

Like Pearls on a Silken Cord
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Beacon UU Congregation
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My former husband David, grew up in Chester, Massachusetts - a small, out-of-the-way, 1 stop sign, hill town in the Berkshires. His city-reared parents had bought the Chester Inn, smack in the center of the mill town village, and ran it as a Boarding House/ Bar that came to be inhabited by a quirky cast of characters straight out the John Irving novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*. The only thing missing was the dancing bear!

They were *neighborhood* characters: Wendell, the hard-working laborer; Elmer Hunt, the slow-moving war veteran; Arvilla Allaire, the crusty and resourceful single mother; Hewitt Pease, the soft-spoken general store proprietor, and Mary Salzano, the warm-hearted Italian immigrant, who fretted that the priest was talking about her behind her back. Throughout his childhood, these Chester characters were constants in David's compact world.

I, on the other hand, came of age in the much more urbanized residential Pittsburgh neighborhood called Squirrel Hill -- a real-life version of the movie *Pleasantville*, with meatloaf wafting from kitchen windows, fathers arriving home at 6 p.m. to eat it, and a knot of children in scuffed Keds locked in battle on a makeshift baseball diamond painted into the intersection at the corner of Phillips and Pocusset Streets.

Yet, like David, I knew the neighbors... it was expected, normal, unremarkable. We drifted in and out of one another's homes un-self-consciously. We even had our own versions of Dennis the Menace and Mr. Wilson...Ricky, who kept hitting his baseball into Mrs. Levitt's yard, despite her shrewish declarations that anything that landed on her property was hers!

We would send some kid on a reconnaissance mission to fetch the ball and out the back door she would lunge, wagging her finger at the fleeing intruder.

Later, when Ricky's mother got cancer, I learned for the first time how neighbors help one another as I watched my mother cart a hot dinner across the street to their home. And when someone moved away, we helped them pack and stood in the driveway waving good-bye to forlorn faces peering out the back of a Chevy station wagon.

We noticed. There went part of the neighborhood. From a child's perspective, it was hard to imagine where they would go or why they would leave. Would they be someone else's neighbor? And who would take their place? Would the new neighbor loan us a ladder or tell us when we left a light on in the car?

After years of living a somewhat isolated existence in a series of apartments, David and I bought our first home in 1985 in one of Boston's classic lace-curtain Irish enclaves called Dorchester.

It was a fixer-upper two-family Victorian, cheek to jowl with nearly identical homes on a snug, tree-lined street, where we couldn't help but meet and greet the neighbors as we sat on our stoops on hot summer nights or walked to the corner shop (or "spa" as it was known) for milk.

Our neighbors were different from us in some ways, but we learned to be neighborly and feel connected to the good folk of St. Mark's Parish. But this neighborhood ultimately proved to be unsuitable for educating our kids, so we packed off happily one hot August day in 1992 for Concord, MA -- back to small-town, village living from David's perspective, away from the suffocation of the city but with the city still within reach from mine.

But what we noticed straight off was how deserted the neighborhood streets seemed to us. Bewildered, even a bit unnerved, we drove around town, wondering, "Where are the people?" Are they in their backyards? Away on vacation? At some swim club? or pond? Where are the quirky neighborhood characters, the Elmer Hunts and the Mrs. Levitts? Where is the crackle of a neighborhood?

So, you can imagine how she stood out; how noticeable and noteworthy she was --the neighborhood "walking lady" -- this trim, smiling woman in her fifties, walking, walking, always walking up and down the streets of West Concord, everywhere, constantly, morning, noon, and night, in sunshine and storm, with a sturdy backpack strapped on. Often she walked alone, sometimes with her husband or with her husband and two grown children.

At first, we thought she must be unstable or at the very least, terrifically eccentric, to be walking about that way. Over time, I came to know her as "Annette," a kind, endlessly optimistic, entirely sane British woman who never failed to have a reassuring word about my garden or my small children, no matter how grubby they were.

She walked because she had no driver's license and having grown up herself in a small British village, she explained that "people walk more there than here." She walked because along with gardening and other pursuits, it offered her a healthy and simple way to live.

Her familiar and dependable silhouette chugging down Main Street reassured me. *There goes Annette and all's right with the world.* So you can imagine how shocked and bereft I felt when I learned that Annette and her tight-knit family had perished in the Swiss Air crash on September 2nd, 1998 in Nova Scotia. Ironically, they were jetting off for a two-week walking and hiking vacation in the Alps.

I was not alone in grieving for Annette. Just as I had noticed and fretted when a childhood neighbor moved away back in the "good old days," the West

Concord community noticed Annette's demise and disappearance. Many residents spoke of the peculiar bond they felt to her and how the "walking lady" had come to symbolize something important but hard to define. It was as if her walks strung together our disconnected lives like pearls on a silken cord.

We remained somewhat isolated in our climate-controlled homes or fenced-in yards while she walked, connecting us, house to house, property line to property line. She was a constant in an ever-shifting cast of suburban characters.

At a memorial walk for Annette, more than 200 people trekked the 2-mile loop she so favored, past the West Concord 5 and 10, the Library and my Main Street house, with the morning glories spilling over the fence.

And in doing so, they might have seen the pearls of our neighborhood, including perhaps their own homes, in a new and promising light, much like Annette might have seen it - from the pavement, in fresh air, and in human scale. Her long walk was most definitely a precious gift to us all.

Clearly, I'm still thinking about Annette and how she absolutely represented a kind of *neighborliness* which recognizes the folks next door as "human beings like ourselves" rather than "abutters."

I must admit to having my work cut out for me on this score, given that my next door neighbor in Concord years back was seven months pregnant before I was even aware of her condition. *Mea culpa!*

All I can say is that I recommitted myself to working harder at neighborliness, and this was made easier by my classic working class Pittsburgh neighborhood of close set houses with well-used front porches.

On that steep Swissvale slope, people make eye contact, they say Good Morning, they know the name of your dog, you get invited over, they bring you haluski and soup. During my years in the Burgh, I've retraining the muscle of good neighborliness that I had begun conditioning as a carefree tomboy on Pocusset Street, but there is still room for growth here.

Now, I am in residence in a cozy, light-filled house on W. Milkey Dr. here in Flagstaff. I haven't met many of my neighbors yet, but I've experienced the extraordinary neighborliness of this congregation. I had a mishap on the way out here from Pittsburgh that has hobbled me a bit and one of you has shown up every morning since to walk my sweet dog, Miss Billie. What a welcome. Thank you for your generosity of spirit and for accepting this new wounded neighbor into your fold.

Like my colleague Lynn Ungar I do believe that good fences may make good neighbors, but the fence should most certainly have a gate in it. Ungar observes that, "Sometimes we chose to build fences, and we can also chose to tear down walls, to make a sense of belonging to flourish, even in a society that expects us to stay apart."

You can if you chose, fulfill the vision of the prophet Isaiah (58:12) who proclaimed that “you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”

In my view, we are in need of such a restoration. Our culture may glorify the lonely hero or the rugged individualist, but in truth, I believe we long for neighborly places like Chester, Massachusetts and from what I have already observed and experienced, Flagstaff, AZ.

And I'm wondering how we might promote and preserve this type of place-based, old-fashioned neighborliness in our age of easy mobility and high-tech communication. The automobile, computers, smart phones and streaming TV, are wonderful innovations, but they've inadvertently broken the web woven by constant interaction with our neighbors.

Once we visited regularly around pot-bellied stoves in general stores, on front porches and at the post office. To be sure, we may still see one another at the dog park or the co-op, at a community garden or supermarket, contra dancing or at art openings, and certainly, here at church. We're not entombed in our homes, by any means. We find ways to connect and to be "in community."

Yet, these days, rather than hearing the familiar and reassuring question posed in TV Land by the kindly Mr. Rogers, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?," we're more likely to be queried, "Won't You Be in My Meetup or google group or follow me on Twitter or Instagram"

For many isolated or lonely people, the Internet is some form of mutuality or a safety net, particularly in a society increasingly plagued with internal fragmentation, “maybe-I-do” commitment, and a hectic, numbing busyness.

Even so, how might we reconnect more broadly with the chat-over-the-fence friendliness of Kansas when the twister of modern living has landed us in e-mail empire of Oz?

It might be considered hubris to presume that we "create community" when, in fact, we are more likely to be created *by* it. Here at Beacon, one can connect in so many ways with the means to be "neighborly" beyond our private dwellings – serving on one of our teams, attending worship, dive into social action projects or adult faith development classes, teaching RE, arranging practical help for those in need (like me), stepping up to serve on the Board.

And, we make efforts to reach across cultural and social boundaries as good neighbors, sharing concerns and resources. I'm so impressed with the work of your Social Justice Allies.

Perhaps we could do more to find ways to be neighborly with folks outside of our typical white, middle class UU demographics and develop real time methods for tying our nerve endings to their concerns and the reality of *their* Coconino County?

That was deliberately framed as a question. I am a carpetbagger at this point. I just got here and it's not my place to tell you Arizonians how to be

neighborly to Native Americans whose reservations surround this city, or how to respond to the immigration crisis beleaguering our neighbors on the Southern border.

That said, I am here to learn about these relationships and enter into them appropriately and intersectionally with and others locally and statewide. It is my hope that we'll be inspired to take a long walk together out of our comfort zones, our safe places and neighborhoods.

My personal Pittsburgh experience did extend beyond the white (mostly Jewish) East End of my childhood. I lived in a multi-racial neighborhood this time around, a fact for which I am grateful. But I admit, with some discomfort, that the pearls are still pretty shiny on my silken cord.

My mind was wrapped around these thoughts as I took a break from sermon writing one day last year and embarked on one of the long walks I enjoy with my dog Billie in the area of Pittsburgh called Regent Square. And, as I did daily, I encountered the ever-present local homeless man at the corner of Hutchinson and Braddock Avenues.

As usual, he was disheveled and dirty, in a grimy coat and baseball cap, his grey beard matted and scraggly. He stood there on the corner, still as a statue, with a coffee cup in his hand. I looked at him, really looked at him. He seemed lost and almost like a specter (rather than a flesh and blood person) as people zipped by him with no acknowledgement.

I was marinating in the topic of neighborliness at that moment, so I asked myself, "Is this man not my neighbor?" He lives in my neighborhood, even if he lives on the street. Isn't he as much my neighbor as Annie and Julie or Sue and Don?

I am struck with the heart piercing thought that he was once someone's little boy and I feel wretched for ignoring him. I have never spoken to him, made eye contact with him.

I am afraid that he may presume a relationship with me or follow me home or endanger me in some way. But he is my neighbor and I have erected a wall between us.

I wonder if yearns to feel visible and known or is content to be invisible. I ask myself, "Is it presumptuous to assume he would want me to speak to him...and even more importantly, am I considering doing this out of compassion or to make myself feel better about myself?" I realize that the same question is pertinent in regard to a newfound zeal for reaching out and connecting with the folks in predominantly black Pittsburgh neighborhoods of Homewood and the Hill District (and I could now substitute the Native American and Hispanic communities in this inner query).

I am not sure of the answer, so I will reflect anew on the principles of allyship (and the dangers of liberal white savior behavior) which I most certainly do not want to impose on my ministry here at Beacon.

By the way, I mentioned this homeless man to a neighbor who responded, "Oh, that's John!" He has family in the area but likes to be on the street." I think to myself (a bit red-faced), "He has a name. He is not a concept or an object of pity. I want to do better.

The stranger and the neighbor confront us in every person we meet. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues, "Jesus walks incognito on the earth as your neighbor." The same could be said of Gandhi or Buddha. How can I not think of Annette, the warm and caring walking lady, when I read such a statement?

Or the brave and resourceful strangers who strung themselves together as a human chain to save a family from drowning in Florida last July. Or, the unconnected travellers who formed a group escort at Albuquerque Airport's Gate 4-A to help a frightened Palestinian passenger find her way.

Just this week, we hear stories of families taking in children left parentless by brutal ICE raids in Mississippi and the brave denizens of Hermitage, TN who formed a human fence in front of a neighbor's home to keep her from being taken away. In a story in the NYT, the journalist Margaret Renki, described them as "ordinary people, who like the rest of us are absorbed by our own worries and contending with our own troubles, nevertheless turned from our own lives to protect our neighbor. She writes: "We remember a truth that as lately been too easy to forget – we belong to one another."

The message of this story and others is clear to me: we are *not* intended to live in isolation; we are meant to live as neighbors to one another.

We're all in it -- this life -- together, and its a wonderful life indeed when we open ourselves to love (and be loved by!) the people around us and even break a sweat being the repairer of the breach.

As David Blanchard reminds us, the most meaningful gift we give each other requires some version of the long walk. Where might a neighborhood walk take you? What shimmering (and not so shiny) pearls on a silken cord might be waiting for your discovery? waiting to nurture you? stretch you? connect you beyond your comfort zone? In what ways might the question "Whose Are You?" be infused with more texture and depth?

"Where an easy walk secures postage stamps, dry cleaning, groceries, a magazine, a sweet roll or a cup of coffee, there will be life beyond private dwellings," writes Ray Oldenburg in his book, The Great Good Place.

My wish for all of us is that all neighborhoods be great good places of easy strolls, where people like us keep pace alongside people like Annette, people like the brave neighbors of Hermitage, people like the Elmer Hunt, Mrs. Levitt, and the homeless man of Regent Square;

neighbors like the native Americans living on reservations and our Southern neighbors suffering in detention, with our feet to the ground, in fresh

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air, in human scale, beyond private dwellings, face to face, neighbor to neighbor,
on the long walk together towards the gift of being visible and known.

Amen and Blessed Be.

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