

Bill Rea ? Do I look suspicious?

The RCMP has put out a request for public assistance in finding two men who were apparently ?exhibiting suspicious behavior? in the vicinity of the Rogers Centre in Toronto Aug. 31.

This ?suspicious? activity evidently took place the same day the Toronto Blue Jays were hosting a ball game against the Indians of Cleveland. I have also subsequently learned that then prime minister Stephen Harper was scheduled to attend the match.

Descriptions of the two men have been distributed, and a grainy photograph has been released.

Considering the mood of the times and the possible threat of terrorist attacks, it's not hard to understand why security forces would be on their guard. Granted, one gets a little curious as to why they waited almost three months before enlisting the aid of the public.

On the other hand, one assumes the people running investigations for the RCMP are pros, and therefore know what they're doing.

But what really got me thinking in all this is what constitutes ?suspicious? behavior. Can someone define that for me?

It also got me wondering if I ever do things that might be deemed ?suspicious.? I probably do.

It also raised the question of at what point should any of us start being ?suspicious? of the actions of others? We have to bear in mind that people who might look ?suspicious? may simply be going about their business, and I really worry about the day when that will be a problem.

As many of you know, I attend many events in the community with a camera bag hanging off my shoulder and a camera slung around my neck. People who don't know me may well wonder what that guy's doing at such an event with a camera. I guess such queries are not quite as common now as they once might have been. Many people carry phones or devices that also have photographic capability. It's really no longer cause for suspicion, at least for the moment.

The fact is when I'm in the field covering events, I'm mindful that some people might be wondering what I'm up to. I usually make an effort to avoid arousing suspicion, although there is the possibility that such efforts on their own might be viewed as suspicious. There's no winning in some cases.

It's also hard to blame people for getting their antenna up when they see something that's not part of the ordinary.

There was an occasion about 20 years ago when I was working in Toronto. One of our advertisers was an auto-repair business. The proprietor had asked that a photograph of the business be included in his ad, and the sales rep passed the request on to me. It was a nice day, and the establishment was just a couple of minutes walk from the office, so I grabbed my camera and strolled down the block on my mission. Taking the necessary picture presented few problems.

But as I was packing up the camera and heading back to the office, a great big guy emerged from the garage and angrily demanded to know what I was doing. This fellow was not the owner of the company, and I briefly toyed with the idea of telling him what I was doing was none of his business. But I also realized I had nothing to hide, so I explained what I was doing. Besides, he was a lot bigger than me. I don't think he believed me.

I wasn't angry with this chap. Some person he had never seen before came up and took a picture of the building where he was employed, so he investigated. I don't know if his employer would have approved, and I do think his tone and manner represented a clear case of over reacting. Yet he had questions, and courtesy, if nothing else, obliged me to try and answer them.

Incidentally, this was a couple of years before 9-11. I wonder what might have happened had he thought I was some kind of terrorist. This issue took on a different meaning for me during the summer.

There was a young girl living on a Caledon farm property who had been a little concerned that someone had stopped on the road, got out of the car and had photographed the farmhouse and barn, then got back in the car and left.

She understandably wondered why some stranger would have stopped and taken a picture of the house in which she lives.

There were a couple of possible explanations, including the fact the scene might just have been attractive and the person taking the picture wanted to preserve that. It might have been the inspiration for the creation of a work of art. There are lots of artists and aspiring artists out there.

My late father took up oil painting in his late 40s, and devoted lots of his spare time in the next 20-or-so years that he lived trying to be creative. Some of his works were better than others. One of his seascapes (inspired, I believe, by a picture he took on trip to the Maritimes shortly after his retirement) hangs on the wall of my office. He was always on the lookout for interesting scenes to photograph, with the idea of painting them at some later date. I know he killed several weekend afternoons driving around rural areas looking for artistic inspirations, and since Caledon is close to the west end of Toronto where he lived, I'm sure he got lots of pictures of some local scenes. Last I recall, those pictures are in my brother's possession, and I wouldn't be surprised if the collection includes shots of the homestead of the farm family that I married into some years later (the pictures would have been taken years before I had ever heard of community newspapers in Caledon).

Would such photography be deemed ?suspicious??

What if some 40 years ago, that young girl destined to one day be my spouse had seen a total stranger taking pictures of her home. True, I think my dad had an honest face, but would her curiosity, if not suspicions, have been aroused? And the fact is, he wouldn't have been doing anything wrong. He couldn't have been accused of trespassing, and I don't think it's a crime to stand on public land photographing pleasing scenes.

How would such activity be viewed today?

During the time I've been in the line of work, I've come to know lots of parliamentarians. One of them once mentioned to me that he had stood for his photograph in front of a property that had been prominent in the local news. Someone claiming to be a representative of the owner of the property had accosted him, telling him he had no business taking such pictures.

I was asked for my opinion, and I mentioned to him that I had taken outdoor pictures of him lots of times, with private homes in the background. He and I were not in the habit of knocking on every one of those doors, seeking authorization to use the picture.

My job sometimes requires me to look ?suspicious,? without seeking authorization.

No, I'm not a terrorist

