

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Summer 2000

Dear Reader,

Over the past couple of months, in the course of working with a neighborhood group, I've had the opportunity to meet a large number of my neighbors. Half-familiar faces now have names, and previously unremarkable housefronts are now the homes of people I know, even if only to wave at or say hello to.

This experience has given me a renewed appreciation for the value of neighborhoods. It had been many years since I felt involved in my community, or was even on regular speaking terms with my neighbors. Now, I thoroughly enjoy walking into the local video store or market and seeing people I know.

Pondering the idea of what makes a successful neighborhood has also given me a greater appreciation for the values of both commonality and diversity. Looking back over the neighborhoods I've lived in, I recall both the feeling of comfort and familiarity on the one hand, and, on the other, the excitement of all the different faces and places just beyond my doorstep, waiting to be explored.

Just the facts...

- Studies show that areas with trees and grass contribute to better social and parental functioning.
- Social isolation is as big a health risk factor as is smoking.

Neighborhoods

A while back I heard an interesting story on the radio about one community's efforts to promote its neighborhoods. I was surprised by the the opinion of one critic, who maintained that the entire concept of neighborhood was "obsolete", but it was gratifying to hear his opinion contradicted by a wide variety of groups, all promoting the benefits of vibrant neighborhoods. Studies have shown that a sense of community is an important component of mental health. Far from being "obsolete", neighborhoods often fill a critical role by creating a feeling of shared experience that supports us in times of stress, spurs us on in times of struggle, and welcomes us home even after a long absence.

For both good and ill, neighborhoods often feel like extended families. While residents of a neighborhood share some common experience of place and routine, all the various idiosyncrasies and quirks of our daily lives, our recreational habits, our housekeeping preferences, can raise issues amongst neighbors. Even the most homogeneous neighborhoods harbor a huge range of personalities and preferences. Sometimes, it feels as if we've all been thrown together simply to make life difficult for each other. Yet, as with families, the ability to cope with problems and respect all the various needs and desires is a large part of what makes a neighborhood work.

In our daily lives, we tend to get to know our neighbors through a repetition of small, mundane exchanges, and it's that casual familiarity which breaks down barriers that separate us. Numerous studies show that proximity and frequency of contact are important in the development of relationships and, eventually, friendships. The physical nature of our surroundings plays a key role in the ease of these interactions and has a direct impact on the nature of the relationships which do develop. Places that create opportunities for casual greetings and conversation, or that bring people together in common daily tasks, are more likely to foster the kinds of relationships that create a vibrant neighborhood.

Even neighborhoods that hardly seem like warm, inviting places can show a surprising amount of solidarity. One of the most common stories following natural catastrophes is of neighborhoods coming together for mutual assistance and support. Fortunately though, we don't need to experience disaster to appreciate our neighbors. Humans have long tended to cluster together in groups. Not only does this meet many of our emotional needs, but often some of our physical needs as well. Many areas form neighborhood watch groups that provide a sense of empowerment, as well as security. Even small favors like picking up a vacationing neighbor's mail can make someone's life a bit easier.

Neighborhoods, particularly the one(s) we grew up in, become part of our identity and help shape what we will become. Healthy neighborhoods do a better job of producing healthy, positive, community-oriented people, and they're more enjoyable places to live. Getting involved in one's neighborhood, even if it means nothing more than greeting your neighbors, helps create a healthy community, and that's something that will never become "obsolete".

There's No Place Like Home

During a recent visit to my childhood neighborhood, I realized how much my definition of *neighborhood* has changed over the years. I had the almost surreal experience of attending a gathering of kids whom I'd grown up with, except we weren't kids anymore. We were all adults with jobs and families of our own, dispersed nearly from coast to coast. As I looked around at the people who had formed my first impression of what neighbors were, it was hard not to see us as we were thirty-plus years ago. Our world at that time was defined by four houses in a row. For many years, I barely ventured beyond our little enclave, and felt little need to do so. Everything I needed was right there.

As I grew older, I expanded my concept of neighborhood by extending my geographical boundaries. Soon, it included just about anywhere I could reach on my bike. Just a few short years later, as I drove around in my first car, a much larger swath of land marked *my neighborhood*. By now, living three thousand miles away, almost any town between Detroit and Ann Arbor, a distance of nearly forty miles, could be broadly classified as *my old neighborhood*.

Since moving out of the family home, I have lived in many different neighborhoods in many states. In some, I very quickly developed the sense that I "belonged". In others, I don't know if I would have ever felt that way. I've jogged

since high school, and I've been able to cover a fair amount of territory by foot in the areas I've lived. I've noticed that some areas have the feel of being a "neighborhood", while others are simply a collection of dwellings. I find myself gravitating toward the areas with lots of plants and trees; the more there are and the bigger they are, the better. I'm attracted toward sections with features that pull people naturally toward the fronts of the houses: front porches, big front windows, or kids' toys scattered about.

Whenever I visit a new city or town, I love to drive around and check out the neighborhoods. I think about the people I see washing their cars; I see myself playing in the parks with my son; I imagine what it'd be like to live in that house with the orange front door; I look at the landscaping, wondering what plants would grow in my yard. I ask myself, "what kind of neighborhood does this feel like? Could I live here?"

It's easy to romanticize the neighborhood I grew up in, though I know it wasn't perfect. The very same things that made it wonderful for me as a small child, drove me to tears of boredom as a teenager. I had to get far, far away as a young adult just to learn who *I* was. Now, I don't know if I could ever go back. For one thing, those winters are just too cold! However, on a late spring morning, chatting with old friends, I was fortunate to be allowed the luxury of nostalgic daydreams, knowing that no matter how far I may have travelled I'm still welcome in my old neighborhood.

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Won't you be my neighbor?

Fred Rogers