

## 2 NEIGHBOURS: A CASE STUDY

My comments on neighbours last year was couched in general terms, but after comparing notes with a friend this follow-up is more specific, and comes to the conclusion that, however nice *you* are,

***There are destructive people in the world: get over it, and find ways to make up for their harm!***

### ***LIFE IN MY OWN HOME SHOULD NOT MEAN THAT I AM FORCED TO***

- ◇ Go to bed at 8 p.m. so I can get enough sleep before being woken at 5 a.m. by the couple above me (nurses on different shifts), or even several times between midnight and 4 a.m. as well (this includes friends they have staying, increasing the amount of to-ing and fro-ing over my head);
- ◇ Creep around when they are in so they don't know where I am in the flat beneath since, otherwise as soon as they hear me they make a point of moving around like elephants, banging doors or constantly moving furniture;
- ◇ Be worried about hoovering, using the plumbing, or moving things around in the normal course of housework since they will retaliate by doing the same things, but at night (they cannot bear to do housework at the same time, or their washing at the same time, which is what friendly neighbours used to do in the past). If they hear me in the kitchen under them they will drum their feet on the floor to drive me out, and if they hear me having a bath they will stand in their own bathroom above me, moving back and forth on creaking boards;
- ◇ If I have a visitor and we chat, within hours they will talk in loud voices over me 'in retaliation', the overall idea being that you are made to feel normal behaviour is a crime;
- ◇ If they hear me out in the garden they open their window to stare at me and empty a sinkful of water down the drain as if to signal, I'm here - go away (but look at me first)!
- ◇ Working from home during the day, I have been disturbed by their group sex parties.

There is so much more I could put down here, but this is enough to convey the general idea. After my weary complaints to landlord, letting agency (both complicit in their tenants' bad behaviour, as long as the rent keeps coming in) and solicitor - as well as to kind friends - an old friend confided in me that he and his partner, newly moved into a different flat, were experiencing exactly the same problem. For the first time I felt someone really understood. In both cases we found the main perpetrator of spite was the female of the couple (East European).

We found that complaining only made the situation worse since their unreasonable behaviour was never admitted or apologised for, and on the basis of our complaints they now knew exactly what things annoyed us most, so escalated on just those fronts. We both agreed that they often deliberately drag things, bang doors, for hours on end, especially at night - with no other intention than to annoy. They might lie low for a week or two but they would always revert to outright harassment - for which of the following reasons?

- ◇ Assertion of power;
- ◇ Harassment to make us move out so they could get friends in below;
- ◇ Attention-seeking or malevolent intention to whoever might be there;
- ◇ Dog in a manger attitude that cannot countenance anyone else in their orbit, part of

- ◇ Inability to cooperate with others, or be considerate;
- ◇ Defensive reaction knowing they are breaking lease rules,
- ◇ Thus goading you to break the rules yourself so their breaking of them becomes acceptable;
- ◇ Mental illness where any noise from others is taken as a 'threatening message' which has to be fought.

These examples involve immigrants, who have not 'got a life' other than their precarious job and letting, obsessed about the threat of *your* alien presence, when they are the newcomers in a street most of us have lived in decades. They never go out to the theatre, have hobbies, or pursue any dimension of a cultural life - they are totally involved in defending the foothold so far achieved in this foreign land - making sure one or other of them is at home at all times.

Perhaps others have similar experiences and thoughts they would like to share: overall these are people who take advantage of your keeping the rules while they break them wholesale without any conscience, or consideration for the disruptions they cause to your life. Nor is there gratitude to the host country for given them asylum or any attempt to 'do in Rome what the Romans do' and blend in with local customs.

What action should be taken? There are different levels you can work on, depending on whether you are prepared to play the long game or not:

- ✓ In Britain you can complain to your local Council, who will record noise made - unfortunately my perpetrators are aware of this, and take the Japanese water torture approach of constant small knocks, thumps and drags over long periods of time which do not have high decibel levels but do have a wearing down irritation level, so the aggression is extremely hard to prove! Look into the status of their entry into this country, their purchase of properties and registration of businesses under several names - you can at least check dodgy credentials as a starting point.
- ✓ You can sue them for nuisance through a solicitor (there are laws concerning what constitutes a Nuisance, but it is very hard to prove if they are not actually holding loud rock and roll parties - and expensive). The end result can be that you have paid a lot of money to sue them, without achieving their move. They will in return find subtle ways to get further revenge on you (I get cigarette stubs and paper bags thrown onto my front steps daily, and other items thrown down at the back from their kitchen or bedroom).
- ✓ You can retaliate like for like, but being the flat underneath puts you at a disadvantage for doing that! I found one night, after they had been moving furniture round over my head for an hour at 1 a.m., when I got up and started banging drawers and cupboard doors, that they simply took my response as licence to continue to do the same the following night, hoping I would do the same back - just what they want, to get you to break the rules too, not accepting they were in the wrong in the first place! They do not take retaliation in the way you expect - to learn a lesson and shut up - because these are not reasonable people.
- ✓ The longer game is that you decide to take no notice of them at all (normal neighbours get on with their separate lives without getting in each others' way after all), which puts extreme pressure on your patience at first, but it does succeed in not giving them the oxygen of your attention, which is what these Unquiet Spirits are hungry for.

The aim of this is to **get them out of your head**, since up to now they have become the general background to your daily thoughts, seeping into and contaminating your life! Ask yourself what the central focus of your life is, and if the answer is 'my neighbours' behaviour' then *they* have succeeded. Remind yourself of the Buddhist story of the two monks and the donkey that took them over the river - the Master forgot it as soon as he got to the other side, whilst the novice kept on thinking about it - instead of concentrating on Nirvana! Hard as it is, **stop thinking about the donkey**.

- ✓ Taking no notice involves simply living in your flat as if they are not there (imagine strongly you are in your own stand-alone house). If they hear you going about your usual routines and retaliate in some way, you just keep on rowing, with no reaction (thus if they stamp on the floor when you are washing up in the kitchen underneath, you just continue doing the cups and plates as if you hadn't heard). If they disturb you at night, don't react (even they will get tired after a while, or after a few days - and a useful tip from my friend: if it gets really bad, put in some of those good quality jelly earplugs so you don't hear a thing anyway. I had my first 9-hour sleep for three years last week after following his advice).
- ✓ Keep asserting to yourself that *their* life is nothing to do with *yours*, and that you are now wearing a psychological Teflon raincoat that keeps all penetration out. It is a strange fact of life that a psychological attitude can be picked up by others, and if your attitude is of total lack of interest, and self-confidence in your own integrity, the neighbours do pick up that psychic climate to some degree, though at first they will continue to challenge it, to get you to reignite your own participation in the ding-dong.
- ✓ This means that even if you happen to pass them in the street or at their front door you do not greet them but look through them as if someone you don't know, someone of no consequence (definitely you do not *pretend* to be friendly). *This is because they actually have a morbid psychological dependency on you which is parasitic.* It's not just that (as in my case) in physical terms they have connected their TV to my private aerial (swearing blind to the letting agent that they have done no such thing - and he believes their smooth talk), or put their rubbish in my personal bin on the street. It is deeper than that, and I see it as a pathological reverse wish to be accepted into society by behaviour asserting that they are not non-persons, bringing you down to their level by harassment to prove they run the show. (Empty barrels make the loudest noise?)

These are people who ignore the fact that, with rights (which they continually harp on) come responsibilities for reasonable and considerate behaviour.

Where we stand at the moment is that my friend has started working on the early action strategies listed above, where I who have been under siege for several years have moved to the long game. I don't know yet what the results will be, but watch this space. If you are in a similar situation, don't expect such people ever to follow the usual considerations of cooperating and helping their neighbours or engaging in friendly chit-chat if you come across each other in the supermarket over the road. Possibly only the shock therapy of life's ups and downs will in the end subdue them, but in the meantime although revenge may be sweet, it engenders a continuing cycle of tit-for-tat, while the Gandhi approach of 'being harmless' is more enduring (it is the Christian idea of 'turning the other cheek'). This does *not* mean you are passive and let people walk over you - you continue very positively your own pattern of life despite the knocks and blows to it - that is the finesse of this battle. What is certain is that you are now sure of your ground, confident, aiming to be the winner, rather than your disturbed and disturbing neighbours. At some point they will come to the position of seeing the consequences of their own behaviour (shunned by everyone living next to them; having removed their doorbell, uncontactable in an emergency such as Fire; no-one willing to receive Post on their behalf) realizing they - and only they - have dug their own pit.

If they were to change, would there ever be forgiveness, along Christian lines? Here I turn to the Hindu folk tale of the snake attacked by a man who later said sorry. 'My friend', said the snake, 'you broke my back, and I cannot unbreak it'. My life has been so debilitated and my work so disrupted by these people that neither can the damage they have done be restored retrospectively.

So there will be no relenting, no surrender - ever.