

Neighboring, Abundance Mindset, Intentionality and Reconciliation in Ord and Valley County

By David Iaquinta

Introduction

Shakespeare's Romeo complains *"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."* In this comment, he is asserting that to denote a thing is independent of the thing itself, that the characteristics of a thing exist independently from the beholder. Yet, the well repeated aphorism says, *"If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?"* suggests something quite different. This often frivolously asked but serious question raises the issue of the relationship between a thing and its perceiver. The conundrum raised here may seem inappropriate to the task at hand, but it is indeed central to understanding both the story of Ord and our telling of it.



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It turns out that in the social world we mostly don't see things as they are in their own terms. By naming them we prefigure how we will see them, judge them, and give them meaning. While always true, it is particularly evident in small communities where judgements rendered about individuals can take root such that despite their veracity, they become widespread "known truths" that direct local institutions and restrict the opportunities and life experiences of individuals. When they converge on a whole category of people they solidify as stereotypes. Sociologists explain this situation with labeling theory, wherein the response to a behavior is not evaluated in terms of the behavior itself, but rather in terms of the status characteristics of the person doing it.

The Saints and Roughnecks

In his classic study *The Saints and Roughnecks*, William Chambliss observed and described the behaviors of two groups of teenage boys in a small community. While the boys who were from good families,

"...were constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft and vandalism ... not one was officially arrested for any misdeed during the two years" Chambliss observed.

Rather, parents and community officials referred to their behavior as simply,

"sowing their wild oats ...[and the] ... townspeople never perceived the Saints' high level of delinquency. The Saints were good boys who just went in for an occasional prank. After all, they were well dressed, well-mannered and had nice cars."

A second group of boys were a different story. The Roughnecks,

“were the same age ... engaged in an equal amount of wild-oat sowing, yet everyone agreed that the not-so-well-dressed, not-so-well-mannered, not-so-rich boys were heading for trouble.”

[Townsppeople would say,] *“You can see the gang members at the drugstore night after night, leaning against the storefront (sometimes drunk) or slouching around inside ... probably stealing old Mr. Wall blind.”*

Both groups were engaged in fundamentally the same behaviors but were judged, labeled, and treated differently leading to serious and divergent path-determinant outcomes in their lives. For example, as Chambliss writes,

“In the eyes of the police and school officials, a boy who drinks in an alley and stands intoxicated on the street corner is committing a more serious offense than is a boy who drinks to inebriation in a nightclub or a tavern and drives around afterwards in a car.”

Clearly, these boys, unlike Romeo's rose, did not *“smell just as sweet.”* The Roughnecks were subjected to **perceptual bias** based on their appearance, visibility, and low community status; they were judged and labeled as delinquents and subsequently treated more harshly by authorities. Yet, the same and worse transgressions by the Saints were viewed as tolerable.

In his study Chambliss lays the fault with the social class system wherein the dress and demeanor characteristic of differing social classes prefigures the judgement of their behavior as good or bad not in terms of the behavior itself but in terms of their social class. Thinking about small rural communities like Ord we might more characteristically refer to the Roughnecks as kids from the *“wrong side of the tracks.”* This notion might derive from a lower social class status, some ethnic minority status, views about the family in which the individual was raised, religion, race or some other status characteristic that is viewed with suspicion, prejudice, and disdain by the dominant power structure of the community. No community is immune from such forces though the context of what is considered a deviant status will vary across communities.

This elaboration of Chambliss's research is necessary to put in perspective the challenges Ord has faced and surmounted and the direction its future will take. Much of our description of Ord may seem idyllic, yet we heard about many challenges – large and small – that confronted both the community and individuals attempting to introduce change.

The fact that we have refrained from sharing them in detail is intentional, not to downplay their importance nor to deceive the reader, but because telling them in first person narrative would misguide the reader as to what is important about Ord and its success. Ord is like any other community in having such challenges, but they have been determined to tell their story in terms of the future they desire rather than as a vehicle to settle scores. It is important for us to honor their vision of who they wish to become while still acknowledging the reality of who they have been at times. Their progress has not been without considerable bravery and cost to the individuals involved, but those individuals have been

resolute in not allowing their challenges, defeats, and pain to define them or to define their course as a community.

The Future Becomes More Important than the Past.

We have heard stories of individuals who actively resisted and intentionally chose to ignore the labels applied to young men with ambition who were from the *wrong side of the tracks*. Rather leaders in Ord reached out to provide support as a community, enabling these young people to become successful entrepreneurs. We have heard stories of women who faced old stereotypes and discouragements who were likewise provided community support and consequently able to rise to positions of authority and business ownership. It is important to recognize that these stories reflect the tenacity of the individuals themselves, but more importantly they reflect a core in the community that has been committed to ensuring opportunity, embracing entrepreneurial goals and individual worth independent of status characteristics that might otherwise prefigure the failure of talented people. This support has been **intentional**, assertive, and resilient over more than 20 years. And, this support has weathered serious large-scale economic hardships (agriculture crisis), community division over institutional change (hospital crisis), community investor crisis (ethanol plant and closing of Shopko) and political blowback (early confrontations with the Posse Comitatus). These were the kinds of crises that often break a community, derail the good intentions of individuals, and exacerbate the trends of economic decline, population loss, and community self-hate in a community, but not in Ord.

We think that the success in Ord is found in a resolute attitude of **reconciliation** lodged in the welfare of the community. This reconciliation takes the form of constructing a narrative of who individuals want to be as individuals and as a community. Some might look at the disinclination of community leaders to talk about their past tribulations as a denial of the past or as a public relations artifice. Such a judgement would be completely in error. Every individual we spoke with was both able and willing to be brutally honest about their experiences, including those that were painful, unflattering and perhaps would reflect poorly on them. Their honesty, however, was matched by a commitment to write their own narrative as a means to move toward their **vision of an abundance community**. Implicitly, they have recognized that the stories we tell about ourselves is in a large part who we become, and this is as true for a community as an individual. They quite simply put the community interests in front of their own, refusing to dwell on retribution, vindication, or a hurtful past. Instead, they have stayed focused on willing their future into being by constructing a narrative that does not revisit old battles but stays fixed on future possibilities. This comes through with strong conviction in the narratives of Bob Stowall, Gaylord Boilesen, Nancy Glaubke, Caleb Pollard, Tanner and Jeana Hackel and many others. It is more than a simple belief that they can achieve their goals. It is potency – manifest as optimism and an abundance mindset – of their social/community integration that their belief is well placed and shared in large part by the core of the community.

The resilience and abundance mindset seem to have arisen in turn from an older cultural imperative, **neighboring**. Historically, survival in sparsely populated rural areas was often difficult and the uncertainty that comes with hardship in the face of natural calamities and intergroup hostilities. Neighboring emerged culturally as a normative expectation to render aid to others in the community in the face of such calamities despite any preexisting hard feelings or conflicts. True neighboring in this form is not just about the niceties of sharing iced tea over home baked bread. It is about a focus on the long-term corporate (i.e., community) interests as central to one's own well-being and success. As Bob Stowell likes to say,

"We all do better when we all do better."

This is a truly embracing view of entrepreneurship that leads to community development. It is far more than simple boosterism. It is deeply rooted in the underlying culture and the fiber of individuals themselves and the future they define into being through their actions and commitment. It is the summative outcome of many individual intentional decisions that reflect the truth that these people have chosen to make "place matter".

That said, it is an open question as to how the future will unfold for this community. How will the inspirational leadership of an older cohort transition forward to new cohorts? How will they adapt to changing demographics in their small community? There is good reason to be optimistic on the former question given the narratives we have captured among the growing number of younger entrepreneurs and leaders in the community. There is also reason to be hopeful given the intentionality with which the SVLA self-development approach has been introduced into the school system with Ord's children.

But the second question is thornier. Many of our respondents have talked variously about the need to attract "new blood," "skilled workers" and "help". These are three quite different types of people. Ord has had good success with the first two and the strategies they have used have been built on attracting "people like themselves". They have been able to attract people who have roots in the Ord area and people who have rural roots in other areas. Consequently, the people they have attracted have also looked like current residents in terms of characteristics that don't activate the perceptual bias that Chambliss described with respect to the Roughnecks and implicit to the question of whether the tree falling in the forest makes a sound.

For Ord, situated in rural central Nebraska, the demographics of attracting help is connected to likely increasing the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of the community. So, the open question is whether the abundance mindset of this community can surmount the residual elements in the community and culture to see such change as an erosion of identity rather than as a cup half full. We are hopeful that this will be the case, but we also recognize that such change will not occur without some conflict, pain, and community self-examination. It will take work. It will take a dogged commitment to retaining an abundance mindset. It will take a continuation of seeing challenge as an opportunity. It will take an

expanding body of leadership to resist perceptual bias as things on the ground change. It will take intentionality to keep from shifting to a negative spiral that stifles creativity, trust-building, shared community interest and an open hand up.

Conclusion

Tupelo, Mississippi was able to accomplish this to a large extent in the face of more than a hundred years of racial antagonism and rigid town and country divisions; so, it is possible. Ord and Valley County have built a platform for the same kind of continued success, but much will depend on the residents themselves and their continued ability to reach out and accept assistance from outside resources that will support them in this effort. Organizations such as the Nebraska Community Foundation and others have been instrumental in their twenty years of success, but it will be the agency of individuals in the community that will ultimately determine the outcome.

About David Iaquinta

David is a college professor with Nebraska Wesleyan University. He is a very special thinker and has joined the e2 team to support our Ord story capture work. David has traveled the world including work with the United Nations World Food Organization and time studying food systems in Tasmania (e.g., Australia) with his wife Pam. Dave's perspective as a sociologist has enriched our work from an academic foundation and human behavior perspective. David calls Lincoln, Nebraska home.

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