

Shortening the Distance



Separate Ways, Separate We(s): Decades of Division Come Home to Roost

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I don't consider myself an expert on anything, but *community* is kind of my thing. I write about it here and in academic work, it is a common thread in a number of my classes at UWO, and I try my best to engage in it here in Oshkosh.

I have even developed my own definition of community by tweaking an established sociological conception of it as follows: An *inclusive* web of interconnected relationships that develops in a particular place through a process of repeated social interaction (around issues of

common interest) in local society, which is shaped by (and shapes) the landscape (built and natural environment) it inhabits.

That stated, I have much to learn about what community actually is and why it matters. I've had a few important moments in this regard during the past couple years, and see a lack of community at the core of the severe social division afflicting our nation.

Who is the 'we'? Does the 'we' include me?

First, I was fortunate enough to attend the outstanding Ecology of Hope conference in Point Reyes Station, California, which featured a variety of discussions exploring the legacy of Aldo Leopold, Wisconsin's own father of environmental thought. There were a number of interesting speakers, but one touched me the most.

Lauret Savoy, co-chair of the Environmental Studies program at Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts, is the co-editor of a book entitled, *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*. She talked about coming across the acclaimed novel *Alien Land* in a library and finding that this examination of race in mid-20th century America was written by an author named Willard Savoy. Thing was, her father had never even told her about this book, so it blew her mind to stumble across it and then find that it spoke directly to her own experience. Savoy had grown up a bit of a bookworm and feeling like an outsider. When she discovered Aldo Leopold's seminal work *A Sand County Almanac* as a young teenager, she devoured it. But she was also terrified about how the (then already dead) Leopold would answer her burning question if she had the chance to ask it. Her question was, when Leopold wrote about the human-land community and that "we" need to change our thoughts and actions, was she part of this community, did the "we" include her, a bi-racial female?

One could hear a pin drop as she stirringly made the point that in the U.S., we continue to live apart from other groups and, just as in Leopold's day, mainstream environmentalism often leaves non-white, females, and less affluent people on the margins.

Then, after having told my students about Savoy and Leopold, we discussed the connection between the concepts of community and environmental racism/injustice, the reality that non-white and lower-income people are disproportionately stuck living with environmental "bads" (e.g. polluted air and water, lack of access to parkland and healthy food, etc.), while white and more affluent folks are more likely to live in areas blessed with environmental "goods" (clean air and water, etc.).

I had an epiphany as we explored why such a situation persists in a nation as wealthy as ours. You might think, "Yeah, duh, professor," but it really struck me that the answer is that our "we" is very narrow in this country. We live amongst people who are generally like us, and when we do have meaningful interactions with others, it's generally with people who look, think, and live basically like we do. Not only does this make it easier to believe and perpetuate negative stereotypes about other groups, but we can also downplay or disregard problems like poverty, racism, and environmental injustice when they do not affect people from our "communities." In fact, in a society where individualism is a core value, it can seem pretty natural to blame the people suffering from these afflictions, for not working hard enough, bringing it on themselves because of their low character, or simply for being whiners.

Cementing ideas, hardening dividing lines

Separate ways help cement ideas and transform people in other respects as well. Angela Stroud, a sociology professor at Northland College in Ashland, recently spoke at UWO, presenting key points from her book, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of*

Concealed Carry. One of her core arguments is that obtaining a concealed carry permit, which Americans are doing in increasing numbers (particularly in our nation's suburban areas, where the largest portion of our population lives), is directly connected to particular worldviews. Doing so also produces changes in behaviors. Interestingly, it is not that people are more likely to fire a weapon (most concealed carry holders never will), but that they more fully adopt a culture of fear. In particular, they develop or more fully cement their fear of "other" types of people who live outside the narrow confines of the places that define their sense of *we*, and with whom they have little meaningful contact. All of this fear, suspicion, paranoia—as well as massive sales of permits and guns—despite the fact that violent crime rates have *dropped* dramatically in the U.S. in the past 15 years. This is a prime example of what we in our field call the social construction of a "problem."

The recent presidential election demonstrates how easily and successfully these sorts of fears and divides can be turned into political strategy, to energize a population with a collective low self-esteem, who is looking for scapegoats for their very real frustrations, and to normalize xenophobia, misogyny, and racism.

Living separately, unequally

The U.S. is becoming more and more racially/ethnically diverse, but income inequality has practically never been higher, negatively affecting huge swaths of our population from the most rural to the most urban. And we continue to live apart, perhaps as any time in our nation's history. As reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, Brown University sociologist John Logan—one of the nation's leading scholars of segregation—studied the residential patterns of Americans using the 2010 U.S. Census. Because of the nature of housing dynamics white folks tend to live around people in the same social class, but the census data revealed that the average white

household making less than \$40,000 is in a more affluent neighborhood than a black or Hispanic household earning more than \$75,000. “White middle-class families have the option to live in a community that matches their own credentials,” Mr. Logan told *USA Today*. “If you’re African-American and want to live with people like you in social class, you have to live in a community where you are in the minority.” His research indicates that the average black American lives in a neighborhood that is 45% black, which is more than three times higher than this group’s percentage of the overall population.

Sadly, according to *Business Insider*, with an overall score of 68, Milwaukee ranks as the most segregated metropolitan area in the country based on the dissimilarity index (100 indicates total segregation). According to this measure, 68% of all residents (and 80% of black people) would have to move to other areas in order for Milwaukee’s neighborhoods to have a mix of people reflecting the overall population in the city. Walnut Way Conservation Corp., a neighborhood organization to which I’ve taken students several times, lies in census tract 1854 on Milwaukee’s north side. There, 97% of the residents are black, compared to 41% for the city, 13.6% in the U.S., and 7% for Wisconsin. And 42% of its residents live in poverty, which is roughly triple the poverty rate for the state and nation. It is also significantly higher than the already high poverty rate in the city overall (28%). This tract lies in a cluster of isolated neighborhoods; residents of 1854 and three surrounding tracts are 95% black and 40% in poverty on average, despite the much-publicized success of economic revitalization efforts in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood (led by Walnut Way), which have become a national model for grassroots neighborhood development.

That such hyper segregation and concentrated poverty continues in Wisconsin more than 40 years after the Fair Housing Act and the height of the civil rights era is astounding. Outside of

the central city, where most affluent and powerful Americans tend to live, homogeneity and abundance are nearly as stark. To illustrate, we could take a more extreme example from the Milwaukee metro area, such as River Hills or Chenequa, the two highest-income incorporated places in the state. Instead, let's go less than four miles northeast of Walnut Way to the village of Shorewood. One its four census tracts is 95% white and has a median household income (MHI) of \$107,356, which is more than double the national MHI and more than three times higher than that of tract 1854. Shorewood also has one tract (804) that borders the City of Milwaukee, which has a poverty rate of 23%. But poverty in Shorewood is still well below average (9.6%) and the village is overwhelmingly white. Consistent with Logan's data, even the lower-income residents of tract 804 live in very white (93%) neighborhood. Nonetheless, while tiny, 98% white, exurban Chenequa overwhelmingly voted for Trump, Shorewood, which is relatively more diverse and directly contiguous with the Milwaukee, chose Clinton by a wide margin.

Though it may be less pronounced, segregation is not confined to large cities like Milwaukee or Detroit. In Oshkosh, we can see a sharp divide in income and diversity between central city and edge city neighborhoods. In four core Oshkosh census tracts (1, 2, 5, and 7), the combined population is 92.7% white, has a MHI of \$31,291 and poverty rate of 38%. Even if we exclude the UWO-dominated tract 7, the average poverty rate is still high (28% compared to 18% in the city overall). In four tracts (18.01, 18.03, 18.04, and 19) that ring Oshkosh on the west and south sides, on the other hand, the combined population is 96.3% white, and has a MHI of \$68,503 and poverty rate of 7%. In Town of Algoma, a contiguous, but separate municipality on the northwest side of the city, the population is 96% white, has a MHI of \$75,227, and poverty rate of 4.6%. In the recent election Clinton easily won the wards aligned with the four

central city tracts, while it was an even split between Trump and Clinton in the four tracts on the west and south edges of the city, but Trump dominated Town of Algoma.

Where do we go from here?

Despite living largely amongst people who are like us, we Americans and Oshkoshians nonetheless band together to address problems in our cities and world, including serving people in need that are categorically different than us. I would argue, however, that when we live apart and do not build inclusive community, we're less likely to see the problems faced by others as *our* problems, which allows them to persist and fester.

Writer and professor Roxane Gay, in an essay for *Marie Claire*, argues, "We need people to stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance. We need people to do this even if they cannot fully understand what it's like to be oppressed for their race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, or other marker of identity. We need people to use common sense to figure out how to participate in social justice."

I don't believe this will happen as long as we continue to live separately. My students and I have decided that this will truly change only when more people get I.I.L. with it, living *intentionally integrated lives*, going out of our way(s) to live amongst and interact with all kinds of people, taking action together that will sow the seeds of change in our deep-seated patterns of living.