a Mercedes pick him up nor a wealthy family invite him into their homes. No, the people that open themselves to him have humble abodes and cars that sometimes work and other times, not

so much. They tend to be young, like Joe, but there are certainly the older-than-Joes that find his mission valid and moving and are more than willing to assist. And not just assist – they invite him in, tell him their stories and, offer to do his meager laundry.

Several of his companions wax philosophical about life. One driver remarks that, when you are on the road (as Joe is) “Time is out the window.” A young woman who Joes travels with from New York to Florida remarks on how the adventure is everything – “life” is what’s important. Doing what some folk would deem “crazy” (i.e., connecting with a total stranger), most of these people are very intentional about their lives and their relationships to people around them.

Just as an aside and not to be sociologically cynical but, I could also see that he had certain advantages during his life on the road. First, Joe is a very “all-American”, white, none-intimidating young man. I wonder if a racial minority had conducted this experiment if they would have encountered such openness and welcoming. Or a woman, or someone very clearly from the lower class. Also he had a cameraman with him – adding to the allure (and the potential to star in a documentary). That aside, his tale remains heartwarming.

When Joe meets with Craig of Craigslist, the founder of the popular website remarks that, in his experiences, “...people are overwhelmingly trustworthy and generous”. Upon Joe’s return, his mother asks if he can briefly summarize his month embedded in adventure via Craigslist. As he chokes up, the only word that comes to him is “Inspiring.” Just as Craig has observed, people tend NOT to be callous and unconcerned with their “neighbors”. Unlike the myth of Craigslist as the site for murder and mayhem, Joe discovered



that, no, we have most certainly not lost our sense of community. And, no, technology (at least in this form) has not created a world of isolation and suspicion.

So, as I head out in a few hours, I am not only excited that I will have a snorkel, mask and fins to take to Florida – I am also looking forward to that brief encounter we have with the people around us. If it’s like other Craigslist purchases I have made, the short exchange will include a brief talk – about the neighborhood, about where we are from, about our need/desire for said purchase. I will drive away with my fun toys and the knowledge that most of us are really nice people.

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