

## INTRODUCTION

# Good Neighbor Nation

### The Quality of the Day

Take good neighbor literally: people who live nearby and contribute to—or do not derange—the quality of life at home. Neighbors exhibit solicitude and hospitality but also unleash their demons on us, or in our view. Snobbery, betrayal, hypocrisy, and cruelty wreck our sleep, our nerves.<sup>1</sup> 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. Killing time. Wounding reputation.

Myra, in Willa Cather's novel *My Mortal Enemy*, is beside herself on account of her upstairs neighbors:

Why should I have the details of their stupid, messy existence thrust upon me all day long, and half the night? . . . They tramp . . . up there like cattle . . . Their energy isn't worth anything so they use it up . . . running about, beating my brains to jelly.<sup>2</sup>

Around home we are unguarded; we don't always think to arrange the face we present or to modulate our words and tone when we step out our door. Proximity creates cause and occasion for arguments, slights, acts of aggression. Family aside, we have no more constant or intimate stage for exhibiting graciousness or foul temper, or worse, than where we live.

Everyone is eager to tell a story about a neighbor and even at academic colloquia I receive unsolicited diatribes—for these are mostly accounts of adversarial encounters and good turns unreturned, costly run-ins and daily insults of noise or disarray, carelessness or abject social incompetence. The stories we tell reflect our bafflement, our incredulity

at the misconduct or sheer obliviousness of the people next door. Even if the trouble is decades in the past and the neighbor has moved away, people narrate their stories at a high pitch—almost as if they are talking about cruelty or betrayal (as indeed they sometimes are). True, when friends sit down to report their trials we may think “how tedious.” But our own neighbors are serious business.

*Of course* we tell our stories with feeling. Neighbors are not just people living nearby. Neighbors are our environment. They are the background to our private lives at home. When they give a sufficiently strong dose of themselves, they appear forcibly in our foreground. Bad neighbors diminish the quality of life materially and emotionally. That is, they diminish everyday life, everyday, where we live, at home. Hence the moral of Aesop’s fable of Minerva: a house should be made movable, “by which means a bad neighborhood might be avoided.”<sup>3</sup> Or this homely truth: “No man can live longer in peace than his Neighbour pleases.”<sup>4</sup>

The unique power neighbors hold over our lives is explained in one word: they affect us where we live, at *home*. We have no exit. And at home we are uniquely vulnerable because of the stakes, the depth and intensity of the interests we have in quotidian private life there, and our expectation of control over our personal affairs behind the door. Not least our “sense of privacy itself . . . [as] something sacred in its own right.”<sup>5</sup>

“Call one of the neighbors. Call the Morgans. Anyone will feed a dog if you ask them to,” a wife assures her husband in Raymond Carver’s story “A Small Good Thing.” We value good neighbors, and the value we place on them comes from more than the grinding irritation and sometime dangerousness of bad ones. We can try to list the benefits and comforts we have in mind when we assure ourselves of “what anyone would do, here.” Feed a dog. Watchful eyes over our property and children. Sweeping the building’s common staircase. Closing the lid of the dumpster tightly. Knowing that in an emergency a nearby neighbor is likely to call for help or come to help. Often enough availability, not the act, is what counts.

We have a history of encounters with our neighbors and expectations that these will continue into the future. This inclines us to return good turns, even if that consists of nothing more than a wave or the standard, solicitous, but not insignificant, “How are you today?” We assess the rewards and the costs of offers and rebuffs all the time. The utility of reciprocity is certainly not lost on us, but a purely instrumental understanding of neighborliness leads us astray. Reciprocity, which provides a

foothold on the difficult terrain of neighborliness, is mischaracterized if we see it as nothing more than strategic cooperation, a network of negotiated support. Instrumentalism is far from the whole of neighborly interactions. In fact, the dynamic works as often in reverse. Give and take may have little purpose except as a way of initiating and sustaining relations day to day. I am reminded of Thoreau's account of building his hut at Walden Pond:

At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house.<sup>6</sup>

Good neighbors too are serious business. Anything is possible, from a nod of recognition to a spark of sympathy and interest, to the rare "unlooked for favor" that alters the day. We shouldn't underestimate the significance of mundane trespasses and kindnesses. The quotidian, local, and personal matter immensely.

If "the ruling passion in man . . . [is] a gregarious instinct to keep together by minding each other's business,"<sup>7</sup> there is enormous latitude in the business neighbors have with one another. Some business is mundane, some life-changing and life-saving, but we shouldn't ignore the simple fact that our neighbors' affairs hold interest for us: "For what do we live," Mr. Bennet asked in *Pride and Prejudice*, "but to make sport for our neighbours and laugh at them in our turn?" Our interest may be to some purpose, or purely idle: "Georgie and Mother used to talk all the time. What about! . . . They would talk about Georgie's neighbours, Georgie's neighbours' children, their husbands . . . They never stopped. It was interesting."<sup>8</sup>

Together, minding our own business and minding our neighbors' are capacious enough to capture a lot about the moral psychology of dealing with people who live nearby. We might be tempted to view these poses as poles and be disposed to one or another—insistent engagement or guarded disengagement. Or, we may arrive at a satisfactory equilibrium: discrete self-distancing from our neighbor's constant company and line of vision, easy or cool familiarity, occasional practical help. Or we may achieve a more fulsome reciprocity: willingly engaging our neighbor on her terms, responding animatedly to her interests, and inviting her to appreciate ours in turn. We arrive at a sort of mutual hospitality, a selective invitation to mind one another's business. In any case, we can avoid neither; these turns of attention are in constant flux. The push and pull of

minding our own business and minding our neighbors' is familiar, and the tension between them is internal to the experience of good neighbors. Both are endemic to what Lewis Mumford called the collective effort to lead a private life.

The phenomenology of everyday encounters is my starting point, then: ordinary good turns and ordinary vices, the give and take of greetings, favors, and offenses in this place whose meaning for us is different from any other. Extreme conditions and frightful degradation of everyday life at home are common enough, however, and then neighbors' responses are immensely important, life-altering. Neighbors may hold our lives in their hands.

My map of this moral minefield begins with local disorder, mayhem, and violence. Under mistrust-creating conditions neighbors become fearful and withdrawn and must struggle to sustain even rudimentary give and take.

Grimmer still, political authorities enlist neighbors as informers, instigating denunciation and betrayal. Neighbors become treacherous, unleashing on one another the viciousness endemic to the politics of the place.

Intimate violence at the hands of neighbors we thought we knew and who knew us has specific horror. The quintessential American case is lynching, and African Americans vulnerable to mutilation and murder by people they know, hoods or no, report (as survivors of other atrocities also report) on the sheer incredulity of the thing when it is *neighbors* who hold our lives in their hands.<sup>9</sup>

Even so, even then, some neighbors warn, protect, comfort, and rescue. We know, too, that the simplest, everyday gestures are precious under extreme conditions. When the quality of life is deranged, ordinary moments of recognition and solicitude assume extraordinary significance. "No-one during this terrible time was moved by blood, suffering and death; what surprised and shook people was kindness and love," Vasily Grossman wrote. The old teacher

was probably the only person in the town who had not changed. . . . This old man seemed to be the only person left. . . . who still asked, "How are you feeling today?"<sup>10</sup>

Unable to remedy devastating reality, still, exhibitions of neighborliness provide comfort, a reminder of normalcy, and hope.

One more collision of the ordinary and extraordinary at home: a common thread in survivors' accounts of natural disasters is the assistance

only neighbors—not strangers, not organized volunteers, not official rescuers—provide. Where physical upheaval obliterates the known landscape, neighbors' faces comprise the firm bits of terrain on which we reemerge. They stimulate awakening and orientation, and then they improvise rescue and aid, resisting the chaos and fury of “decivilization.”

These reflections remind us that the everyday has a claim on our attention: “to affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts,” and neighbors brighten or degrade the day, every day.<sup>11</sup> My argument in *Good Neighbors* is that in America this “highest of arts” is grounded in a distinct set of norms I call *the democracy of everyday life*.

### On Our Own

Neighborliness “is not an emotion but a practice, a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration.”<sup>12</sup> Just what good neighbor entails is elusive, however, more so, I believe, than any other significant social relation. Not because neighboring is abstract but rather because it is concrete and nothing is excluded from the wide-open domain of give and take. Reciprocity is open-ended, loose, and permissive. What counts as a fitting turn for turn? And when is a return of a favor on the calendar? It's not surprising that our calibrations are often mistaken, our footing unsure in this tentative, unchoreographed dance of give and take. Our day-to-day encounters are direct and personal, mainly discretionary, and marked by considerable spontaneity. Personal disposition plays a large part and affects whether our response to a particular neighbor is attraction, aversion, or the indifference of a clam precisely because neighbor relations fall outside of articulated social structures and purposes.

True, neighbor relations operate in the shadow of law and public policy: zoning ordinances, property law, landlord-tenant contracts, association covenants, the unlovely law of torts—nuisance above all, and criminal law as well. In many instances appeal to authorities is unavailable, however, because behavior is not a matter for the police or a civil suit, and in any event many people are ignorant of their entitlements or can't go down that costly road. The direct, personal encounters I'll explore are mostly outside or beneath the notice of these jurisdictions. We are on our own.

It is hard to think of another sustained interaction except friendship that floats so free of the institutional securities, the rules, processes, shared purposes, and agreed-on outcomes that define roles and cabin relations in

other settings. No professional ethic, no articulation of “special responsibilities” of the sort moral philosophers attribute to “thick” relations of family and friends, no “associative duties” we are said to owe social groups or the nation to which we belong are suitable guides. The judgments we make of those who live close by, our responses to their good and bad turns, and our responsibilities to them (if any), don’t come with scripts. Maxims abound, but hardly constitute an articulated ethic.

Except, that is, for severe Old and New Testament injunctions to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Every element of the command requires interrogation. What is this self-love that sets the measure for neighbor love? How is it possible to *will* love toward my neighbor, or anyone? And not least, who is my neighbor? In millennia of interpretation of these sacred texts, “neighbor” ranges from tribal (Leviticus’s Israelites) to Christ’s radical universal commandment erasing boundaries (in Soren Kierkegaard’s words, “You can never confuse him with anyone else, since the neighbor . . . is all people”<sup>13</sup>), but not in any case simply people living nearby. “Love thy neighbor” ranges from specific prohibitions and duties set out in codes of Jewish law to nothing less than an abridgement of all the divine commandments.<sup>14</sup> Today, “love thy neighbor” draws its force from general morality rather than divine law but its scope and content and motivating disposition remain elusive. Mary Parker Follett, the great Progressive advocate of neighborliness as a path to participatory democracy, gave voice to this predicament:

I am ready to say to you this minute, “I love my neighbors.” But all that I mean by it is that I have a vague feeling of kindness towards them. I have no idea how to do the actual deed. I shall offend against the law of love within the hour.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, we can safely say *something* about what a minimal ethic of neighborliness entails: warning of danger, acting in emergencies, avoiding arrant cruelty and wanton disruption. Of course, these are matters of decency, obligations in every sphere with special application to neighbors only because living in proximity amplifies opportunity. Beyond that, a general ethic of neighborliness might be defined by friendliness and helpfulness. Something like a threshold ethic of care. These are not restricted to relations with people next door either, though, which is why the phrase “good neighbor” is frequently appropriated to refer to all sorts of volunteerism and organized beneficence.

Neighborliness has a moral aspect, plainly, but we must search for it by drawing on past experience or on stories we hear from friends and rela-

tives, or seizing on anecdotes that circulate without attribution to illuminate how we feel (or think we should feel), and how we might respond to our neighbor's offer or offense. Small wonder that we act impulsively or erratically, are often baffled by how to react to things our neighbors do and say, or are ambivalent about engaging them at all.

All that said, our experiences and our understanding of good neighbor have ballast. The general ethic of neighborliness I described plays a part. But in the United States that ethic is overlaid by something more. What I call the democracy of everyday life gives good neighbor added value beyond basic decency, friendliness, helpfulness. It shapes expectations, disposition, demeanor, and our repertoire of daily encounters.

The scope of neighbor interactions is indeterminate, the matter unpredictable, and the temper of encounters colored by the full human spectrum of moral and social dispositions. How to contain this subject in a reasonably unreductive way, one that brings out the distinctive dynamic of neighbor relations in America? What patterns are discernible without embedding give and take in ethnography or social history? The democracy of everyday life does this work, I argue. It captures the flow of neighbors relations, which, illuminated from within, are seen to have interests, habits, and moral injunctions of their own. And the democracy of everyday life also opens out to political theory.

## Neighbors in America

First, this background. Being a good neighbor is a component of how we think about ourselves, an element of Americans' moral identity. That gives psychological as well as ethical weight to my subject. Neighborliness—with its historical roots in settler and immigrant experiences, its incarnations in popular culture, and its democratic character—is deeply engrained. For most of us (not all) much of the time (not always) “good neighbor” is a regulative ideal. We are seldom prepared to cast ourselves out of the universe of good neighbors; indeed, we may see ourselves as exemplars or enforcers. We are certainly inclined to blame and shame and speak out against bad neighbors, and we accuse them not just of selfishness, carelessness, or malice but also of a deeper failing: falling off from this ideal, which is also familiar practice.

If “neighbor” designates proximity only, neighbors are universal except in the most isolated, unsettled spots. Everywhere, people exchange good turns and bad with those living close by. Characteristically American, though, is good neighbor as a moral identity that is also a form of

democratic excellence. It is a commitment to a form of goodness that entails discipline, and sometimes courage. My claim is not that the democratic ethos of good neighbor is unique to America, only that it is distinct and identifiable here.

At the same time that good neighbor is an element of personal identity, good neighbor is a common representation of national character, as proverbial as the proud self-portrait of America as a nation of volunteers who perform good works, and rivaling the representation of America as a nation of public-spirited citizens. Indeed good neighbor is prior and primary, arguably more deeply rooted as a national self-image than these. Representation of America as “good neighbor nation” has surprising force and continuity. In the face of historic changes in economy and demography, regional and social differences, enormous variation in the needs and dependencies of neighbors (contrast settlers with suburbanites), and an expanding array of residential patterns, domestic lifestyles and cultural etiquettes, the good neighbor is a steady, symbolic American.

This collective self-representation of America as “good neighbor nation” is a point of national pride that spills over into foreign affairs. President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” was intended to resonate with standard elements of the idea of a good neighbor: benign intent, practical assistance, and respect for other states’ self-determination.<sup>16</sup> It promised reciprocity and goodwill. It pretended rough equality and disclaimed assertions of power. *Vis-à-vis* nations in the hemisphere, the title of the doctrine was a mix of assurances and moral hubris. I imagine it addressed less to the government of Mexico than to ourselves.

Of course, invocations of good neighbor can be facile, sentimental, self-flattery, or wishful thinking. But when it is sober and reflective we recognize good neighbor as a significant element of personal and collective identity, and as the deep substrate of democracy in America.

I use the first person plural, “we,” to emphasize that moral identity as good neighbor is commonplace among Americans and many residents here, and that “good neighbor nation” is part of our collective self-understanding. It should be abundantly clear, there is nothing uniform about neighbors’ experience, quite the contrary. Contingency and sheer individuality insure that neighbor relations are variable, and so does the enforcement of “local knowledge”—“what anyone would do, here.” Many of us want to live in a comparatively homogeneous home environment, most of us do in any case, as I show, but there is nothing homogenizing about neighbors’ actual encounters. Still, none of us is a stranger to



the tension between minding our own business and minding our neighbor's, to negotiating the terms of reciprocity, to giving and taking offense, to the impulse to withdraw and refuse to deal, or to the democratic ethos that infuses all of these. In using the pronoun "we," I mean to encourage recognition of the democracy of everyday life and to prevent myself (and readers) from disassociating from the errors of judgment and abject moral failures that corrode neighbor relations. And from sentimentality.

### The Sentimentality Trap

Settler, immigrant, and suburban narratives are the canonical materials from which both exemplary identity as a good neighbor and the collective representation of "good neighbor nation" are built. These narrative threads provide the basic content and the dominant tenors and colors of "good neighbor." They give it articulation. But many fictional narratives (think *Little House on the Prairie*) and representations of neighbors in popular culture (*Seinfeld*, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*) come to us in a sentimental register. I pause on this point because the sentimental hold good neighbor has on moral imagination presents an obstacle to understanding.

"Neighbor" comes bathed in a certain glow. The adjective "good" is superfluous. We harbor nostalgic images and subscribe to easy nostrums. Among neighbors, we imagine, we have occasions to spontaneously exhibit solicitude and kindness. Neighbors, in this fantasy, do not give offense or drive us to distraction. Neighbors do not tax us morally. They do not require us to exercise patience or to endure slights. Or if they do, misunderstandings are quickly cleared up, offenses forgiven, conflicts amicably resolved. Things are put back in place. That is part of the satisfaction of sentimentality—to reinforce unearned, pleasurable feelings. "There is nothing in the world so good as good neighbors," Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

Sentimental ideals differ from ideals that figure in moral and political philosophy whose purpose is to stimulate reflection on the distance between what could be and what exists, between a just society and our own. Sentimentality operates in reverse. It works by tapping previously prepared emotions and eliciting acquiescence in a flattering conventional picture. It does not provide a standard for assessment. It induces complacency. It shuts our reflective minds down. It is an impediment to absorbing social facts and to facing up to the requirements of our own and our collective well-being. What degree of attention (if any) can I tolerate

from the people next door? Honestly, do I have the disposition to inquire about my neighbor's pet, to return a favor, to refrain from registering disapproval or disgust? Can I admit to discomfort where sentimentality tells me there should be easy familiarity? The peril of sentimentality is as true for neighbors as it is for friendship and love: we deliver ourselves and our neighbors up for disappointment, or worse.

Sentimentality is liable to infuse the collective characterization of America as "good neighbor nation" as well. Neighbors constitute beneficent society, on this view, *because* we offer one another company and reciprocity unfettered by rules and sanctions, untainted by contracts and commercial exchanges, unfragmented by a division of labor, without the constraints imposed by unchosen collective purposes. Like friendship, the sentimental ideal of neighborliness inverts the ways of the larger society. Our interactions are personal and expressive "all the way down." In this dream, they don't rest on entrenched social structures shaped by law or public policy, or on the constraints of "local knowledge," or on the discipline of the democracy of everyday life.

This sentimental conception of voluntary sociability among neighbors has consequences not unlike the counterpart conception of rugged individualism. Most important, it fuels a romance in which neighbors do for one another in a world of unregulated individual good turns. When government and politics disappear from view as they do, we are left with the not-so-innocuous fantasy of ungoverned reciprocity as the best and fully adequate society. Laura Ingalls Wilder portrayed settlers living outside of most jurisdictions as an idyll not a fearful Hobbesian reality. The author's daughter ("Baby Rose" in the *Little House* books) was an advocate of *laissez-faire* and opponent of the New Deal who refused to pay social security taxes. Sentimental accounts of "good neighbor nation" fuel anti-government strains of American thought.

Sentimentality hinders understanding, in short. Cruelty and aggression among neighbors and the degradation of life around home are especially shocking if we start from the assumption that neighbors are marked by mutual care and concern, if we assume "thick" ties that command loyalty, if we begin from the notion that good neighbors are a spontaneous state of affairs rather than a hard-won status. We can shed sentimentality without rebounding and insisting as Freud did that my neighbor has more claim on my hostility than my love:

He seems not to have the least trace of love for me. . . . If it will do him good he has no hesitation in injuring me. . . . Indeed, he need not even

obtain an advantage; if he can satisfy any sort of desire by it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me, and showing his superior power.<sup>17</sup>

Which is not to say that the moral identity good neighbor isn't laudable or that America as "good neighbor nation" is pious self-flattery. The sentimental ideal of neighbor is a distortion; it bends perceptions of reality. The democracy of everyday life is a sober ideal, and it is sufficiently realized to escape pure idealization.

### The Democracy of Everyday Life

"The stuff of a civilization consists largely of its substantive norms," Robert Ellickson wrote, which have "no identifiable author, no apparent date of origin, no certainty of attention from historians" and that "are among the most magnificent of cultural achievements." He went on, "The overarching substantive norm of the rural residents of Shasta County is that one should be a 'good neighbor.'"<sup>18</sup> But what is that? An ethnographer of "the practice of everyday life" wrote of "the murmuring of the everyday in which one can multiply the soundings indefinitely without ever locating the structures that organize it."<sup>19</sup> I propose that our everyday experiences around home, the meaning we attribute to them, and our identity as good neighbors have a structure called the democracy of everyday life. My task is to tease it out.

Three signature elements make up the democracy of everyday life: reciprocity among "decent folk," speaking out, and live and let live. Absent defined rules and methods of enforcement, which is the essential predicament of neighbors, reciprocity is a touchstone. We know that give and take go on everywhere among people living nearby. The specifically "democratic" in relations shaped by the democracy of everyday life is in part a matter of rough parity in the terms of reciprocity and in part a matter of who counts as my neighbor in this dance of give and take.

"Decent folk" is a common way of referring to neighbors in settler, immigrant, and suburban narratives. It is a virtual synonym for good neighbor, and I adopt the phrase. "Decent folk" gathers in the qualities—practical and moral—that figure when we size up the couple next door to decide whether we will open ourselves to or wall ourselves off from willing encounters. It reflects a modest practical assessment that these neighbors intend us no harm, will take our elementary interests into account, and are available for the rudiments of give and take. "Decent folk" desig-

nates equality in this one respect: *qua* neighbor. Importantly it entails disregard for our neighbors' origin, social status, and character overall, and disregard for ascriptive characteristics. It is focused on what we can expect from one another day to day. Reciprocity detached from the considerations that govern interactions in social spheres outside home is not the practice in every society. More often, neighbor encounters and the terms of reciprocity are governed by the rules of social hierarchy, rank, class, kinship, or sectarianism.

Of course, the democratizing import of "decent folk" is aspirational. It is imperfectly realized. I discuss failings, including momentous historical failings and the intersection with racial politics at length. In fact, the phrase is double-edged. The negative reverse of the capaciousness of "decent folk"—the dark mirror of its inclusive embrace as a defining element of the democracy of everyday life—is denigration and exclusion of designated "others." Then the phrase conjures categorical judgments: white judgments of African Americans, and other "out groups." Yet reciprocity among "decent folk" is a mainstay of the democracy of everyday life.

It does not stand alone. When neighbors give offense we are drawn into a familiar world of difficulties: assessing the offense and whether or not to keep our sense of injury to ourselves. And whether or not to rally with others against a neighbor's derangement of our days or nights. "Speaking out" is the second element of the democracy of everyday life. Our indignation is specific to neighbors: we are subjected to another's arbitrary and unrestrained will at home, where we are uniquely vulnerable and retreat is impossible. We can sometimes appeal to local authorities for relief but matters are not always meant for police or civil suits and we may be unhappy to find ourselves on our own. We *want* other neighbors to confirm that our indignation is justified. We recruit them to speak out in what amounts to homely resistance to a sort of despotism. In that moment of speaking out we neighbors are self-governing. We are carrying on the work of protecting ourselves from one another in the domain of daily life at home where we don't want government regulation and enforcement to be.

Among the things that make speaking out interesting as a norm of good neighbor is the countervailing value of detachment and minding our own business. Both are internal to good neighbor. Refusing to join in enforcing "what anyone would do, here" is one way in which we limit the demands neighbors may make on us and limit the demands we make on ourselves. It is a condition for fashioning our own relations around home, and for care of the self.

The injunction to live and let live is the third element of the democracy of everyday life. “Live and let live” is not at all a matter of the shrug of indifference or caution against meddling that the colloquial phrase implies. It requires close attention to our neighbors and stern self-discipline. It enjoins us to protect as we can neighbors’ control over the environment of home. One characteristic expression of live and let live is reticence. Minding our neighbors’ business is unavoidable, forced on us by proximity. Do we exploit this accident of proximity? Do we admonish, report, agitate? Or do we maintain the neutral ground between us created by unacknowledgment. Live and let live makes us hesitant to publicize, pronounce, and report to other neighbors or to authorities. Under repressive political conditions, we are liable to become agents in a system of surveillance, and then, whether or not we follow the injunction to live and let live can be momentous.

For the same reasons and to the same purpose, live and let live prescribes not only reticence and inaction, but also a specific sort of action—a signal and offer. In mistrust-creating situations, with a gesture or word we acknowledge one another as neighbors, regular presences. We signal that we are safe with one another and will not disturb, injure, or exploit one another. We register our mutual vulnerability. We are paying attention. We are extending ourselves. The injunction can become a casualty of hostile situations, effectively muted. But where we can proffer it, live and let live is a powerful reassurance—a quiet demonstration of our intent to protect and repair the quality of the day.

The democracy of everyday life is not only a regulative ideal, but also—and readers will recognize this—a set of implicit expectations, dispositions, and practices that actually shape our interactions as neighbors and give them meaning. Of course, the democratic ethos is not always realized and is sometimes horribly deranged. My burden is to show that as neighbors—good or bad—we inhabit a distinct domain of quotidian life. The democracy of everyday life has its own place—encounters around home. Which is to say that neighbor relations comprise just one sphere in the complex pluralism and shifting involvements among spheres that mark life in society today. The value and meaning of good neighbors, the characteristic concerns with privacy, and the sociability associated with neighbors are one part of the larger story of the moral uses of pluralism.

Often then, I emphasize discontinuities. I proceed in part by “talking against.” Thus, the ethics of the democracy of everyday life are not encompassed by the usual considerations of moral philosophy. There, the

subject is the particular attachments and obligations we have as citizens, or members of a family or ethnic or religious group. Or, moral philosophy focuses on our common humanity. Something is lost if the democratic ethos of good neighbor is conflated with the special responsibilities that come with family or group ties. Something is lost as well if good neighbor is conflated with universal moral decency, respect, or an ethic of care said to apply to everyone, everywhere.

The elements of the democracy of everyday life comprise a set distinct, too, from formal and informal democratic institutions and practices, from public principles of justice or fairness, from the legalism of rights, and from civic virtues. Put simply, good neighbor is not a redescription of good citizen. One is not an informal variant of the other. The democracy of everyday life is not democratic public life writ small.<sup>20</sup> This is not just a question of scale and scope, either. We simply do not experience neighbor relations in these terms. To represent the democracy of everyday life as if it were a matter of translating public democratic principles to fit direct personal relations among neighbors at home is a distortion. We learn more by keeping the distinct moral identity of good neighbor and the independence of the democracy of everyday life firmly in view.

Yet the democracy of everyday life does hold significance for democratic public life—just not for the reasons political theorists and civic activists might predict. I don't suggest that neighboring is a school of civic virtue, or that good neighbor is preparation or model for citizenship. Not at all. Neighbor and citizen are not coextensive. But neither are the zones rigorously separate. There are both continuities and discontinuities in the contours of our experiences as neighbor and citizen and the meaning they hold for us. I show just how nuanced interactions are between the democracy of everyday life and formal democratic principles, public spaces and institutions, and civic virtues. The important point is this: something is lost if the democracy of everyday life is overlooked or seen as valuable only insofar as it instantiates public democratic principles and practices. Good neighbor is both supplement and corrective to how we think about democracy in America.

### Biography of a Theory

Theoretical activity begins in the private world of inquirers. It works this way: something happens, and we are startled into thought. The intimate history of *Good Neighbors* began with a bully in my apartment building who tormented the family next door. The incident prompted self-

reflection. Joining my neighbors in speaking out and standing up to the offender was a point of pride; I identified with this facet of being a good neighbor, which I experienced as a sort of resistance to despotism. Pretty quickly, though, I realized how challenged I was in other respects. I have only a limited capacity for friendly exchange trapped in unwelcome conversation in the hall. I harbor a frankly judgmental attitude toward neighbors' disarray. I envy the apparent ease and familiarity of less withdrawn neighbors. What sort of person am I, really, that I'm not sure I want my new neighbors to know my name? Clearly, on reflection, neighbors brought out traits I didn't know I had (or pretended not to have). Neighbors, I argue, can illuminate our reluctance to know ourselves and they can spur self-understanding. *Good Neighbors* began with my own experiences, with situations that would trouble anyone. I hope to be seen as a trustworthy narrator and theorist in part because I am present in these pages: acknowledging the awful power of ordinary anxieties and the comfort of ordinary sympathy and recognition, making larger sense of otherwise inchoate encounters with neighbors, drawing out the elements of the democracy of everyday life around home and their real shaping force in the moment.<sup>21</sup>

Personal experience along with stories from friends and offerings from colleagues at seminars are very much to the point. For one thing, they are direct testimony of the capacity neighbors have to brighten or degrade life at home, everyday. For another, these stories yield patterns of encounters. I'm making a more general claim, too: these stories are part of the "biography of a theoretical idea."<sup>22</sup> Here, the world of personal experience and my subject are connected in a simple and obvious way, but the connection is always there. It is there when theorists plunge into ideas "as if into religion or revolution"<sup>23</sup> as I do in appreciating "the moral uses of pluralism" and the sphere of life around home as essential to moral personality, to the quality of life, and to democracy.

Literature carried personal observation further. In three iconic representations of the United States—as a settler nation, a nation of immigrants, and as the quintessential scene of suburban life—the democratic ethos of neighboring is a constant theme. It sounds with remarkable continuity across economic and demographic changes and a host of "spatially inscribed social differences."<sup>24</sup> I draw out the elements of the democracy of everyday life from these narratives. I did not find my organizing concepts ready to hand in moral philosophy or democratic theory. The selections I draw from literature are not merely illustrative. I have not exploited fiction to flesh out previously existing arguments. Rather, I found

there conceptual as well as material resources from which to build a political theory of the democracy of everyday life. Stories by Phillip Roth and Raymond Carver, Willa Cather's and Saul Bellow's novels, Frost's poems and Robert Hayden's and Richard Wright's do more than paint situations and encounters that make the experience of neighbors available to us, recalling us to ourselves. Beyond that, the theoretical framework of *Good Neighbors* emerged from reflecting on the truth of these narratives.

Popular culture underscores the empirical reality of the democratic ethos as well as its power as an ideal. A genre of television comedy of manners revolves around reciprocity among people living side by side. The centrality of good neighbor is evidenced too by the fact that it is a staple for children, however sentimental: *Mr. Rogers* coming home, removing his shoes and jacket, and singing "I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you."<sup>25</sup> *Sesame Street* teaches preschoolers the alphabet but also the democracy of everyday life among humans and monsters on the block. These settings speak to the importance of home and place and encounters there, and to our anxiety that we might be producing "children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held society together."<sup>26</sup>

The centrality of personal experience and of literature and popular culture to the biography of the theory of the democracy of everyday life suggests that I take my bearings from "inside." Also important for my subject, then, are firsthand accounts by men and women in extreme situations of mistrust, violence, and betrayal, and accounts by survivors of neighbors who rescue. These close descriptions of the moral psychology of neighbors ward off unwarranted simplicity and abstraction. At the same time, I have had to take experiential meaning and make it less fragmentary and confused, more complete. Every move from internal experience to narration involves interpretation.<sup>27</sup> *Good Neighbors* embraces what we do, the language we use to think about what we do, our identity as good neighbors, and its significance for democracy in America.

Resources for my theory include empirical studies of neighbors. A large social science literature examines local government, policing and crime, racially segregated housing, group conflict, "neighborhood effects," and more. I've benefited from studies of the neighborhood as a jurisdiction and site of political participation. Studies confirm the lay of the land as I have described it: encounters carried on against the background of law and officialdom but without institutions and formal rules, often be-



yond appeals to any authority, with neighbors carrying on on their own. Mine is not empirical social science, but it is empirically aware.

### The Order of Good Neighbors

*Good Neighbors* is sometimes a story of neighbor relations unsettled, terribly degraded, aborted, or in eclipse. I have given this narrative the figure of an arc. The democracy of everyday life rises from the ground of day-to-day reciprocity and neighbors' responses to ordinary kindnesses and ordinary vices. We give and take favors and offense; we assist, speak out, monitor, scold and rebuke, and rally others to enforce "what anyone would do, here"; we live and let live. These situations and the dispositions and actions they evoke are the mundane stuff of life around home. The arc rises sharply to challenging terrain where mistrust is widespread and neighbors must struggle to sustain the rudiments of give and take. Insecurity can stifle even "how are you today?"—bare acknowledgment of one another as "decent folk." Neighbors' successes in maintaining or recovering the democracy of everyday life in an environment of mistrust are genuine achievements. The arc descends where the democracy of everyday life goes into eclipse, as it does when political authorities instigate or condone betrayal and murder, infusing neighbor relations with violence and fear. The light of good neighbor is visible even in the darkest times, though, present within and across racial and other lines of division. It is there, in extraordinary acts of protection and rescue that neighbors often cast as ordinary ("what anyone would do, here") and in countless moments of comfort. Even in extreme political situations, the moral domain outside of and beyond politics does not disappear.

The book traces this arc. Part I, "The Lay of the Land," is groundwork. Chapter 1 poses the foundational question, "who is my neighbor?" Proximity to home is essential, but we count as neighbors those who affect the quality of life at home, with whom we have repeated encounters. We don't confuse neighbors with strangers or with intimates and friends.

Chapter 2, "Narrative Threads," introduces accounts of good neighbor and the democracy of everyday life in American literature. Settler, immigrant, and suburban portrayals demonstrate the centrality of this regulative ideal in our moral imagination and in Americans' self-representation.

Part II, "The Democracy of Everyday Life," explores what comes from the plain fact that minding our neighbors' business is inescapable and from the fact that neighbor relations fall largely outside of formal institu-

tions and articulated rules of conduct, are ungoverned by set obligations and established means of enforcing them. Four chapters traverse the spectrum of the elements of the democracy of everyday life that shape ordinary encounters.

Chapter 3, “Reciprocity among ‘Decent Folk,’” introduces the principal defining characteristic of the democracy of everyday life: rough parity in give and take among neighbors. Reciprocity among “decent folk” fleshes out this facet of the democracy of everyday life, for “decent folk” carries a distinctive understanding of equality for the purposes of living side by side.

“Taking Offense, Speaking Out,” Chapter 4, explores ordinary vices and how reciprocity works, or fails to work, when we are faced with a neighbor who gives offense. Do we withdraw? Elect detachment? Or do we speak out, rally and recruit others to the cause? What is peculiarly democratic about neighbors speaking out?

Things escalate in “What Anyone Would Do, Here,” Chapter 5, where I consider neighbors as enforcers. Neighbors surveil, instruct, monitor, correct, and reproach, and become indignant when those living nearby have not learned the lay of the land, or rudely map their own way.

In mistrust-creating situations where chronic conditions of disorder, mayhem, and organized violence foul encounters among neighbors, the democracy of everyday life is tested more severely. That is the subject of Chapter 6, “Live and Let Live.” Privacy—understood first and simply as protecting ourselves from intrusive authorities and from one another—is the felt necessity that makes live and let live a moral imperative. Live and let live enjoins reticence—refusing to broadcast or report what we know when revelation would have potentially disturbing, even life-altering consequences for our neighbors. Live and let live also enjoins a characteristic demeanor and form of conduct signaling recognition of our mutual vulnerability. The literal meaning of the phrase comes into play when we offer assurances that we are not threatening—that we will do no harm and will preserve as we can the quality of life around home. Live and let live is the essential, “safety net” element of the democracy of everyday life.

Part III: “Holding Our Lives in Their Hands” focuses on extreme degradation of the democracy of everyday life and on efforts to assert the rudiments of good neighbor. When political authorities exercise control by deliberately derailing life at home, encounters among neighbors are not only stressed and unsettled, they are radically politicized. At the same time, politics is personalized as neighbors turn on one another opportu-

nistically—moved by envy, greed, unsettled disputes, an eye to advantages, or revenge. There is a distinct quality of moral breakdown when it is neighbors who betray and murder. And there is a distinct quality of moral assurance when it is neighbors who comfort and rescue. I ground these claims in detailed explorations of historical touchstones of politically instigated betrayal, killing, and rescue among neighbors in America. I study this terrain for good reason: the political apparatus of betrayal and murder is not safely in the past. And in atrocity-producing situations, the value of the democratic ethos of good neighbors remains powerfully with us. The democracy of everyday life emerges as a “saving remnant.”

Chapter 7, “Betrayal,” looks at neighbors turned informers. An abnormal Panoptical society, a “world without walls,” replaces the ordinary boundaries and neutral ground among good neighbors. It becomes a punishable offense to see and hear yet refuse to report, and neighbors become active agents in this system of control. We associate invitations and inducements to inform on neighbors (and others) with totalist regimes, but they are hardly alien to the United States. My touchstone is the mass Japanese evacuation and internment at the start of World War II: a story of public betrayal by government and personal betrayal by white neighbors before “relocation” and again after resettlement at the end of the war. It is also a story of brittle, fractionated relations among Japanese families living side by side in the camps.

In “Killing,” Chapter 8, I look into the ugly face of the democracy of everyday life aborted. Killing neighbors is the outer tail, the far reach of derangement, and the convergence of murder and home is a unique horror. Lynching is the homegrown American case of neighbors killing neighbors. Victims often knew the people who mutilated and killed them. Murderers knew their victims. Lynching was a public spectacle or in any case a public secret: these “feasts of blood” were “owned by all the town.” Still, neighbors were not all implicated in the same way in this intimate violence. They may be unable to arrest terrorization and killing but they can carry on in the interstices of horror and warn, aid, comfort, protest, and protect. Strikingly, rescuers cast their extraordinary actions as ordinary—frequently invoking “good neighbor” for its homely resonance. At the same time, ordinary neighborly gestures have extraordinary force, affirming the inestimable, now-not-to-be-taken-for-granted value of quotidian life. These expressions of good neighbor are lodged deeply in the memory of survivors and witnesses.

In Chapter 9, “Disasters,” I explore neighbors in emergency situations. Neighbors are always the “first responders” who do what no group of or-

ganized volunteers or government provider can. Hurricane Katrina is my set piece, and survivor narratives show that the significance of neighbors emerges in three temporal steps: recognition and witnessing, awakening, and improvised cooperation. In disasters too, rescuers often make explicit reference to being good neighbors and “what anyone would do, here.” And they bring to bear as resources the elements of the democracy of everyday life.

Part IV, “Minding Our Own Business” asks just what that business is. Minding our neighbors’ business and minding our own work in tandem when it comes to self-examination and transformation. We listen and observe and then compare our neighbors’ lives to our own. (“I guess just watching you/Has made me lonesome too.”)<sup>28</sup> From our vantage point as witnesses to our neighbors’ lives, we gain insight into our vulnerabilities, moral resources, and the terms of our happiness. Thoreau’s *Walden* is the great American reflection on the quality of life at home, in this place, with these neighbors. Good neighbors emerge in Thoreau’s work as essential to self-understanding and care of the self. And Thoreau presents treating one another as neighbors as the “saving remnant” of democracy in America.

In the conclusion, I provide a systematic account of my political theory of the meaning and value of the democracy of everyday life for formal, organized democracy, as well as—what is no lesser thing—its importance for the quality of life personally and individually. I press my argument that the moral identity of good neighbor shaped by the democracy of everyday life is distinct from the political identity of good citizen. I lay out continuities as well as discontinuities between the democratic ethos among neighbors and political democracy proper, and I represent the democracy of everyday life as the hardy remainder or “saving remnant” when formal democracy seems to have lost its integrity.

Throughout, I try to make the felt experience of reciprocity, the offenses we give and take, and the circling, snaking course of our attention as we move between minding our own business and minding our neighbors’ vivid. The truth to experience lies not in our perfect faithfulness to the regulative ideal but in the way it figures in our personal stories about neighbors, in our accusations against bad neighbors, in our own attempts to adhere to it. Does the democracy of everyday life capture the quality of your encounters? The meaning you attribute to them? That is, finally, the verification available. We are “the subjects for whom these meanings are.”<sup>29</sup>