

Managing the Spiritual Neighborhood
How to Restore the Conscience of America's Communities
A Grass Roots Approach



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Chapter 2

The Problem With Westchester

Somehow over time we have grown to accept that there is crime in poor neighborhoods. The deplorable living conditions of the underprivileged and minorities has been largely ignored for decades. Not only do we ignore it, but we put the blame for urban blight on the very people who suffer it. "Let them help themselves. Let them get off welfare and get a job." Isn't that what they say? We are all very adept at shifting the burden to someone else. It's the guiltless way to look at social problems. From the perspective of, say, an inner-city teenager the message is clear: "You're on your own buddy. I don't want anything to do with you." It's like standing in a store waiting for service while the clerk ignores you. It's fundamentally rude, and there is a fundamental rudeness in how we handle crime and juvenile delinquency. The social elite would never think of actually associating with city kids, but woe be unto those children if they should break society's rules. Lawmakers would be more than happy, thank you, to inflict the appropriate punishment on the hapless individual who steps outside the boundaries.

It all comes back to courtesy. Our society is seriously flawed in this regard. Yet it's not really a deliberate thing. It's almost unconscious. The fact is, we simply don't assign much importance to the finer aspects of civility and decency anymore. Decency is on the decline, and you see the evidence of it everywhere. From the magazines in the check-out lines, to the movies playing at the local theater, to the patter on radio talk-shows, discretion, restraint and modesty have all but disappeared from our culture. It seems that the most highly regarded folks these days are the ones who behave the worst. If you're gross and outrageous, it means you're cool. But the grossest violation of decency by far is the manner in which people are allowed to exist in poor neighborhoods. The sheer ugliness of it alone is disgraceful, and the extent of the crime is absurd.

The problems of the inner city are so daunting that it's too difficult to focus on them directly. You get overwhelmed and dragged down by the magnitude of the task. Out in the suburbs, however, you have some breathing room. You can step back and see both sides of the picture: the sunny and hopeful view of America, as well as the dark and seamy side. So rather than examining the problems of, say, the housing projects of Anacostia, I'm going to instead put a microscope on my immediate neighborhood of Westchester Estates. We are five miles away from Anacostia geographically, but five hundred miles away on the socio-economic scale.

Over the past several years there has been a steady increase in crime in our area. What is disturbing about this trend is that serious crimes such as armed robbery have started to occur within the residential neighborhoods. In Camp Springs, and in the original Temple Hills, where the subdivisions are designed for middle to upper-middle income families, there is a sharp contrast between the comfortable suburban setting and the level of crime that we're seeing. No, Camp Springs does not have open air drug markets, at least not the kind you associate with the ghetto, and crimes where someone is physically hurt are still a rarity, but we have indeed seen carjackings in my neighborhood. We've seen front doors kicked in by armed robbers. We've seen people mugged taking a walk to the park. And we know for certain that there have been, and may still be, teenagers living among us who carry guns and do business with drug dealers. The incidence of crime has gone beyond the point where you can dismiss these things as "isolated events". Many residents have chosen to sell their homes and move rather than put up with it. For those folks even one carjacking, or one armed robbery, or one break-in, is one too many.

Meaningful crime statistics are hard to come by in this county. The Prince George's police are reluctant to give out crime information. You can't just dial-in to a police computer, or make a phone call and get a report sent to you, at least not the kind of report a resident really needs. You might be able to put your hands on a yearly summary that totals the number of robberies, carjackings, and so forth county-wide for the entire population of 800,000, but the crimes that are of most interest to me are the ones that take place in my own backyard. Since a detailed neighborhood by neighborhood crime report is impossible to obtain from the law enforcement people, I have resorted to keeping my own database of incidents. I compiled them mainly from the word-of-mouth accounts of my neighbors. In Figure 2.1 I have cited several examples that illustrate the severity of the crimes that have begun to occur in Westchester in recent years. What these incidents have in common is that they all occurred either within the neighborhood, or very near to it. In other words, they took place right where people live, right at our homes. I submit that any one of these incidents is serious enough to make an intelligent person think long and hard about leaving. In this respect it doesn't really matter what the statistics say about crime in other parts of the county, or even in the other parts of Camp Springs. If nothing ever happens on your street, or in your neighborhood, you can overlook an awful lot of bad news from elsewhere. Even the robberies and what-have-you that go down at nearby shopping plazas have nowhere near the impact of a crime that takes place at your home, or at the home of a neighbor. When crime hits that close, you realize how outrageous this stuff really is. It simply should not be happening. No one, regardless of where they live, should have to deal with this kind of thing ... ever.

Serious Crime in the Westchester Area – 1994 to 2000

April 18, 1994. Home Invasion/Robbery. Monday 6:00 a.m. A lady who lives on Coolridge Road is awakened in bed by a masked intruder. He makes her lie on the floor, takes jewelry and other valuables, then cuts the phone lines and escapes.

June 29, 1994. Robbery. Wednesday, 10:00 p.m. A young couple out for a walk is accosted on Lansing Drive by two men with guns. They are forced to lie on the ground and then robbed of jewelry, keys and wallets.

May 10, 1995. Home Invasion/Robbery. Wednesday, 11:30 p.m. Mansfield Drive. The R. family, which includes two young girls, is getting ready for bed when they hear a loud crash. Two men armed with a revolver and a rifle have broken through the front door and are proceeding to search the house. They pull the phone out, make the family lie on the floor, shout obscenities and demand to be told where the safe is. The men make a hasty search, apparently decide that they have come to the wrong house, and leave.

June 14, 1995. Carjacking. Wednesday. A 79-year-old man visiting a relative on Wessex Drive is getting out of his car when he is approached by four teens. One pulls out a gun and demands his keys. This happened at 11:00 a.m. on the last day of school.

November 1995. Rape. A woman who accepts a ride from some strangers in D.C. is taken against her will to an unfinished home on Guazor Court and assaulted. The assailants apparently must live in the area in order to know about this empty house.

February 13, 1996. Home Invasion/Robbery. 12:30 a.m. A man unloading groceries is accosted in front of his house on Sheffield Drive by two masked men. He is forced into the house where he and his wife are robbed.

March 8, 1997. Carjacking. Lansing Drive. 1:00 a.m. Mr. M. parks his car at the curb and is walking towards the house when a masked man runs up, points a gun at him and orders him back into the car, saying, "We're going to the bank." Mr. M. manages to get away, but several weeks later all the windows in his van are smashed, and the contents torn apart.

October 15, 1998. Murder/Robbery. Two employees of Dunkin Donuts are shot to death during a robbery. Three youths are charged in the slaying, including a 20-year-old who lives in the Camp Springs Forest subdivision, across Allentown Road from Westchester.

December 13, 1998. Robbery/Assault. Wessex Drive. A woman returning home after shopping at the Giant is confronted in her carport by a man with a gun who demands her pocketbook. It appeared that the woman had been followed home from the shopping plaza. A similar incident took place at Davies Church on Temple Hill Road. An elderly woman was apparently followed there from Padgett's Corner by a robber. He accosted her in the parking lot, demanding her purse. The woman resisted, and suffered serious injuries as the robber cut both of her wrists during the struggle.

December 20, 1999. Police Chase/Two Killed. A 25-year-old Crossland grad driving a stolen Lincoln, fleeing police at high speed, collides head-on with a Toyota Land Cruiser near the Henson Valley Montessori School on Allentown Road. The youth is killed instantly. The other driver, age 56, a 20-year resident of Westchester, dies 3 days later, leaving a wife and daughter behind. A loaded gun and 11 grams of crack cocaine are found in the Lincoln.

July 22, 2000. Home Invasion/Robbery. Saturday, 9:30 a.m. A man carrying a package and dressed in a FedEx uniform rings the door bell of Mr. R. on Chesterfield. When Mr. R. opens the front door, the FedEx guy produces a gun and tries to force Mr. R back into the house. Mr. R resists, and the robber flees in a waiting car.

Figure 2.1 Crime in the Westchester area

As measured by the rising crime rate – in other words, by the safety factor – the quality of life in these parts has suffered badly in recent years. At the same time, the expression of courtesy has declined as well. I would like to relate a few anecdotes that provide evidence of this decline. My purpose in doing so is to demonstrate how the lack of courtesy is manifested at the grass roots level. I'm going to concentrate on incidents that I myself have observed either here in my own neighborhood, or very close by. It might seem that such a parochial focus would hurt my argument, but after you read through these narratives, I think you'll agree that the phenomenon they illustrate can be observed almost anywhere you go these days.

The sharp contrast between the apparent affluence of my neighborhood and the nature of the crimes being committed actually provides us with an advantage for analyzing the cause of this trend, because it allows us to eliminate the factors that are usually associated with crime: poor housing, lack of education, hunger, and so forth. On the surface this neighborhood seems to afford its residents with a perfect living environment. There are big brick homes and tree-lined streets. White picket fences and flower beds. We have abundant green parkland nearby, and we're located only two or three miles from open country and actual farms. For a developed area it's remarkably peaceful here. Hawks soar overhead all year long. Deer, fox, and beaver inhabit the bottomland along the creek. We are quite far removed from city life. No sirens, no traffic, no congestion. No one here is underprivileged. No one here is starving. No one here is suffering from "urban stress syndrome".

So why is there crime? The answer can be found by taking a close look at how folks behave. You don't find urban stress here, but there most definitely is stress. Perhaps we can call it *sub-urban* stress. It's a tension that can be observed in the way people interact – or perhaps I should say, in the way they don't interact. Over the past couple of years I have noted several incidents where this tension came to the surface. Before I get into the examples however, let me offer a little background about the neighborhood.

Camp Springs, and the Westchester subdivision where I live, is really nothing more than a population center; a mainly residential, unincorporated region in the southern part of Prince George's County, Maryland. Prince George's is one of a handful of close-in suburban Washington D.C. municipalities. The only noteworthy landmark here is Andrews Air Force Base. Andrews is the airport used by the President when he travels. Three decades ago it was home to the Air Force Systems Command. There was limited military housing in those days and many of the personnel assigned there were obliged to live off-base. My subdivision was home to mainly Air Force officers and their families. There were lots of colonels, and even a general or two living here. Most of the 500 or so homes were built during a period that extended from the late fifties through the sixties.

In the early days this neighborhood and the ones nearby were nearly 100% white.

The demographics began to change after federally mandated school desegregation began in 1973. It was then that the county began a program where white school children from the neighborhoods of Camp Springs were bused to black schools in other parts of the county, and black children were bused from there to here. At some point in the mid-seventies black families began to buy homes here. By the time I arrived in 1986, the subdivision was roughly 30% black. Now I would guess that the breakdown of households is more like 70/30 black to white, with a couple of Asian and Hispanic thrown in. Prince George's County itself is 60% black.

The white population is mainly older. There are still quite a few military retirees and military widows living in the homes that they have owned for decades. Their children have for the most part grown up and moved out. The black population on the other hand, includes many younger families, who no doubt chose to buy homes here because it is such an attractive neighborhood in which to raise their kids. When you encounter children in the neighborhood these days, they are usually school-age black kids. Over the past several years there has been a growing perception among parents that the public schools in this area are no longer functioning; that they aren't safe, that the curriculum is poor, that kids don't learn, etc. It's not clear how much truth there is to this perception, since there are thousands of students who continue to pass through the Prince George's school system, graduate from high school, and become successful in their careers. Nevertheless, most of the white parents have either enrolled their children in private schools, or simply picked up and moved to a different area. I'm not sure when this trend began, but at present the student population in the nearby public schools is almost entirely black.

By virtue of having organized our Neighborhood Watch, I have come to know personally a considerable number of the people here, black and white. Keeping in mind that there are exceptions to the following, I'd like to offer a couple of observations regarding the interracial relations in this neighborhood. Although most of the local residents are fairly decent people once you get to know them, my perception is that the black folks are generally friendlier and more gregarious than the white folks. It does make some sense that since they are mainly newer residents, that blacks would be more inclined to appreciate the beautiful environment they have moved to, and would be happier to be here, especially if they came from an urban setting closer to D.C. I find that the white folks on the other hand have been pretty much taking the neighborhood for granted all these years. In fact, I am quite certain that many of them are hardly conscious of the neighborhood at all. In some cases they don't even know, or care for that matter, who lives next door to them, let alone how good the quality of life has been in

Westchester. Let me emphasize that these are broad and subjective generalizations. Certainly we have many white neighbors who are quite friendly and genuinely concerned about the welfare of the community, and there are most definitely a number of black residents who are not at all neighborly.

The reason that I bring up the friendliness issue is because genuine friendliness is a fundamental trait of a developed character, and it does seem that a lack of friendliness underlies some of the tension we've seen. It may also appear to the casual observer that there is a racial component to this tension, which is why we've been discussing demographics. By no means, however, does racism fully explain what's going on. Moreover, when you're searching for solutions to crime, it doesn't help to view things in racial terms. The problem is much more complex than that. As you read the anecdotes that follow, I think you'll see what I'm referring to. You will notice that the general tone of the narrative is decidedly negative, and I confess that I have to struggle to keep my outlook from becoming too pessimistic. Yet it's impossible to avoid negativity completely. If you want to solve a problem, you must first define the problem. Since courtesy is the angle of attack that I have proposed, we must look at examples where courtesy is missing. Such examples are not pretty. But consider this: They are far less ugly than an armed robbery, or an assault, or a shooting.

The shadow boxer

I was driving through the neighborhood a few months back – I might have been doing my Community Patrol duty – and I encountered two boys, perhaps sixteen-years-old, walking near the corner of Mansfield and Berkshire Drives. I had my window down, and I slowed just a bit as I was turning the corner and shot a quick glance at them. They were perhaps thirty feet from the car. As soon as we made eye contact, one of the boys stared straight at me, opened his mouth and let out an animal-like grunt in my direction. The sound he made was a low-pitched, grunting "Hunh". I think he grunted twice. His antics caught me by surprise, so I just continued on my way.

Some weeks later I was walking down Berkshire Drive and there were four or five boys, teenagers, in front of the Palmer home. It was mid-afternoon and these boys, black kids, were just hanging out. I guess they were tossing a football around. One of them might have been Brian Palmer, a former football standout at Crossland High. I glanced over as I walked by, and I saw that same kid again, and once again he gave me his greeting: He stared at me, made a face, and gave out a loud grunt.

This time I stopped and looked back at the boy. I think I might have said "What's up?" But when I tried to speak to him, he did something very strange. He raised his hands, clenched his fists and began a hopping, dancing movement

as if he were shadow boxing. As he was dancing around, I might have again said "What's up?" or "What are you guys doing?" In the meantime his buddies were standing in the background looking a little sheepish. When I walked towards them, the shadow boxer danced away, picked up a football and said, "Go out for a pass," in a challenging tone. As he did so I noticed that several of the kids were wearing the same clothing: baggy, low-slung camouflage pants, high-top sneakers and black tee shirts.

"How come you're dressed like that?" I asked him.

"Cause we FEEL like it," he replied defiantly, squinting and snarling his lips.

The other boys were watching us, half-smiling, with a look of embarrassment on their faces. I turned towards them and said, "You guys play football?" It seemed they were relieved to hear the question, since they immediately nodded yes.

"Who do you play for?" I asked, "Crossland?" One or two said yes. I think one said Oxon Hill. I continued on my way.

The spitter

John J., Charlie T., another guy and I were standing in front of John's house on Berkshire Drive talking. It was a Saturday afternoon in September. John lives right across the street from the Palmers, and around the corner from me. As we were standing at the end of his driveway, we were interrupted in mid-conversation by a voice asking for a match.

"You got a light?" We looked up and saw that it was a black kid, mid-teens, who was walking up Berkshire. I turned away from the others and approached the kid.

"No, I haven't smoked in years," I said. Seizing the opportunity I tried to strike up a conversation.

"You live around here?" I asked, moving towards the boy. I didn't recognize him.

The kid did not stop. He looked over at me and said "No," without breaking stride. There was not the slightest hint of friendliness in his look. As he walked by I persisted.

"Just passing through?" I called out. He turned his head to the side and spat on the ground. "Yeah," he replied in a harsh tone. I watched as he walked up the street without another word.

A strange black kid interrupts a group of adult, forty-something white males in the middle of a conversation and asks for a match. Innocent enough, you would think. The entire encounter lasted no more than thirty seconds. But this boy's voice, his movement, everything about his manner, expressed sullenness and resentment. And the way he spat on the ground ... it was not an accidental thing. It was a deliberate parting gesture. An expression of disdain.

Twenty-years-old

The Rose Valley subdivision is in Fort Washington, a mile or two from Camp Springs. It is very similar to Westchester except that there happens to be an elementary school in the middle of it, and a small airport right beside it. As I was trying to find the airport one day, I took a wrong turn somewhere, and wound up on a neighborhood street that didn't seem to take me where I wanted to go. It was a school day and I noticed two boys walking through the neighborhood. One looked about nineteen and the other was probably fourteen. I had my window open and as I drove by, I'm quite sure I heard one of them curse me using a familiar obscenity. I turned around, came back and slowed down to talk to them. I didn't mention what I had heard. Instead I said, "What's happening?"

The boys seemed surprised that I was addressing them. I think their answer was something like, "Why? Who are you?"

Although it wasn't my neighborhood, I pretended I was doing Neighborhood Watch, and I asked the boys if they had seen anything suspicious, or knew about any break-ins. They said no. The older boy seemed a little agitated. It was hot and he didn't have a shirt on.

"I'm not a kid you know," he declared emphatically. "I'm twenty years old."

I acknowledged him and drove off, wondering why this black youth had thought it necessary to offer that single piece of information to me, an older white man, whom he had just finished cursing.

No reply 1

My neighbors Tom and Sheila were out for a walk on a Saturday afternoon recently, taking it slow as usual. I spotted them down near the corner of Westchester Drive. I was out in the front yard and I noticed four young people walking from the other direction down Chesterfield Drive, heading for Tom. The teenagers, three boys and a girl, were walking very slowly. More slowly even than Tom and Sheila. And that is SLOW. After I saw Tom take Sheila into the house, I approached him.

"Did you see those kids?" I asked.

"Yeah," Tom said. "I said 'How you doin'?' but they didn't answer. And then Sheila said 'Hi' again, and they still didn't say anything." Tom continued, "A car was coming by, and I heard one of boys say 'I'm not moving,' and the car had to weave through them."

Tom and Sheila are white. The four kids were black.

No reply 2

Four boys, aged fourteen or fifteen, were standing in front of Mr. A.'s house on Berkshire on a warm evening. This is the house where young Jivon lives, and where the boys occasionally put up the portable backboard to play basketball in the street, an activity which seems to annoy some of the residents who live fur-

ther down the block. It doesn't bother me, but I've heard several folks complain about having to slow down when they pass through this group playing ball. They tell you that the kids act like they don't want to get out of the way, as if they are daring you to run them over.

Jivon seems to be a decent kid. The neighbors say he used to be a lot angrier, but that he has mellowed out a little. He doesn't appear to be a troublemaker, although the guy across the street mentioned that a mysterious gold Mercedes would occasionally pull up to the house, park where it was hidden by the bushes, and that it looked like some kind of transaction was going on between Jivon and the guy inside.

In any event, on this night no one was playing ball, but I slowed down anyway, rolled down the window and called over to the kids. "How's it goin'?"

There was no response. I couldn't tell if Jivon was there, but one of the younger Palmer kids (James I think) was in the group. "What's happening?" I said. I knew they had all heard me. One kid just kept on talking to his friend, not even looking at me. Another one just stared silently. The Palmer boy glanced over.

I waited a moment. "All right guys, see you later." Not one of them acknowledged me, but as I drove off, I thought I heard that familiar curse word again. Was it directed at me? No way to tell.

Stopping cars 1

Charlie's brother, who is white, stopped by the house one evening and told us about an encounter he had with a group of boys near the corner of Chesterfield and Berkshire, about a block from my house. He explained that as he was slowing down to make the turn at the end of the street, one of the boys rolled a basketball in front of his car. It seemed like a deliberate act, so he stopped the car and asked the kids if they had done it on purpose. Charlie's brother is a soft-spoken guy, so I don't imagine he would have provoked a confrontation of any kind. I didn't ask him if the kids were black or white, but the spot where the incident took place is very close to where the Palmers live, so it's easy to surmise that these were some of the same kids that usually hang around there.

Stopping Cars 2

My boarder Charlie described another incident that follows the same theme. It seems he was driving home one evening recently, coming down Westchester Drive, and as he approached the hill that descends from the intersection of Mansfield, he spotted three boys in front of the house next door to Harry K. As Charlie passed the kids, he had to swerve to avoid hitting an object in the road. He slowed down and saw in his rear-view mirror that one kid was bending over as if to pick up the object. He turned around at Devon Court and as he was driving back he could see that the kid was not picking the stuff up at all, but was instead

nudging it over with his foot, as if adjusting its position so that the next car would run over it. When he drove up, Charlie noticed that there were actually three pieces of debris in the street. He picked them up himself and spoke to the boys, admonishing them, and saying that objects like these could cause flat tires. The kids were apparently amused by the whole thing.

Harry told us later that a family by the name of Moore owned the house, and that they had lived there for some time. They have a twenty-year-old son at home, and it was probably he and his friends whom Charlie had spoken to. Harry said the boys had not caused any problems in the past. When I examined the stuff that Charlie had picked up, it turned out to be parts of a broken electronic game. It did indeed seem that the pieces sticking out of the thing could put a hole in your tire.

No room on the sidewalk

The following story concerns a man whose real name I won't use. Skip, as I'll call him, is a white guy, in his mid-fifties, a federal employee, divorced, who owned a home in Westchester and lived here for a number of years before moving out several months ago. I didn't know him very well, but having talked to him on a couple of occasions the conclusion I came to was that he was an intelligent man, fairly polite, but without much compassion. It also seems that he was not at all averse to the use of force in "defending" himself. Skip is not very big in stature and I guess he felt the need to fight his way out of a predicament or two in his life. In fact, one of the neighbors told me that Skip had once gotten into a violent altercation over a fender-bender.

I bring all this up because it lends credence to a disturbing story that Skip himself told me the very first time I met him. There had been a car that looked out of place parked near his house, and I knocked on his door to see if he knew whom it belonged to. We started talking about the problems in the neighborhood and about whether it was safe to walk the streets anymore. He told me that he took walks late at night, sometimes at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and that he never had a problem. He explained that he didn't worry because he always carried a knife. We talked for a good while, and as the conversation went on I started picking up some weird vibes from the guy, like he wasn't the sort of person you would invite to dinner.

Anyway, as we were standing in front of his house, a couple of black kids passed us. I said hello to the kids and after they walked by, I remarked to Skip that I thought many of these teenagers had too much time on their hands. My comment apparently reminded him of an encounter he had had with three teenagers at the Padgett's Corner shopping plaza. As he explained it, Skip was walking down the middle of the sidewalk in front of the CVS one way, and the boys were walking the other way, directly towards him. As the boys approached,

they began to squeeze him over towards the glass window, as if they weren't going to let him pass, or so it seemed to Skip. So Skip whipped out his knife and slashed at one of the boys.

"And I cut him. And he screamed," said Skip.

When he told me this, I didn't show any reaction, but to myself I was thinking, "Wow! You've got to be kidding me!" I shook my head and said something like, "You don't do that kind of thing."

To which Skip replied, "If you ever tell anyone about this, I'll just deny everything."

Is it possible that this really happened? Did this guy really slash someone with a knife because they *looked* threatening? It's an appalling thought.

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When you spend time observing kids, you soon discover that children are a reflection of the people around them. They learn how to act from watching others. Furthermore, normal kids want to learn. They want someone to show them what's okay and what isn't. They automatically gravitate to elders so they can observe their body language; so they can hear how adults talk, watch how they move, see how they treat other people. It's quite natural, and it's actually a physical thing. Kids need to be physically close to adults, and they know this instinctively.

So what happens when kids are pushed away? What happens when adults won't have anything to do with them? What happens when they never hear civilized speech from anyone around them?

Well, if you visit Camp Springs, you can see for yourself. The anecdotes I've related are a sample of the kind of thing that goes on all the time in these parts. What you observe in each of these incidents is that the basic elements of courteous behavior are missing.

Take the shadow boxer who grunted at me. Can there be any doubt about the way he was treated in the past? I'll bet that every white person he ever encountered either scowled at him, looked away, or crossed the street to avoid him. It's quite obvious that this young man has never heard a kind word from a white adult. The grunting? That was his way of saying: "Look at me man! What's wrong with me? Am I a monster?" The boxing exhibition was adolescent bravura. He saw that I was white, therefore I had to be an enemy. What do you do when an enemy approaches? You challenge him. You show him that you're not afraid. If we were observing, say, a bull elk on its breeding grounds, this display of bluff and bluster would be expected. But for a child to act this way in the presence of an adult is utterly inappropriate. Play fighting ... it's kid's stuff. If it weren't for the fact that it shows the flaws in your character, this sort of behavior would be laughable. His antics show us how badly the kid lacked attention.

Since no one would so much as look at him, let alone talk to him, he had no other way of expressing this need.

Similarly for the spitter. That kid was clearly angry at the world, and it's apparent that he too has grown up seeing nothing but ugliness. You can easily imagine what was going through his mind: He's walking through the neighborhood, and he sees four of those whites who he knows despise him. They have to despise him. They're white, and no white man has ever been anything but nasty to him. Why should these guys be any different? So here's your nastiness right back at you ... he spits on the ground ... it's the perfect expression of contempt.

The twenty-year-old? Same thing. A white guy drives by ... doesn't wave ... doesn't stop. How often does this happen? "Go ahead, ignore me, and by the way, [expletive] you."

As for those kids who didn't reply when someone actually spoke to them civilly, it's quite understandable. It was a novel situation for them. They didn't know how to react. The courtesy baffled them. "A white man addressing ME in a friendly tone? What's this all about? Something's not right." It's as if a stranger came up to you and stood on his head. Wouldn't you be a little wary of the guy?

The one incident that is truly disturbing was the confrontation between Skip and the kids at Padgett's Corner. Did this character actually slash someone? I'm inclined to believe that it really did take place. Even from the brief conversation I had with him, it was clear that however intelligent he appeared to be, Skip was seriously impaired as far as courtesy was concerned. He may not be a serial killer, but there is nevertheless a key element missing from this guy's make-up. He vented his pent-up stress on an unlucky black kid who happened to crowd him, and we wind up with an ugly racial incident. But I maintain that it was something deeper than racism that brought out Skip's violent side. It shows that seemingly well-adjusted, ordinary adults right around you are capable of demonstrating profoundly ignorant and even dangerous behavior.

Regarding the kids who by Skip's account wouldn't let him pass on the sidewalk, it's easy to imagine such a thing. I'm quite sure that Skip was not exaggerating, that the kids did indeed walk towards him as if they weren't going to give way. It's the same phenomenon that I've been observing in the neighborhood. These are kids who are crying for attention, and who don't ever get it. They zero-in on your body language: your stride, your expression, the look in your eyes. They can detect the finest fluctuation in a person's aura. All kids have this power. And there is no doubt at all about what Skip's body language was saying: "Keep the hell away from me you lousy punks." Of course they challenged him. Of course they didn't give way. They have no other way of getting an adult's attention.

Now the boys putting debris on the street, and rolling a basketball in front of the car, they were demanding attention as well. However, those incidents involved more than just a desire to be noticed. We know how young children seem to be fascinated by watching things get squashed, but these boys were older. You would think they should have had more sense than to pull that kind of nonsense. This is where it starts to get closer to criminal behavior. There was an element of malice in what they did, and you could certainly argue that these boys are nothing more than criminals. Hey, property could have been damaged ... maybe somebody hurt ... and furthermore, they were old enough to know that what they did was wrong, but they did it anyway. Moreover, a kid who is rolling a ball today might be shooting a gun tomorrow, right?

So what do you do with them? Fines? Probation? Jail time? Whip their back-sides?

Sure, but all of these remedies are purely reactive. The crime had already been committed. If Charlie's brother had swerved to avoid the ball, hit a telephone pole, and broken his neck, putting the kid in jail would not undo the damage. Moreover, would any of these things – fines, etc. – stop these boys from doing it again? Perhaps, but there's no guarantee of it. Are any of these things somehow educational? No. Not unless you want to say that teaching fear is educational. Oh, I know, the whole world says you need to "learn" that there are "consequences" to your actions, but I maintain that this has nothing to do with real learning. We all know how to be afraid. No one needs to learn fear. Furthermore, if I may inject some theology into the discussion, one could argue that it's not man's place to decide the consequences for what another man does. There are religions which in fact teach that the payment you must make for your actions is determined on a more divine level. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let me relate a few more anecdotes that further illustrate the decline of courtesy. My purpose in doing so is to demonstrate how badly the quality of life suffers when courtesy is absent, and how young people by their behavior show us in stark reflection the consequences of neglecting this aspect of life. Again, all of these events took place very close to home.

I'll wear what I want to wear

Returning home one evening, driving down Berkshire Drive, I came up suddenly on a boy riding a bicycle. He looked about fifteen, and he was dressed entirely in dark clothing – pants, jacket and cap. It was nighttime, and the only things visible in my headlights were the reflectors on his bike peddles. I slowed down to talk to him. Rolling down my window, I called him over and politely suggested that he should try to wear white, or something that would make him easier to see after dark.

He stopped, gave me a annoyed look, and said, "Huh?"

I told him again that dressed in that dark clothing, he was at risk of getting hit by a car.

Looking agitated, he said forcefully, "I'll wear what I WANT to wear!" and then rode off. His tone was high-pitched and angry. We were two blocks from my house.

Ten-year-old with an attitude

I was doing the Community Patrol in the early afternoon, cruising by the corner of Lansing and Kenstan, when I slowed down to greet a kid standing on the corner. I would guess that he was ten or eleven-years-old. A friend of his was watching from across the street.

"How ya doin'?" I said.

I don't exactly remember what his reply was, but he gave me a strange look. His face was contorted in an expression of incredulity. I thought to myself, "He learned that look from someone else."

I waved at him and kept on driving, and just before I got out earshot I heard this come out of his mouth, "How ya doin' faggot?"

I went up to the corner, turned around and came back to talk to the boy. I didn't mention what I had heard. I tried to strike up a conversation. School was out, and I casually asked him what kind of plans he had for the summer. "Are you going to camp?" I said.

"Huh? WHO'S going to camp?" he replied in a rough staccato.

There was that same look again ... knitted brow, mouth agape. It was not a kid look. There was not a hint of friendliness or innocence in it. Just contempt. It was not something you would expect to see on the face of someone so young. Clearly this young boy could not have created such a look on his own. He had to be imitating the manner of some adult who was close to him; a parent perhaps, or a sibling ... someone older.

The cop dies

Two boys, teenagers, were walking up Chesterfield. I happened to look up just as they were going by my house, and I watched as one of them pulled out an imaginary gun, and with his index finger for a barrel and his thumb for a hammer, blasted two shots at Frank M.'s car, "Pow, pow!"

Frank is a Metropolitan Police Sergeant who has lived up the street from me for a number of years. He keeps pretty much to himself, but he's an okay guy, and as far as I can tell, an okay cop. The car that the boys were blowing away is the patrol car that he always parks in his driveway. I'm certain that neither of these kids knew him or his family at all.

Some would say that this was a small thing; an insignificant gesture from a kid who was just playing around. But what I want to know is, why would a kid, or anyone for that matter, even think of doing this? Apart from the obvious dis-

respect for the police that was shown, how does a person even *imagine* shooting a gun at another human being, in jest or otherwise? Does everyone grow up believing that this is acceptable? It would seem that even the imitation of such a grave act would be more than just discourteous. Shouldn't someone say something to this kid about it?

Bottle smashing

Driving down Temple Hill Road on a summer evening, heading south towards Piscataway Road, I had passed the mobile home park, but not yet reached Clinton Grove Elementary. Two teenagers were walking single file towards me along the side of the pavement. They looked about fourteen. As I approached, the one in front raised his hands as if he were shooting a rubber band, or maybe a paper clip, at my car. I went by them too quickly to see what it was, but as I passed, I looked in my rearview mirror just in time to see the second kid break a bottle in the road. He flipped it in a high arc, and it smashed to pieces in the middle of street where my car had been two seconds earlier.

I pulled into a driveway, turned around and caught up with the boys. I slowed down.

"What do you think you're doing?" I said. They looked at me silently. "What did you break that bottle for?"

For a moment they seemed surprised. But then the second kid decided to show off his machismo. He started walking towards the car.

"The [expletive] you talking about, [expletive]," he said in common gutter slang. "Get out the [expletive] car. C'm on. Get the [expletive] out the [expletive] car."

He was walking down the middle of the street. I was rolling along on the other side with my window down. Cars were backing up behind me. It was clear that this boy was ready to fight. I had challenged him, and he reacted violently, vulgarly. His swagger, his language, everything about him was harsh and insulting. His reaction stirred up my own bile. For an instant I too was ready to swing some lumber. At that moment nothing would have pleased me more than to hurt that kid.

I kept on driving, turned around again about a half-mile down, and when I came back the kids had left the road and were making their way along a path that leads to a nearby neighborhood. I later realized that I could have been cooler about the incident. Perhaps I could have discreetly followed the boys, found out where they lived, and approached them afterwards. I had followed my instincts and spoken to them on the spot, and in this case it accomplished nothing. I hadn't anticipated that kids that age could demonstrate such antagonism.

This wasn't the only time I saw a bottle thrown in the street. Just a week earlier I had witnessed a bottle fly out the window of passing car. It smashed on the pavement near where I stood talking with a friend at the Sunoco on Allentown Road. I also periodically find broken glass and empty bottles on the streets of the neighborhood. It's more than just an annoyance. You can't just shrug it off, and you can't just shrug off the behavior of those kids on Temple Hill Road.

Twelve-year-old with an attitude

Jerry A. lives around the corner from me, across the street from the Palmers. He told me that some youngsters were tossing around a ball on the pavement outside his home one afternoon. Jerry parks his van on the street, and apparently the boys were bouncing their ball against the van. He approached and asked them to stop doing it. A kid who appeared to be about twelve-years-old replied, "Well, move your van."

"Hey, I live here," said Jerry.

"Yeah, well I got as much right to the [expletive] street as you. If you don't like it, call the [expletive] police. And if you don't, I'll go in and call them myself," was the boy's answer.

Jerry is in his seventies. He has lived in his house on Berkshire Drive for 28 years. Last year his van was burglarized. His tools were stolen.

A gesture of disrespect

Out for an afternoon walk on a warm day in February, I took the long way through the park and then back home by way of Geneva Drive and then Coolridge to Mansfield, where I crossed back over to Berkshire. It was a fine day. The crows were calling, the breeze was mild, and I was enjoying the exercise. I was approaching Berkshire from one direction, and a car came up Lansing and then Mansfield from the other side. As I was walking towards it, I could see from some distance that the car was a junk: no tags, lots of body damage, etc. There were two kids inside, but I couldn't make out their faces because of the tinted glass. We both arrived at the intersection at the same time. They were turning to go up the street, and I was turning to go down. I looked right at them, and as the car made its turn, the guy on the passenger side made an obscene gesture. Put it up against the glass he did. I couldn't see his face, but I could clearly make out that the gesture was directed at me. I watched the car intently, and for some reason I waved as it made the turn. I guess I couldn't think of what else to do. The car continued up Berkshire for about 100 feet, and then screeched suddenly to a halt. The driver must have been watching me in his mirror. His driving antics were no doubt meant to frighten me. He paused for just a moment, and then squealed up the street and out of the neighborhood. I tried not to let the incident ruin an otherwise perfectly good walk.

Peeing in public

Here's an incident that I noted in the Patrol Log. Normally the Patrol doesn't extend beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood. We rarely venture very far on Allentown Road, the main drag that takes you to the nearby shopping plazas. However, on this day I had to drive to Padgett's Corner for some reason. I think I might have been buying gas. As I approached the plaza, I noticed two young men getting out of a parked car in the lot next to Kentucky Fried Chicken. I slowed down to turn into the parking lot, and as I watched, one guy got out one side, one guy got out the other, and they both proceeded to relieve themselves as they stood next to the car. It was mid-afternoon. Although the car was parked towards the side of the lot, they were in plain view of the traffic passing by on Allentown Road, and also of the shoppers going in and out of the stores nearby.

Their action bothered me so much that I pulled into the lot, and approached their car, which was now in the drive-thru lane of KFC. The guy sitting in the passenger's side had his window open, and I said something like, "Do you always piss in the parking lot?"

I let him know I was angry about it. His only reply was "Aw right." Apparently he and his partner thought it was funny, because they were both grinning. But when I started taking down the tag number of the car, the smiles disappeared. The driver got out and wanted to know what I was doing. I asked him if he lived here. When he said yes, I answered, "Well I live here too." I went back to my car, and the pair drove off.

The phenomenon of public urination has become a too common occurrence in these parts. Charlie says he sees it all the time near the all-night Sunoco gas station and the 7-Eleven across the street. He and I were sitting in the car outside the 7-Eleven about 9:30 one evening when I caught sight of a teenager peeing on the sidewalk just around the corner from the store. The only way he could have been more exposed was if he had stood in the street to do it. To that kid I said nothing.

Unresponsive

For a number of years we were lucky enough to have a hardware store located very close to us in the Padgett's Corner plaza, but when Allentown Hardware closed a couple of years ago, folks in our area had no choice but to drive to one of the mega-stores for every little tack and screw. So I found myself in the Oxon Hill Home Depot one morning having to go through the line at the return desk after the cashier overcharged me for five bags of top soil. It's a tedious operation, navigating a return line. I was anxious to get out of the store, but unwilling to let Home Depot get away with the five dollars extra they had charged me. I borrowed a pen from the clerk to fill out my form, grumbling to myself about why I had to go through all of this when the error was theirs and not mine. Just

as I finished writing, someone came up to me and asked to borrow the pen. "Sure," I said, and handed it over, not really noticing to whom I had given it. Several minutes went by as I was standing at the counter, and at some point the clerk noticed that her pen had not been returned.

"What happened to my pen?" she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I gave it to someone else," I replied. "I think it was the guy in the orange apron."

But it wasn't that guy. The clerk went over and asked him. Now I was a little embarrassed about not remembering whom I had given the pen to, and the clerk was not happy about losing it. Then I noticed another man completing his return form with a similar pen. He was an ordinary looking fellow. Thirtyish. Heavy set. Casually dressed. I got out of line and went over to him.

"Did you get that pen from me?" I asked.

There was no reply. He didn't even look up.

"I think that pen belongs to the cashier," I said, a little louder this time. "Could you please return it to her when you're done?"

No response. Not even a grunt. He acted as if I wasn't there.

"How could he not hear me?" I wondered to myself. "I'm standing two feet from him."

Then a woman behind him piped up. "I gave it to him," she said.

Ah. It was she who had borrowed it. The guy turned and gave her the pen when he finished writing. I went back to my place at the counter and looked over at him. He looked back with a blank stare. It felt very strange. I wanted to say, "Hey mister, don't you answer when someone asks you a question? It's not like you were doing brain surgery there. Couldn't you have at least waved, nodded ... something?" But I said nothing.

Then a different thought came to me. I was the only white person at that desk. The clerks, and everyone else in line were black. Was it possible the guy wouldn't speak to me because I was the wrong color? "Hmm ... this must be what discrimination feels like," I thought.

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No doubt many folks would say that this last incident was a black-white thing; that the guy was "dissing" me like he had been dissed in the past. It was payback time for the white trash. For that matter, there are those who would say that all of the incidents I've related were racially motivated. But what does that actually mean, "racial motivation"? And why is it even relevant? Is there some deep philosophy contained in this? I think not. When two human beings come into contact with one another, there is a dynamic, fluctuating, moment-to-moment interplay of thoughts, emotions and actions. A myriad of factors comes

into play. In view of this complexity it is simply not logical to cite such a gross characteristic as race to explain their behavior.

If we ignore the fact that the Home Depot guy and I were of opposite color, the incident appears in a different light. It is still a minuscule event on the cosmic scale, but it gives evidence of a much larger problem. What we discover is that the guy lacked courtesy. There is really nothing racial about it at all. The trouble is that we don't make a big deal about things like this. We don't care that teenagers are making obscene gestures, or using the sidewalk as a toilet. We don't care that ten-year-olds address their elders as faggots. It doesn't matter that an adult can no longer offer some friendly advice to a neighborhood youngster without getting nasty back talk, or worse. It's not important that the youth of today have so much animosity for the police that they act out spontaneous executions with imaginary guns. I guess I should be more precise. It is important, but only to a scant few people, and those few people do not include society's leaders. To the leaders of business, of science, and to the political leadership, courtesy matters little. If it did matter, these things wouldn't be happening. If the mission to Mars, or the Dow Jones average, or getting reelected – if any of these things depended on showing neighborhood kids how to become courteous, enlightened individuals, you can be sure that a lot more people would be paying attention to how this all works. The fact is, our system doesn't just overlook ignorance, it encourages it. Business actually thrives on ignorance. The economy depends on it. In the face of such obstacles, it's easy to see why so few people make a serious attempt to address the problem. But hey ... come on ... things aren't that bad. Isn't the economy booming? Isn't unemployment down? Look at the stock market. It's been going up for ten years. And we're still a wealthy nation, aren't we? So what's to complain about?

The observant reader will no doubt detect that a distinct moral tone has crept into the discussion. Evidently it wasn't realistic to think that we could stay completely clear of moral issues. Yet I think the moral content of the argument appears to be greater when seen in the abstract than it would be in actual practice. I'm groping for the boundary where action in the light of morality leaves off and pure action by itself begins. The problems we are examining manifest themselves as moral questions, and we must describe them as such, but the solution to the problems lies outside the moral realm.

