A Walk around the Block

This morning I went for a walk around the block, as I usually do on Monday mornings. Naturally, the block looked about the same as it had last week, although I did notice a few small changes and occurrences that either hadn’t been there, or hadn’t struck me, the last time I walked through the same area.

One of the biggest changes that I noticed, though I’ve been watching the progress for a while now, was that the neighbor tore out and re-poured cement for a new sidewalk on his property, which makes walking through that short section somewhat easier. He also put new grass in on both sides of the sidewalk. I guess he is trying to improve the appearance of his property. He’s a new owner who recently bought his house. The last tenant was poor (as are many of the people on my block, myself included), and so the house, an old house, hadn’t been renovated in a long time. I think the last owner, a seemingly nice guy with a large family, was evicted because he couldn’t pay the rent. This new guy is apparently related to the young couple that recently bought another house on the corner, the oldest house on the block and one of the oldest in town, and started restoring it.

With the arrival of these two newcomers, the block has been somewhat divided in appearance. On one half of the block, the side closest to the main road, and the side that I live on, the tenants are poor renters living in old, rundown houses (the area is one of the oldest parts of Caldwell). The properties on this side have faded, flaking paint, crumbling foundations, and weeds lining their edges. My house in particular has a dull green, corrugated tin roof, windows old enough to be historic and leaky enough to be sieves, a concrete staircase on the side of the house, leading to an uninterrupted wall where there used to be a door to a back porch and a
forgotten basement. In all fairness, my house should have been condemned a couple of decades ago.

On the other half of the block, the side with the old church (oldest one in Caldwell), the tenants are more affluent, having bought their old houses for the prestige that restoring them will bring. Since these more affluent neighbors have moved in, the neighborhood has visually improved. The people on that side of the block have put decorations up during the holidays, and they have planted cherry trees, flowers, and fresh grass. After nearly a hundred years of existence, that big house on the corner, the one that the young couple is restoring, was also recently given a sign by the city of Caldwell, proclaiming the house to be a historical monument. These houses have matching coats of fresh blue paint, clean white trim and pillars, and sharp, black wrought-iron fences to keep people off the new grass. The gravel alley-driveway that my house shares with two of the renovated houses had been in terrible shape before, pothole ridden to the point that it had been impossible to drive through it without damaging most cars, but once the new neighbors moved in, the city poured a fresh new concrete entrance to the alley, which has been a great benefit.

Despite this significant increase in shrubbery, ease of access, and historical appreciation, I can’t help but feel some suspicion towards these neighbors. I can’t forget the reality that these fortunate newcomers have been given their opportunities at the expense of those poor families who could no longer make payments. According to the website city-data.com, 36.4% of the people in Caldwell lived below the poverty level in 2012, as compared to 19.9% of the population of the entire state. The same website said that 10.7% of the population in Caldwell lived below 50% of the poverty level, while 6.0% of the whole state lived in poverty that severe. Thus Caldwell has almost twice the percentage of people living in poverty and even severe
poverty as compared to the rest of the state. This severe poverty is visible in many parts of town, especially the parts of town I often hear the comfortable people complaining about, claiming that these areas are a source of crime, and that these buildings should be torn down.

Complicating this divide is the fact that the housing market in Caldwell is unabashedly corrupt, favoring wealthier investment buyers over poorer home buyers/renters, despite laws that are meant to even the playing field. The poor are then forced to rent houses that are no longer seen as economically viable. Many of the oldest houses in Caldwell, including the governor’s old house, have been divided into three, four, sometimes up to six sections to be rented out to poor families. However, now that the housing market is beginning to pick back up, and these old houses are seen as having some value once more, poor families are often evicted to make room for investors and others who are interested in restoring these houses for their historical value. On the surface, this is portrayed by the media and local politicians as a win-win situation, as the presence of the rich is seen as a good sign for Caldwell, as is the absence of the poor. However, poor folks who had previously been funneled into rundown areas have now been pushed out, and I’m not sure what has happened to all of them. Though I’m sure my new neighbors did nothing wrong, I often wonder if they appreciate the privilege and circumstances that allowed them to buy their “new” homes.

These new neighbors haven’t been especially friendly. One of the restored houses, the one closest to my unrestored house, is owned by an old man who drives a shiny new car and has never once looked at me without a glare on his face. Most of the other neighbors on that side of the block just avoid looking at me altogether. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen the young couple who live in the big house on the corner talk to any of the neighbors besides the man that just put in the new sidewalk, who, as I said, is likely related. Though to be fair, I’ve never interacted
much with any of them either. I can’t imagine talking to them; the division between them and me has been well established for too long, and I’m sure that’s as much my fault as theirs. Today when walking, I saw the young couple playing ball with their two little children on their well-tended yard. The kids smiled and waved, the parents didn’t. I waved back anyway.

Kids, and the schools they attend, have been another controversial issue in Caldwell. Many years ago, urban and rural Caldwell were divided into two school districts, the Caldwell School District for kids who live in downtown, and the Vallivue School District for kids who live farther out of town, toward Nampa. Some people in town, myself included, accuse the city of creating the Vallivue School District in the 1960’s as a way to separate wealthier white farm children from poorer children, especially Latino immigrant children, living in cheaper housing and in labor camps closer to town. Although this is a hard motive to prove, the Vallivue School District has a significantly different student demographic than the Caldwell School District, even today, more than fifty years after the creation of its borders in 1961 (according to the Vallivue School District’s website). For example, according to the website febp.newamerica.net, a website under the New America foundation intended to share the results of the Federal Education Budget Project (or the FEBP), in 2012 35.8% of Vallivue students belonged to some kind of ethic minority, as opposed to 60.2% of Caldwell students. During the same year, 19.4% of Vallivue students lived in poverty, while 35.5% of Caldwell students lived in poverty. As these two districts border each other closely, these differences are staggering, and they were likely more pronounced fifty years ago.

The pronounced racial differences in the Caldwell and Vallivue School District populations raise another issue, that of race as connected with poverty. Racism, though not as tolerated as it was in the 1960’s, is still very much alive today, everywhere in the US. There is
still a racial divide in Caldwell, most visible near the part of town that I sometimes hear referred to as the “Mexican” part of town, the area between Albany Street and the freeway. My block is on the edge of this area, and the transition is visible by the presence of traditional Latino markets and restaurants and the absence of most other types of stores.

This divide, like the poverty divide, is not simply a matter of situation, but of attitude. Most Idahoans, myself included, have seen and heard examples of racism. Though it’s a hard thing to collect statistics on, I am sure that minorities in Idaho experience racism on an all too regular basis. This kind of attitude, in connection with a negative attitude towards poverty, results in a hostile cultural mindset for the poor, and especially poor minorities, to overcome. Without doubt, this mindset works to keep those at the economic “bottom” from ever improving their situations.

These are the things I thought about when walking around my block today. The divide between the people living there was both visually and emotionally detectable. It’s a divide that has long been there, and will probably remain. My walks offer a valuable lesson in the structure of the American class system. They also teach an important lesson about my own role in this system. As a college student, I am considerably more advantaged than many, though I may live in a poor neighborhood. I have the opportunity for mobility, and someday I will have the chance to leave my neighborhood, possibly to do the same thing as my neighbors are doing, to renovate an old house. Many people in my neighborhood don’t, and won’t, have that luxury. As a result, I realize that I will need to consider carefully the impacts of my actions in the future, and I will need to remember the consequences of poverty, even if I am not always living in poverty myself. My walks and observations have been part of an important experience, a step towards a larger social consciousness. When I observe the changes on my block I see a scale model of the divide
between the poor and the rich, the white and the nonwhite, the haves and the have-nots, that have shaped, and continue to shape Caldwell, along with most other towns and cities across America. Perhaps knowing one’s place in the larger economic picture is not such a bad thing after all.