

Presidential Column: Who's Your Neighbor?

October 01, 2006

My family lives on a cul-de-sac. As I often say when directing people to my house, we are at 11:00; to our right (at 2:00) lives one neighboring family, and to our left (at 9:00 and 7:00) live two other neighboring families. While pulling into our driveway one evening during the election campaign of 2000, I realized that each of our four houses represented — by virtue of political yard signs — allegiance to each of the four candidates on the U.S. Presidential ballot.

Contrast that image of heterogeneity — and admittedly, local social disconnection — with that of the neighborhood in which my father grew up. In his southwest corner of Fort Worth, Texas, lived three solid blocks of Reformed (not Conservative, not Orthodox) Jews. My father's first-cousins lived catty-corner; his third cousins lived immediately behind. Each Saturday they all walked to the Reformed synagogue — the one my great-grandfather co-founded — with the same en masse coherence as school children walking to the local bus stop. My father told of the great sense of diversity and freedom he felt during college, even when living in an all Jewish fraternity house; although he was still expected to date only Jewish girls, at least he was no longer expected to take his second cousin to every school dance.

A similar geographical homogeneity and proximity characterized the small east Texas town in which my husband grew up. His paternal grandmother lived in the house 50 yards west; his great aunt, 50 yards south. A complete family gathering required no one to walk more than a block in any direction; the same was true for Sunday gatherings at the First Baptist Church. These days, a chain grocery store occupies the great aunt's lot, a savings and loan occupies the grandmother's lot, my husband and I are a thousand miles to the north, and my husband's brother and his wife are two hundred miles to the south. My in-laws remain, however, in their Goode Street house of 60 years.

In 1988 I organized an international conference solely by email, a fact which the university's faculty-staff newsletter found newsworthy. What they found even more newsworthy was that while I was being interviewed in my office, I emailed my lab coordinator for an answer I couldn't remember; she was in her office just two doors down the hall. These days I could not only organize but hold the entire conference via the Internet. We have virtual colloquia, streamed lectures, and Powerpoints a plenty, ready, and waiting for downloading from millions of Internet sites.

In these days when computer files of just about any kind can be exchanged with the click of a mouse, when not only conferences, but research projects and multi-institutional program projects, can be executed online, when we use the Internet not only for text but also for talk, complete with a white board, does it matter whose office is next door to mine? Of course, it would be impolitic (and cast aspersions on my Wisconsin colleagues) for me to say that it doesn't. But do we — as academics — need physical proximity to further our science? Are we as able to find intellectual stimulation on the other side of a 900-acre campus, a continent, or an ocean, as we are to find it on the other side of the corridor? Can we pursue academic job offers based on career opportunities for our spouses, public schools for our children, elder-care resources for our parents, or more flattering bottom lines for our paychecks, without

loss to our daily cerebral sustenance?

A few years ago I visited a psychology department of a dozen faculty and was amazed, when walking through the main office, which was the tributary leading to all faculties' individual offices, to see a sign-in board (complete with a slot for each faculty member's name, a column for "In" and one for "Gone for the Day"). I shared this cockle-warming experience with a colleague from another university who surmised that, in his department, faculty could light a candle whenever they were in town — and the candles would not burn down for a decade.

Does it matter? When we return bummed out from a contentious committee meeting or psyched up from an effective Intro Psych lecture, do we look for an open office door to enter, to sit for a while, and to chat, just like we did in the college dorm? Or do we check our email, return a phone call, or even fire up iChat? Do we get our social support needs met having anyone or no one right next door, as long as we have access to email, phone, and video conferencing?

Now, the true litmus test. You just finished reading a journal article that egregiously annoyed you, utterly delighted you, or simply gave you a damn good idea. With whom do you immediately share your incite, excite, or insight? Do you walk down the hall to a departmental colleague's office, strategically arranged during hiring to be near yours, or painstakingly situated through a series of woeful space-discussing faculty meetings, which led to gnarly discussions of area groups? Or, in less time than it would take you to walk down the hall, journal in hand, have you emailed the PDF to your dearest colleague, your most active collaborator, the psychological scientist with whom you are the most simpatico, and who just happens to live in Australia?

Who is your neighbor? Does it matter?