

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

“It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood. A beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?... I’ve always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.” – Fred Rogers

Many of my columns dealt with abstract concepts of “The People” and “Community.” You can speak of the *will* of The People, or the *sense* of the Community, but even that is just an approximation based on an election, or polling, or what the buzz in the media is that week.

But we don’t live in the abstract. We live in real rooms, on real streets, in real neighborhoods. We live in varying degrees of proximity to other real persons with their own lives... which means persons with their own activities, personalities, problems, hang-ups, habits, pleasures, schedules, likes, and dislikes. Somehow, we have to peacefully accommodate our lives to their lives (and vice-versa) to the extent that we all have to share a particular narrow strip of the space-time continuum.

If you live on a typical village or city block of separate one-family houses, as I do, the geometry sets you up with approximately five immediate neighbors (one each to your left and right, three across the street); perhaps you have one to three more if your backyard abuts other backyards.

If you live in an apartment building, a similar geometry applies to about five doors in your common hall, or the comparable doors of those apartments or duplexes whose walls are contiguous with yours.

Even if you live on a remote road, out of sight from any other homes, at least the nearest three or four other homes (between you and whichever directions you have to travel to in order to conduct your life) have to be considered your neighbors.

Unlike *The People*, neighbors are real, specific individuals. Every interaction builds up on a preceding history, and there’s a constant judgment scale that can tip from *good* neighbor to *bad* neighbor at any single moment. Maybe there are some grumpy-grumps who don’t care how they are perceived, but I will assume that YOU, as I, would like to be thought of, if at all, as falling into the *good neighbor* camp.

What makes a “good” neighbor? For now, let’s ignore the more abstract notion of “Who is your neighbor?” put forth in the biblical allegory of the good Samaritan showing up by chance and behaving like an angel. We’re limiting this discussion to those persons and families you are stuck with, year in and year out, maybe for a lifetime, whose coming and going are likely beyond your control. (This, too, is as opposed to your *friends*, who may live next door – lucky you! – or miles away, but with whom you *choose* to be more than strangers, or even mere acquaintances.) For the most part, neighbors, like relatives, can’t be picked; other than moving away, we’re all in it for the long haul.

With some neighbors I have very few dealings; we may say hello or nod or smile if we see the other passing by. That’s just the social grease that keeps things fluid, until such time as more interaction is required. After all, we each want to be thought of as pleasant, friendly, approachable types, willing to pitch in if asked, quick to run over in a real emergency, and not being out of place if we should ask a favor. Some of us are more private than others, and if we seem to want to be left alone, so be it – less time needed to accommodate the other guy.

Ah, but what happens when the other guy does something that intrudes on *your* peace, property, privacy, or comfort? If it is intentional (that is, if it is clearly done to bother you), surely that is not being neighborly, and any response short of violence may be considered, as appropriate. But that is rather rare; indeed, my first thought would be, “What did I do to *him* to have him *respond* this way?” No, I’m thinking of the small or unthinking acts that are more likely due to ignorance or not taking others into account before acting.

Some acts are due to not being informed. I wish the Village and Town would prepare a sheet listing the most common restrictions and rules that residents must follow but often are unaware of. Everyone should get a copy, and when someone moves into the community, it should come with the keys to the front door. Things like: when and where you can or can’t park a car, trailer, or boat; what requires a building permit; how loud is too loud; when you can hold yard sales; rules regarding pets; restrictions or requirements regarding spraying, burning, dumping, spilling, watering, burying, shooting, repairing, storing, stacking, shoveling, salting, raking, swimming, lighting, digging, fencing, mowing, skating/biking/skateboarding, celebrating, driving, littering, voting, and a few more I can’t recall just now.

Other acts are simply inconsideration, but, again, are not done maliciously. And this is where it gets difficult. I’m not a wimpy or shy person. But when I see a neighbor doing something that may violate village code, or is simply annoying to me, I have to weigh my reaction against possible long-term consequences, chief of which is... will I be branded a snitch, grump, kill-joy, irritant, or goody-two-shoes by those I will run into over and over, and may, some day, have to ask a favor of.

Consider the following actual illegal or annoying things I have not told various neighbors about in person, because I am not sure of their reaction if I do:

- Parking *under* a No Parking sign, or on their lawn, or on *my* driveway, or leaving ruts in *my* lawn;
- Letting their dogs run around without a leash, so they crap on *my* property, and I have to pick it up;
- Burning trash in their fireplace so that the acrid smoke comes into *my* window on a nice day when I’d like to leave my windows open;
- Playing the radio so loud that I can hear it in *my* house, even with the windows closed.
- Setting security lights so that they shine into *my* windows every time a car passes their house.
- Setting-off fireworks that upsets *my* dog, interrupts *my* sleep, or leaves burned-out rockets on *my* lawn.
- Revving-up cars and ATV engines or screeching them by *my* house so as to be heard through *my* walls.
- Draining water away from their property by piping it onto *my* property.

That’s enough for now. For each one, should I:

- a) Do nothing and try to ignore it; either it will stop eventually, or I will just have to learn to live with it.
- b) Call the police and let them deal with it; hopefully, the cops will leave me out of it.
- c) Leave an untraceable note in their mailbox and hope they find it and don’t connect it to me.
- d) Just softly explain that, gee, were they aware that the actions in question were either not allowed here or were causing me personal discomfort, and would they be kind enough to cease doing them, please, and not think I’m being a grump for asking, thank you?

I’d like to think that if one of my neighbors came to *me* with similar complaints, I’d say “Oh, wow, I didn’t realize that. Thanks for pointing it out. I’m sorry, and it won’t happen again.” And we’d shake hands and that would be that. Hmm, maybe that’s all that will happen to *me* if I try Plan (d). Maybe, next time, *that’s* what I’ll do.