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**Good Neighbor Nation: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America
Taking Offense and Speaking Out**

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**GOOD NEIGHBOR NATION: THE DEMOCRACY OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN AMERICA
TAKING OFFENSE AND SPEAKING OUT**

By Nancy L. Rosenblum*

Abstract

Good Neighbor Nation: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America is a study of “good neighbor” as an element of personal moral identity and as a representation of national character in the U.S. that draws on American literature, history, and contemporary social science. Neighbor relations fall under the shadow of the law, but in many interactions we are on our own without articulated rules and roles. I identify the three elements of the democracy of everyday life that define “good neighbor”: reciprocity among neighbors seen as “decent folk”, acting together and speaking out against offenses, and the moral injunction to “live and let live”. I explore the limits of congruence between the democracy of everyday life and formal democratic institutions and practices. “Good neighbor” is not the equivalent of “good citizen” or preparation for it. Understanding the distinctiveness of the sphere around home is a condition for appreciating the several facets of moral personality, pluralism, and democracy in America.

The quality of private life at home is vulnerable to neighbor. Daily trespasses and kindnesses are inescapable, and range from ordinary offenses to betrayal and dangerous situations where neighbors hold our lives in their hands. “Taking Offense and Speaking Out” introduces the repertoire of the democracy of everyday life in the context of ordinary vices and disturbances.

* Straus Institute Fellow 2012-2013, Senator Joseph Clark Professor of Ethics In Politics and Government, Department of Government, Harvard University, nrosenblum@gov.harvard.edu [Draft: not for circulation or citation] “Taking Offense, Speaking Out” is a chapter from *Good Neighbor Nation: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America*. The book manuscript was drafted during 2012-13 at the Straus Institute for the Advanced Study of Law and Justice, New York University School of Law. I am grateful to the director, J Weiler, and to Richard Pildes and Samuel Issacharoff for awarding me this valuable fellowship, and to the fellows for their advice and support.

“Taking Offense and Speaking Out”

“Neighbor” comes with a certain glow. The term is often used evaluatively; “good” is superfluous. We see neighborliness as a personal and social virtue, and lapses disqualify us from the title: “Thay be not neighbours, sir. Thay be near-dwellers.”¹ 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.²

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,

¹ “neighbour | neighbor, n. and adj.”. OED Online. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/125923?rskey=GfCf54&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed August 03, 2013). Quotation from A. Porson, *Notes on Quaint Words and Sayings in the Dialect of South Worcestershire* (Oxford, 1875), p. 23.

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

Then helps to sugar her bohea at night
With your reputation.'³

The troubles neighbors cause us may be frivolous or costly. 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?”⁴

We must deal with dissemblers, manipulators, bullies, compulsive types, emotional aggressors. Their offenses, grim or trivial, 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.⁵ A righteous sense of injury at the hands of an offensive neighbor is endemic; few of us escape it entirely. We rail against him; he throws us into a

³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book IV, 1857.

⁴ Robert Frost, “The Code”, in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 69-73.

⁵ 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.

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 pianola; he is a dispute about a party wall; he is drains that are worse than yours, or roses that are better than yours.”⁶

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. Precisely because neighbor relations are carried on in the absence of defined rules of conduct and set obligations and established ways of enforcing them in any case, 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”.⁷

My subject in this chapter is the phenomenology of taking offense and the vicissitudes of speaking out and taking action. My account will be familiar. In this chapter and the next, “What Anyone Would Do, Here”, I look at ordinary vices and ordinary offenses and the uncertain terrain of reciprocating bad turns. 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

⁶ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity: A Book of Essays* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1921), pp. 51-2.

⁷ “neighbour | neighbor, n. and adj.”. OED Online, op cit. Quotation from David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. Thomas Thomson, Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1843), p. 25.

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 continue here to make a case for the autonomy of the democracy of everyday life in relation to democratic institutions and practices proper. I continue, too, to explore the independent value of the elements of the democracy of everyday life: reciprocity among ‘decent folks’, ‘live and let live’, and speaking out against bad neighbors. I begin to show that something is lost by collapsing the democracy of everyday life and public democratic principles and practices. The democracy of everyday life has its own ethos and value. It is an independent form of democratic excellence.

Ordinary Vices: Enduring Snobbery

There is a universe of reasons why neighbors give and take offense. The best way in to the moral psychology of offense is to begin with ordinary vices, the readily accessible sources of offense in everyday life. I’ve chosen one for a start: snobbery. The hurtful experience of being the target of a superior neighbor is common enough, and so is the difficulty of fashioning a response. In early English usage neighbor meant “to place in conjunction with something”, and references were to the crown and nobility: “neighbour’d him to the Court”, or “this ancient baron neighboured to a throne.”⁸ 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. In contrast, the democratic ethos of “good neighbor” commends us to regard our neighbors simply as “decent folk” and to disregard status, wealth, origin, and personal history. 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

⁸ “neighbour | neighbor, v.”. OED Online. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/125924?isAdvanced=true&result=2&rskey=W5jzJy&> (accessed August 03, 2013). Quotations from Peter Heylyn, *Cyprianus Anglicus* (London, 1668), p. 60 and William Godwin, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Vol. II (London, 1803), p. 400.

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. I will survey the many ways we violate this democratic ethos; snobbery is one.

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”.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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

⁹ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 87.

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

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.¹¹

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 as we expected, 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.¹²)

Our neighbors may not demonstrate their superiority by snubs and withholding, though. 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. ¹³) Whether the behavior is harmless puffery or

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

¹² “Growing Up and Old in the Same Little Neighborhood”. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/12/nyregion/12about.html>

¹³ 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...>

meant to diminish us, we are right to be as troubled by our inability to slough it off as by the exhibition of superiority itself.

Good Neighbors, Do- Gooders

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 for ministrations and she does not look for, indeed she deters, returns. She exults in the one-way donation of aid or advice, gifts 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. Our encounters are expressive of our relations as neighbors. It is not a stranger or friend making offerings, unasked for or more than asked for, but a neighbor. And the actions as I describe them are not one-time good turns but consistent offerings, part of her identity or would-be status as “best neighbor”. 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 all as a virtue, a display of beneficence that deserves appreciation or gratitude. Or we may experience it rather as an unwelcome show of advantages that seems to demand acknowledgment, which we begrudge awarding.

In either case our strenuous neighbor likely knows that reciprocity in kind is impossible for us – that is the point. Whether or not she is ostentatiously keen

to accept shows of appreciation, even deference, in return, we recipients are likely to be ambivalent if not outright resentful. We see good turns as an offense.

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.¹⁴

Things are exacerbated if neighbors are not only benefactors but reformers who aim at our improvement. 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.”¹⁵

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. Her behavior translates as condescension, noblesse oblige. Her offerings offend the democratic ethos of neighbors. It is simply not the case that helping and improving are beyond reproach. Beneficence, to give it a strong label, when it is not an organized effort at justice -- to repair the failings and lacunae of state provisions, to “continue and complete the work of justice” -- arises within relationships. It is personal and direct: aid between friends, within families, colleagues and neighbors, and its scope and constraints are dictated by these relations.¹⁶ *You help me*. Offers and favors should bolster not corrupt these relations; they should be consistent with the history of the friendship or years of living side by side. Neighbor relations rests on reciprocity. So, like exploitation, excessive favors and incessant advice

¹⁴ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Warner Books, 1960), p. 44.

¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p.145; 69.

¹⁶ Barbara Herman “Articulated Beneficence”, unpublished paper on file with the author.

fail the test of rough equivalence. Reciprocity among “decent folk” is a core element of the democracy of everyday life. Ostentatiously good neighbors put us in their debt, and then decline repayment or make it impossible. There is a one-way street.

There is more for understanding ordinary vices and neighbor encounters. We may see Lady Bountiful’s magnanimity as a bid for being “the very best neighbor”, as a claim of status. Our give and take is expressive – we interpret our neighbor’s intent. In the case of Lady Bountiful, she offers too much, as we see it, because she wants a sort of recognition. We have a history of encounters with her, and we are able to draw comparisons to other neighbors with whom we have give and take and who we willingly call on for help. We are liable to level another charge of inappropriateness at Lady Bountiful: her ambition is cramped because her domain of action is cramped. She is driven by the desire for recognition as a good neighbor because this block is her whole world. She has no other arena for action and distinction. Her personal identity as good neighbor plays too large a part. Private life at home can be the most important part of life, of course; being a good neighbor is, clearly, a commendable element of personal identity; our value to our neighbors is a source of gratification to us – we are pleased to exhibit the virtues of the democracy of everyday life. But neighbor relations are normally not our principal relations, or sole source of self-esteem. Her life among us and her status here loom too large. She fails to exploit “the moral uses of pluralism”, to her own detriment and to her neighbors’.

Keeping Offenses to Ourselves

Normally we want others to see our neighbors’ misbehavior and to acknowledge that 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 standard dynamic shortly. Not always, though. Sometimes we keep the offenses we suffer to ourselves. A pair of reasons for reticence rooted in self-doubt operate often. 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?"¹⁷ 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?

Also, 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. Then 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. There is something disreputable about our situation, we feel. We are unable or unwilling to protest much less recruit others nearby to our cause. We don't solicit sympathetic attention. If the ideal of good neighbor is an internal, regulative ideal 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.) So the phenomenology of taking offense includes the impulse to keep the injury we believe we have been dealt to ourselves.

In certain grave 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. Some harms suffered at the hands of neighbors are more painful than noisy air conditioners or the stench of cats. We don't want our grievances to become public knowledge, and we don't want to elevate the bad neighbor into a local legend.

¹⁷ Doris Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*, (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 25.

Consider personal 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 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, all along 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 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 personal 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.¹⁸ 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. The course of these relationships tracks children’s development, and as they grow up they no longer provide the glue. Interactions fall off, we lose our 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.¹⁹

¹⁸ Raymond Carver, “Neighbors” in *Where I’m Calling From*, (New York: Vintage, 1989) p. 86; 89.

¹⁹ I return to betrayal by neighbors and reticence in later chapters. In some instances the consequences of neighbors speaking up rather than keeping what they know to themselves has

Keeping offenses to ourselves stems in large part from uncertainty, then, much of it peculiar to us individually. We have difficulty interpreting actions and assessing offenses and are uncertain about how to respond. The available means of self-defense and enforcement are not established either. The consequences of speaking up and taking action are not reliably known. So behind the picture of personal uncertainty are the lacunae I have emphasized as characteristic of the domain of neighbors: absence of articulated standards of behavior— just what casts someone out of the capacious class of “decent folk”; absence of reliable, neutral interpreters of actions – are they offenses; and absence of established forms of enforcement, whether by ourselves or in alliance with other neighbors. I return to this shortly.

For now, suffice to say that when it comes to ordinary vices and everyday offenses, we are often reticent. Exercised though we are by an offending neighbor, we practice calculated self-restraint. We pretend to ignore the nuisance or injury. We do not acknowledge our neighbor’s bad behavior. With effort, we keep our judgments to ourselves. 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. At a minimum it creates awkwardness that outlasts the offense itself. Most of us exercise restraint most the time. We are selectively inattentive to slamming

damaging, life-altering consequences. In “Live and Let Live” I examine moral philosophers’ notion of special responsibility to family, friends, and members of a group with whom we share a strong identity, and ask whether relations among neighbors sometimes fit this model, entailing loyalty even if we do not have the shared history and attachment “betrayal” implies in thick relations of husband, friend, or nation. Where we have the possibility of not disclosing what we know, broadcasting their offenses or turning neighbors in to authorities has a whiff of “betrayal”. In “Betrayal: the Eclipse of the Democracy of Everyday Life” I discuss mistrust and betrayal by neighbors that is a key support for systems of political repression. Authorities set out deliberately to degrade social connections, and use political coercion to get neighbors to turn on one another in frightful ways. Where officials demonstrate their power to arbitrarily and unpredictably confiscate, relocate, imprison, deport and kill, protracted fear makes us treacherous.

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.²⁰

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. Besides, we acknowledge these neighbors as ‘decent folk’ for the purposes of day to day reciprocity. It seems disproportionate to derange ordinary dealings. 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. 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

²⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 139-40.

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.²¹ 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 may incline us to resignation, especially if the offense is a matter of irritation and inconvenience.

If we resolve to act, the disturbing difficulty of calibrating rough equivalence must be confronted. We have reason to mistrust our judgment. 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.²²

Nowhere do we find more detailed accounts of the dynamic of hostile give and take than in novels. The difficulties we face in attempts to be faithful to the norm of reciprocity are brought to life. 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

²¹ These phrases are taken from Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”, which I discuss in Chapter 1, “The Lay of the Land”.

²² John Skoyles, “Spite Fence”, unpublished poem on file with the author.

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 possessions. 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."²³ 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

²³ Thomas Berger, *Neighbors* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), p. 173, 169, 160,

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.”²⁴

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 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.²⁵ Gogol makes us, as another writer put it, “grotesquely aware of how little we know even when we are convinced that we are 100 percent right.”²⁶

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 their 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

²⁴ Berger, p. 18; p. 162.

²⁵ Leonard Kent, ed. *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 169-214.

²⁶ Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p 63.

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.”²⁷

Recruiting 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...”²⁸

Neighbor relations operate in the shadow of the law. In many 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.²⁹ 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 hope for enforcement, and for compliance. We want the offense to cease but we also want compensation for the nuisance, interference, distress. We experience our neighbors’ actions as the intentional infliction of emotional distress or as interference with the use of our property – which it is. But interference with our peace of mind was not the intent, or the offense does not rise to the level of “extreme outrageousness” required by tort law, no matter how malleable the standard. When available official channels fail us, we are doubly indignant. We may petition local authorities, organize our neighbors,

²⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 112.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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, and advises “know who is responsible” and “find out who else is affected”.

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. That is, I focus on the innumerable cases invulnerable to official sanction, the multitude of cases where we neighbors are on our own. We are on our own interpreting the offense, regulating our emotions, rallying supporters, attempting enforcement.

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."³⁰ 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".

³⁰ Thomas Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure" in *Concealment and Exposure and Other Essays* (Oxford, 2002), p. 15.

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 other values at stake? For however unlikely repair of the situation may be, neighbors do rally round, voice indignation, confront, snub, sympathize, console. How should we understand these acts of neighborliness?

Speaking Out: Prudence and Solidarity

My neighbor's cruel conduct degrades the quality of life of the family next door but it is not accurately described as an injustice.³¹ 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.³² 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 in contrast 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

³¹ Nor is the neighbor's action a public nuisance that government authorities have an obligation to address.

³² When political philosophers analyze the obligation of private citizens to speak up and take action the context is violations of public principles of justice, 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 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..

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? What distinguishes 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. We 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 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!³³

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

³³ Robert Frost, “Provide, Provide”, in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 307.

aware of the effect of the AC on his neighbors (“The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does”, Rousseau advised.”³⁴). 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, typically one-on-one, 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, our encounters are not one-on-one. Rather, 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.

REDO 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 number of neighbors propose a gathering for some common purpose, it takes on the character of “what anyone would do here”. We are likely to give two thoughts to skipping out on a neighborhood barbecue; we 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, too, though it is not an independent reason. Solidarity piggy-backs on the idea that “good neighbor” entails joining in the action against

³⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) , p. 123.

the bully. 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 in part because of the pull of solidarity, and employ the collective "we".

When we do, speaking out is one element of what I call the democracy of everyday life among neighbors.

Speaking Out: The Democracy of Everyday Life

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...³⁵

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 have no exit. Neighbors are uniquely vulnerable to

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 63' 'occasion for enmity' at 66.

one another too because of the stakes, the depth and intensity of the interests we have in quotidian private life. Among the vital necessities is a degree of control over conditions at home. The noise bully's cruel arbitrariness is a willful exercise of the power inherent in proximity to trespasses across critical bounds. We may experience this derangement of life at home as something close to a total violation.

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. We understand that fact of life about proximity to others, and we know that the control we have over private life at home is variable and never what we may want. 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. And this is a case of wanton derangement, deliberate and capricious. The point is, 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 or 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, that he has violated the principle of "mutual respect", say. 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 recognition as enforcers.

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. It may be as strong or stronger than sympathy for the afflicted family down the hall. Whatever the relative valence, indignation is an independent, propelling reason. Aimed at capricious cruelty and in defense of the quality of private life at home, speaking up, causing a fuss, running amok against the offender falls peculiarly to neighbors. We can understand speaking up as defense against the bully who has cast himself out of the universe of ‘decent folk’. By casting ‘speaking out’ as an element of the democracy of everyday life I mean to capture speaking out as the resistance available to us.

We might think of neighbors speaking out as Lockeans defending themselves as arbitrariness. Neighbor relations are carried on ‘in the shadow of law’ but very often we have no legal recourse. We’re not enforcing natural law (the bully has not violated life or property) nor are we enforcing local ordinances or homeowner covenants. We neighbors name the offense – we do so after time and with experience with this offender.

Economists and anthropologists study the emergence of informal norms through collective action and enforcement in the absence of formal institutions: the coordinated actions of cartels; the mafia; in some circumstances neighbors’ common appeal to tribal elders. Robert Ellickson examined cattlemen and farmers coordinating rules of liability for damage done by wandering cows. He termed these “adaptive norms of neighborliness that trump formal legal entitlements”.³⁶ Thoreau made the

³⁶ Robert Ellickson, *Order Without Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4. Most studies he points out view norms as exogenous givens; the usual question is transmission of norms not their content, pp. 154-5. His hypothesis is maximizing the aggregate welfare of members of the close-knit group, defined as a social network whose members have credible and reciprocal prospects for the application of power against one another and a good supply of information on past and present internal events, p. 167ff; 181. “The stuff of a civilization consists largely of its substantive norms. These norms identify the everyday behaviors that call for the

broader point, apart from the need for financial coordination, and he made it in blistering terms: “We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette... to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war...”.

Here then is the ‘democratic’ in speaking out as an element of the democracy of everyday life. We neighbors on our own identify the bounds of “decent folk”, judge that the bully’s cruel arbitrariness casts him outside the bounds, and decide on an action to enforce “local knowledge”. Neighbors are, in that moment, self-governing. Absent rules, authoritative interpreters, and enforcers, neighbors determine norms and what conduct marks the noise bully as beyond the pale. We take the decision to act, and to attempt to enforce “what anyone would do, here”. “Democracy” lies in the informal determination of “what anyone would do, here”, rallying, and acting together. In that moment of speaking out against the noise bully, we neighbors are self-governing.

We do this without the organization, structure of authority, and decision-making procedures of formal democratic practices. We are not democratic in the process sense – majority decision-making is not at issue. As important, we do not appeal to law or to public democratic principles. For good reason. My description of speaking up as collective resistance to political arbitrariness is evocative, but it is an analogy only. Speaking up is not a more local, more intimate version of resistance to despotism. Speaking up against the neighbor bully is not micro-resistance, either. It is not aimed at abuse of authority or over-weaning social power. The maliciously placed air conditioner is a cruel and arbitrary act but it is not a public injustice. The victims are not deprived of political, civil, or social rights; their standing in terms of public equality is not at stake. Our

informal administration of rewards and punishments...which have no identifiable author, no apparent date of origin, no certainty of attention from historians – are among the most magnificent of cultural achievements.”, p. 184.

authority for speaking out derives from our private and accidental status as neighbors; we are not acting as citizens or oppressed subjects.

Good Neighbors, Good Citizens

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 comparative independence of the democracy of everyday life from public democratic principles and from formal and informal institutional arrangements. Identifying this boundary between democracy and the democracy of everyday life, and with it recognition of neighbors as “decent folk” is part of my inquiry. Speaking out as citizens witnessing an injustice is quite different from neighbors responding to an offender. The site of taking offense and taking action in the domain around home among neighbors is a separate sphere where the comparative autonomy of the democracy of everyday life holds sway. It is an example of what I call the moral uses of pluralism.

Consider, then, what differentiates civic from neighborly experiences of speaking out against offenders. 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 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 this 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.³⁷ 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”³⁸ (to say nothing of courageous exposure to violent opposition.) We speak out and join this history in challenging the prejudiced clerk. Citizenship has something of the character of a public office and speaking up 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 or in terms of civic duty. We don’t employ terms of rights or civil or social equality, justice or injustice, to express our indignation at the noise bully either. He casts himself out of the bounds of “decent folk” meaning trustworthy partners in quotidian reciprocity. So it is worth considering why fairness and reciprocity are not equivalent for my purposes here. The standard of fairness is an articulated principle whose substance has an identifiable political history. It is part of a system of justice. Invoking it, we rely on a general understanding of the principle and its genealogy in the social life and law of the nation. We know that fair treatment is required by law in many institutions and areas of social life –stores are one. Also, fairness applies to any single act as the bakery line example illustrates. And it does not matter who invokes and enforces fairness; we are all owed it; state and federal and local regulations

³⁷ Discussed in Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton, 2000) , pp. 279-80.

³⁸ Elizabeth Anderson *The Imperative of Integration*, p. 97.

require it. Reciprocity among neighbors, in contrast, occurs outside of law and institutions. It does not have a specific, historically articulated content either. Its terms are open to invention and to interpretation of “what anyone would do” here. In the case of unfairness, with the discriminatory bakery clerk, strangers have a right and duty to intervene. Among neighbors, reciprocity is relational, generated by ongoing back and forth over time. It matters for arousing our indignation and for our response *who* gives and takes offense. It matters who the offender is in relation to us our history of encounters, interpreting them, improvising collective action with others who live nearby and also know the scene. Our indignation and determination to speak out build over time, and has some proportion to whether our relations with the victim and are such that they call on us to support the former and confront the latter. Again in contrast to speaking out against unfairness in the baker, the intervention of a stranger would be a different matter, which we may or may not welcome.

Put simply, the principles of civil equality and fairness don't correspond to our *experience* of arbitrary degradation of life at home, or to most other offenses where we neighbors are on our own. We don't invoke them. Our brief is 'quasi-private': 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). Speaking out against the noise bully in the building may signify little or 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. Moreover, we should not expect that speaking out at home spills over into speaking out against public injustice, and we know that men and women dedicated to public democratic principles may fail to exhibit the democratic ethos at home.

Good neighbors are not good citizens writ small, or preparation for the part.³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ 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. We don’t experience or explain ourselves in terms of democratic principles. We should not expect that speaking out in one setting fuels civic action in another. Speaking up alone or with neighbors in defense of the quality of private life has its own roots in moral identity as a “good neighbor”, and its own value. Again, it is one of the moral uses of pluralism.

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 close to a

³⁹ The democracy of everyday life does not depend on a deep moral substrate of dignity claims any more than it rests on political principles.

⁴⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *God Land*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 9.

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 moral blame for his assault. 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. He has removed himself from the field of “decent folk”. If she has interacted with the bully in the building in the past, his conduct will 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 lead to 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.⁴¹

Why not? Why can’t we simply assign her the responsibility to speak out? 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 don’t have to be spelled out. They are firm if not unconditional criteria of bad neighbor. Of

⁴¹ T.M. Scanlon, “Blame” in *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 138; 150; 131.

course, neither is unique 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 disengaged neighbor does have a responsibility to support the victims and join the resistance. On this view, she has assumed it by her own actions over time. After all, we regularly take commitments on ourselves.⁴² Usually these evolve as a result of the repetition of discrete turns. Our own actions and signals are not enough to create responsibilities, however; our neighbors' responses enter too. That is, our actions produce expectations, and reliance on us to ask "how are you today?", to sweep the hallway, or to join in censoring the ceaselessly interfering woman next door. 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 interactions are repeated over time, produce expectations, and are endorsed by those involved. Because they flow from relations 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.⁴³) They are especially vulnerable to divergent understandings since they are unspecified and expectations often follow incrementally and implicitly from encounters, as extensions of firmer commitments we do acknowledge. Responsibilities arising from commitments are riddled with ambiguity.

⁴² I am indebted to Mara Marin's discussion of commitment in her unpublished dissertation on file with the author.

⁴³ 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.

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 detach 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 this history of encounters as she understood them. She has taken some care to delimit reciprocity. She sets the terms of relations, limiting them to a set of modest gestures of give and take. She has 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, I have argued that speaking up against the bully is one facet of the democracy of everyday life and of the status of good neighbor. In "Live and Let Live" I will look closely at moral philosophers' idea of "special responsibility" and whether it is entailed by being a neighbor. In any case, 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 a categorical failing. Along with minding others' business by speaking out there is the value we place on 'minding our own business'.

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 thoughtful decision about the contours of the quality of private life at home in proximity to 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 "Minding Our Own Business". The woman down the hall takes a detached stance, dictated by past experience, 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.

So, 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*.

Minding our own business is an armature we are justified in putting on for another reason: it protects against our own bad impulses and others'. At work in minding our own business, too, is wariness of the imperial expansiveness of neighbors' claims. Although it is meant to be supportive, the prospect of neighbors rallying, recruiting, and confronting the offender may be reason enough to keep our own grievances to ourselves and to stand apart from collective action on behalf of others. The accident of proximity gives neighbors presumptive authority, which some are keen to exercise. They draw up strategies, make pronouncements, organize meetings. We have reason to look with a cold eye at their eagerness to take sides, to engage the offender, to communicate the news, to recruit allies. 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."⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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

⁴⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ I find the term in Abrams, p. 91. Like "key individual", it is drawn from network analysis

indicates the time she will be at home to greet children with treats.⁴⁶) 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 enforcers of “what anyone would do here” – my subject in the next chapter. Or they may insist that they are in the light: infused with sentimental notions of neighborliness and good turns. Some neighbors committed to 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 attending meetings on community policing -- activism we can reasonably decline to join.

Activist Neighbors

Faced with offenders 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.”⁴⁷ Then comes resolve that “we” must “do something”.

⁴⁶ Private communication

⁴⁷ Tad Friend, “Blowback” The New Yorker, Oct. 25, 2010, p 50; p, 53.

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 ordinance' 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.⁴⁸

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

⁴⁸ "Anti-Social Behaviour Order": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Social_Behaviour_Order

BPA-free bottles, and to bond over the myriad challenges of what is supposed to be the most natural thing in the world”.⁴⁹ 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. We can view this as the colonization of the sphere of neighbors by formal law.

To illustrate: my association sued and was sued in return by the wealthy buyer who tore down the original house on the lot and prepared to build a structure in violation of the homeowner 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 as required by the association by-laws) 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.⁵⁰ 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’. We paid our share of the legal expenses as a matter of contractual obligation, 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

⁴⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/11/nyregion/l1breast.html>

⁵⁰ *Kline v. Shearwater Association, Inc.*, 63 Mass. App. Ct. 825 (2005)
<http://caselaw.findlaw.com/ma-court-of-appeals/1003016.html>

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”.⁵¹ 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 as well as personal and social failing, 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

⁵¹ Friend, p. 52; 55.

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...⁵²

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

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. There, aid is constructive, only neighbors can offer it effectively, and it invites collective action. Though as I've suggested 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 contrary pulls internal to being a good neighbor. In contrast, the claims on us as neighbors are not strong when the purpose is sociability alone. Refusing to join is seen as disagreeable, but minding our own business is not blameworthy when it comes to block parties or Halloween treats. The claim of responsibility and solidarity is weakest in the case of organizing for and against leaf-blower bans. 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 or participate at all. But democratic theory does not support this ranking. From the standard perspective, acting together for purposes of civic improvement just is the great value of good neighbors.

Neighbors do 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.⁵³ This is common enough; neighborliness leads some people to work together to participate in local affairs. The path from neighborliness to civic engagement is

⁵² Franzen, *op cit*.

⁵³ 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.

well travelled. That fact 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.

As we see, the repertoire of “taking offense” and speaking out 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, when they form associations and seek correction or compensation by political or legal means, neighbors 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 once again, 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, I argue. 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 eclipses 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. Elements of democratic theory may be wrenched to apply to almost any social interaction, even the most informal, and often are.

What I have called “the logic of congruence” is aspirational for some democratic thinkers; it should apply ‘all the way down’.⁵⁴ 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. And the presumptive sociability and solicitousness of neighbors is added on so that good citizens are like sentimental good neighbors. Good neighbor and good citizen are collapsed. So, reciprocity among “decent folk” is collapsed into equality or tolerance; speaking out is collapsed into resistance to injustice. As we will see, neighbors are represented as a way-station to good citizenship, or as dependably congruent with citizenship, or as exemplary citizenship. I return to this theme in the Conclusion on “the logic of congruence” and the moral uses of pluralism.

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. 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”.

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

⁵⁴ See Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals* (Princeton, 1998)

land. This dynamic too is shaped by the regulative ideal of the democracy of everyday life.