COMMENTARY

David McGrath: My experiences with my kind and bigoted neighbor reveal an American paradox

By David McGrath

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When a relative, friend or colleague dies, you regret that you canceled a lunch date with them or never made the phone call you had intended but kept putting off.

It was different with one of my neighbors, though. I felt something more serious than a pang of regret when he died recently. I had never thought about turning in a friend to the police before him. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My neighbor was an older man, a retired truck driver who lost his wife 10 years ago. You never get over losing your spouse, but he seemed able to move on, spending hours every day tending his flowers, shrubs, lawn and trees.

Gardening was his passion. Twice, my wife, Marianne, asked if he'd accept a potted plant someone gave us as a gift, but which was struggling under our care. He nursed each one back to life, and they're still out in front, 10 times the size when we had them, thriving and flowering and adorning his place.

Once, near sundown, I stepped outside and heard conversation drifting over from an open window in his kitchen. When I asked the next day if he had company last night, he smiled and said it was his late wife.

“Oh, I talk to her all the time,” he said. “I tell her everything.”

I told Marianne about it, theorizing that it was a healthy thing for him to do. And that I would probably be bending her ear after she was gone. She joked about marrying a man who wasn’t going to let her rest in peace.

The fact is, I did worry a lot less about my neighbor after that. And then came the weekend our 4-year-old granddaughter was staying with us. As I wheeled her in her wagon into his driveway, his countenance changed to the look people get when they spot a rainbow. I had never realized his eyes were blue until he stepped back to behold her, cleared his throat and said softly: “Howdy do, little miss.”

Thereafter, when the granddaughter visited, she would wave to him from our yard or when we passed his house in her wagon. He’d call out the same greeting to her in a dialect born from southern Indiana where he grew up, and she’d point to all his “pretty flowers.”

One day, he walked into my garage where I was cleaning a paintbrush and handed me a stuffed animal for her. I said he could give it to her the next weekend, but he insisted I take it then.

Unfortunately, after that, the trouble started. It involved a tree encroaching on my neighbor’s property — not mine but that of the couple whose house was on the other side of his.

I had not heard him say much about them until he told me confidentially that there was going to be big trouble over the tree with that “dumb Mexican” who couldn’t learn proper English.

The couple were our friends, two of the kindest people Marianne and I knew. I tried reasoning with

my neighbor about stereotypes and informed him that the husband, actually a native of Spain, had risen to the rank of supervisor with the Ford Corp. But he just turned and glanced at the offending tree, then bragged about how his hometown was still all-white.

Then he turned sideways, caught my eye and said with a sly smile that he had a “persuader” under lock and key in his house that he could use to settle the dispute. I studied him hard. I convinced myself it was just talk, the empty talk of a curmudgeon.

I should have told Marianne. She would offered wisdom about what to do or say. But it felt like a shameful thing — a dirty thing to report only to the police or to keep to myself.

Meanwhile, the couple had already paid a tree service hundreds of dollars to comply with the old man’s wishes. He resumed his gardening, often on his hands and knees. Things quieted down. I considered the matter resolved. And I hoped that maybe his perspective had changed after all this. Until a florist rang our doorbell.

The florist was holding a vase with red roses, a birthday gift for the wife of the couple, sent by her daughter from Michigan. But they weren’t home, and the man in the house next door, with all the beautiful flowers in his yard, refused to accept the roses for them, the florist said. Would we kindly see that they got them?

Later in the year, the couple moved away. They said they wanted to be closer to their children. But things were never the same with my neighbor and me.

We spoke less. Said what neighbors say. He was getting on, and I read a prescription label for him when he asked. I helped him move a chair.

It was easier that way.

What was hard was to detoxify hate. To cure his blindness.

But surely, it must be possible: his wife, after all; my granddaughter; the miracles in his garden. Clearly, a capacity for love. For empathy.

Humanity.

But the clock ran out. And that's the regret.

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