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Community magic

The Southwood Community Association's executive committee is in session, with Councillor Dom Fin in the chair. This used to be called the Southwood Progress Association, until a property developer called Hank Thyssen gained control of it and came up with a series of proposals he thought could be justified in the name of 'progress', but which everyone else found repugnant. Like his proposal to drain Southwood Ponds and turn the area into a race track for dirt bikes, with Thyssen himself holding the concession. Or his plan to close part of Railway Parade and turn it into a plaza with market stalls controlled by his wife's company. Or his idea for a design competition to encourage international architects and urban planners to submit ideas for a massive redevelopment of Southwood Central. 'We don't have to award a contract to any of them, but we might attract some fresh thinking and get some useful ideas,' Hank Thyssen thought.

That was the point at which the mayor of Southwood, Mary Kippax, stepped in. Supported by everyone on the council except Mrs Thyssen, she decided to abolish the Progress Association and

replace it with a Community Association of eight members, elected annually, each member representing a particular constituency – sporting clubs, youth organisations, service clubs, churches and charities, the business chamber, schools and adult education groups, the creative and performing arts, and the historical society.

The centenary of Southwood is rapidly approaching, and the Community Association is pondering ways of celebrating the occasion. Dom Fin, the deputy mayor, is responding to a suggestion from the representative of the churches.

'Thank you for the thought, Pastor Jim, but really . . . cart before the horse. Know what I mean? We're not sufficiently advanced to take up your offer of a festival service out there at Southwood East church. We haven't yet really decided what form the festival is going to take. We haven't even decided if there's going to be a festival and, if there is, whether we're going to call it a festival. Know what I mean?'

Jim Glasson, the elderly minister of the Southwood East Community Church, slumps in his chair, fighting familiar feelings of frustration. He couldn't help noticing Dom's use of the phrase 'out there', as if Southwood East, a mere ten minutes away, was too remote from the action to be a suitable venue for a festival service. Jim recalls the Southwood of old, when he was growing up here and churchgoing was pretty close to the norm. Mainly Protestant, back then. But the combination of a sharp drop in church attendance all over Australia and the emergence of Roman Catholics as the dominant denominational group, thanks to an influx of Italian, Spanish and Vietnamese migrants, has eroded support for churches like Jim's.

Jim looks around the table at his fellow committee members, but they are all avoiding eye contact – even Judith MacGregor, one of his own parishioners who, in this context, is representing the Southwood Players. Judith is widely expected to run for council at the next local government election. Jim worries that she might be overcommitted.

Now Judith is speaking: 'Well, let me say, for the record, that I think there *should* be a festival, we should *call* it a festival, and we should start planning right now. I can see a street parade, a historical pageant – perhaps some re-enactment of the pioneering days of Southwood – a choral festival with some interpretive dance . . . what is it, Marcus?'

Judith has become conscious of a groan from the other end of the table. Marcus Li, the representative of the education sector, has his hands over his face.

'Marcus?' Dom Fin says kindly. He admires Judith's energy but does not find her an easy person to deal with and is wary of her increasingly evident hunger for power.

'Please, please, please . . . no re-enactments. Please! Haven't we all had enough of re-enactments?' Marcus Li appeals to the group for support.

It comes from an unlikely source: Geraldine O'Brien, the chair of Southwood Historical and Heritage Society (that cumbersome name the result of a merger between two falling memberships). 'I couldn't agree more. We must do our best to save ourselves from public embarrassment. I don't mind if the Players want to stage some well-proven period piece, but I would draw the line at untrained local people – or schoolchildren, even worse – dressing up and taking part in some tedious ceremony that we imagine will inspire us all to think fond thoughts of the real estate company that developed Southwood in the first place. There's nothing particularly noble or heroic about our origins, Judith. Pioneers? No way. We were just another suburb created by a smart developer who saw an opportunity and grabbed it. What's to re-enact?'

Judith MacGregor is smiling patiently in the direction of Dom Fin, as if she's merely indulging all this peripheral talk. 'Chair, if I may?'

Dom nods.

'Forget I ever mentioned re-enactment. I'll wash my mouth out. I was simply throwing out ideas.'

'Yes, well throw that one out,' says a barely audible male voice – probably the man from the soccer club, Judith thinks.

'As I was saying, perhaps a music-hall type evening, perhaps a display of fashions over the hundred years of our history. Fireworks, dancing, floral displays, street parties, vintage cars of the period, old photographs, books . . .'

'*Books?*' Marcus Li is on red alert once more.

Dom Fin intervenes. 'Thank you, Judith. I think we get the idea and we're grateful to you for coming up with such an extensive list of possibilities. Others might want to come up with some more . . . er, original ideas, too. Perhaps it's time to wrap this up and we can take these thoughts back to our various organisations for discussion. There's not a lot of time. If we're going to stage something in the spring, we need to decide whether to focus on a particular weekend, or perhaps a week, like Southwood Centenary Festival Week – I'm just putting that out there. Or people might prefer to spread it out over a longer period. We meet again in a month. Thank you, all.'

As they are leaving the meeting, Marcus Li and Jim Glasson fall into step beside each other and Marcus says: 'Can I have a word with you, Jim?'

'Of course,' Jim replies, 'let's have a cup of coffee.'

They find a corner table at E.K., where Southwood's best coffee is served, and settle in. 'What is it?' says Jim, intrigued by this approach from Marcus, a man with a good reputation for his work as deputy principal at Southwood High, and the moving spirit behind a new community garden for refugees.

'I'm not a great committee man, I've decided,' Marcus replies. 'I'm used to making decisions and getting on with it. Not that I don't consult with my colleagues before I decide something, but I'm not sure I've got time for all this wheel-spinning that goes on in meetings like the one we've just endured. What's the point?'

Jim sips his coffee and looks into the face of the younger man. Energetic, impatient, creative . . . just the kind of talent

Southwood needs, he thinks. 'I'll tell you what I've found, over the years. When it comes to boards and committees associated with volunteer work, process is everything. In some ways, the process of making a decision is more important than the decision itself. Does that sound crazy? I'll tell you why I say that: these people are all volunteers, which means they have good hearts. Oh, they might be ambitious, but mostly they're here to make the world a better place – or this neck of the woods, anyway. So they need to be heard. They think very seriously about these things; this might be the one place where they feel they really can make a difference. A surprising number of people don't feel like that about their paid work, I've found. So when they get involved in some community project, they want to shine. They want to contribute. So they tend to insist on having their say, even if it's been said by someone else already, as you saw in that meeting just now. Yes, it may take a bit longer to arrive at a decision – and sometimes we never get there and someone just has to take the ball and run with it.'

'I guess I'll have to change into a different gear when I come here.'

'Exactly. Well put.'

'By the way, Jim – do you mind if I call you Jim? – you looked a bit grumpy when Dom stomped on your offer. Is there a bit of history I need to know?'

'No, not really. I made the offer in good faith, no pun intended, but I guess it was a bit pushy. Dom knows I'm always on the lookout for ways of putting our little operation on the map. Just indulge an old bloke, will you?'

Marcus smiles. 'Thanks for the coffee. My shout next time.'

Come and hover with me in a helicopter above Southwood. What do you see? At first glance, it looks pretty formless, doesn't it? Just another vast suburban sprawl. Could be anywhere, really.

Red roofs as far as the eye can see, interrupted by occasional green or blue tiles, with patches of grey in the newer areas. In Southwood, 'newer' means they were built thirty or forty years ago, when the emerging architecture of domestic housing demanded open-plans inside and anything but red on the roof. (There was also a bold attempt to reintroduce corrugated iron to the suburbs – not only for roofs but water tanks – but that initiative failed to impress Southwood Council.)

Southwood has no riverbank or harbour's edge to mark its boundary, no mountains – not even much undulation, apart from a prominent hill to the north-west. A few arterial roads stand out boldly from the rest of the streets; a four-lane highway sweeps past its western side; a railway line; a series of small lakes surrounded by houses laid out in an unconventional array, like clusters, quite different from the inexorable grid pattern that chops the rest of Southwood into more traditional blocks. A crisscross of electricity wires running from pole to ugly pole. A large retail precinct. A scattering of slightly taller buildings – offices, perhaps, or apartments – but no towers. Cars everywhere.

It almost looks like a caricature of a suburb; a stereotype. Standard three-bedroom housing stock dominates, sliced and diced, row upon row, so similar as to appear homogeneous from this height. Streets, mostly straight, lined with an assortment of parked vehicles, including trailers, boats and a few cars without wheels, up on blocks. Unrelieved by much vegetation, though there are thousands of front lawns and backyards down there, many with swimming pools, and a few playing fields and parks dotted about.

We know from our pre-flight briefing that about 75,000 people live here. Because we can't make out any natural boundaries, it's hard to know where Southwood begins and ends, or how large the area is – about 30 square kilometres, we were told, but unless you're a geographer, that doesn't convey much. Perhaps it's easier to grasp

that there are about 30,000 dwellings in Southwood, most of them detached house-and-gardens, but there's a steadily growing supply of medium-density housing, too – low-rise flats and some modern approximations of terrace houses, now called 'townhouses' to add a touch of grandeur to a low-cost option.

It's not as crowded as an inner-city residential area with its teeming street life; not as spread out as some suburbs on the outer rim of the metropolitan area that strive to maintain a semi-rural identity, with occasional paddocks where children's ponies graze, brightly painted barns housing luxury cars rather than hay, gravel drives, lofts and mini-orchards. Southwood used to boast that kind of thing, though in rougher and more authentic form than the newer, more cultivated versions. But that was a hundred years ago. Now, although there's an echo of its heritage in the area called Southwood Fields, it has become unambiguously, uncompromisingly, unfashionably . . . suburbia: there's no other name for it.

And what's wrong with that?

The suburbs – disparagingly, 'the burbs' – get a bad rap, which is unfair to the billions of people around the Western world who live in them. *Most* of us live in them, because it's affordable, convenient and pleasant. Yet suburb dwellers are constantly being told their lives would be richer and more rewarding if only they would sell up and move to an apartment or a terrace closer to the action – where 'action' is defined as inner-city living. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they are urged to 'go bush' – which might mean those semi-rural areas on the metropolitan rim, or it might mean moving to a regional town or village where it is assumed that life is simpler, people are nicer, communities function more effectively and mental health will be restored. Get onto acres somewhere and become self-sufficient!

Depending how far out you go, there may be other complications not always spoken about: drought, flies, mosquitoes, deadly spiders and snakes; intractable unemployment; an economy in

thrall to commodity prices; limited access to medical, educational and financial services; higher rates of obesity, suicide and alcohol addiction; more respiratory disease due to a combination of pollens and a haze of agricultural chemicals. (In fact, most people will stay right where they are, in the suburbs, while cheerfully embracing the symbols meant to evoke rural culture and frontier myths: blue jeans, rugged boots on city pavements, plaid shirts fit for a bit of hunting and gathering at the supermarket or the hardware store, and a growing preference for SUVs that shout or, more often, whisper, 'off-road'.)

If you're not prepared to swap that dreary suburban existence for inner-city stimulation or bucolic charm, then get yourself to the coast and feel as if you're permanently on holiday. You might have to adapt to the unique problems of saltwater rust, the influx of tourists in summer, the threat of rising ocean levels and the increased incidence of storm surges (plus the standard problems faced by non-urban communities), but it will be worth it for those sea breezes and the ozone in your lungs.

Stop!

Nowhere is perfect. Moving to this or that place won't transform your life – many people who make the sea-change eventually move back to the comfort and familiarity of the suburb where their friends and neighbours sustained them more than they had realised. Which would most of us prefer: to be lonely in a beauty spot, or nurtured by a thriving community in a visually dreary suburb? We all know the answer to that (though, naturally, we'd prefer to have a bit of both, thanks). People rarely advocate suburban living for its clever compromise, combining semi-urban convenience with more space to breathe and a garden to tend. The suburbs are more often ridiculed for being neither urban *enough* nor tranquil, spacious and beautiful *enough*.

Yet if we were to swoop low over Southwood – low enough to glimpse the lives being lived under all these red roofs; low enough

to sense what's really going on here – we'd get a very different impression. Southwood, like every place of human habitation, is a rich and complex cultural phenomenon. Yes, it's one of those much-maligned suburbs; but aren't the suburbs where most poems are written, most cups of sugar borrowed, most flowers grown, most dreams fulfilled, most passions stirred, most sexual relationships consummated, most babies conceived, most marriages celebrated? It's the suburbs where most parents feel those primitive surges of joy, swelling like silken banners in the heart. The suburbs are where faith is most often tested by experience, and where the most painful lesson of all – that love's work is hard work – is usually learnt. Suburbs are where the joy of sex is most often experienced (and its disappointments most often faced), where most intimations of mortality are first detected, and where a feeling of contentment – yearned for, yet unexpected – most often descends on people.

This is not because suburbs are better or worse places to live than anywhere else. All those things happen in country towns, too; they happen in inner-city terraces and apartments, in caravan parks and fishing villages. But the suburbs have the numbers.

Which is to say: most *life* happens in the suburbs.

Kendall Street, in Southwood Fields, had been a close community in the 1970s, full of families with young children. As the children grew up and moved elsewhere, some of the residents sold the family home and moved to apartments or to smaller houses closer to the city. Some moved interstate to be near their grandchildren. Others stayed to watch a new generation of families arrive and begin the cycle all over again.

When a young Vietnamese couple, Jason Ng and his heavily pregnant wife Victoria, moved into number 8, their next-door neighbours on both sides welcomed them, but Victoria and

Jason were both working and there had not been much time to connect with other people in the street before their baby was born. They had both come to Australia as students and then been granted permanent residency, so they had no family in Australia.

When their baby died in his cot, aged three months, the young couple felt their world had collapsed.

They were devastated by shock and grief. They called their parents – Victoria's in Hanoi and Jason's in Bien Hoa – and both mothers agreed to come out, though it would take a little time to organise. Sympathetic friends dropped in, rendered speechless by sadness.

The appearance of the ambulance had triggered an immediate reaction in Kendall Street. The next-door neighbours had insisted on bringing Victoria and Jason into their home for a cup of tea and something to eat. Those neighbours had been phoned by various other people in the street enquiring what had happened.

Over the following days, a stream of local people came to the house to introduce themselves and offer support. One did some shopping; one mowed the lawn; several prepared simple meals and dropped them in, ready for heating.

At first, Victoria and Jason, inconsolable, didn't know whether they wanted to be left alone or embraced by these kindly strangers. But the trickle of visitors came anyway – no one stayed for long, but people felt it was important to make sure everything possible was being done for the bereaved couple. When it was decided that a service would be held in the funeral director's chapel, the street turned up and packed the place out.

Weeks passed. Waves of grief still engulfed the young couple without warning, but they gradually embraced the idea that life could go on; must go on. They were comforted by the kindness of their neighbours. When the two mothers finally arrived, they met several of the families in Kendall Street and

were assured that Victoria and Jason would never feel alone or neglected here.

Tragedies and disasters often have the effect of bringing a community closer together (see chapter 9). But, whatever our circumstances may be, the natural human tendency is to seek the security of being woven into the social fabric.

Like most species, we humans are great congregators. See how we cluster into suburbs like Southwood. If we were to fly in our helicopter away from the city and hover over a regional town or a rural village, we'd be struck by the same thing. Most people choose to live in close proximity to each other.

Yes, there are hermits and isolates who hate companionship and really need to be alone or just with a partner or a dog, but most of us hanker after the herd. There are people whose work forces them into social isolation – but mostly they'll go into a town somewhere when their week's work is done, seeking companionship, connection, community.

That magical word *community* conjures up the deepest truth about us: that we are social creatures by nature. We belong in social settings. We like being around other people. We work with colleagues, often in tight-knit groups. We play together. We drink together (who *chooses* to drink alone except a bruised soul or a drunk?). We like to eat in company with others (so if we live alone, we'll often eat out – see chapter 4). We go to meetings. We join clubs and choirs and committees. We go to church for social as well as spiritual reasons (see chapter 5). We like to congregate in small groups that satisfy our herd instinct. We need networks – our families and our friends – to be accessible *in the flesh*, and not just online or acknowledged in an exchange of Christmas cards.

The great myth of materialism (and its most pleasing illusion) is that we are defined by the objects we possess, including not

only our cars and clothes but our houses. The truth about us is quite different. In fact, we are defined by community: we belong to each other in ways we can never 'belong' to a house or a car, a pair of shoes or a piece of jewellery. Those things belong to us, but that's a one-way street unless we have surrendered so utterly to materialism that we've actually become slaves to our desire to possess. Materialism seduces us as successfully as it does by appearing to confuse subjects and objects: we – you and I, living persons – are subjects, but the things we possess are mere objects. This blurring of the distinction between subjects and objects gets us into terrible trouble in other ways, too: if we commodify people, treating them as objects to be possessed or manipulated, we diminish both them and ourselves in the process. *Place* – a house, a street, a suburb or town – matters so deeply to us not because it is a precious object in itself but because it symbolises the fact that we belong to a family, or a community.

We become deeply attached to particular places because of the life we associate with them. The most lavish house in the world will ultimately seem pointless and empty – except as the equivalent of a velvet-lined cave that provides shelter – unless it works as a symbol of our connectedness. This is why the true meaning of 'home' has little to do with bricks and mortar. Indigenous people's attachment to the land – expressed as a quasi-mystical sense of place – points to the *social* significance of those places, their meanings for a tribal group, their cultural and ancestral significance, *not* their significance as a pile of rocks or a running stream, per se.

We are not only defined but actually sustained by our social networks. We thrive on being part of a community – whether that's familial, social, residential, intellectual, cultural, political, religious, professional or vocational. In the end, it makes no real sense – no biological sense, no psychological sense – for us to dwell on our identity as individuals. That's not who we are. We're tribal. We're social. We're communal. We need to *belong*.

But here's the rub: communities don't just happen. We have to create them and build them. That means participating in the life of the community – socially, commercially, culturally. It means, among other things, paying our fair share of the taxes that fund the infrastructure the community relies on. (In fact, arranging your affairs so you can avoid paying tax in the place where you live is a powerful declaration of a desire *not* to belong.) After all, communities don't automatically survive – history is littered with examples of towns that died; neighbourhoods that ceased to function as communities and became dangerous, hostile places; communities that lost their cultural soul, or their commercial heart; entire civilisations that crumbled. Yes, we're sustained by our communities, but they don't have a life of their own: we must nurture them. For communities to survive, we must engage with them and attend to them.

If the deepest truth about us is that we are social creatures by nature, then it follows that social isolation is unhealthy for us. Even a less-than-optimal daily dose of social contact can have a deleterious effect on our wellbeing, our mental acuity and our outlook of life: nothing keeps us on our toes like random, unplanned conversations. Reduced Social Interaction (let's call it the *other* kind of RSI) carries a hefty penalty, and online contact doesn't quite measure up as a substitute (see chapter 7).

That's why being deliberately excluded from a community – banished, excommunicated – is the toughest punishment of all. Even being accidentally excluded – by carelessness or thoughtlessness on the part of our neighbours, for instance, or being overlooked when a work colleague is inviting everyone but us out to lunch – can induce feelings not only of isolation, but of alienation and even worthlessness.

Allowing our neighbourhoods and communities to disintegrate is not only foolish: it diminishes our very nature as humans. Our primary responsibility to our species is not merely to reproduce,

but to create and nurture these fragile yet precious communities that sustain us. For all their tensions and difficulties, for all their inevitable rifts and rivalries, communities give us the juices we need if we are to realise our full potential as human beings.

Whether in Southwood or any of the millions of other densely settled suburbs around the world, or in cities and towns, or in villages clinging to the coast, nestled in the hills or dotting the wide plains, we are at our best when we belong. Belonging is one of the deepest sources of human fulfilment. Welcoming someone into a group is therefore one of the most warmly appreciated of the gifts we can offer each other. Knowing I belong implies that I am taken seriously; I am connected; I am supported.

Part of the magic of communities is that, however imperceptibly, they shape us to fit them. That applies as much to a neighbourhood as to a political party, a church, a school, a workplace, a club or a choir. Any community we belong to – any setting where we gradually come to feel 'at home' – will make a rich contribution to the story of who we are. None of us is born a blank slate: we have too much genetic inheritance to claim such a thing. But the story that gradually unfolds on that slate is mostly written by others, not by us. We are the authors of each other's stories through the influence we have on each other, and the way we respond to each other. Each of our stories is unique, but the subtext is universal – it is about finding the answer to just one question: *Where do I belong?*

Not all our impulses are directed towards building up the community, and not all neighbourhoods encourage or foster the spirit of community. We humans are caught in the crossfire between two conflicting sides of our evolutionary heritage: we are selfless and cooperative by nature, because we need to maintain the communities that sustain us; yet we are also selfish and competitive by nature, because we are driven by the need to

ensure our personal survival and that of our families. We are both nurturers and fighters.

It might not feel like a war within us, but the tension is ever-present. The outcome depends on which side of our nature we choose to nurture, to reinforce, to encourage; which inner army we choose to feed. Each of us is capable of behaving nobly; each of us is equally capable of ugly, insensitive behaviour. Some circumstances bring out the best in us; some provoke the worst. Our restraining moral sense is community-based; our recklessness is usually all our own work (though gangs can be reckless, too). We are both nice and nasty. All of us.

Selfish impulses can damage the spirit of a community, such as when we become obsessed with accumulating wealth at the expense of others; when the drive for success overwhelms our moral scruples, or when the desire for power or status erodes our willingness to respect other people's rights and needs; when our aggressive tendencies are let off the leash in the form of prejudice against 'otherness'; when we give way to jealousy, rage, greed or sexual predation.

At one of Southwood's most 'desirable' addresses – Liesl Crescent, Southwood Rise – lives Angie Koutsoukas, forty-two, married, no children. She is a public relations consultant in a city firm. Her next-door neighbour is Bill Ritchie, fifty-five, married, two daughters aged twenty-eight and twenty-five, neither living at home.

Angie's husband, Michael, knows his wife is deeply unsatisfied. He suspects she actually despises him and his work (he's a mid-level corporate lawyer). He, in turn, finds it hard to take her work seriously, and he assumes she realises that. But he knows she loves their house, their cars, their exotic holidays and their easy access to the cultural life of the city. Their personal life is chilly

but civil. Michael holds out the hope that, one day, Angie might rediscover the passion for him she once appeared to feel. He adores her, and he can't help noticing that many other men adore her, too.

Bill Ritchie's wife, Petra, has a fulfilling professional life as a teacher at one of Southwood's seven primary schools. She knows her husband is bored with their marriage, but that's part of a bigger problem: she senses that he's bored with his work, too (he's a solicitor in a suburban practice twenty minutes' drive from Southwood). He's clearly bored with their almost non-existent social life, short of male friends and disappointed that his sister has moved interstate and doesn't keep in touch with him. (She occasionally phones Petra but rarely asks to speak to Bill.)

Petra often finds Bill standing at their front window, staring into the street, or sitting at his study desk, gazing out the window at nothing but the side of the Koutsoukases' house, barely three metres away. She has wondered if he's depressed, but has concluded the problem really is simple boredom. Yet he snarled at her when she suggested inviting some of her colleagues and their partners for a Sunday barbecue, and he sneered when she proposed enrolling together in one of the courses being offered at the library, so she has given up trying to provide the stimulation she believes he needs. He tells her he doesn't need friends.

The Koutsoukases and the Ritchies do not socialise with each other, nor with anyone else in their street. It's a street where people come and go by car. There's very little footpath traffic, and the few children who live in Liesl Crescent are driven everywhere by their parents. Though both the husbands are lawyers, this hasn't drawn them together. They nod in acknowledgement when they see each other, and occasionally exchange a few words when they are putting out the garbage or watering the garden, but nothing more. The wives chat to each other in the polite way of neighbours who feel no warmth towards each other. They would all say they were

lucky to have 'nice' neighbours, and they take a certain pride in the fact that they actually know each other, since many people in Southwood Rise and elsewhere in Southwood say they don't even know their neighbours' names. Petra and Angie would never meet for coffee at the weekend, though Petra occasionally does with other women in Southwood.

Bill Ritchie is consumed by lust for Angie Koutsoukas. When he gazes out his study window, he sees more than the side of a house: he sees the window of Michael and Angie's bedroom and, on a few recent occasions, he has seen Angie preparing for bed through the partially-open slats of a venetian blind angled to his advantage. If it happens much more, he will be tempted to conclude that Angie knows what she is doing.

Neither Angie nor Bill feel they belong where they are. They don't feel comfortable, content or fulfilled. They both look beyond their marriages and their neighbourhood for some half-imagined source of fulfilment that eludes them. Angie feels some connection with the people she works with, and with some of her clients: that's a kind of community, but the members of it keep changing. Bill's workplace is more stable, but his relationships with his colleagues are confined almost entirely to the professional level. He doesn't discuss sport or music or politics with them. He doesn't enquire after his colleagues' kids, or volunteer anything about his own. He lunches alone. He fantasises endlessly about Angie and some imaginary paradise where they will end up together, yet he barely knows her. They have exchanged only a dozen sentences in the year they have been living next door to each other, but each of those fleeting encounters has been, for Bill, electrifying. And from the warmth of Angie's smile and the intensity of their eye contact, he senses it might be the same for her.

All over Southwood, there are people who appreciate the sustenance and the discipline – and sometimes even the chaos and distractions – of being part of a functioning community. Those are the people who know how to engage, but not everyone does. Some residents of the district don't even realise what treasures are on offer. In single-person households, in two-person households, and even in many three- or four-person households, the need for connection with a social network runs deep, but is not always recognised for what it is: the answer to one of our most insistent human yearnings.

It almost goes without saying that the people who are drawing most deeply on the resources of Southwood are those who are contributing most to it. Those who are nurtured by their neighbours and by the life of the community are those who, consciously or not, are themselves nurturing the life of that community. Those who think the place has no soul haven't yet realised it might be their own soul that's missing.

In primitive tribal societies, there is nowhere to hide from the community: it's everywhere; there's nowhere else to be but in it, part of it. Nor is there anywhere to sulk or smoulder if you belong to a large and rowdy household; you might need to go out occasionally to find some peace, but you're inextricably part of the dynamic life of the domestic herd. In smaller households, people often do hide from each other, because the emotional temperature is too high; the focus – particularly on the one or two kids – is too intense. Being part of a larger community protects us from that intensity and relieves us of the burden of having to take too much responsibility for each other's wellbeing.

'It takes a village to raise a child', yes, and we ignore that wisdom at our children's peril. If we insulate the child from the village and try to do all the raising on our own, when will the child learn about complexity, diversity, ambiguity? How will the child learn to meet the challenge of difference? Schools are helpful socialisers, but

they are only one part of the 'village': the neighbours we never chose are a crucial factor in the process of developing the resilience and the tolerance we will need if we are to learn how to fulfil our destiny as social creatures.

It's not only children: it takes a village to keep an adult sane and sensible, too. The French Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) claimed that the reality of our personal existence could only be fulfilled through our engagement with communal life. Marcel believed – and who would disagree? – that if we position ourselves (or are forced) outside a community, we tend to become obsessed with ourselves and our own needs. Self-absorption, self-pity and self-indulgence are the sure signs of a person not engaged with a community.

The US psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902–87) had precisely the same view. He found that when his patients came to a full realisation of who they were, it always included the sense that they were essentially social creatures who belonged in groups, who needed networks, and who thrived on being part of a community.

The Australian social analyst, Richard Eckersley, has put the point rather more metaphysically in 'Redefining the Self' – the sidebar to a paper titled 'Whatever Happened to Western Civilization?' (*The Futurist,* November–December 2012):

> When I was at school we were taught that the atom was made up of solid particles, with electrons whizzing around the nucleus like planets orbiting the sun. Now, we think of the atom as more like a fuzzy cloud of electrical charges. Similarly, we currently think of the self as a discrete, biological being with various needs it seeks to satisfy. Like atoms combining into molecules, we form and dissolve bonds with other separate selves to create and terminate relationships. Sociologists talk of modern society as [comprising] 'atomized' individuals.
>
> What if we were to see the self not as a separate physical entity, but as a fuzzy cloud of relational forces and fields? This would be a

> self of many relationships, inextricably linking us to other people and other things and entities. Some are close and intense, as in a love affair or within families; some are more distant and diffuse, as in a sense of community or place or national or ethnic identity; and some may be more subtle, but still powerful, as in a spiritual connection or a love of nature.
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> . . . Transforming how we see the self in this way – as a fuzzy cloud of relationships – would change profoundly how we see our relationships to others and to the world . . . It brings us closer to how indigenous people see the self, and represents one way that scientific and spiritual views can be compatible.

In an era of rampant individualism, we have often lost sight of our nature as social creatures. Seeing ourselves in the way Eckersley suggests might help us recognise our inescapable interconnectedness and that, in turn, might encourage us to accept our responsibilities to the communities that sustain us. The neighbourhood can be a magic place, but the magic comes *from* us, as well as *to* us.

Community and morality

In cities, towns and suburbs all around the Western world, the same concern is being aired: do we look out for each other as much as we used to? Are neighbourhoods functioning as well as they did in the past?

Some of this might be good old-fashioned nostalgia, but there's a sufficiently persistent pattern of concern to warrant some investigation. And the starting point is to recognise that the two most common complaints about 'decline' in Western societies are inextricably linked. First: *Our communities are not functioning as well as they once did*. Second: *Our shared values are not as clear or strong as they once were; the idea of 'right and wrong' is more slippery than it used to be.* How can you separate those two

things? The moral sense is, after all, a social sense: we develop our moral codes and systems out of the experience of learning how to get along with other people – first in the family, then in the classroom and the playground, and finally in the wider community. It's not the values we're taught that shape our true morality: it's what works in practice.

Cohesive communities produce coherent moral systems. So communities are not just places where we can belong; they are also places where we learn to tell right from wrong and distinguish good from bad. Communities are our moral teachers and, when they're working well, they're also our moral guardians.

> It's a funny thing – the kids that cause most trouble in Southwood Fields are the ones we don't see much, the ones we don't really know. I remember when I was growing up in a country town, everybody seemed to know everybody and that put a sort of pressure on you when you were a kid. A good sort of pressure, though. Made you realise that things you might want to do – silly things – had consequences for other people, and those other people might be someone your mum and dad knew.
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> We got into various scrapes – what kid doesn't? – but you always knew people were keeping a bit of an eye on you. 'Oh, you're Eric's boy, aren't you?' So then you were identified, tagged; it was a bit like carrying your ID around with you.
>
> To some extent it's the same around here. There are some kids you recognise, or you've seen them with their parents, or you know where they live. And that helps. Not that you want to be spying on kids all the time, but it's often for their own good. If you can see they're in a jam of some kind, you know who they are and where to take them.
>
> In some parts of Southwood, you never see the kids outside – or not in the street, anyway. Their parents drive them everywhere

and you'd never get to know them unless you happened to have kids around the same age. I think that's a pity. How can they feel part of the place if they don't know their own neighbours?

Of course, it's not just kids. We all rely on each other a bit, don't we? To keep an eye on things? And there's no doubt you're more likely to do the right thing by people you know. I often think that about graffiti – there's a bit of that up at Southwood Central. Would those kids be doing that to someone they know? Would they be doing it if they knew we knew who they were and who their parents were?

I just don't get the feeling that people care about each other as much as they used to.

Want to hear the worst example of what I'm talking about? Just a few blocks away from here, still in Southwood Fields, an old man died in his house. This was not a man I knew, and it didn't happen in my street, but we all heard about it. He died in his house and no one noticed for two weeks. Two weeks! Can you imagine that? I'm not talking about trying to imagine the stench when the police finally went in and found him. I'm talking about the fact that no one noticed he wasn't around. No one noticed the newspapers piling up on his front step, or the mail spilling out of his letterbox. I don't think it would happen in our street – we're all pretty alert if someone is sick, or hasn't appeared for a day or two. You knock on the door or phone them, just to say, 'Haven't seen you around – I just wanted to make sure you're alright. Is everything okay?' No one's going to be bothered by that. It's alright for people who've got family and that, but a surprising number of people live on their own around here, especially older people or people licking their wounds after a break-up. They're the ones you've got to look out for.'

Morality is only ever about one thing: how we treat each other. In *The Good Life* (2013) I expressed it like this:

> Morality can never be a solo performance. You can be comfortable on your own; you can be rich on your own; you can have bright ideas or tinker with inventions on your own; you can sail around the world or cross the Sahara on your own (though if you get into trouble, you might be glad to know other people who think your survival matters); you can even be happy on your own. You can lead a blameless, exciting or passionate life on your own, but you can't lead a good life on your own, because morality is about our interactions with each other. It makes no sense to consider the good life in isolation.

When communities fragment or disintegrate, the one certain casualty is their moral standards. That's why we are generally at our worst, morally speaking, when we live in segregated or divided societies – such as the years of South Africa's policy of apartheid or the US's racial segregation – or when the fabric of a community is frayed. (William Golding's great novel *The Lord of the Flies* is, in essence, the story of what happens when the constraints of a cohesive society are removed.) If you think morality is in decline, the first and most logical place to look for an explanation would be to the life of our neighbourhoods and communities: *are* they in danger of fragmenting, or is this all a myth?

Take a dispassionate look at the state of contemporary Western society and you will certainly identify some trends that might be expected to erode the cohesiveness of neighbourhoods. Changes in our patterns of marriage and divorce would be one factor: if marriage is becoming a less stable institution, this may well threaten the stability of local communities. High rates of marriage breakdown imply high rates of family disruption and that implies some fracture of social networks.

Unless we manage it very carefully, it's obvious that children can suffer when their family falls apart. Imagine how it must be, at a young age, to find yourself suddenly caught up in the disruptions of regular access visits that unplug you from one parent, one

home and one micro-community and plug you into another, sometimes with acrimonious exchanges between your parents at the changeover. In Australia, about half a million children are involved in these regular back-and-forth movements between their separated parents' homes. Not all of those are traumatic or even unpleasant for the children involved, but all of them are disruptive.

Some children who grow up with this kind of instability will learn to take comings and goings in their stride, and might become more socially and emotionally adaptable as a result. Others might react quite differently – feeling insecure and hesitant about forming close relationships because of a lurking fear of further emotional upheaval. Some will be grateful to their parents for managing a difficult situation sensitively, and for continuing to love and nurture them in a way that protected their feeling of emotional security. Others may resent parents who had seemed to place their own needs above the needs of their children.

As time passes, all these reactions will be carried into the adult community – some as resources and some as emotional baggage. They will become part of the social fabric.

Here's another potentially fragmenting factor: low birthrates. The low birthrate in most Western countries (well below the replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman) has an inevitable impact on communities, since kids are often the social lubricant that facilitates contact between their parents.

Many other factors may be contributing to the trend: the rise of the two-income household – generally welcomed as a sign of the liberation of women from domestic oppression – means that, in most households, both partners are absent from their local neighbourhood by day and busy with domestic matters at weekends. The increasing mobility of the population means we are less likely to stay in one home for a lifetime – or even for a long time – than our parents and grandparents were, which might make us feel less committed to the long-haul business of

nurturing relationships within the local neighbourhood. Almost universal car ownership reduces public transport use and local footpath traffic – both effects tend to reduce the accidental encounters that traditionally helped to maintain social contact between neighbours. And increased reliance on information technology draws us into online communities that may distract us from our connections with the local neighbourhood (see chapter 7).

That's by no means a comprehensive list, but there are clearly many reasons to suspect that Western social cohesion has been under threat. Which means we need to compensate; we need to try harder to maintain the all-important local connections that fuel the life of the local community; we need to acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between community and morality. If our suburbs were to become mere dormitories, with no cohesive *communal* life of their own, our moral sensitivity would indeed be under threat. If we were only to connect with people we like or who share our interests, that might be comfortable for us, but how healthy is it for the continuing development of the noblest human values, like tolerance, patience, compassion, kindness and respect? The way we respond to people who are *unlike* us is the best test of our moral integrity.

A fashionable dystopian vision of the future is of a place where the sense of community has been corrupted by greed, vanity and selfishness; where the idea of 'neighbourhood' no longer counts; where garbage piles up in unkempt streets; where law enforcement has become an impossibility because the local citizens have lost interest in taking any responsibility for each other's wellbeing; where gunshots are often heard in the night; where there are bars on every window and locks and bolts on every door; where people come and go by car and never connect; where there's an

air of deep insecurity and mistrustfulness, sometimes amounting to menace; where online communities are the prime source of connection and emotional support.

Some pessimists think we're halfway there already. It's true that some parts of the world's big cities have gone through somewhat dystopian episodes. It's true that crime sometimes takes over a neighbourhood and the police seem powerless to control it. It's true that, in many streets of many cities, neighbours don't know each other and appear to show no interest in doing so. It's true that the domestic security industry is booming – deadlocks, alarms, CCTV cameras, electronically operated gates, window bars, all the way up (or down) to 'gated communities' with boom gates and armed guards.

But who welcomes that kind of development? Who thinks that's a good way for humans to live? Who doesn't think that, if some of those developments were to become major trends, we would have a huge social problem on our hands? Who would welcome the idea of our cities becoming a series of ghettos disconnected from (and perhaps impenetrable to) each other? Who wouldn't rather live in a friendly and safe street than an unfriendly and unsafe one? Who wouldn't like to live in a street where, if we were going away, we could leave the key to our house with a trustworthy neighbour?

The good news is that there are countless towns and suburbs like Southwood around the world, where the residents do nurture their local community and take some pride in its health. So the challenge is: how do we preserve that way of life, and extend it to neighbourhoods where isolated people are at risk of being paralysed by fear and insecurity?

Part of the answer lies in the quality of urban design and, in particular, the creation of more imaginative and socially attuned living spaces with increasing emphasis on public rather than private space – including well-designed 'hubs' (see chapter 5).

Another answer is to focus more on the development of contemporary versions of the well-proven model of medium-density housing that eschews unsustainable house-and-garden developments at one end of the scale and inhospitable high-density housing at the other.

But even in cities, towns and suburbs that don't enjoy the benefits of enlightened design, there are hopeful signs that we understand the threat posed by fragmenting communities. Many of us are paying more attention to our local neighbourhoods. We are coming out of our shrinking households to find new ways of herding (see chapter 3). The tide may well be turning for communities and that's good news not only for our social nature, but for our moral nature too.