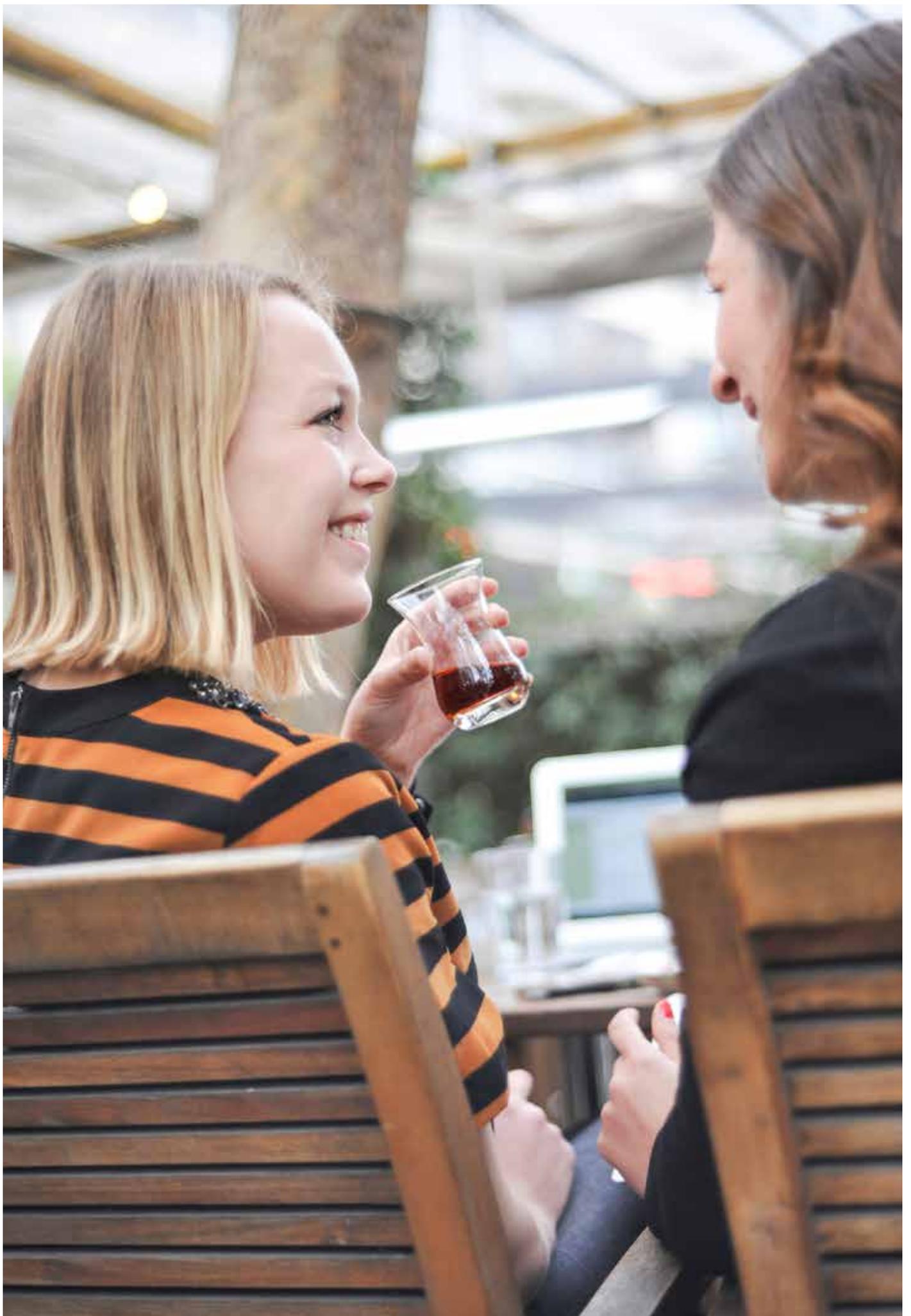


HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOURS?

INSPIRING
SOCIAL
CHANGE





INTRODUCTION

How well do you know your neighbours?

Enough to nod hello of a morning? To drop in for coffee, now and then? To help with shopping when it's icy underfoot? Perhaps you wouldn't recognise them at all.

Most of us live surrounded by other people. But many of us still feel lonely, especially as we grow older. And, as we age, more of us need some support, whether that's with everyday chores or in a crisis.

What if we felt closer to those we live nearest to? If we were ready to help each other – and could spot when someone needs support? What if we all simply decided to be better neighbours? What would that look like?

This is the story of one woman's bid to be a Good Neighbour. She asked herself: What can I do to make my neighbourhood a kinder place?

The Good Neighbour lives in the kind of home many of us do. She's passionate about helping others and that's at the heart of her working life. She works hard. Her personal life has its ups and downs. She has some great friends, but they don't all live close by. Most days, the people she sees are those who just happen to live next door.

She noticed how simple acts, like taking in a parcel, began to connect people around her. Could this lead to something richer? A neighbour's husband died. Could she help the widow through bereavement? People close to her struggled as they moved to the end of their lives. She believed there must be a better way.

The Good Neighbour didn't know what she might do or where she would end up, but she wanted to give it a go.

So JRF gave her a recorder and, from Easter Sunday to Halloween, she kept an audio-diary. Now we've written her observations up here.

This isn't a formal project. There was no budget and no plan, no objectives, no evaluation. It's one person working things out as she goes along.

We've changed the names and places to respect people's privacy. But the story is a real one, told from the heart.

It didn't always go quite as the Good Neighbour expected. Read on to find out what she discovered hidden in the small matters of everyday life.

I'D LIKE TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION, JUST HERE

Easter Sunday – seems a good day to start.

A kinder, more supportive neighbourhood – what can one person achieve?

It's been an idea of mine for a lot of years now, so let me see if I can explain it.

There's a feeling that we've forgotten some things we used to know a generation or two – or ten – ago, about being resilient and growing old. Our old age is being stolen from us.

Take my friend Bernie. We were good mates – he was probably 50 and I was 20 when we first met. He had no family, so we went from being friends to me accepting this tag of 'carer' because Bernie named me as next of kin. It gave me a place in the system and a voice.

What made the biggest impression on me is the fear that was there for Bernie as he got older. Not admitting what he couldn't do, coping, finding ways round... For instance, he was always so dapper. Then he stopped going to the barber's. His hair got longer and longer, scruffier and scruffier. I even suggested getting a barber to visit. We argued and –

eventually – he let me cut it myself. Only when I'd finished did he blurt out: "I will not have a barber come to my home! That means I will never go to the barber's again."

As he got older, I found myself passed from pillar to post, this professional to that. And that went through to deciding that I *couldn't* make things better, I was best just being his mate. And I was with him until he died ...

I went through something similar with my Mum and then my Dad. If you've been close to older people towards the end of life, it can feel like one crisis after another. We end up in a place of fear, defined by interventions, diagnosis, medicalisation, bouncing in and out of hospital. It breaks your heart.

Surely it can be better than this? Over the past ten years, I've been through anger, I've been through fighting, I've been through storytelling...

Now I want to discover: What would making it work well look like?

I'd like to be part of a solution just here, where I live.



THIS IS MY BLOCK

Let me describe where I live so you can get your bearings. There are 42 flats in separate blocks. It's a lovely spot, right next to the park.

Above me is Malcolm. When I moved in, he was definitely the playboy, money and girls clip-clopping up the stairs at 2 am, ringing bells to get in. Ha, but now there's a twist. My older neighbours are starting to care for Malcolm in a way, like mother or grandparent figures!

Other side, at the top are Alan and his daughter, who's a student.

Next floor down belongs to me and my husband. He's living in another town at the moment. That's part of my story too.

Opposite me are Bob and Valerie. And their dog. There's a whole community of dog walkers who meet in the park.

Below them, Jonathan and his wife. He's a keen runner; we don't see her much.

Next to them, Carol. In her 70s, single but has a gentleman friend. She's part-retired but manages a charity shop. She does all sorts of things – loves dancing especially.

On the ground floor is Jean. She's been here from the beginning. A keen sewer, watches Al-Jazeera TV to get a different perspective on the world.

Immediately below me, Barbara and Ray. And Ray died just a couple of months ago. They have a daughter, but she lives about 5 hours away.

So that's my block.

BEREAVEMENT DOES SHIFT THE WORLD FOR YOU

I'm looking at some magazines that Barbara has passed on to me. There's a sticky label on one: 'I don't know if there is anything in these magazines of interest, but thought I would let you see.' And that's from Barbara. She's a lovely neighbour.

Her husband died recently. And that whole thing of life after bereavement is with me right now. I'm in my fifties and I've been through it a few times myself, first Mum and then Dad. My beloved brother died suddenly too. It does shift the world for you.

So I think I'm going to start with Barbara and these magazines.

She's pointed out an article on how to make sure you get the best of your time with your GP. Then, there's magazines from the British Heart Foundation and Age UK. And they are very much about being well rather than illness. That's quite interesting to me.

Finally, there's a general magazine, saying 'Declutter your life!' I do think that's a big thing as we get older. We've got loads of stuff – we need to declutter.

So I'll read these and maybe that will open up the chance for me and Barbara to talk more about how older people stay well and independent.

WHERE DO WE GET OUR INFORMATION FROM?

You know how the best ideas come when you're washing up? So, it's Bank Holiday Monday, I'm listening to some jazz, Wynton Marsalis.

I was thinking about whether, as we get older, we become known to health services before we find ourselves in a crisis? So, the thought was, you know how the police come and talk about local crime and safety through Neighbourhood Watch? Maybe there could be an equivalent, where someone comes and talks about neighbourhood health.

All this does make me wonder: how do we make decisions about our lives as we get older. Where do we get the information that might help us?



“I KNOW THAT IF SHE ASKS FOR HELP, SHE REALLY NEEDS IT”

As part of some volunteering I do, I found myself in Accident and Emergency doing surveys. What was so interesting was the number of neighbours who were there, helping the person needing treatment. Just gorgeous affection and support between them.

One gentleman had had a fall. His neighbour had come in with him. Both were living in sheltered accommodation. He'd had a bump to his head, there'd been a lot of blood. He just wanted to go home. The charge nurse was really laying it on thick about the risks, as if he was a child. It wasn't a proper discussion, no questions about the actual situation at home. But his neighbour was very clear: yes, he did understand the risks and she would make sure the support staff knew what had happened.

The second example was two next-door neighbours. The patient was a small, sharp, witty lady. She described her neighbour as her “guardian angel”. And the neighbour was saying, “June never wants to go near doctors, so I know that if she asks for help, she really needs it.”

What I wanted to record here was these neighbours going the extra mile. Just a huge feeling of mutual support and care for each other.

IS THERE SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER ABOUT BEING NEIGHBOURS?

We have a Management Committee for our flats. It's supposed to look after communal maintenance, like the hallways and the gardens.

There's a big discussion about what our management fee pays for and what we do for ourselves. It's not really clear. Just one or two people have suddenly taken charge of something. One guy's doing loads on the garden. The committee chair does lots of practical jobs. But that doesn't really work either.

So I'm going to give that a bit more thought. And I wonder, could the Committee help with something much bigger in our blocks, about how we are neighbours to each other generally?

“I JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW THAT SOMEBODY'S GOT YOUR BACK”

This isn't going as I expected at all.

I thought this would be about me supporting other people. I'd been thinking of where I live and my immediate neighbours, I guess in the mode of: what can I do to be a good neighbour, particularly as we age and end our life?

So, I come back from a weekend with my husband in the town where he's living. We've been going through some ups and downs, and my lovely neighbour Barbara rang to see how I'd got on. Just that, her asking me how I was, was a real help.

But then, this is what really bowled me over. She was going away herself for a few days. And she left me this card with the key to her flat:

I'd feel much happier knowing you have this key, in case you'd like to have some quiet time on your own while I'm away. Just make yourself at home and help yourself to food and drink.

Such a gorgeous act of kindness. She said, “I just wanted you to know that somebody's got your back.”

She's only recently lost her own husband. It makes me think, who actually is the vulnerable one here?

SOMEHOW IT CREATED A SPACE WHERE PEOPLE COULD CHAT

Can I paint a picture? I've travelled in India a fair amount and within communities there you'll see a big shady tree. And there'll be seats around the tree. I think they call it chaupal. And people just gather – it's men, of course! – and chat.

What happened was, I spent one Sunday clearing out my garage. So, my car's backed out of the garage and I've got packing chests out, making a kind of seat. I'm in and out so the door's open.

And somehow it created a kind of public space without any timescales where people could come and chat.

First, my neighbour Valerie stopped on her way to the park with her dog.

Then, I'm sitting on one of the boxes sorting through some papers. Down comes Alan from upstairs and sits on another. He's got some worries at work and we ended up having a long conversation about things that are getting to him.

After he'd gone, Barbara called from her window to see if I'd like a cup of tea. She brought me one out, saying, "I saw you talking to Alan. I don't want to disturb you any more". But I'd already set up a little stepladder with a comfy cushion, so I said, "Have a seat". So we chatted as I drank my tea.

I'd come across an old letter from my Dad. He wrote it in 1995 but it was just on the button for some of my personal things right now. I was able to just touch on elements with Barbara. It was this gorgeous, gorgeous gift of my Dad's voice.

THEY HAVE TWO FUNCTIONS, ONE PERSONAL, ONE PUBLIC

Mid-morning, and as I'm walking out, in come Barbara and Valerie with a beautiful plant. It's yellow, that's all I can say. I know very little about gardening! But I was so struck by the way the light caught the little scene. I stopped, took a photograph and passed it on to them both.

They have two functions these plants, one personal, one public. Barbara bought some as a small memorial for Ray. But they brighten up a communal corner some of us walk past all the time.

It's like Jean's bench. She bought it in memory of her mum, who lived here too. But it's somewhere other people often sit. It wasn't planned but it does create a place where people can linger.

MAYBE IT'S ABOUT ME BEING CONNECTED TO WIDER THINGS?

I do have some neighbours that are close to me. But I guess when you're working hard and you're in and out, there isn't much by way of neighbourhood relationships.

As I've been thinking about what I'm trying to do, suddenly the idea comes to me of seeing it the other way round. It's also about me being more connected to my community. If I could find a way to do that, how lovely that would feel.

So that was the lovely, rich thought. The next step in this little story might be about me being connected to wider things.

LISTENING TO WHAT REALLY MATTERS

I had a meeting with the person running the local neighbourhood networks. They support people over 65.

She has such a strong view of old age as a gift. What struck me is, she has a lovely way of listening to what really matters to the person. Instead of saying, right, we've got the day centre, she has this gorgeous way of trying to match the person to what might really help them stay well and independent.

She also has this sense that their work doesn't just benefit the person with a need, but also the person who gives. So, there's an interplay between the person who's receiving the care and the person who volunteers to give it.

And that's the kicker.

THOSE FEW WORDS OPENED UP SUCH A CONVERSATION

I've had a friend, Cath, staying over. As we were coming in, we bumped into Barbara's daughter parking up. It was maybe 9.30pm. She'd just driven 5 hours. It had been a tough journey, she said. So I asked, "Do you fancy a glass of wine, Sue?" "Ooh, yes!" she said. It just felt like she needed a boost. So Cath and I went upstairs and Sue went to pick up her mum.

Then the phone rang. It was Barbara, and she said, "But I'm in my dressing gown!" And I said, "Good, you're really welcome in your dressing gown, I'll put mine on!" After I put the phone down, I thought, hmm, does she really want to come? So I took two wineglasses and a bottle and started downstairs. But there were Sue and her mum already on their way up.

And it was just lovely. Cath knew that Barbara's husband died a couple of months ago and just said to Barbara, just naturally, "I'm sorry for your loss". And those few words opened up such a conversation. Barbara talked about the days around Ray's death and Sue was able to be kind of in and out of the conversation.

She said she'd had quite a weepy journey, had Sue. She's been going through some letters that her grandfather wrote to her dad. So, yeah, I guess you can picture a lovely moment. They stayed around half an hour while I cooked me and Cath a meal.

It was just a little piece of magic.

IS MOVING NEAR TO FAMILY ALWAYS THE BEST THING?

There's another interesting thread for me, and that's about where people choose to live when they retire.

Barbara and Ray were looking to move near Sue, but then Ray died. A couple in another block chose to retire here, from a couple of hours away. One son lives nearby, but they were very clear that they needed to live somewhere they would be content, even if he moved on. They love the park, and think it's a beautiful spot.

I have friends who've moved halfway across the country to be near their children, but have ended up feeling so isolated, away from their friends and familiar places.

Is moving near to children always the best thing to do as we get older? I would love to find a way where we can have more honest conversations about this. Children can be a great support. But parents don't want to be parented by their children!



I WAS JUST THE RIGHT PERSON AT THE RIGHT TIME

We have a communal storeroom for our block, but it's been a bit of a mess. Off his own bat, Alan did something about it. Not just a little thing. He drilled holes and put up industrial strength hooks to hold the various garden tools. I love that he had the courage just to get on with it. He does coach a rugby team; maybe that helps with his 'just get it done' attitude!

When I was sorting out my garage, Alan sat and talked for quite a while about problems at work. It was one of those moments of real neighbourliness: I was just the right person at the right time.

I know that he found what I said a real help and it changed his approach. Later I got a text from him saying, "I'd like a quick chat when you have a minute. Just to say thank you for your help and advice."

HOW COULD WE CELEBRATE THE SPACE WE SHARE?

I mentioned earlier that I've been thinking about what our Management Committee could do to help neighbourliness. A long time ago, I chaired the Committee. A couple of neighbours are keen for me to take it on again.

So I've been thinking more about how it works. It feels like a lost opportunity. At times, a formal structure actually hinders neighbourliness. And sometimes, individual interests can take precedence over common good.

I wonder, is the legal vehicle for managing maintenance one thing and the inhabitants of the 42 flats sharing a space a totally separate thing?

We're a real mix of people and generations. Could we create an opportunity to imagine something together? For me, the future is intergenerational. Otherwise, where's the grit, the feistiness, the colour in our lives that we need to take with us as we get older?

One thing we have done is put together a welcome pack for people moving in. I'd like to have a list of 'emergency contacts and preferences' for small groups of flats. In the past, people would have known these things. Now maybe we need something written down. Or – going back to that Neighbourhood Healthwatch idea I had earlier – could we run 'Ann Summers' style parties?!... What I mean is something with that kind of playfulness but focused on 'what to do in a crisis' so people know what help's available close by.

Or maybe just a summer garden party to bring us all together to say hello and celebrate the space we share?

IT WAS JUST A NICE LITTLE MOMENT

Ray taught French so he and Barbara spent a lot of time in France. As my husband and I are planning a tour of Normandy and Brittany, Barbara and I set an evening date so I could pick her brains. But Barbara got talking to Carol and Carol ended up coming along too.

There's a nice little habit among us of putting notes on each other's door. So I got this one from Barbara, saying 'Not quite as we planned, but Carol would like to join us for our meal this evening. Sorry, I told her that you wanted to talk about France. We can always have a later rendezvous on our own soon.'

I just loved the card and, as it turned out, it was a nice meal for three. Barbara had some music on, she opened a bottle of wine, and after an hour and a half or so, Carol went and did her own thing. Barbara and I got all our maps out and carried on. It was just a nice little moment.

I'M BUMPING INTO ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE

I'm restoring an old campervan. I've even rented a separate workshop for it. It belonged to my beloved brother. He was such a good mate. And at 54 he suddenly died.

After he died, I decided to do up his battered VW. It's a kind of design/engineering project but it's also a labour of love. There's no great plan – it's all a bit quirky. I guess it does relate to grief and, yeah, I can't really begin to describe that...

But it's causing me to bump into all sorts of people. A friend suggested I make a note of the characters who've popped into my life as a result. At the last count, it's around 50 people, so many of them keen to help with advice or practical expertise or spare parts.

We overestimate the job that money does. It's like there is the money economy and a 'real economy' of relationships and dues. In this 'real economy', we are making constant transactions, all the time, but these are never tracked.

IT'S THE SAME THEME, I GUESS, OF STEPPING OUTSIDE

I've mentioned Jean's bench. She brings her papers out and sits reading. Other people use it too. It means we bump into each other and conversations take place.

So, mid-morning, I'm heading out to the car, two-hour drive ahead. And a neighbour I don't know is sitting on one of the communal benches. This one's not used often. It's in the middle of a lawn so I think people feel a bit exposed.

Anyway, I didn't have much time, but I chose to walk across. I didn't know her name, but now I do, it's Julie. And Julie was so pleased that I went over and said hello. "Oh, I live in the next block," she said. "Everybody knows my husband, Mike. He goes outside to smoke."

THINGS PAUSE AND WE JUST GET ON WITH OUR LIVES

Back from a short break and I've been thinking about this question: what can one person do?

The reason is that I'm finding the days go by with nothing in particular that I can think of. Things pause and we just get on with our lives.

I'm not sure, am I building neighbourhood or not?



Now, I'm not recommending smoking! But it's the same theme, I guess, of stepping outside. One idea I had was looking at the layout of the garden. Could we make more communal spaces where we could bump into each other more easily?

SOMETIMES YOU JUST WANT TO HUNKER DOWN

Today's been a pretty bad day for me. I even drew all the blinds. And the thing I want to record is that sometimes you just want to hunker down into your cocoon.

Barbara rang yesterday. She wants to change the flowers on the communal staircase. She thought I might enjoy helping, and I would.

So I said, "I'm glad that you rang, and I would enjoy doing that but it might be a few days before, you know, I feel up to it."

I was pleased that I explained just briefly that I would like to do it, but just not that particular day.

I think what I wanted to capture is, it's all very well this feeling neighbourly when you're in a good place, but when some horrible things have happened you really don't want to talk to anybody. And it's somehow being able to have the honesty to do that.



IT WAS A VERY BIG CAKE!

Yesterday was my birthday and a friend baked me a chocolate cake.

And it was a very big cake! So, I thought I would chop it nicely into big chunks and give it away to my neighbours.

So I went from door to door with my cake. Which felt a lovely thing to do.

MY NEIGHBOURS TURNED UP TO SUPPORT ME

I'm working on a pilot Patient Liaison Service at the local GP practice.

So, we had our first drop-in session. Two of my neighbours came along to support me. It means, too, that I get their point of view about the service and they find out more about it for themselves.

My colleague was really struck that my neighbours turned up to support me. I think Barbara and Carol enjoyed it very much. And it was an excuse for the two of them to meet for coffee.

Then, when I got home, there was a little gift from Barbara. And what I love is, it was just one packet of my favourite biscuits and a jar of homemade jam.

There's something about making your own things. You've got something you can easily give away at very little cost to you but it can mean so much.

WHAT MAKES FRIENDS DIFFERENT FROM NEIGHBOURS?

A mate from university came to visit. It was one of those lovely days where time just meanders. We ate a little, chatted, then headed off for a walk on the hills and got very wet.

I've been thinking about the difference between neighbours and friends. Neighbours are physically close to me all the time and I've become close to some emotionally. Then I have some really good mates from past times. I may not see them often but they are really precious to me.

But we can't always speak our truth to families or friends. Sometimes, they feel just too close or entwined in our lives. I wonder if that slight distance sometimes allows us to be more honest with a neighbour we can trust. Like Alan telling me about his problems at work.

WITH NEIGHBOURS, YOU NEED TIME

Barbara rang to say that she'd got the new flowers for the stairs. Would I still like to arrange them with her? I was very pleased she rang.

We agreed she would call on Saturday once she was up and about. So, a pleasant Saturday morning, quarter to ten, the phone rings, Barbara saying, "I'm up, pop down whenever you like". And I loved the relaxed and easy way of being together. I said I'd be there within the hour. Actually it was a bit longer. And that's a bit strange for me. At work, you commit to a time, you make promises, you're there on the nose. But with neighbours, you need time to just bump into each other, have the casual conversations.

We spent a lovely couple of hours. We sat at Barbara's kitchen table, laying out the flowers. We chatted about Barbara coming to the drop-in session on Monday. And that easy

and relaxed time led to us having quite a long discussion about how we need to adapt as we get older.

We talked about how the vases we were using had been in a high cupboard. Barbara's granddaughter, Natalie, is due to visit soon. So we played with this idea: maybe have a little notebook and think in advance what you need to do. Instead of climbing on steps (which you're not supposed to do!), you could make an entry in your book. Then, when Natalie comes you'd have a list of various things you could ask her to help with.

A LITTLE RAY OF SUNSHINE TO START MY DAY

Sometimes nothing much happens.

I'd been working at home for a few days. They've been grey days, but I did walk round the park.

I didn't really bump into any of my neighbours for three days.

On the fourth day, as I was leaving for work first thing, there was a knock from the window above. There was Carol in her dressing gown, just a big, beaming smile and waving at me.

And it was a little ray of sunshine to start my day.



I'M RECORDING THINGS THAT ARE USUALLY HIDDEN

A few months into this, and I'm just reflecting a little and wondering where we're headed.

I had hoped that something might have emerged by now.

I guess most of us round here are good neighbours to each other. We generally keep ourselves to ourselves but also bump into each other and do friendly things like the ones I've talked about here. It just sort of feels as if there's an intention for us to be neighbourly.

But, if I'm honest, there's a sense of frustration for me in – maybe this is all it can be? Do I need to think a bit more clearly about what exactly do I have in mind?

Thinking back, though, to what first started me on this idea, it was about things that are hard to measure – informal, personal things.

About how we can feel more confident to just be kinder to each other.

We've come to believe that funders have the solutions. But it's all being done to us. There's so much more we can do to change our approach to ageing. Funding's all money and specifications and commissioners. Neighbourliness is about the complex and subtle – and that can never, ever be written into a specification. Relationships aren't things we can write an objective plan for.

So I'm going to just carry on. Does it even matter that I can't measure or structure what I'm doing? It's like dipping a glass-bottomed bucket into a stream and just seeing what's going on in there.

I am putting onto this recorder things that are usually hidden.

HE LOOKS A BIT SEVERE, BUT HE'S EASY TO TALK TO

I arranged to meet a mum and her son at my workshop. He's just beginning vehicle maintenance and was thrilled to have a look at my campervan. So Sunday, we spent a lovely afternoon poring over the wiring.

Coming home, I bumped into another neighbour, Jonathan. He's an incredibly keen runner. He's often in his garage, on a treadmill he keeps there, so we tend to just nod rather than chat. But today he happened to have his car outside, so that was a nice prompt for me to go over.

He was packing his car. His wife's mum died, over a year ago now, and they were going over to clear the house.

So we talked about lives ending and clearing things out. He looks quite... 'severe' – is that the word? But he's very easy to talk to. And, even though we were talking about those tricky subjects, we had a comfortable – even playful – conversation.

“I'M GETTING OLD BUT I DO HAVE MY USES!”

Later that day, I'm up in the flat and I can hear Alan and Bob bantering outside. So I look out of the window. And it was just a pleasure to hear them chatting. Of course, it's men so it tends to be practical things. That's one of the things I enjoy, bantering with the men about practical things. Women – I guess older women in particular – do tend to talk in a different way.

I was intrigued as to what it was that Bob had lent Alan. Turns out it was an automatic tyre pressure pumper-upper – I'm sure there's a more technical term! When Alan was commenting on what a great help it was, something Bob said struck me. His phrase was, “Yep, I'm getting old but I do have my uses!”

And I just want to reflect on that, being useful.

Barbara is still dropping off magazines. This time, she's included Age UK's Love Later Life. It's really upbeat and strong. It's made me think I should sign up to it. But it did strike me

it's all about older people doing what I'd call little 'pootling about' projects.

If I think of my Mum and Dad, well, they both worked in the caring professions. And one of the things they were able to do was to bring those skills and that passion through into their retirement.

Must we leave behind all those skills and energies and just pootle? Is there a way to truly tap into all the strengths that we had during our working lives?

Interestingly, the Patient Forum at my GP practice is talking about doing just that, bringing the skills that people had in their past lives into the work in the practice. I like that.

With age we become less resilient, loss becomes our reality. We need to keep that sense of being fruitful, of being a fully flexible human being. It needs more than dropping in for tea and a chat in some community hall!

HOW MUCH OF YOUR BUSINESS DO YOU TELL PEOPLE?

Back home early from our holiday in France. Some tough things happened and everything went a bit pear-shaped. Today I spoke to my next-door neighbour, Valerie. Just to update her, so she knows why she's not seeing me. And my other close neighbour, Barbara, rang to see how I was.

What's the point of this story? Well, it's really about how much of your business people know. There's this tension between being close to your neighbour versus your neighbours knowing all your personal life.

When we shut our front door, it's our private, personal place. Sometimes we need to avoid our neighbours. That's a judgement we all have to make. I sometimes think we've lost the confidence to do this – so end up not connecting at all.

THE REAL RISK IS YOU BECOME ISOLATED

I was coming home a few days later. There was Jean, sitting on her bench, doing the crossword. I stopped and we had a good chat.

She's had a very interesting life. But she can keep you talking. Sometimes people do walk the other way to avoid that.

What if we could all be more honest? What if it was OK to move away – politely – from a neighbour when we didn't have the time or the inclination to talk? Wouldn't finding the right words to do this be better than going out of our way to avoid people?

We do perceive a risk in getting entangled with other people's lives. But that's not the real risk. The real risk is that you become isolated yourself.

WE DON'T EVEN CALL NOW, WE TEXT

Barbara phoned and said, "Just to let you know, I've left some scones outside the door". And I said, "You can knock any time, Barbara". "Yes," she said, "I know but I didn't want to disturb you."

After I put the phone down, I thought, this is one of those critical moments. We've all got into a habit of not disturbing each other. We don't even call people now, do we? We text them to say, is it a good time? And before you know it we end up with 20 texts instead of a quick and lovely phone call. It seems to me that some of the technology is adding to our isolation.

So I went downstairs, knocked on Barbara's door and said, "I'm just coming to give you a hug, 'cos I want you to remember, I meant

what I said, you're welcome to knock any time." So we hugged. Then I said, "I think we know each other well enough that if it wasn't a good time I would feel free to say to you, you know what, it's just a tough place right now."

I don't know, it just felt like an important exchange.

And the scones were delicious!

THE NEIGHBOURS DECIDED JUST TO GET IT DONE

Going back a little, I arrived home from holiday to the smell of wet paint through our common hallway. Later that evening, there was a knock on the door and it was Malcolm from upstairs. We got fed up of waiting for the management committee to sort the decorating out, he said. The neighbours had decided just to get it all done. If I was comfortable, would I chip in a small amount to the cost? Which, of course, I did.

So, this is just a little something about neighbours collaborating, just deciding to get something done together, for all of our benefit.

IF IT WAS JUST ME, WOULD I HAVE DONE THAT?

I was collecting shoes from the menders and I noticed a poster in the window. It's advertising an evening of World War 1 poetry. Straightaway I thought of a lady I met recently through my work on the Patient Liaison pilot. She's 85, but she can still recite WW1 poetry by heart. And with such resonance.

So, on spec, I called round with a flyer, even though I was 'off-duty'. And this magic little moment was created, she just felt cared for.

But it also just warmed my heart to this idea of neighbourhood. Somehow having the Patient Liaison role entitles me to knock on somebody's door. If it was just me being me, would I really have done that? Probably not.

HOW GREAT THAT NEIGHBOURS JUST LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER

A story from a friend in a different neighbourhood. A neighbour called, saying another neighbour's door seemed to be half open, could my friend and her husband come and have a look? So three of them gently knocked on this neighbour's door, no answer, door half open, stepped inside, lights off, called her name, no answer.

But then, she came down the stairs. She'd been reading a bedside story to her grandson who was staying over. But she was so touched and moved by the care of her neighbours. She's been talking about it since.

This reminded me of staying with another friend recently. She's in her late 70s and her husband died about a year and a half ago.

In a morning, although she sleeps at the back of the house, she opens her curtains at the front just so the neighbours know she is up.

How great that neighbours just look out for each other without it demanding anything much of them.

I JUST WISH THERE WAS A DIFFERENT WAY

My neighbour Jean is really coming towards the end of her life. Her best friend lives a little distance away, but we neighbours are supporting her. One or two of us know what the code is on the door. Valerie called in yesterday. And they ended up ringing Jean's doctor, and Jean was carted off to Accident and Emergency. We know how it will end, she'll be stuck on a hospital ward and it will not be good.

I just wish there was a different way.

IT REALLY WOKE ME UP TO THE WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD

The local community association has put on a series of arts and cultural events. So I went down to the local pub for beer and poetry one Saturday afternoon. And in the garden of the library, there's a sculptor doing amazing work with old car parts. It struck me he might be interested in my campervan project. He lives just nearby, so I'm going to link in with him.

During that week, there were so many different events. And it really did wake me up to the wider as well as the immediate neighbourhood.

A BEAUTIFUL MOMENT OF SADNESS AND LAUGHTER

My final story is from *All Hallows Even*. I like to use its old name!

I was going to visit my goddaughter and her children. And I had a marvellous, black-velvet witch's hat with purple trim, and long gloves with spiders, and a black-and-blue wig.

On my way out, I thought I would brighten up my neighbour's day so I knocked on the door and we had a moment of real laughter.

But it turned out that, in that moment, Barbara was also a little bit sad. Her husband, Ray, died in January. I encouraged her to speak. And we literally just stood at her doorstep and it was a beautiful moment of sadness and laughter.

Then later I found a poem that just seemed to echo her sadness in that moment. So I am going to write it up and I think I'll call in and maybe even read it to her.

And that's where my diary comes to an end.



So, what could you do?

Trying to be a better neighbour has never felt like hard work. I just spent six months being more aware. I simply recorded things, and recording made me notice.

When I started this diary, I was thinking about how I could support my older neighbours. One thing I wasn't expecting was to find that being a good neighbour is as much about receiving as giving. When I've been having a bad time, my older neighbours have been there for me. Reaching out to support me has, I think, helped Barbara ease the pain of Ray's death. It's just been a time when we've fitted together.

I did have a bit of a wobble halfway through. Was I actually changing anything? But I think I was trying to pin down something that has to be unplanned, spontaneous. In the end, I just did some things that came naturally.

If you asked me to sum up what I've learnt from this, I'd say, it's that being a good neighbour is essential to a good life. Otherwise, every time we step out of our front door, we're blocking other people out of our lives. I so believe neighbourliness could make life better every day for all of us. And then, even if a crisis comes, we're ready.

I'd love this diary to show what's possible just by doing things quietly. These are some of the questions that helped me:

- ***We're always in such a rush. How can we make it normal again, just taking the time to speak to our neighbours?***
- ***What difference can I make, just by doing little things?***
- ***I still need my own space sometimes. How can I lay down some rules to do that without shutting people out altogether?***

You might think of others, but there's really only one to start with. What could you do to be a better neighbour?

Find out more

This project is part of the JRF's programme on 'Risk, Trust and Relationships'. For more information, go to www.jrf.org.uk

Charity registration number: 210169



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Photos on pages 1, 4 and 19 courtesy of Holger Mohaupt.
The Good Neighbour's audio-diary was transcribed, edited and written up by freelance writer, Sharon Telfer.