

Grandma McCann's neighborhood: Hungering for community and care

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I was reared just a few miles from the University of Chicago on the city's South Side. As a kid riding past, I was certain that its buildings were haunted. After all, there were gargoyles clinging to the edge of every Gothic building, and where there are gargoyles, there must be vampires. It would be many years before I entered those haunted classrooms to study.

I lived in Morgan Park, one of those "old-fashioned" neighborhoods common throughout America during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. I was born into an extended family network in that village. My grandparents were Mississippi migrants who found their way to the broad-shouldered city of Chicago after the Depression. They lived for years in the inner city until my grandmother Martha and her sister purchased a pair of two-story wood frame houses next door to each other at 118th and Watkins, one block west of Vincennes Avenue, the dividing line between white and black blue-collar Chicago.

In our extended family, most of the men were married, and divorce was a rare and terrifying word. As some of the couples told me, "Look, we survived Jim Crow and sharecropping in the South, and we've survived poverty and racism Chicago-style. We're not about to let anything destroy our families now." They all went to church, worked hard and enjoyed good relations with Jews, Italians, Irish, Eastern Europeans and Mexicans with whom they interacted.

Our household always felt crowded. Two of Grandma Martha McCann's six sons, two of her daughters (one of them my mother) plus my father all lived together. That's six adults. Nearly every day one or more of my other uncles came by to visit or eat. My dad worked over 35 years at the Campbell Soup Company plant on Chicago's West Side.

Grandma was a church mother and home missionary at the St. Paul Church of God in Christ. She utilized her consummate culinary skills to do ministry throughout the

city. I remember her loading my three brothers and me into our rickety 1956 green and white Chevy to drive into the inner city delivering pots of collard greens and corn bread. We hated having to ride that far in a non-air-conditioned car (except for the holes in the floorboard), even with the award of a Tastee-Freez soft ice cream on the way home. But we always felt gratified when people greeted my grandmother with shouts of joy. We saw little kids who lived in squalor and despair in these ghetto buildings—buildings our family had left behind just years earlier. Grandma did not forget the people she'd left behind. Now she had a garden and could give them fresh produce. This was the first generation of black people who had no land, she said, and they'd lost touch with the therapy of gardening and were forced to eat vegetables packed in aluminum cans.

Another memory is of the day a group of boys from outside our neighborhood showed up to visit a local girl. Several of the local boys gathered to prevent the visit and end the relationship. As their voices escalated, neighbors gathered to observe the muscle-bound urban gladiators. Suddenly, before a blow was thrown, my grandmother ran into the street with her apron flying and stood in between the youths. She reminded them that she knew their mothers. "How would your mother feel if she heard that one of you was shot over nothing? I had sons in the army who were shot, and there's nothing like a mother hearing those words. You think about that." Amazingly, these tough boys from the hood looked at her, looked at each other and walked away.

During the unbearable summers, we screened in our front porch so we could sleep there nights. During the day the "church ladies" would come over to visit and break bread. So did my uncles' friends, affectionately called the "winos," who came for fried chicken, yams, collard greens and peach cobbler. Sometimes all of them would gather on the porch at the same time—guys who reeked of cheap wine and talked too loud next to the "praying women," heavily perfumed and decked out in starched white dresses and nurses' shoes. That was my beloved village.

When I return to the neighborhood today, and as I survey black communities scattered across America, I do so through the eyes of my departed grandmother, and I feel pain. I also feel hope. The African-American communities that I know best are facing serious challenges when it comes to providing children with the benefit of being reared in households with their married parents who ensure that they show up on the first day of school ready to learn and achieve, and with the psychological and social foundations for building moral character.

I long for others to have the experience of family and community that I've known, and memories that sustain them—memories like Grandma's fried chicken and lemonade, which were sacraments shared by a motley crowd hungering for community and care. Her home visits, her street courage and her hospitality demonstrated to me the power and the surprising possibilities that are contained within the religion of Jesus.