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*Good Neighbor Nation: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America*

*Chapter 2. Taking Offense*

“Neighbor” is often used evaluatively; “good” is superfluous. We see neighborliness as a personal and social virtue, and lapses disqualify us from the title: “They be not neighbours, sir. They be near-dwellers.”<sup>1</sup> Sentimentality is smuggled into our terms, and experience sometimes confirms warm, unearned emotions, as in this report:

“The town of Essex, sleepy with the approach of winter, had detected the presence of newcomers and roused itself to greet us. In one week, two people knocked on the door of our rental house bearing actual welcome baskets, and three others came by to invite us to the Tuesday-night potluck at St. John’s Episcopal Church. .... The next week we met some people our own age who had us to dinner...the babies were laid down to sleep on the bed and the fiddles came out and the cabin filled up with music, like an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* but with beer.”<sup>2</sup>

These idylls are not dependable, or durable. The stories we tell are often indeed mostly miserable. They reflect our bafflement, our incredulity at the misconduct or sheer obliviousness of the people next door. We welcome any opportunity to recount our neighbor woes -- I never had to ask twice. We become agitated again in the telling. Relentlessly barking dogs, blaring televisions, incessant quarrels, an excess of domestic odors. Sounds that startle us at night and disturb our sleep. Bedraggled yards. Snooping and interfering in ways that make us anxious or hostile. Killing time. Wounding reputation:

A good neighbour, even in this,  
Is fatal sometimes, cuts your morning up  
To mince-meat of the very smallest talk,

Then helps to sugar her bohea at night  
With your reputation."<sup>3</sup>

The troubles neighbors cause us may be frivolous or costly. In any case, they are daily insults, inescapable. That our neighbor did not mean to offend is not a reliable barrier to our sense of injury. That's the thing about physical proximity: interference and offense are inevitable, and neighbors' casual, thoughtless words and actions can seem to be aimed at us. He didn't realize that loading the dumpster with materials left over from his home repair would make it hard for me to get rid of my trash. He wasn't guilty of negligence; my trash disposal was a bit more difficult but not impossible. But that hardly registers with me. To my mind, his selfish inattention to the overloaded dumpster has made my already stressed out life harder. In that moment, he is the last straw. We all know someone aggravated by (we might say fixated on) the neighbor who uses his lawn as a short-cut, shoddy new construction being erected next door, teen-agers massed on the sidewalk blocking the way, pets let loose to soil the hallway. We experience bad neighbors as more than a nuisance; and a nuisance, if it persists, can degrade everyday life.<sup>4</sup> A righteous sense of injury at the hands of a bad neighbor is endemic; few of us escape it entirely. We rail against him; he throws us into a rage. "Your next door neighbor is not a man", one wry observer wrote, "he is an environment. He is the barking of a dog; he is the noise of a piano; he is a dispute about a party wall; he is drains that are worse than yours; or roses that are better than yours."<sup>5</sup>

Plainly, the value we place on good neighbors comes at least as much from the grinding irritation, inveterate difficulty, ordinary vices, malice, and sometimes dangerousness of bad ones. So much so that "good neighbor" might be defined by the absence of trouble and offense. He is quiet. She minds her own business and leaves us alone. The predominance of bad experiences shouldn't be surprising. Neither should the fact that once we shed sentimentality, bad neighbor is the background against which good ones stand out in bright, sharp relief. We have so many opportunities to give and even more to take offense. There are so many ways to run amok.

"What is there wrong?"

"Something you just now said."

"What did I say?"<sup>6</sup>

Precisely because neighbor relations are carried on in the absence of defined rules of conduct and set obligations, without institutional constraints, lacking the shared purposes and specified outcomes that shape interactions at work and other social settings, temperament and disposition or just the mood of the day have comparatively free reign. Around home we are unguarded. We don't always think to arrange the face we present, to modulate our words and tone, to have an eye on our behavior when we step outside our door. The quotidian is often unthinking. Neighbors have latitude to be careless and inattentive, and to unleash their demons on one another. We have innumerable occasions to discharge our desire to get back at offenders, too, so that it may take enormous effort to "repress all appetite of our neighbour's hurt".<sup>7</sup>

My subject in this chapter is the phenomenology of taking offense, and my account will be familiar. When neighbors give offense we are drawn into the difficulties I survey: whether to keep our sense of injury to ourselves, the baffling accounting involved in responding to bad turns, the responsibility (if any) to speak up in support of aggrieved neighbors— to rally and take sides or to mind our own business. Through it all, what I call 'the democracy of everyday life' has a part in shaping the dynamic of taking offense and taking action in response. I begin here to make a case for the autonomy of the democracy of everyday life in relation to democratic institutions and practices proper.

### *Snobbery and The Very Best Neighbor*

There is a universe of reasons why neighbors take offense. It's best to begin with ordinary vices, and I'll illustrate with one prime bit of the field – snobbery – chosen because its effects and our responses are the readily accessible stuff of everyday life. In early English usage neighbor meant "to place in conjunction with something", and references were to the crown and nobility: "enighbour'd him to the Court", or "this ancient baron neighboured to the throne."<sup>8</sup> Even after the definition expanded to indicate residential proximity generally, 'neighbor' continued to draw attention to comparisons across class and status, as we know from novels whose plots turn on the complex social etiquette of hierarchical local society. The democratic ethos of "good neighbor" commends us to disregard status, wealth, origin, and personal history, and to regard our

neighbors simply as “decent folk”.<sup>\*</sup> In violation, some neighbors invite us to revolve around their magnificence. Our neighbors may be awful snobs. They believe they are superior, and want us to acknowledge it. This is not just a measure of relative wealth or social standing, education or connections. It is a way of using these to diminish us. That is the definition of snobbery: “the habit of making inequality hurt”.<sup>9</sup> Social climbers look up, of course; snobs also look down at social inferiors.

Quiet insults are common. Our superior neighbors refuse to acknowledge us; they cut us off; they withhold even the recognition of “how are you today?” They would exile us from the vicinity if they could (or not, if they enjoy displaying disdain). In one scenario two families on the same suburban block enact snobbery and its antidote, self-esteem: “She was a society matron...They lived in a different world...We didn’t bother with them and they didn’t bother with us.” Over time, both couples sold their houses and they ended up living in the same apartment building.

“When the lobby elevator door opened, there standing inside were my dad and Mr. Prewitt – he was steadying himself with a cane – both in their eighties, riding side by side in silence. Neighbors, one might say, to the end.”<sup>10</sup>

The status neighbors claim from having lived here the longest is the democratic substitute for descent. Indeed, the two may be intertwined: the Mayflower floated our family to America and “our people” settled Wellfleet. “The trouble with these new people” is a common refrain. In *Where I Was From* Joan Didion ruminates:

“I grew up in a California family that derived, from the single circumstance of having been what Ira Ewing’s mother called ‘born here for generations’, considerable pride, much of it, it seemed to me later, strikingly unearned”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> A virtual synonym for “good neighbor”, “decent folk” gathers in the qualities – practical and moral – that count when we size up the new couple next door in order to decide whether we will open ourselves to or close ourselves off from encounters. The criterion is not personal qualities or character overall. Instead, “decent folk” reflects a modest but good enough practical assessment that these neighbors are trustworthy for the purposes of ordinary give and take, however minimal. Which is to say they recognize the utility of good turns, the rough parity of give and take, and the power neighbors have to enhance or diminish the quality of life at home.

The native/newcomer divide may go back to the Dust Bowl or World War II or just a few years to first arrivals in a suburban subdivision or retirement community. The baseline Didion points to is some, any, point in time when we first arrived and things were ideal, after which things changed. (Of course, we can turn boasts by residents of longest standing back on them: “he has spent his life in a neighborhood no bigger than roughly nine blocks from end to end,” and “in over 87 years, she moved 150 feet” are evidence of stubborn or fearful immobility, sheer parochialism.<sup>12</sup>)

Our neighbors may not demonstrate their superiority by snubs and withholding. They may impose unceasing demands for recognition. We may be helpless to avoid or ignore their boastful self-presentation, and must resign ourselves to hearing them out and acknowledging their claims (if we can bear to) repeatedly for the sake of peace. If we don't feel forced to esteem our neighbors more than we think they deserve -- if we can say with equanimity “we didn't bother with them and they didn't bother with us”, we have retained our sense of proportion and our pride. We may have the good sense (and the will) to draw on reservoirs of patience. Less sensitivity to offense is a personal as well as social good particularly among neighbors for whom contact is inescapable. (I'm speaking here of snobbery, not behavior that is vicious and demeaning; I take up prejudice in the next chapter.<sup>13</sup>) Whether the behavior is harmless puffery or meant to diminish us, we are right to be more troubled by our inability to slough it off than by the exhibition of superiority itself.

It is a sign of the luster of the “good neighbor” ideal that people seize on *it* as the route to local celebrity; their ambition is to achieve the status of “best” neighbor. They are exhibitionists of good turns; their attentions and offers and their own housekeeping are aimed at demonstrating that they are exemplary. These very best neighbors are too strenuously present and ostentatiously helpful. Lady Bountiful offers unasked ministrations and she does not look for, indeed she deters, returns. She exults in the one-way donation of aid or advice, offerings of food or taking many more than her share of turns driving the carpool. Keep in mind that neighbors' good works are personal and direct, not at a remove. How do we understand and respond to this? We may attribute striving for the status of best neighbor to her advantages. Like Aristotle's magnanimous gentleman, our neighbor has unearned leisure, and the means to bestow gifts on the city.

She has the time to pick up the children at school because she doesn't have to work, we say, in a slightly accusatory or jealous tone. It may not be means and good fortune that shines on us from these superior neighbors, either, but superior personal capacities: Lord and Lady Bountiful manage their own lives so much better than we do that they can spill their surplus practicality and cheer onto us. We may see this as a virtue, a display of beneficence or rather as an unwelcome show of advantages that demands not just acknowledgment but gratitude. In either case our strenuous neighbor knows that reciprocity in kind is impossible for us – that is the point, and she is keen to accept shows of appreciation, even deference, in return. Naturally, we are ambivalent if not outright ungrateful.

We bring other perspectives in assessing encounters with “the very best neighbor”. We may attribute Lady Bountiful's ambition to her limited vision, her parochialism. She is driven by the desire for recognition as a good neighbor because this block is her whole world. She has no other setting for action and distinction. We may take the point further and say that overly-neighborly beneficence signals lack of appropriate social conscience, *faux* good works. All that magnanimity should be directed at the really needy. We don't enjoy being the object of her unremitting good will; we experience it as goodness tainted. We insist that what we come to see as charity is misdirected; it is not needed and unwanted. We resist those who make us the objects of their voluntary good works. We have invented negative terms to describe neighbors for whom assistance is their whole business and who approach us in that spirit. “Do gooder” is not a term of praise. Here from *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Scout's assessment of two neighbors on her street:

“True enough, [Miss Maudie] had an acid tongue in her head, and she did not go about the neighborhood doing good, as did Miss Stephanie Crawford. But while no one with a grain of sense trusted Miss Stephanie, Jem and I had considerable faith in Miss Maudie.”<sup>14</sup>

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Thoreau was the sharpest critic, calling self-styled do-gooders reformers, and improvers “men-harriers”, and made it personal: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.”<sup>15</sup>

Lady Bountiful's immoderate good turns provoke justifiable unease. We are on firm ground in holding back from welcoming her efforts much less acknowledging her perfect neighborliness. Striving to transcend "what anyone would do" here conflicts with the democratic ethos. Lady Bountiful's behavior translates as condescension, noblesse oblige. It is simply not the case that helping and improving are beyond reproach. Like exploitation, excessive favors and incessant advice fails the test of rough equivalence and inhibits easy reciprocity. Ostentatiously good neighbors put us in their debt, and then decline repayment or make it impossible. There is a one-way street. Reciprocity among "decent folk" is a core element of the democracy of everyday life.<sup>†</sup>

### *Keeping Offenses to Ourselves*

Normally we want others to see just how we have been wronged. We label this woman a bad neighbor that it is our misfortune to live beside, and broadcast this conviction. We invite others to make our business their own, and rally neighbors to take action to correct the abuse; I return to this shortly. Not always, though. Part of the phenomenology of taking offense is the impetus to keep the injury we believe we have been dealt to ourselves. Some harms suffered at the hands of neighbors are more painful than noisy air conditioners or the stench of cats. We must deal with dissemblers, manipulators, bullies, compulsive types, emotional aggressors. In some situations, making the wrongs inflicted on us a matter of public knowledge, much less urging neighbors to involve themselves in the affair and deal with the miscreant collectively, enhances our distress. We don't want our grievances to become public knowledge, and we don't want to elevate the bad neighbor into a local legend.

Consider betrayal, which along with snobbery is one of the ordinary vices neighbors inflict on one another. The list of Old Testament prohibitions against coveting begins with "your neighbor's wife". Proximity provides opportunity, the cover of regular interaction, and the *frisson* of discovery, which is why stories of infidelity often involve neighbors. It is colored by the fact that all the parties are likely to know one another. It is calculated to inflict maximum insult if uncovered, for choosing a neighbor as a partner in

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<sup>†</sup> In the Introduction I lay out the three elements: reciprocity among "decent folk", speaking out against cruelty and arbitrariness, and "live and let live".

betrayal brings the offense doubly home. There is the visible presence of the offender living one floor below, and the possibility that others nearby will learn all about it. We may keep our partner's deceitfulness to ourselves to ward off embarrassment, suffering the anxiety that the story will get around. Embarrassment is not all: neighbors' attention can disrupt whatever intimacy remains with our unfaithful partner. There is also the damage to our own inner life that comes from knowing that others know: focused on their inquiries or equally unbearable commiseration or their silence, our attention is diverted from our own feelings. We are distracted from minding our own business. We are grateful that neighbors don't know, or grateful for their reticence in not acknowledging what they know.

There are other betrayals, violations of trust. In Raymond Carver's story "Neighbors", Bill and Arlene Miller are vaguely envious of the couple that lives across the hall.

"It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life.

The Stones were always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country somewhere in connection with Jim's work".

When the Millers agree to feed Kitty and water the plants while the Stone's are out of town, they indulge their fantasies about this brighter life. The Stone's apartment seems at one visit cooler and darker, another time the air feels heavy and sweet; it is mysterious, a foreign country. During his visits to feed the cat, Bill takes sips of Chivas Regal, pockets pills from the Stone's medicine cabinet and cigarettes from the bedside table, tries on Jim's Hawaiian shirt and Arlene's bra, uses the toilet, acts out erotically on their bed (which "seemed enormous, with a fluffy white bedspread draped to the floor"). When it's her turn to feed and water, Arlene trespasses too. She finds pornographic pictures, and urges Bill to join her so that they can enjoy them together. Discovering that they have each turned the Stone's apartment into a place of experiment and thrilling disorientation, Bill and Arlene fantasize that their neighbors won't return and that the new world across the hall will be a permanent escape from the banality of their lives. One day, caught up in their play, they forget the Stones' key, locking themselves out. Kitty and plants go untended.<sup>16</sup> The Stones may never know the dimension of the violation of trust. If they do, they may keep it to themselves, neither confronting the Millers nor speaking out

against them to others in the building. They may be so appalled by the indignity of the trespass and feel so queasy about their own misjudgment that they do not want anyone to know.

Then there are the developments we experience as betrayal but keep to ourselves because we have a glimmer of recognition that we have not been victimized, however hurt we feel. The life-cycle of neighbor relations makes this point. Children are a source of circumstantial friendship; they intertwine this family on the block in our daily lives, more closely for a time than old friends and relatives.<sup>17</sup> The course of these relationships tracks children's development, and as they grow up they no longer provide the glue. Interactions fall off, neighbors lose their common ground. Sometimes these bonds outlast shared parenting, but typically they have an uneasy, drawn-out half-life and we revert awkwardly to exchanging bare greetings or mundane good turns. The time-frame of withdrawal is individual, which is why cooling feels like betrayal. A personal history of closeness can become an embarrassment in any fading relationship, but neighbors must routinely confront one another's diminished attention. These break-ups (or drifts) may be painful, but we don't speak out. It's not the case that our neighbor was a bad one or that our trust was misplaced. They did not deceive us. Simply, walling in and walling out is ongoing and changeable, and may give offense, intended or not.

Other inhibitions on speaking out against the offense are at work and a pair of reasons for reticence rooted in self-doubt are worth noting. Grating effects are not always known quantities that we can describe convincingly to others; indeed, we are sometimes unable to explain our reaction even to ourselves. It's not like squatters or junkies. The chemistry of proximity to certain individuals just arouses anxiety and hostility. "How about Mrs. Penny, a nuisance to her children, to everyone in this building, and particularly to me – something I simply cannot face?"<sup>18</sup> Why do frequent sightings of this young woman and her latest boyfriend set our teeth on edge? Why do we time our comings and goings to avoid that apparently unobjectionable elderly man? Or why, normally insensitive to aesthetics, do we experience the noxious color of the trim on the house next door as an act of aggression? In the same vein, uncertainty about what constitutes willful offense may provide cover for neighbors to inflict their damage for some time before we are sufficiently miserable that we admit we have been trespassed

on, exploited, misused. We wonder if our weakness or misjudgment is to blame. Do I invite mistreatment? Allow myself to be bullied? Am I a patsy or a fool? We find our situation at the hands of our neighbor humiliating. We are unable or unwilling to protest much less recruit others nearby to our cause. We don't play our part in the cycle of bad turns. There is something disreputable about our situation, we feel. We don't solicit sympathetic attention. If the ideal of good neighbor operates as internally regulative, so that shame keeps most of us most of the time from willfully inflicting offenses, shame can be inverted so that some neighbors are ashamed of being the objects of aggression. The dynamic has twists. For some people passivity has its own sorry gratifications. We wallow in our sense of injury. We become smugly moralistic (a close relative of sentimentality -- another easy appeal to prepared emotions.)

Exercised though we are, we may take another tack and practice calculated self-restraint. We pretend to ignore the offense. We do not acknowledge our neighbor's bad behavior. We are, with effort, reticent. We don't advise the couple across the way that because they neglect to pull down the shades we see them displaying themselves nude or arguing aggressively, and that it is upsetting to have to be exposed to these intimacies. Whether exhibitionist or just indifferent, they make the difficult business of minding our own business harder. Still, we accommodate. We give way to them because we estimate that things would be worse if we spoke out. Speaking up, we judge, is bound to initiate cycles of anger and recrimination, or at a minimum awkwardness that outlast the offense. Most of us exercise restraint most the time. We are selectively inattentive to slamming hallway doors or to doors left ajar, to neighbors who park their car "temporarily" in our assigned spot, to the disturbances caused by unsupervised children. We don't acknowledge slights or inconveniences even if we find our neighbor's indifference maddening or detect a whiff of malice. We pretend to disregard her selfishness, carelessness, nuisance, excessive demands and intrusions.

"I couldn't forgive him or like him but I saw that what he had done was to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people...I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child."<sup>19</sup>

Keeping offenses to oneself is a convention of denial that operates in almost every setting. We refrain from revealing our every thought and emotion. This limits collisions, and cautiousness is sensible among neighbors from whom there is no escape; we may be unable to entirely evade or shun them. Reticence or more simply “unacknowledgment” permits us to carry on our interactions, such as they are, without more upset. We take a warning from the neighbor who is in a state of perpetual agitation, who calls us out on every misstep and slight, real or imagined, who creates awkwardness and excites conflict. Knowing that our avenues of recourse are limited reinforces reticence. As does the premonition that our attempts to fashion a response will be fumbling and futile reinforce. No wonder offenders often do their bad turns with impunity.

### *Returning Bad Turns*

Deciding to respond to an offending neighbor, we take tentative initial steps: calm explanations, mild protests, typically reiterated. Once we are resigned to the fact that these do not move her to acknowledge the nuisance or slight, once it is clear that no apology will be offered, and without assurance that the disturbance will stop, we fall back on our one foothold: reciprocity. Reciprocity holds for bad turns as well as good, after all. Assuming we don’t launch into impulsive retaliation (letting the air out of her tires, say) and assuming we give our response just a moment of thought, we are struck by the asymmetry. ‘Mending wall’ and ‘balancing loaves and balls’ are different for offense and injury than for greetings and favors.<sup>‡</sup> Normally we think we should respond to solicitousness – if not now, later, if not in kind than a rough equivalence. We typically think we should reciprocate good turns even if they are uninvited, even if assessing what return requires is wearing, and even if in the end we find reasons for withholding and distancing ourselves. We are less certain about bad turns. Uncertainty about both proportionality and the consequences of returning bad turns are reasons for resignation when it is a question of irritation and inconvenience.

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<sup>‡</sup> These phrases are taken from Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”, which I discuss in Chapter 1, “The Lay of the Land”.

If we resolve to act, the disturbing difficulty of calibrating rough equivalence must be confronted. We may hit on a spiteful response that seems so apt and so gratifying that we are pleased to imagine it is proportional.

My neighbor demanded his abutter  
raze the warped and rotten fence  
along his property line.

He said he didn't want to see  
the sagging wood when he sat  
on the porch in the morning  
having coffee with his wife.

The fence was removed, replaced  
with something new, so now  
the neighbor has breakfast  
facing a row of garden gnomes,  
some naked, and a few  
of those anatomically correct.<sup>20</sup>

Nowhere do we find more precise accounts of the dynamic of hostile give and take than in novels, and Thomas Berger's *Neighbors* carries us along on the astonishing wild ride of a mild suburban man's response to his offensive new neighbors. Harry and Ramona have taken occupancy of the only other house on Earl Keese's cul-de sac. Learning of their arrival, Keese considers asking them to dinner. He and his wife waver. Before they can make up their minds, Harry and Ramona intrude on them uninvited. The young couple is vulgar, erratic, and vaguely menacing. Local knowledge of acceptable suburban behavior eludes them. They are oblivious to the bounds of what "anyone would do" here. They don't respect personal space or property. They come and go from Keese's house; behave with what he sees as crude familiarity towards his wife and daughter; find reasons to shower in his bathroom, put on his clothes, and borrow his car. Keese feels he has lost control of his existence. The usual disapproving gestures and remonstrances have no effect. The only course open for handling the situation, he concludes, is response in kind.

Keese tries to calculate what Harry and Ramona are owed in return for each instance of trespass and derangement of his life at home. Without local etiquette to keep

them from blows, reciprocity is Keese's life-line, his hope to preserve his own equilibrium and a shred of his identity as a good neighbor. Before and again after each round of give and take Keese tries to estimate rough equivalence. Did his traps warrant Henry's failed effort to strangle him with a garden hose? He struggles to find some coherence in his "pay back", and after each evaluation of the latest give and take "he was satisfied that his version of the outcome was fair." Well into this war, Keese still imagines that the fallen loaves and balls can be picked up and balanced on the wall: "Everything can be put back where it belongs."<sup>21</sup> Harry mocks Keese's attempts to "think ethically". Throughout this cycle of escalating bad turns, however, Keese never entirely abandons the norm of rough equivalence. He worries that he is "in fact defenseless against any form of revenge that a demented adversary might choose" and he attempts a Hobbesian strategy of preemptive self-defense. "He was not displeased", Berger writes, "to be considered dangerous". But given the bizarre unpredictability of his neighbors' moves (and perhaps Keese's paranoia) his calculations are fantastical. Pushed over the edge, he wants things to be a bit to his advantage in the final assessment. "I've given more than I've got", he observes, and "I don't mind admitting I'm proud of myself."<sup>22</sup>

We wonder whether Keese has imagined the whole wild encounter. Still, Berger's surreal *Neighbors* rings true because provocation prompts us to imagine returning bad turns; it is part of the phenomenology of "feeling like a neighbor". We are not fantasists, but imagination almost always plays a part, which is why literary accounts of hostile give and take typically focus on neighbors who mistakenly perceive one another's conduct as an act of aggression. The initial reaction is unprovoked, but once the dynamic of taking offense/taking action is set in motion, however, it is difficult to reverse. A comic account of run-away misperception is Gogol's "The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich". A careless word interpreted as an insult sets in motion an escalating feud between formerly friendly neighbors in the Mirogord *shtetl*. Each begins to imagine the other has designs on his property. Each Ivan rejects attempts by the other to explain his perspective on events and to roll back the offense. Each represents the other's claims of innocence as a lie that by itself amounts to a despicable personal affront. Moreover, the Ivans know that their feud has become a public spectacle in the village so that betrayal is compounded by dishonor. They demand apologies and compensation from one

another, but from the start they have made satisfaction inconceivable. One Ivan initiates a legal battle, which lasts a decade and has no conclusive outcome.<sup>23</sup> Gogol makes us “grotesquely aware of how little we know even when we are convinced that we are 100 percent right.”<sup>24</sup>

For the most part, our responses are tempered. Unlike Gogol’s Mirogord neighbors, we don’t wreak havoc on goose pens -- though like the two Ivans we may sue. Unlike Earl Keese, we don’t cast our neighbors as maniacal, push our neighbors’ car into a creek, lock them in the cellar, smack them, or mete out other kinds of physical punishment. Nevertheless, we recognize the psychological logic that propels them. We think we accurately discern injury and offense. We are almost always innocent in our own minds of inviting bad behavior. We fear we have been naïve and allowed ourselves to be suckered. Compensating, we are prone to exaggerate and to work ourselves up. “There is no stopping to read the riot act, no firing over the heads of the mob.”<sup>25</sup>

#### *Inviting Neighbors to Mind Our Business*

We are drawn into the storms that gather when neighbors mind one another’s business, as they do. We abandon reticence. We join the circle of conversation on the stairwell or sidewalk. We understand that once our neighbor’s business is acknowledged it becomes meat for discussion and action. “If something is not acknowledged, then even if it is universally known it can be left out of consideration in the collective social process...”<sup>26</sup>

In some circumstances dealing with offenses involves an appeal to authorities. When we believe our neighbor has violated local ordinances or impinged on property rights, when their fence encroaches on our yard or blight fouls the area, we report to police, zoning boards, housing authorities, small claims court.<sup>27</sup> We translate ordinary offenses into officially recognized misconduct and actionable grounds for complaint, or we try. We want every offense to be legally cognizable – for every wrong a remedy. We experience our neighbors’ actions as the intentional infliction of emotional distress, but interference with our peace of mind was not the intent and in any case the offense does not rise to the level of “extreme outrageousness” required by tort law, no matter how malleable the standard.<sup>28</sup> We hope for enforcement, and for compliance. We want the

offense to cease but we also want compensation for the nuisance, interference, distress. When available official channels fail us, we are doubly indignant. We may petition local authorities, organize our neighbors, advocate and protest for a change in ordinances, rules, and standards that will comprehend the derangement of our life at home. For now, though, I focus on offenses springing from carelessness, spite, or ordinary vices that degrade the quality of everyday life at home but that hold no interest for local authorities and do not rise to the level of a legal harm. I focus on the innumerable cases invulnerable to official sanction, the multitude of cases where we neighbors are on our own.

We don't want our neighbor to offend with impunity. Bad behavior should have consequences, including reputational consequences. So we seek confirmation from others nearby. Keese acted alone; we want allies. We know that our neighbors will judge the reliability of our reports. We want them to see things from our point of view. We want that reassurance. We want them to agree that our agitation is reasonable, that we are not thin-skinned or histrionic. We may worry that despite our sure grasp of the situation, when it comes to proving provocation our evidence is not unassailable. We talk censoriously about the local delinquent. We report untrustworthiness, deception, bad attitude, nuisance and more serious offenses. We narrate her trespasses in detail so that there is no ambiguity. We want our neighbors to concur that our patience has lasted long enough, that our objections have been ineffective and that more is called for. It is not enough for us that they sympathetically affirm: 'the son-of-a-bitch should have it coming to him.' We want them to get involved. "It seems more efficient to make explicit acknowledgment function as a signal that something must be collectively dealt with."<sup>29</sup> We want our neighbors to make our business theirs. We want them to mediate, to persuade the offender to change course, to extract an apology, to repair the situation. We want them to take action with us and do together "what anyone would do": confront, remonstrate, retaliate, ostracize, shame, invoke some authority (any authority) however futilely. We want the matter to be "collectively dealt with".

The most damaging of ordinary vices is cruelty, and a common form among neighbors is bullying. Consider assaulting neighbors with noise. In my building, a converted Payne Elevator industrial space, one couple tormented the family next door – tormented is the right description -- by locating an air conditioner on a spot on the roof

that amplified motor noise and vibrations, keeping the family awake on warm nights. The owners refused to relocate the compressor. When a number of neighbors proposed pooling the cost of moving it to another spot on the roof, the offenders declined our offer. They insisted that they were within their rights; they hired an engineering firm to testify that the sound and vibration fell within the permissible limits set by the city; they posted the paperwork in the hallway. Their determined failure to relieve distress, indeed their pleasure in their sleepless neighbors' impotence was plain. So was the grim satisfaction they seemed to derive from observing others spend fruitless hours mediating and proposing solutions. Attempting reconciliation is one of the actions neighbors take in support of one another; we wanted to restore a state of peaceable encounters in the building so that "how are you today" as we pass in the hallway is not forced or impossible. In this case, attempts at resolving the conflict failed. The bully was intransigent. The victims were brought to the limits of distraction. They tried earplugs, added insulation, moved their bed to a back wall. They tried to sell (were they required to warn potential buyers of the AC racket and the malicious couple next door?) but the real estate market was slow and they got no offers. They were stuck. They became depressed and withdrawn. The bully (the husband took the lead) was shameless.

Neighbors' confrontations are sometimes effective, but efforts at correction much less reconciliation are often futile. We can expect only cathartic relief from speaking up and demonstrating solidarity with hapless victims. Or are there, then, other gains? For however unlikely repair of the situation is, neighbors do rally round, voice indignation, confront, snub, sympathize, console. How should we understand these acts of neighborliness?

### *Speaking Out: The Democracy of Everyday Life*

My neighbor's cruel conduct degrades the quality of life of the family next door but it is not accurately described as an injustice.<sup>30</sup> It is not a violation of a public principle of fairness or nondiscrimination, say. Nor does it rise to the level of a violation of a basic right or fundamental well-being of the sort that grounds general moral obligations to intervene and assist.<sup>31</sup> To say simply that common decency makes it imperative that we try to help the victims next door is

insufficient. While the situation has urgency for the bully's miserable targets, it is not an emergency and there is no threat of violence or destruction. The cruel infliction of suffering I describe would be understood in different terms, too, if the neighbor were a government official singling out particular neighbors for torment for personal or political reasons. Where cruelty is officially condoned and backed by formidable power, speaking up is a form of political resistance, and I turn to dangerous, politically inspired neighbors in "Holding Our Lives in Their Hands". The noise bully perpetrates an ordinary offense. This is not to minimize the malice or harmful effects. Our neighbors suffer sleeplessness, distress, the sheer frustration and rage of impotence. Still, neither injustice nor violation of a basic right or degradation of fundamental well-being corresponds well to our neighbor's experience. If principles of justice or the moral obligations arising from our common humanity were invoked, they would strike us as grandiose.

In fact, we probably don't think too closely about our reasons for speaking out against the bully next door, or deliberate much about whether we have a responsibility to respond at all. True, we may be tempted to gesture vaguely toward neighbors' "responsibility" to join the chorus of objections, but invoking responsibility is typically less a considered account of why our status as neighbor dictates personal involvement than a rhetorical effort by those already engaged to rouse others. In fact, "responsibility" is unlikely to move those who do not see speaking out against the bully down the hall as any sort of imperative, for reasons I will lay out. First, however, what is at work for those who *do* speak out? What does speaking up owe to our standing as neighbors? What makes it a defining element of the democracy of everyday life, distinguishing it from a response to public injustice?

One motivation, of course, is the sense that we are not immune from this sort of harm, perhaps from this particular bully. Instrumental considerations are in the back (or front) of our minds. It is not hard to imagine that we will want neighbors' assistance when some noxious resident takes aim at us. Rallying to confront the offender and comfort the target is a form of insurance that others will take action on our behalf. There is nothing wrong with prudence:

“Better to go down dignified  
With boughten friendship at your side  
Then none at all. Provide, Provide!”<sup>32</sup>

In addition, certainly, our sympathy is stirred. “Neighbor” entails both place and knowledge. Proximity matters: we observe close-up the daily degradation of this family’s quality of life, the disruption and emotional disturbance. We are uniquely situated to offer support to the bully’s poor targets. Our sympathy is enhanced because we are also uniquely situated to observe the deliberateness of the offense, once it is clear that the bully is aware of the effect of the AC on his neighbors (“The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does”, Rousseau advised.”<sup>33</sup>). We have a ‘room with a view’ into his intransigence. “Epistemic opportunity”, our comparatively intimate knowledge of the details of the offense and our neighbors’ suffering, play a part and may be decisive. Sympathy impels us to action.

There is something else at work: *we* rally to confront the offender and defend his victim, and in doing so affirm our special relation as neighbors. For the most part we relate to neighbors selectively and individually. Through particular encounters we come to appreciate the core value of good neighbors: solicitude presence, and availability. We judge them “decent folk”. And like Earl Keese confronted with Harry and Ramona, through discrete encounters we come to appreciate our vulnerability to assaults on the quality of life at home, and reasons for mistrust. Episodically, however, neighbors take on the character of a group, coming together as in this case to rally and speak out. Others on the hallway or on the block recruit us to participate in collective action, invoking our shared standing as neighbors. Solidarity enters the picture. When a group of neighbors propose an activity, we normally give some consideration to joining in. We might reject out of hand a single neighbor’s overture (how much domestic strife begins with unwelcome invitations to visit next-door, thoughtfully delivered six weeks in advance!) But when a considerable number of neighbors propose a gathering for some common purpose, it becomes “what anyone would do here” and solidarity becomes a consideration. That is, we likely give two thoughts to skipping out on a

neighborhood barbecue, and don't dismiss it out of hand. Solidarity adds presumptive weight to neighbors' claims that we have a responsibility to act in the case of the noise bully, though it is not an independent reason. Solidarity piggybacks on the idea that "good neighbor" entails joining in the action against the bully.<sup>§</sup> The point is, these aroused men and women now figure if they didn't before on one another's lay of the land. In the wider society --where bullies have other titles and there is institutional accountability and formal avenues of relief and punishment --speaking out may be somebody else's business. At home, there is no one else. We elect to make it our business and employ the collective "we".

Finally, speaking out is one element of what I call the democracy of everyday life among neighbors. Why? We are moved to take action by indignation. Its source is clear: no one's private life should be intruded on and disturbed at another's pleasure. No one should have to endure willfully imposed, purposeless distress at the hands of people living nearby. Freud's grim generalization about neighbors is overstated but fits this case:

“ If it will do him good he has no hesitation in injuring me...Indeed, he need not even obtain an advantage; if he can satisfy any sort of desire by it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me, and showing his superior power...”<sup>34</sup>

So indignation moves us to speak up against domination and humiliation there in our face. Indignation propels us – moral anger aroused by this neighbor exploiting the power inherent in proximity to inflict harm. Malicious willfulness, sheer aggressiveness invulnerable to institutional checks and accountability is, in a word, despotic. We experience it that way, as a show of arbitrary cruelty. Speaking out constitutes resistance to arrant capriciousness, which we rightly view as a sort of despotism.

To be clear: indignation at arrant arbitrariness derives its force from its locus at the frontier of privacy, at home. It is at a pitch because the tyranny affects neighbors at home, where retreat is impossible; in contrast to many settings, we

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<sup>§</sup> I turn to 'bad solidarity' and enforcing "What Anyone Would Do Here" in the next chapter.)

have no exit. Neighbors are uniquely vulnerable to one another too because of the stakes, the depth and intensity of interest we have in quotidian private life.

Among the vital necessities is a degree of control over conditions at home. That control is variable, of course, and never what we may want, but this is a case of wanton derangement, deliberate and capricious. In general, neighbors enjoy wider license for idiosyncrasy, inconstancy, and the exhibition of ordinary vices than in any other domain of life outside the family and intimate relations. Given that fact, insofar as we conform to the democracy of everyday life we are latitudinarian, or try to be when it comes to disqualifying neighbors from the capacious category of “decent folk” with whom reciprocity, however minimal, is possible. We make this judgment expecting that “decent folk” take our elementary interests into account. Underscore ‘elementary’. In this case the interest at stake is basic: sleeplessness, along with impotence and despair. When a neighbor casts himself outside the field of “decent folk” by arrantly diminishing the quality of private life at home, indignation moves us to join the resistance.

Direct, personal confrontation is neighbors’ way of holding the despot accountable. Our solid front might force the bully to listen to reason and alter his conduct, but in taking this action we may no longer aim at mediation and reconciliation. Our confrontation is not principally educative, either. It is not designed to get our neighbor to acknowledge his actions as egregious violation of the rudiments of neighborliness. It is certainly not to persuade him that his behavior is morally objectionable more broadly, or that he has violated the principle of “mutual respect”. It is unlikely to have these results in any case, but that is not now our principal purpose. Our purpose instead is to confront cruel aggression and beat the bully back –or to be seen as resolutely trying. It is about the bully’s recognition of us as enforcers. The analogy of resistance to political arbitrariness is just an analogy, and speaking up is not a form of political resistance. Our authority derives from our status as neighbors not citizens. By casting ‘speaking out’ as an element of the democracy of everyday life I mean to capture indignation at the bully as despot and our neighbors, the targets, as powerless in their subjection. Speaking out is the resistance available to us. We

also know intuitively or from wretched past experience that passivity in the face of cruelty encourages the despot next door. He becomes bolder, more confident and entitled. Passivity is debilitating too, and may take a toll on us personally and individually and a specific toll on us *qua* neighbors. Like the bully's targets, we, too, are liable to descend into abject docility.

So in moving neighbors to take action indignation may be as strong or stronger than our anticipation that we may need their support down the line -- stepping up as insurance, and it may be as strong or stronger than sympathy alone. Whatever the relative valence, democratic indignation is an independent, propelling reason. Aimed at capricious cruelty, speaking up, causing a fuss, running amok against the offender falls peculiarly to neighbors.

### *Good Neighbors, Good Citizens*

The maliciously placed air conditioner is a cruel and arbitrary act but it is not a public injustice. Speaking up against the neighbor bully is not political resistance. It does not count as micro-resistance, either. It is not aimed at abuse of authority or over-weening social power. The victims are not deprived of political, civil, or social rights; their standing in terms of public equality is not at issue. The contrast between speaking out against this neighbor and speaking out against patent unfairness or discrimination in public settings is one application of the larger argument of *Good Neighbor Nation*: the independence of the democracy of everyday life from public democratic principles and from formal and informal arrangements of democracy proper. Identifying this boundary between democracy and the democracy of everyday life is central to my inquiry.\*\* Consider, then, what makes civic and neighborly experiences of speaking out distinct.

In public, standing on line in a bakery, for example, we may remonstrate in defense of a stranger who is being treated unfairly, particularly if we believe she is a target of discrimination. We speak up even if we feel personally immune; we don't

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\*\* Not drawing boundaries (admittedly shifting) simply, but understanding the democracy of everyday life as an independent good.

belong to her racial, ethnic, or political group. It is precisely the force of general, impersonal principles of fairness and nondiscrimination that moves us, and that we affirm. Our action in the store has purposes that don't figure at all in speaking up against the noise bully, all owing to the public character of injustice. Speaking out offers visible, public assurance to the person mistreated that she is an equal member of society, that fairness is her due, and that we recognize that she is being treated unjustly. It is meant to correct the abuse in this instance, of course, to get her proper place in line restored, to see that she is served without being demeaned, but it is also to acknowledge the toxic public atmosphere created by discriminatory speech and behavior. Beyond that, speaking out is almost certainly educative. We explain our action to other customers on line in principled terms – even if it is only to look directly at them and insist aloud, “that’s not fair”. Implicit in our protestation is the background of the “huge moral achievement” of civil rights: the “free speech, public assembly, protests, petitions of grievances to officials, testimony before Congress and publicity of complaints through a free press mobilization of supporters and voting”<sup>35</sup> (to say nothing of courageous exposure to violent opposition.) We speak out and join this history in challenging the prejudiced clerk.

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The injustice we witness on the bakery line is public; it is patent unfairness and where discrimination is involved it is a denial of standing as equal members of a democratic society.<sup>36</sup> Citizenship has something of the character of a public office; speaking up is a civic responsibility (though it is a severe imperative that we often fail to meet).

Neighbor is not an office, and normally, neighbors don't pretend to speak with the authority of citizens. We don't employ terms of rights or civic or social equality to express our indignation at the noise bully either. These concepts don't correspond to our experience of arbitrary degradation of life at home, or most others in which we neighbors are on our own. Our brief is 'quasi-private': arrant arbitrariness degrading the quality of life at home. The considerations we bring to recognizing neighbors as “decent folk” who do us no harm and are available for reciprocal good turns are a different set from those we use in reference to good citizens (nondiscrimination, civic spirit, a sense of political efficacy, cooperation

in the general interest, providing resources of money or space, leadership or time...the list is long). Good neighbors are not good citizens writ small, or preparation for the part. Speaking out against the noise bully in the building may signify nothing at all about our commitment to principles of civic or political equality or to the forms of civility that philosophers designate as demonstrations of “mutual respect” in public life. The democracy of everyday life does not depend on a deep moral substrate of dignity claims any more than it rests on political principles. I don’t accede to the proposition that good neighbor entails a creedal affirmation of this kind. We should not expect that speaking out at home spills over into speaking out against public injustice, and of course individual men and women dedicated to public democratic principles may fail to exhibit the democratic ethos at home.

We know from analyzing the scope of racial discrimination or hostile environment under sexual harassment law, say, that the line between offense and injustice is not always sharp. “Things slide and merge into other things.”<sup>37</sup> I’m less concerned to disavow any continuity between neighbors speaking out and the civic obligation to speak out against unfairness than to show that the phenomenology of neighbors taking offense is distinctive and that speaking up alone or with neighbors in defense of the quality of private life has its own moral character and value.

### *Whose Responsibility?*

I’ve proposed speaking out as an element of the democracy of everyday life, entailed by the ideal of ‘good neighbor’ here. How, then, should we think about the woman down the hall who holds back from joining the chorus of protest against the noise bully and support for the miserable family nearby? Her aim may simply be to avoid unpleasantness. The only judgment she makes is that she will not make this affair her business. Or she may be acting self-protectively according to her calculations; she has a myopic view of reciprocity and discounts her potential need for assistance. Or, this disengaged neighbor may have a crystallized assessment of the situation; she is satisfied that the offender is within

his rights, or that confrontation is misguided. If she has no history of encounters with the bully or with other neighbors and spurns every interaction she is a disinterested third party, protected from the furious goings on, less susceptible to the developing solidaristic “we” of neighbors rallying and speaking up and invulnerable to the surge of emotional indignation felt by those in the thick of things.

Detachment from the action need not indicate selfishness or indifference though, which makes refusal to join in collective action interesting. This neighbor may recognize full well that the bully deserves general moral blame for his assault. Beyond that, she evaluates him in terms of the basic “ground relationship” of neighbors. He failed to do the minimum -- desist from willfully degrading the quality of life of those around, and beyond that he is aggressively intransigent. His contemptuous attitude toward others is revealed by his conduct. If she has interacted with the bully in the building in the past, his conduct should alter her own attitude toward him and her willingness to continue on the old terms. The relationship is impaired. As T.M. Scanlon explains, “blame is not mere evaluation but a revised understanding of our relations with a person, given what he or she has done.” Her judgment of blameworthiness does not necessarily entail speaking up or joining the resistance, however. The intention to challenge or to demand justification or apology “need not be present in every instance of blaming.” No imperative to speak out and rally with neighbors follows from her judgment that the bully is in the wrong.<sup>38</sup>

Why not? The terms of neighborliness are loose, open-ended, indeterminate, and changeable. There is no list of constitutive acts or presumptive responsibilities to or for people living nearby. A very few acts and failures to act serve as a “bright line” test of bad neighbor: willfully degrading the quality of life of people nearby is one; refusing to warn of danger or to respond in an emergency is another. They do not have to be spelled out. They are firm if not unconditional criteria of bad neighbor. Of course, they are not distinct to neighbors; these standards of behavior apply generally in many settings. In any case, the woman

down the hall who refuses to speak out against the noise bully has not demonstrated this extreme disregard.

We might say that nevertheless this neighbor *has* assumed a responsibility to support the victims and join the resistance. After all, we regularly take commitments on ourselves. We create responsibilities over time by our own actions.<sup>39</sup> Usually these evolve as a result of the repetition of discrete turns. Our own actions and signals are not enough to create them; our neighbors' responses enter too. Our actions produce reliance on us to ask "how are you today?", to sweep the hallway, or to join in censoring the ceaselessly interfering woman down the hall. Our repeated encounters over time with particular neighbors who figure on our lay of the land generate expectations firm enough to be described as commitments. In short, commitments arise when encounters are repeated over time, produce expectations, and are endorsed by those involved. Because they flow from encounters and interactions in this way, they are unspecified, open-ended. Our commitments are in that sense voluntarily incurred but indeterminate and typically unarticulated. Which is why commitments may be both stronger and more burdensome than other more determinate forms of obligation.<sup>40</sup> They are also especially vulnerable to divergent understandings. Not surprisingly, since they are unspecified and expectations often follow incrementally and implicitly from firmer commitments we already acknowledge. Responsibilities arising from commitments are riddled with ambiguity.

So it is with the reticent neighbor who refuses to make the noise bully her business. Let's say she engages in regular good turns with those nearby. She demonstrates concern for the well-being of (some of) her neighbors; she does not distance herself entirely or erect walls. But reciprocal greetings and favors do not extend automatically to being drafted into taking action against even an egregious offender. Speaking out does not follow from these encounters as she understood them. She has taken some care to delimit reciprocity to a set of modest gestures of give and take. She tried to insulate herself from creating expectations she is likely to disappoint and from expanding commitments. She has restricted the terrain of reciprocity, perhaps particularly when it involves collective action. She will resist

being recruited into rallying and confronting, and she does not accept her neighbors' insistence that it is her responsibility *qua* neighbor to take sides and take action. She feels justified in electing disengagement for reasons that are not just selfish or circumstantial. Suffice to say, then, that self-distancing is permitted by the voluntary terms of reciprocity among neighbors and by the limits we set on our admittedly elastic commitments.

True, speaking up against the bully is one facet of the democracy of everyday life, or so I have said. It is not created by commitment but entailed by the status of good neighbor. By this standard, resolute detachment in the face of malicious degradation of a neighbor's quality of life appears to be a falling off of good neighbor. It is mitigated, however, by the fact that refusal to speak out does not denote wholesale indifference to neighbors' well-being, and by the fact that speaking out is just one facet of the democratic ethos. I don't want to take away from the latitude we have as neighbors to keep a distance, a neutral ground, between us without running afoul altogether of the basic character of good neighbor. A conflict internal to the idea of good neighbor is at work as well, which adds to making detachment something other than an obvious, automatic failing. . Along with speaking out is the value we place on 'minding our own business'. The particular form it takes as an element of the democracy of everyday life among neighbors is the injunction to "live and let live", part of my subject going forward.

### *Minding Our Own Business*

The woman down the hall who refuses to join the resistance has ground for remaining aloof and for thinking disengagement is warranted: the countervailing value of minding her own business. It is, as we know from experience, a vital element of good neighbor. Some neighbors consistently adhere to this pose. For the woman who refuses to join the fray, minding her own business need not be an unreflective rationalization of indifference or self-interest but a decision about the contours of the quality of private life at home in the shadow of neighbors. In the most general terms 'minding our own business' owes

to acknowledgment of our separateness and our need for privacy and control over our lives at home. It includes the personal value of detachment as a condition for self-reflection and even transformation, which I take up in Chapter 4. The woman down the hall takes a detached stance, dictated by past experience, or disposition, or by a jealous regard for her own liberty and care of the self. For the neighbor who assigns minding her own business weight, self-distancing is more than a personal pose. It *is* a defining characteristic of good neighbor; for some the principal characteristic. Minding our own business is an armature we are justified in putting on; it protects against our own bad impulses and others’.

At work in minding our own business, too, then, is wariness of the imperial expansiveness of neighbors’ claims. Wariness is warranted. Although it is meant to be supportive, the prospect of neighbors rallying, recruiting, and confronting the offender may be reason enough to conceal our grievances or, if we are not targets, to stand apart from collective action. The accident of proximity gives neighbors presumptive authority. They draw up strategies, make pronouncements, organize meetings. Their eagerness to take sides, to engage the offender, to communicate the news can be disconcerting, and worse. Neighbors become willing informants, attesting to anyone who will listen ‘we predicted his bullying; he was aggressive, always inciting conflict’. Neighbors magnify the importance of what they know and with that magnify their own. They are “there to represent spectatordom, and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with the removal of the gods of Troy.”<sup>41</sup> So distancing is commended by judgments we make when we cast a cold eye on activist neighbors and the course they pursue and urge us to pursue with them. Our reluctance to fall in behind what network analysis calls the “sociometric star” is almost a reason by itself.<sup>42</sup> The point is, indignant, engaged neighbors often intend something more than confronting this offender. They look for more than to enlist us in this difficult situation, which may well justify speaking up. They want to create a community of continuous engagement around home, organizing good works, involving us in displays of community. (Sam Scheffler tells the story of the Halloween Sign-Up Sheet in his building, where each resident indicates the time she will be at home

to greet children with treats.) They would proactively ward off offenses by surveillance and remonstrance, warning disturbers of the peace or neighbors who are errant in any of a hundred different ways. They offer themselves as exemplars and defenders of ‘the character of the community’ on the block or in the building. They may slip over from speaking out against the noise bully to acting as monitors and dark enforcers of “what anyone would do here”. Or they may insist that they are in the light: infused with sentimental notions of neighborliness and good turns.

Some advocates of speaking out go further. They are activists in local affairs. They invoke our responsibility as neighbors in attempts to recruit us into advocating for sidewalk curbs or championing zoning laws or meetings on community policing -- activism we can reasonably decline to join. Resistance to the seemingly irrepressible impulse neighbors have to invoke our responsibility to take action is justified by the injunction to mind our own business, or to insist that *qua* neighbor it is not my business to try to right every wrong. From this standpoint, the reticence of the woman down the hall is defensible. She won’t earn the accolade “neighborly”. Indeed, she is likely to figure as a secondary villain in her activist neighbors’ tales. We may disagree with her judgment about speaking out in a particular case, like the noise bully. But given the indisputable value of both minding our own and others’ business, it would be wrong to assign her the character of bad neighbor *simpliciter*.

### *Activist Neighbors*

Faced with offenses like the noise bully, we have little recourse except for the voluntary rallying of neighbors. But many offenses can be translated into violations of local regulations and ordinances, civil rules of property, contracts and covenants. In these cases too, aggrieved neighbors often try to convince us that the problem is not theirs alone and that we all have an interest in settling this matter. Our property values are at stake, they argue. Or -- the second front in neighbor wars -- our health is endangered. Leaf blowers, for example, are not only a noisy nuisance, “two-hundred-plus-mile-an-hour bazookas”, they are “a biohazard buffet of diesel soot, brake-lining particles, fungi, mold, spores, and animal fecal matter” launched onto near-by properties. The claims

escalate: “Children exposed to these noise bombs, it’s a disaster: impaired concentration, impaired sleep, inability to learn to read and speak.”<sup>43</sup> Then comes resolve that “we” must “do something”.

So, neighbors file complaints and notify official agencies. They show up at the Development Review Board hearing, where just a few people voicing opposition to the design of an addition to our home (opposition that may owe to sour grapes) have disproportionate influence. They invoke the General Unsightliness Ordinance. They call the police.

### **Officers Remove 50 Pets From Malodorous Mich. Home**

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Filed at 6:55 p.m. ET August 5, 2010**

REDFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) -- Police say more than three dozen dogs, a dozen cats and about six rabbits are getting veterinary treatment after being removed from a small home in a Detroit suburb. Police Lt. Eric Gillman says neighbor complaints about the smell prompted police to show up Wednesday at the home in Redford Township. Gillman says... officers described the condition of the house as "deplorable," and that they said floors were "covered in dog waste, urine."

This is a standard example, a cliché. In the U.S. we have nothing quite like Britain’s “Anti-Social Behaviour Ordinance”, a broad umbrella covering conduct that “caused or was likely to cause harm, harassment, alarm, or distress” in matters ranging from noise pollution to racism to something called ‘urban exploration’ (trespass?) to the “harm, alarm, or distress” caused by an 87-year old man who was sarcastic to his neighbors. The ‘anti-social ordinancy’ has been called “a form of personalised criminal law”, issuing made-to-order penalties ranging from fines to the woman forbidden to make excessive noise during sex anywhere in England.<sup>44</sup>

We may not have a unique institution of this kind; nevertheless Americans are endlessly inventive when it comes to what counts as an officially cognizable offense and our repertoire of responses. “Breast-Feeding Boutique in Feud with Condo Board” is the New York Times headline. The condominium board of the Pythian, a building that was

once an all-male lodge, lodged a complaint that the door to the community facility's ground-floor space was left improperly ajar. They wanted to evict the nursing emporium, "a place to buy breast pumps and BPA-free bottles, and to bond over the myriad challenges of what is supposed to be the most natural thing in the world".<sup>45</sup> Involving a condominium covenant, several city agencies, the owner of "Upper Breast Side" and her customers/clients, this dispute illustrates the expanding universe of offenses and avenues of recourse neighbors seize on. Litigation is a staple action, encouraged by the ever growing number of legal "hooks" afforded by coop and condominium arrangements and homeowner's associations.

To illustrate: my association sued and was sued in return by the wealthy owner of a lot who tore down the original house and prepared to build a structure in violation of the association covenants. His plan did not conform to limitations on square footage, roof height, or placement on the lot, and the review committee denied permission to build his favored design. My neighbor was confident that he could have his way by outspending that is out-lawyering us. He did not count on our determination to resist. We (a majority of homeowners) were buoyed to keep up the expensive fight by his arrogance and indifference to the reasons underlying the terms of the covenant -- preserving water views. With its numerous appeals, the lawsuit dragged on for almost a decade. It became famous in the state for its cost and acrimony. The District Court in Barnstable ruled in favor of Shearwater Association -- the first ruling to uphold homeowner association covenants in Massachusetts.<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, this illustrates the increasing encroachment of law and institutional regulation on the terrain of neighbors, and a challenge to the enduring sentimental notion of neighbors as face to face relations 'all the way down'. Association covenants took this out of the realm of unregulated neighbor relations. We paid our share of the legal defense as a matter of contract, not because of a sense of responsibility as a good neighbor. On the other hand the dynamic of "negative association" transformed us from proximate home-owners and stakeholders into neighbors brought together by a common adversary -- the most reliable source of solidarity. And we always had something to talk about with one another.

So neighbors organize in favor of a leaf-blower ban under consideration by the town council. They write to local papers, create websites, convene meetings, arrange for

invited experts to gather at a “No Blow” summit and barbecue. They advocate and recruit. They pronounce to everyone living nearby that it is our responsibility to take action. Aroused activists make willingness to pronounce grievances and join in a criterion of good neighbor, and when they do, just keeping up the old greetings and considerations will not suffice. From their perspective, we are delinquent if we don’t. As the leaf blower controversy shows, for aroused neighbors “virulent, almost foaming at the mouth”, failure to participate may be unforgivable. It is taken as evidence of stone coldness, of absence of “feeling like a neighbor” and incapacity for solidarity. Inaction provokes the accusation of hypocrisy, too: playing the part of good neighbor until it entails conflict and a commitment to collective action. It provokes the charge of complacency: as long as her house or comfort or children are unaffected, she is perfectly able to bear the harm to those around her. “Somehow the blower issue became a referendum on what it means to be a neighbor: whether neighbors constitute a community or are just nuisances and Nosey Parkers”.<sup>47</sup> Exactly.

The accusations expand, in fact, when taking action moves from spontaneous support against the bully down the hall to organized activism. As neighbors seek correction by political or legal means the charges against those who refuse to participate escalate. Detached neighbors lack the presumptive public spiritedness of speaking out, reporting offenses, forming associations, joining in. Indeed, disengagement is cast as a civic failing as well as a personal character flaw, and bad neighbor is fused with bad citizen. Neighbors in Jonathan Frazen’s story fire these insults at the woman on the block who runs errands and bakes cookies for the neighborhood children:

“there was *no* larger consciousness, *no* solidarity, *no* political substance, *no* fungible structure, *no* true communitarianism in Patty Berglund’s supposed neighborliness. It was all just regressive housewifely bullshit...it was obvious that the only things that mattered to her were her children and her house – *not* her neighbors, not the poor, *not* her country...”<sup>48</sup>

The author intends us to read this characterization as histrionic. The conflation of good neighbor and good citizen amounts to piling on.

The claim of solidarity is strongest, it seems, when aid is constructive, when only neighbors can offer it effectively, and when it requires collective action. It is less strong

when the purpose is sociability alone. It is weak here. For the import of inaction differs in the case of neighbors rallying in opposition to the noise bully from the leaf-blower dispute. Refusal to stand up to the cruel arbitrariness of the despot next door is a falling off from one element of the democracy of everyday life. As I've suggested, however, this element of the democracy of everyday life is in tension with the injunction to mind our own business. Our decision is bound up with pulls internal to being a good neighbor. Disagreement about the utility of leaf-blowers and tolerable noise levels is a conventional difference of opinion about local policy; indeed there is no compelling reason we should have a view of the matter much less participate at all, still less accede to the added pull of solidarity.

*The Democratic Wish: From Good Neighbors to Good Citizens*

Neighbors talk about potholes on the street, erratic garbage collection, local schools. One neighbor gives another the name of a plumber, they discover that others on the street have wet basements too, they identify a problem with the sewer and organize to petition the city for repair and compensation.<sup>49</sup> This is common enough; neighborliness leads some people to work together to participate in local affairs. The path from neighborliness to civic engagement is well travelled. It does not undermine the independence of the democracy of everyday life, however, or its separability from civic and political engagement. This caution is necessary because part of the romance of “good neighbor nation” sees neighbors as the best hope for democracy. John Dewey focused on the local community as “the saving remnant or regenerative kernel,”<sup>50</sup> but nowhere is this democratic impulse to make good neighbor a model of citizenship clearer than in Mary Parker Follett’s faith in neighborhood associations -- “the homely realities of the neighborhood meeting.”<sup>51</sup>

“People should organize themselves into neighborhood groups to express their daily life, to bring to the surface the needs, desires and aspirations of that life, that these needs should become the substance of politics, and that these neighborhood groups should become the recognized political unit.”<sup>52</sup>

Follett saw them as both the solution to bad government and as the alternative to “good government” by technocrats and experts. She was adamant: not all the well-run agencies

for education, sanitation and welfare make up for a deficiency of popular democratic responsibility. Follett's charge to neighborhood groups was extravagant, and extended beyond building a playground or any other particular project. At stake was "the right method of attacking all our problems" -- regular meetings, group discussion (her terms anticipate deliberative democracy), spontaneous initiatives.<sup>53</sup> What could be more romantic -- by which I don't mean utopian (though it is) but rather bound up with an image of democratic holism -- than Follett imagining that neighborhood organization "gives us the best opportunity we have yet discovered of finding the unity underneath all our differences...of living the consciously creative life"?<sup>54</sup> Follett knew what she was up against. This passage says it all:

"Whenever I speak of neighborhood organization to my friends, those who disagree with me at once become violent on the subject. I have never understood why it inflames them more easily than other topics. They immediately take it for granted that I am proposing to shut them up tight in their neighborhoods and seal them hermetically...They tell me of the pettiness of neighborhood life, and I have to listen to the stories of neighborhood iniquities ranging from small gossip to determined boycotting."<sup>55</sup>

Which is precisely her point: by itself, being a neighbor is no preparation for citizenship. The value to democracy depends on neighbors serving as the jumping off point for organized groups and the creation of a "genuine public opinion". She saw neighborhood groups as transformative: participation would convert neighbors into active, self-governing citizens. When social scientists today refer to civic activists as "good neighbors" we recognize it as a residue of Follett's Progressive imagination. Or we see it as just a rhetorical flourish that lends a familiar accessible tenor to active citizenship, personalizing and sentimentalizing, harmonizing and miniaturizing democratic public life.

As we see, the repertoire of "taking offense" and taking action" is varied. It may involve recruiting neighbors in our effort to admonish or confront, mediate or pay back the bully next door; resistance to despotism at home is one signature element of the democracy of everyday life. For the most part our encounters with neighbors do not

revolve around local affairs. But when they do and neighbors take collective action around sewers and schools, when they move from spontaneous mutual support to organized activism and form associations and seek correction or compensation by political or legal means, they no longer view one another in the simple guise of “decent folk”. They make claims on one another beyond ordinary domestic reciprocity. Neighbors recruited by leaders and rallied for action sort themselves by displays of “community spirit” and identification with a common, public interest. For reforming, improving democratic activists, a neighbor’s refusal to speak out, report offenses, form associations, join in is cast as a civic failing, as indeed it may be. But they are liable to take it for what it is not: evidence of being a bad neighbor. Rejecting civic engagement is consistent with speaking out at home and with minding our own business.

The scope and character of the democracy of everyday life is distinct from civic and democratic participation. Identifying conceptual boundaries is the orientation I bring from political theory, to which I add a dose of moral psychology to support this claim of difference with evidence of experience. I am making a normative case for the independent value of “good neighbor” as well. For now my point is just that fusion of neighbor and citizen produces the eclipse of the independent status and contours of the democracy of everyday life. Public principles of fairness (and others, like due process) have been incorporated both by legal mandate and voluntarily into all sorts of social and quasi-public associations and institutions. What I have called “the logic of congruence” is aspirational for some democratic thinkers; it should apply ‘all the way down’.<sup>56</sup> Elements of democratic theory may be wrenched to apply to almost any social interaction, even the most informal, and often are. Just as some moral philosophers anticipate without rue that well realized social justice would crowd out charity, some democratic theorists hold to the thought without rue that faithfulness to public principles of justice could crowd out the autonomous democracy of everyday life because they do not acknowledge its independent value. So, reciprocity among “decent folk” is collapsed into equality or tolerance; speaking out as resistance to injustice. Good neighbor and good citizen are collapsed. Adherence to public principles is commended “all the way down”. And the presumptive sociability and solicitousness of neighbors is added on so that good citizens are like good neighbors. As we will see, neighbors are represented as a way-station to

good citizenship, or as dependably congruent with citizenship, or as exemplary citizenship.

Democracy and the democracy of everyday life are not congruent. They may be complementary, but not always. Dissonance is not hard to find. The democracy of everyday life is not derived from public democratic principles and institutions, either. It is prior to them historically. And we know that it is perfectly possible for individuals to be one and not the other. Evidence of separateness also inheres in the phenomenology of neighbor relations, which is saturated with the quotidian and the quality of life at home. We learn from narrative threads of “good neighbor nation” (settler, immigrant, and suburban threads) that neighbors can provide aid and company, signal that we are safe among one another, offer small gestures of recognition that enhance the quality of life especially under exigent conditions, help repair newcomers’ ignorance, “show us how to practice in the world”. But *qua* neighbors we are not civic activists, agents of social justice, guardians of equal rights, or citizens committed to reform.<sup>57</sup> Something is lost when the democracy of everyday life is eclipsed: the independent significance of reciprocity among “decent folk”, speaking out, and “live and let live” for the quotidian quality of life at home and for America as “good neighbor nation”. We can say that the origin and foundations of the democracy of everyday life and democracy are distinct and that they are not congruent, and still say that they are implicated in one another. Put positively, that they are generally complementary and mutually reinforcing. But things are more complicated, or so I will argue. The hard question, then, is their significance, if any, for the formal and informal institutions and practices of democracy *per se*.

There is more to the phenomenology of taking offense and taking action. I turn next to patterns of response to neighbors who deviate from local knowledge and decline to conform to “what anyone would do” here. Moved by fear of social disorder, parochialism, prejudice, or zeal for improvement we label neighbors delinquent. We monitor, censure, correct, and enforce our map of the lay of the land. This dynamic too is shaped by the regulative ideal of the democracy of everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> OED On-Line 1b.

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Kimball, *The Dirty Life: On Farming, Food, and Love* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 71-2.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book IV, 1857.

<sup>4</sup> I use nuisance in the colloquial sense. The requirements of substantiality and unreasonableness that make for an actionable nuisance that interferes with the use and enjoyment of property are outside the point I am making here. See Kenneth S. Abraham, *The Forms and Functions of Tort Law* (New York, Foundations Press, 2012), p. 204ff. “Up to a point the rule is that modestly incompatible uses must ‘live and let live’”, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert K. Chesterton GET

<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost, “The Code”.

<sup>7</sup> OED 1650 1B.

<sup>8</sup> OED notes, 1a.

<sup>9</sup> Shklar, p. 87. Snobs may disavow people from their own past; snobbery is a source of shameful disloyalty.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Loewenheimer, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time* (New York: Perigree, 2010), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> “Growing Up and Old in the Same Little Neighborhood”.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/12/nyregion/12about.html>

<sup>13</sup> Though we might wish that all targets could summon up the strength and self-respect to be inured to shows of disdain, it would be blaming the victim to say that “the fault lies with a failure of resolve.” Stanley Fish, “The Harm in Free Speech”: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/04/the-harm...>

<sup>14</sup> *To Kill* (New York: Warner Books, 1960), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Thoreau, p.145; 69.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Carver, “Neighbors” in *Where I’m Calling From*, (New York: Vintage, 1989) p. 86; 89.

<sup>17</sup> I distinguish neighbors and friends in “Love They Neighbor”.

<sup>18</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*, p. 25. In Franzen’s story a neighbor charges the mother across the street with hypocrisy: she presents herself as modest and self-deprecating but “the subtext is always ‘My son is extraordinary’...Every word she says about him is some kind of backhanded brag”.Franzen, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Great Gatsby*, pp. 187-8.

<sup>20</sup> John Skoyles, “Spite Fence”, unpublished poem on file with the author.

<sup>21</sup> Berger, p. 173, 169, 160,

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Berger, *Neighbors* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), p. 18; p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Kent, ed. *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 169-214.

<sup>24</sup> Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* p 63.

<sup>25</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the convention of “inattention” in another context see Thomas Nagel, “Concealment and Exposure” in *Concealment and Exposure and Other Essays* (Oxford, 2002), p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> A guide to neighbor rights and responsibilities, Cora Jordan and Emily Diskow, *Neighbor Law: Fences, Trees, Boundaries and Noise* (Nolo Publishers, 2011) begins with noise, advises “know who is responsible” and “find out who else is affected”.

<sup>28</sup> Abramson, p. 32-33. He cites two circumscribed exceptions to liability for independently causing emotional distress: mishandling the corpse of a loved one and negligently sending a telegram that incorrectly announces the death of a loved one, p. 271.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Nagel, “Concealment and Exposure” in *Concealment and Exposure and Other Essays* (Oxford, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Nor is the neighbor’s action a public nuisance that government authorities have an obligation to address.

<sup>31</sup> When political philosophers analyze the obligation of private citizens to speak up and take action the context is violations of public principles of justice or of basic rights, or harm to essential well-being. These obligations arise in response to official acts of injustice, or in certain quasi-public social and commercial domains where adherence to rules and procedures of fairness and

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nondiscrimination are monitored and enforced. Our understanding of the moral grounds of these obligations varies, and so do explanations of the dynamic that leads citizens to take action. On some philosophical accounts we should speak out when we see that circumstances call principles of justice into play; our obligation is to affirm and uphold them, and this suffices to impel us to act. On other accounts, we identify with the weak whose well-being is impaired by oppressive authorities or dominant groups; the spur to action derives ultimately from pity or a sense of shared humanity. On still others, we speak out as a matter of personal integrity; self-contradiction is painful and we are compelled to remain true to ourselves and to match our actions to the values we hold.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Frost, "Provide, Provide"

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Berlin, p. 3 of print. *Two Concepts*. "Ordinarily, acting in the face of knowledge that one's act is substantially certain to cause harm is only slightly less morally objectionable than acting with the desire to cause harm." Abraham, *Tort Law*, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 63 'occasion for enmity' at 66.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Anderson *The Imperative of Integration*, p. 97.

<sup>36</sup> Discussed in Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, pp. 279-80.

<sup>37</sup> Connor Cruise O'Brien, *Godland*, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> T.M. Scanlon, "Blame" in *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press??), p. 138; 150; 131.

<sup>39</sup> I am indebted to Mara Marin's discussion of commitment in her unpublished dissertation on file with the author.

<sup>40</sup> Plainly, commitments of this kind, growing out of relations, could not be encompassed by the articulated terms of legal obligations, say, or the bounds set by professional ethics, which is why commitments may be stronger and more burdensome than other more determinate forms of obligation. They may come to encompass obligations we did not sign up for or anticipate. For example, commitments to a spouse give rise to care if he or she becomes disabled. In the context of neighbors, however, commitments do not entail many forms of protection or care. I return to this in Chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> I find the term in Abrams, p. 91. Like "key individual", it is drawn from network analysis

<sup>43</sup> Tad Friend, "Blowback" *The New Yorker*, Oct. 25, 2010, p 50; p, 53.

<sup>44</sup> "Anti-Social Behaviour Order": [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Social\\_Behaviour\\_Order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Social_Behaviour_Order)

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/11/nyregion/11breast.html>

<sup>46</sup> *Shearwater v. Kline* (GET)

<sup>47</sup> Friend, p. 52; 55.

<sup>48</sup> Franzen, op cit.

<sup>49</sup> The example is from Harry Hirsch, private communication, July 18, 2012 on file with the author. Hirsch challenges the bounds I draw between neighbor and citizen.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Sabel, "Dewey, Democracy and Democratic Experimentalism", August, 2012, p. 6, paper on file with the author.

<sup>51</sup> Follett, p. 222.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *The New State* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University, 1998), p. 192.

<sup>53</sup> Follett, 217.

<sup>54</sup> Follett, p. 201.

<sup>55</sup> Follett, p. 196

<sup>56</sup> See Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals* (Princeton, 1998)

<sup>57</sup> The immigrant neighbor narrative has been altered by institutional intervention. From early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Educational Alliances and immigrant aid associations worked impersonally and didactically to repair newcomers' ignorance and to "show us how to practice in the world". Increasingly today, relations are mediated by urban housing policies and public agencies and a host of intervening voluntary organizations. Immigrant neighbors bump up not only against one another but the bureaucratic apparatus of schools and welfare offices and immigration bureaus – government, as well as the swirl of civil society.