Social Experiment: Know Thy Neighbor by Peter Lovenheim

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*The author asked himself: Do I live in a community or just in a house on a street of people whose lives are separate from my own? And he wondered: What if he could deliberately get to know these strangers?*

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When I was growing up in upstate New York in the late 1950s and '60s, people didn't exercise in public the way they do now. You didn't see adults jogging, biking or power-walking on the street.

Except one. Nearly every day, a middle-aged woman of slight build walked rapidly through our suburban neighborhood, usually with her head down. No one knew her name, so we called her the Walker. She usually wore a simple blue or yellow dress, if memory serves, and when it rained she would wear a clear plastic raincoat with a hood pulled over her head. In the winter I recall a long, cloth coat, also with a hood; in driving snow she'd cover her face with a scarf.

Forty years later, when I'd moved with my wife and children back to what had been my parents' home, I was amazed to see the same woman still walking through the neighborhood.

Resolved, finally, to meet her, I approached her one afternoon in 2003.

"Excuse me, " I began. "I've lived on this street a long time and have always noticed you walking."

Up close, she looked older, smaller and frailer than I had imagined.

"Yes," she said. "I've been walking here a long time."

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Her voice was shaky, but she spoke with a clear diction. She said she'd walked in the neighborhood almost every day since 1960.

"You've walked on our street every day for more than 40 years?" I asked.

"I didn't miss many," she said, smiling.

"In just one more year, I'll be 90," she added.

Her name was Grace Field.

In answer to my question, Grace said that in all the years she'd been at it, few people had stopped to speak with her.

I was, at the time, writing a book about how Americans live as neighbors and asked Grace if she'd be willing to talk with me about that. She agreed, and a few days later, I met her at her home. It turned out she lived in an apartment nearby. She'd never married, lived alone and walked each day, she said, for exercise.

Among the things I learned about Grace was that as a young woman she had studied at the Juilliard School and was an accomplished harpist and pianist.

What a waste, I thought; if only we'd gotten to know her, Grace might have made an interesting friend. Maybe she even could have given music lessons to children in the neighborhood.

I had not been particularly interested in neighborhoods until about 10 years ago when a tragedy occurred on my street: One evening, a man shot and killed his wife and then himself; their two middle school-age children ran screaming into the night. The kids soon moved to their grandparents' house in another part of town. What struck me about this event — besides the tragedy — was that a family who had lived on my street for seven years had, in essence, vanished overnight. Yet the effect on my neighborhood seemed slight. No one, including me, knew the family well. In fact, as far as I could tell, no one seemed to know anyone beyond a casual, superficial level.

I asked myself: Do I live in a community or just in a house on a street surrounded by people whose lives are entirely separate from my own? And I wondered: What if I could deliberately get to know these strangers on my street — know them in a meaningful way — what would I learn and how might it change the neighborhood?

Admittedly, the methodology I stumbled upon — sleeping over at my neighbors' houses — seems eccentric. In practice, though, it worked well. Fully half the neighbors I asked — after we'd gotten to know each other through initial interviews — said yes. And the connections forged did help transform strangers into friends and a disconnected group of people into something more resembling a community. When we discovered, for example, that one neighbor, a single mom, had breast cancer, we patched together a group of neighbors to drive her to doctors and help watch her kids after school.

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In this age of cheap long distance, discount airlines and the Internet, when we can create community anywhere, why do neighborhoods still matter? They matter because we are all mortal, and if we have an emergency, a friend even 10 minutes away may be a friend too far.

They matter because all our resources are finite, and if you're baking a cake at night and have to drive to the supermarket for a bottle of vanilla — as one of my neighbors confessed she recently had done — instead of borrowing from the person next door, you're wasting gas, energy and your own valuable time.

They matter because our society is too fragmented, and if we want to start rebuilding a healthy civil society by learning to understand and live peacefully with people whose ideas about religion, morality and politics may be different from our own, a very good place to start is with the people in our own apartment building or on our own block.