This Is America

The case for progress

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Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?

How interactions between neighbors reflect the democracy of everyday life.
Posted Jul 12, 2016


In Robert Frost’s classic poem, “Mending Wall,” a man tells an apple farmer that the two of them must maintain the stone boundary between their orchards. With a boulder firmly grasped in his hands, he declares that “Good fences makes good neighbors.” Sensing that “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” the apple farmer is not so sure. “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,” he tells us, “And to whom I was like to give offense.”

But, then again, the farmer – and Frost – understood and embraced the desire and need for people to mind their own business. “We’re too unseparated,” the poet also wrote, “And going home/From company means coming to our senses.”

In Good Neighbors, Nancy Rosenblum, a professor of Ethics in Politics and Government at Harvard University, examines how interactions between neighbors reflect what she calls “the democracy of everyday life in America.” Rosenblum maintains that neighborliness is a component of moral identity unfettered by contracts and commercial exchanges, workplace rules and regulations, and the collective purposes of philanthropic, civic and political engagement. Shaped in no small measure by American settler, immigrant, and suburban
traditions, it is marked by the aspirational and at times contradictory precepts of reciprocity among “decent folk,” speaking out, and live and let live.

Although neighborliness is often applied to “weighty, often fraught relations in that vital, sensitive place, home,” demanding judgment and self-discipline, Rosenblum emphasizes, it often flies beneath the radar of political theorists, psychologists, and public intellectuals. Her book goes a long way toward calling attention to the concept as a regulative ideal, whose absence diminishes our quality of life.

Implying a rough give and take parity among “decent folk,” the ideal of neighborliness, Rosenblum suggests, “eclipses social standing, class, religion, ethnic and racial identity.” In To Kill a Mockingbird, she indicates, Scout, the daughter of Atticus Finch, reminds the leader of a lynch mob that he once brought hickory nuts to her house and that she often played with his son. Mr. Cunningham squats down and puts his hands on Scout’s shoulders: “I’ll tell him you said hey, little lady…Let’s get going boys.”

Although she reads into the record the deeds of men and women who rescued their neighbors from vigilantes and the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, Rosenblum knows, of course, that in real life it doesn’t always work that way. She asks hard questions about why neighbors in the South participated in and attended the brutal murders of African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century and why so many neighbors turned a blind idea to (or applauded) the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. She wonders as well whether decent folks should inform authorities about drug dealers or illegal immigrants in their neighborhoods – and when live and let live reticence (as a recognition of mutual vulnerability and a check on sometimes arbitrary authorities) is appropriate. And she points out that lending and borrowing do not have a sociable, casual, economy of mutual favors character when dire poverty drives the requests.

Good Neighbors is a work in progress. Rosenblum tends to define neighbors as those living in residential proximity to one another, but she also acknowledges that contingency, individuality, and local norms “insure that neighbor relations” – and, I would add, expectations – “are variable.” She makes a start, but just a start, in distinguishing neighbors from friends (claiming that the former involve neither the necessities of life nor intimacies). And, perhaps unintentionally, she undercuts her analysis of the response to lynching in the South by acknowledging that the emergence of the democracy of everyday life as a regular feature of encounters between blacks and whites came much later.

Rosenblum refers, albeit briefly, to the impact of the Internet on privacy. And she points out that homeowner associations, co-ops and condominium agreements can be antithetical to informal, self-governing neighbor relations. She does not, however, examine the implications for neighborliness of what Bill Bishop has called “the big sort” – the self-imposed and economically driven residential segregation of people into remarkably homogenous communities. Do changing demographic patterns make it more likely, one wonders, that we will only extend the precepts of reciprocity, civility, and live and let live and “the quotidian disposition to see neighbors as ‘decent folks’” to people just like us?
Professor Rosenblum makes a compelling case for “the inestimable value” to each of us and all of us, “in everyday life, at home, and in extreme situations,” of the ethos of the good neighbor. But in the paralyzed and polarized times in which we live, you’ve got to wonder, don’t you, whether this “ethical bulwark against our own worst impulses and against the demons of cruelty and despotism, large and small,” will remain “an enduring substrate of democracy.”