

NEIGHBORS

Scott Russell Sanders

One night, deep in winter, deep in the Ohio countryside, midway through the 1950s when I was a boy of ten or so, there came a knocking at our farmhouse door. Glad of an excuse to escape from the scary movie that was playing on our brand-new TV, with its round screen and murky black-and-white picture, I ran to answer the knock.

Opening the door, I found our neighbor from down the road, Mrs. Thompson, with a baby in her arms and her other four children huddled behind her, shivering. The look on Mrs. Thompson's face was even scarier than the movie. "I need to ask your parents a favor," she said.

Before I could fetch them, my father and mother came to the door, having heard the urgency in Mrs. Thompson's voice even above the spooky music on TV. To my relief, the one-eyed monster, as my father called it, was now silent.

My mother hustled them all inside, laying a hand on the head of the baby and on each of the kids in turn as they scurried by like a troop of ducklings. They were wearing pajamas under their raggedy coats, and worn-out sneakers caked with snow. No boots, no gloves, no hats. No wonder they were shivering. I knew they were poor, because the two kids who were old enough for school climbed on the bus wearing the same clothes every day. My parents often sent my sister or me down the road to their place with vegetables from our garden or Mason jars from our canning shelves. "To share the wealth," my mother would say.

The favor that Mrs. Thompson shyly asked was if she and her children could spend the night until they found some other place to live, because their house had burned down. Only then did I notice the smell of smoke.

“Burned down?” my father repeated. He flung open the door and stared out, but there was nothing to see except the snowy fields and starry sky, because the Thompsons’ place was half a mile away, beyond a bend in the road. “Where’s Jimmy?” my father asked, about the man whom I knew to call Mr. Thompson and knew to avoid because of his foul temper.

“Took off in his truck,” Mrs. Thompson said. “It was him as started the fire. He fell asleep smoking.”

My mother and big sister quickly made up pallets for the kids; put the baby, who had slept through the whole ruckus, in a bassinette that my own little brother had recently left for a crib; and put fresh sheets on my bed for Mrs. Thompson.

I slept on the couch that night, and off and on for weeks afterward, until my father and a dozen or so of our neighbors finished building a new house on the foundations of the tarpaper shack that had burned. The materials were donated or purchased with money gathered in local stores and churches, and, of course, the men, mostly farmers or carpenters or factory workers, volunteered their labor. Women delivered casseroles and cakes and soup and a feast of other foods to our door almost every day while the Thompsons stayed with us.

Soon after Mrs. Thompson and her children moved into the new house, Mr. Thompson returned from wherever he had been wandering. But he stayed only a few days, and then he left for good.

Why he left for good I did not learn until years later, when I asked my father if he knew the reason. My father explained that Jimmy Thompson used to beat Mrs. Thompson and the kids, who often showed up at school or the hospital covered in bruises. When my father learned of this, he talked to the sheriff, who talked with Mrs. Thompson and then secured a restraining order. When the beatings continued, despite the court order, my father paid a visit to the house and had what he

called a heart to heart talk with Jimmy, who saw the benefits of moving elsewhere and leaving the family in peace.

Knowing that my father had been a Golden Gloves boxer in his early days, I asked, “Did you threaten him?”

“I told him if he hit anybody in his household one more time, and I learned of it, he would have to hit me next, or try to, and he could find out how it felt.”

I recall this story as an especially vivid example of the mutual care I witnessed in the rural Ohio community where I grew up. My parents and all the other grownups had lived through the Great Depression and World War II; they knew they needed one another. When someone fell sick, lost a job or a child, neighbors would nurse them, feed them, console them. Neighbors would loan tools, offer rides to town, share garden bounty, listen to happy news or sorrows, visit shut-ins, and swap work. The people in that community recognized one another's dogs and horses and cows, and made sure any stray animal was returned to its own pasture or house. They kept an eye out for one another's children. We kids roamed freely over everybody's land, knowing we could knock on any door for help. Once, when I fell through river ice while checking muskrat traps, I staggered to the nearest farmhouse, where the elderly couple thawed me out by their woodstove and thanked me for livening up their morning.

I do not mean to romanticize that rural community. Jimmy Thompson was not the only scoundrel. There were grumps and gossips among us, but no saints. Nor were there any African Americans or Asian Americans. I believe that my parents would not have distinguished among neighbors on the basis of race or ethnicity, a belief supported by what I observed in their later years when they lived in cities in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Ontario. How many others on those Ohio

back roads would have been equally tolerant, I cannot say, but I recognize that the all-white homogeneity of our community eased the way to a culture of mutual care. It also helped that there were no rich people, so nobody suffered from the delusion that money could buy all the necessary help or comfort. People knew that sooner or later they would need a hand or a hug, a recipe or advice; they would need a neighbor, not a hireling, to rescue them from loneliness or loss. Knowing their own vulnerability, they had a livelier sense of what others needed or suffered.

The neighborly culture I observed in the 1950s was shaped by other circumstances that are less common in America today. Because a greater stigma was attached to divorce and to pregnancy outside of wedlock, and because women had few options for supporting themselves without a husband, nearly every family had two parents. Many women, by choice or necessity, were fulltime homemakers. In addition, households often contained grandparents or other kinfolk. So there were grownups at home during the day, available to look in on an ailing neighbor or help can tomatoes or hold a fretful baby. People often worked outdoors, repairing their houses and cranky machines, weeding gardens or mending fences. There were no electronic attractions indoors aside from primitive televisions, so children commonly played outdoors, requiring no equipment aside from a ball and bat and mitt, perhaps, or a bow and arrows and a bale of hay, and requiring no guidance except from their imagination. Chores also kept children in the open air, filling water troughs in the barn lot or gathering eggs from the chicken coop. In hot weather, families sat on porches in the evening, listening to the radio, reading books aloud, playing cards or board games and telling stories, all within sight of passersby who would stop to chat.

It's clear most Americans would not choose to go back to such a world even if we could. In our millions, we have chosen air-conditioning, jumbo TVs, video games, and sundry other electronic devices, food from grocery stores or fast food joints, and a life spent almost entirely indoors. Without leaving our desks or easy chairs, we can tap into news and knowledge and products from

around the world. Who could regret this enlargement of our awareness and reach? Who could regret that our society has become more appreciative of racial and ethnic and sexual diversity, however halting and imperfect the changes in attitude may be? Who could regret that women now enjoy wider opportunities for learning and living and working than they did in the 1950s?

These gains have come at a cost, however. Our mechanical conveniences, proliferating gadgets, and industrially-grown foods have placed an ever-increasing strain on Earth. Since 1950, for example, per capita consumption of electricity in the United States has nearly doubled, contributing to a tripling of our greenhouse gas emissions. During that same period, the rate of obesity in America has also tripled, affecting nearly a fifth of children and fully a third of adults, and this trend has placed an increasing strain on our healthcare system. Living indoors has cut us off from neighbors as well as nature. Thanks to electronic technology, we may learn about the needs of people in distant nations, may donate money to global causes, and that is all to the good, but we may not know the person who lives next door. Ignorant of our neighbors, we may be reluctant to walk in the streets, visit parks or allow our children to play outdoors. The increase in opportunities for women in paid employment, surely a change for the better, has led to a decrease in the care that women as full-time homemakers once provided to their children, kinfolk and communities. Insofar as that care is still provided, much of it is paid for, either directly out of pocket or indirectly through taxes.

The shift from a culture of care based on familiarity and affection to one based primarily on money has freed us from many burdens. It has also exposed us to risks. Junk food may ruin our children's health; junk media may dull their minds. Hiring strangers to repair our houses may lead to shoddy work or scams. The more we count on private wages, savings and loans to meet our needs, the more we may neglect the public wealth that our ancestors created—schools, libraries, parks, museums, civic organizations—as well as the natural wealth of healthy soil and water and air. Those

who cannot pay for necessities, such as medicines, may have to do without, unless they can secure help from government programs or charities. Those who can easily afford not only necessities but luxuries often resent paying taxes to benefit people whom they regard as lazy or alien or otherwise unworthy. When that resentment is turned into public policy, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the majority live in dread of job loss, accident, illness, divorce or other contingencies that might plunge them into poverty.

Loving one's neighbors, or at least caring for them without expecting to be paid, is in keeping with instructions from many of the world's scriptures, including the Bible, a respected authority in the community where I grew up. In that community, in that era, people looked after one another, trusting that they would be looked after in turn. They shared their abundance—of sweet corn, say, or plumbing skills—trusting that they would benefit from the abundance of others. Compassion might reinforce this mutual care, as when my mother hustled the shivering Thompson children into our house and fondly patted their heads, but the essential motive was practical. Being able to rely on neighbors made everyone more secure.

Anthropologists call this non-monetary exchange of goods and aid “reciprocity,” and they find it in every long-lasting culture. As a boy, I learned to call it neighborliness. Hearing that word today, one might be tempted to sigh or shudder—sigh, if one imagines people have become too selfish, too plugged-in, too mercenary to care for others; shudder, if one fears that neighbors will pry into one's business or add to one's responsibilities.

Isn't life easier if we mind our own business and let others mind theirs? Isn't the American way to be self-reliant, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and let others fend for themselves? Besides, who counts as a neighbor? Is it simply the person next door, whose house might burn

down? Is it anyone who lives on my block or my stretch of road? Should I consider as neighbors every- one in my town or city? All the members of my tribe, ethnic group or social class? All those who salute the same flag or worship the same god? Anybody anywhere who needs help? Who is my neighbor?

According to the Gospel of Luke, a wily lawyer asked that question of Jesus, who answered by telling a story: A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was set upon by thieves, stripped of his clothes, severely beaten and left in a ditch to die. First one and then another religious official, seeing the man, a fellow Jew, passed by on the far side of the road. A third traveler came along, a Samaritan, a person who by the customs of that time and place should have shunned the injured man. Instead, he bound up the man's wounds, delivered him to an inn and cared for him through the night. Next morning, he paid the innkeeper the equivalent of two days' wages to look after the man until he, the Samaritan, could return and pay whatever additional charges there might be. On finishing his story, Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"The one who showed him mercy," the lawyer replied.

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

That was a tall order when Jesus delivered it two thousand years ago, and it is an even taller order today. On a planet with more than seven billion people, there are more robbers than ever, not only burglars and muggers but also identity thieves, online scammers and financiers who bundle bad mortgages and rig markets; there also are far more injured people abandoned in prisons or camps or slums. The media bring us news of ethnic and religious hostilities that make the ancient rift between Jews and Samaritans seem mild by comparison; they bring us news of wars, coups, droughts, floods, famines and epidemics. Worldwide at the end of 2014 there were sixty million refugees displaced by such turmoil, the largest number ever recorded by the United Nations, and more than half of them

were children. Agencies ranging from Oxfam to the Pentagon have predicted that all of these threats will intensify under the combined impact of climate disruption and population growth, placing more and more people in jeopardy. Whose mercy can stretch to embrace so much need?

Psychologists first diagnosed “compassion fatigue” among nurses, mental health workers and others who care for trauma victims; in recent years they have observed the same condition among people who learn of trauma only through the media. Our screens blaze with images of disaster; our mailboxes and inboxes overflow with appeals for desperate causes. Dismayed by the scale of suffering, caregivers may burn out, viewers may tune out and all of us may retreat into numbness.

Yet neighborliness persists. In barrios, ghettos, villages and leafy cul-de-sacs, along country roads and disputed borders, inside high-rises and apartment buildings, in churches and synagogues and mosques, the practice of mutual care still goes on. What form it takes will vary from place to place, from person to person, depending on resources and circumstances. For an elder in a slum, it might be telling stories to children, and for those children it might be carrying jugs of water from the public tap to shut-ins who can no longer carry their own. For refugees fleeing war or famine, it might be taking turns carrying those who are too weak to walk. For a teenage girl in a suburb, it might be staying overnight with a woman down the street whose husband of fifty years recently died, and for that widow it might be teaching the girl how to bake bread. For a high school boy it might be sending a portion of his lawn-mowing earnings to UNICEF or CARE.

Even in a wired, crowded, money-driven world, neighborliness will survive. For we are a social species, with an inherited disposition for cooperation and sharing. We also have an instinct for selfishness, of course, a fact exploited by many advertisers and politicians and pundits. We are urged to think of ourselves as consumers rather than citizens. We are told that the pursuit of private greed

will produce the greatest good. Despite these appeals to selfishness, however, all but the most affluent or arrogant of us realize that we need one another; we are responsible to one another for practical as well as moral reasons.

Anyone fortunate enough to live under a roof and eat regular meals might volunteer in a homeless shelter or community kitchen; anyone skilled in music or computers or languages might offer free lessons; anyone adept at reading and writing might tutor adult learners or kids who are struggling in school. Sharing money can certainly be an expression of neighborliness. After all, the Samaritan paid the innkeeper to provide lodging for the man set upon by thieves. However much or little we have to spare, we can donate money to support causes in our own communities, such as free medical clinics or after-school programs, and we can support international service organizations such as Doctors without Borders, Habitat for Humanity or the Heifer Project. Even if we have no money to spare, we still have gifts to share—knowledge, perhaps, or laughter, a knack for listening or a kindly touch.

Before binding up the wounds of the man set upon by thieves, so the story goes, the Samaritan salved those wounds with oil. There was courage as well as kindness in that touch, for the injured man was not merely a stranger but a presumed enemy. Courage may or may not be required when we reach out to help others, but kindness always is. The Samaritan was moved by more than an expectation of reciprocity, for he could not hope to receive help in return. He was moved by compassion. To be a neighbor, the story teaches, is to show mercy.

The same lesson is taught in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and most other spiritual traditions: We should treat with compassion those whom we encounter who are in need. We may encounter them in our travels, as the Samaritan did, or learn about them on television, or meet them in the street, or find them knocking at our door. They may be wounded, hungry or sick; they may carry the smell of smoke in their clothes and need a house to replace the one that burned down; they

may need only a shoulder to cry on or a consoling hug. That we cannot meet every need even in our own communities, let alone in the world, is no excuse for despair. If we feel overwhelmed by the barrage of bad news, then let us disengage from the media for a spell, look around, and see what good we might do.