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# Living on Normal Avenue

ELEANOR NICKEL

I really do live on Normal Avenue—1408 West Normal Avenue, Fresno, California. My neighborhood was built in the 1950s, and it really belongs on *Leave It to Beaver* with its wide streets, huge lawns, and trees that tower over the modest, two-bedroom houses. The streets are named after elite universities such as Cambridge, Yale, and Vassar. “Normal” refers to Fresno State, which used to be a “normal school,” but also suggests a vision of the good life that included wives staying home and husbands working hard downtown, so that someday the kids might go to an Ivy League school and achieve the American Dream. By the time I moved here, the 1950s atmosphere had degenerated into one of broken windows and blaring hip-hop music, challenging me to ask a difficult question for financially stable, security-minded Christians: what kind of neighborhood would Jesus want me to live in?

Normal Avenue is surrounded by the ruins of the 1950s. To the west is the old Golden State Boulevard, which runs parallel to the railroad tracks. The trains still run, making their loud whistles a constant background feature. But Golden State has been superseded by Highway 99, which rises above us, sending down a shower of noise and air pollution. The 1950s hotels along Golden State are still there, some of them boarded up and covered in graffiti, others seemingly inhabited, but I hesitate to imagine what kind of business is being done there now. To the south is downtown, once a thriving economic center where 1950s husbands would go to work, now a maze of streets that meet at bizarre angles, thwarting every revitalization attempt.

Like many cities, Fresno has developed far beyond its original downtown area, with wealth always moving to the outer edges. One quirky exception is the bohemian Tower District to the east of our neighborhood, in which luxurious homes from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s now sell for up to a million dollars. When people talk about wanting a home with “historical significance,” they tend to mean a house with a speakeasy in the basement, not a house from the 1950s. You have to drive many blocks to the north to find the increasingly cleaner and prettier

neighborhoods where middle-class people now move to experience the American Dream.

So where does that leave us? Normal Avenue and its surrounding streets are the home of the working poor, with a mixture of Hispanic, Asian, African-American, and a few white families. Before the astronomic rise in real estate prices, my husband bought our house for \$74,000. Working families did the same, and most of our neighbors earn their living, although they don't make enough for Yale or Vassar to be real possibilities. Houses on our street now sell for more than \$200,000, but there is something bizarre about that price in an environment characterized by the out-of-tune blaring of ice cream trucks, old cars on blocks, weedy lawns, and fences that are falling over. More and more homes are vacant or occupied by renters, some of whom live on state assistance.

It is not "normal" for a professional couple to live in a run-down, working-class area, and the truth is that our income would allow us to live in a much nicer place. I have had a few moments when I definitely wanted to leave, most of them caused by the renters who live across the street. They have a troubled son, who broke most of their windows earlier this year. Nobody fixed them, leaving sharp, jagged holes and dangerous shards of glass all over the lawn. When I looked out my kitchen window this past winter, I was confronted with their giant, dead magnolia tree towering over the street, its brown leaves rasping in the sky.

But those simple words of Jesus—"love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39)—do not allow me to flee to a more comfortable environment. One of the turning points came when I took a walk by myself on a cold night in January. I asked God why He might want me to live here, and I was looking at my own frosty breath when He answered, "You're here, in case I need you." Despite my position as a professor at a Mennonite Brethren college and my firm pacifist convictions, the metaphor that came to mind was that of a soldier stationed in a war-torn country, just in case she was needed in an emergency. I was to hold the fort, and be ready for the call.

My husband and I also began to take action. We called the city and harassed them about the dead tree for several months—with the voices of native English speakers who have PhD.s—until they finally cut it down. We called the city and

demanded that the neighbors' landlord come and repair the broken windows, which he did. When it came time to build a new fence around our property, we told our neighbors that we would pay for all the materials, and my husband built the fence with their help. Most importantly, we started praying for the neighbors. We don't know them as well as we would like, given the barriers of ethnicity, language, and class, but at least we are their neighbors.

We have slowly come to appreciate the hidden joys of this neighborhood, which abounds in cultural diversity. My husband and I are among the few white people on our block. Our sweet next-door neighbors have a Spanish-speaking church that meets in their backyard, giving us the mixed blessing of loud, amplified Spanish worship music filling our home on Wednesday and Friday evenings. On the other side lives a charming young boy, who recently threw a baseball through our guest room window by mistake. When we went outside, he translated our words into Spanish for his uncle as we worked out a solution.

We also really love our house, with its charming fifties details like the decorative mail slot and the kitchen tile which matches the colored accents on the dishwasher. My husband has spent the last ten years creating a gorgeous garden in the backyard, including grape vines, grapefruit trees, orange trees, lemon trees, lime trees, pomegranate trees, a plum tree, a bay tree, every kind of herb, and flowers for all seasons. Compared to our home, the expensive new developments going up all over Fresno seem a bit sterile, with the sun beating mercilessly down on dirt lots and trees that come up to my knees.

I have to admit that I'm still ashamed of where I live, especially when I invite my university colleagues to my house. But I have to remind myself that Jesus did not preach the gospel of the American Dream. He told the rich man to "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor" (Matthew 19:21). Because our mortgage takes up a small fraction of our income, we are able to give an entire "mortgage" every month to world missions. When I get that MCC magazine in the mail, I remember that living on Normal Avenue allows me to be a neighbor to people in Palestine who have no clean drinking water. More than anything else, this experience has taught me that we need to look beyond our ideas about what is "normal"—because Jesus's Normal Avenue might look a lot like my street.