

Time to Reassert Order

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
October 2019

We need reform or removal of undesirables



What is it that makes a community great? Besides the caliber of your immediate neighbors, you probably count safety and security, and the quality of public amenities and spaces. Can you walk the neighborhood, experience great parks, libraries, and public spaces?

The health of our public sphere -- which includes parks, libraries, and public spaces -- is directly dependent on the maintenance of public order. That's because no matter how beautiful a park is or how much public money is poured into it, say, in the form of a beautiful playground or new community center (take that, Miami Shores!), if the place has a dangerous reputation, people will actively avoid it.

A recent bicycle ride through Biscayne Shores and Gardens Park, at NE 116th Street and Biscayne Blvd (tucked behind the Advance Auto Parts store) in unincorporated Miami-Dade, brought this point home for me. During various jaunts through the park, I've seen a number of homeless people sleeping on the park benches and a suspicious crowd of heavily tattooed, glassy-eyed, mean-looking adults who glared at me as though I was interrupting what I assume to be some kind of illegality.

What I didn't see were families or children or anyone else enjoying the park. The suspicious crowd wasn't so much enjoying the park as *occupying* it.

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And the unfortunate reality is that many of our public spheres have been “discovered” by...may I say it without being labeled a Miami Shores snob?...threatening and unpleasant people, be they the criminal element or homeless. A stroll through a park should be a pleasant endeavor, not an act of courage.

Our public libraries are another problem. Miami-Dade’s main library in downtown Miami is a natural magnet for a significant homeless population. The homeless understandably seek shelter in the library, but they undeniably also bring oddball behaviors and...err...odors that turn off the broader public. As a frequent visitor to the main library (I hold library cards to both the Miami-Dade and Miami Shores library systems), I try to keep my trips brief and avoid a visit to the men’s room.

The real issue here is that if these public amenities, be they parks or libraries, become undesirable, then the broader public will abandon them. The public will not only stop patronizing them but also stop using their tax dollars to support them.

Without public order, public spaces are devalued, and a downward cycle of neglect and deterioration sets in. Aggressive panhandling, public drinking, excessive noise, profanity, and casual drug selling -- all these give residents the impression that nobody cares. These are by no means “victimless crimes.” The result is that we become anxious, pessimistic, civically alienated, and prone to flee cities.

A contrast can be witnessed in the parks of Miami Shores and Biscayne Park. Their fields are brimming with sports activities, families, and playful kids. Criminal behaviors and vagrancy are not tolerated and, if presented, prompt swift calls to the recreation departments or police. Order prevails, and as a result, the public freely enjoys and utilizes the spaces.

Years back, Biscayne Park resurfaced its basketball court and became a popular attraction for area teens. But as is the case with street ball, foul-mouthed taunts and cursing became a common complaint by neighbors. The village removed the rims from the backboards, completely shutting down basketball. After a few weeks, rules of expected etiquette were posted, sending the unmistakable message to the young people that basketball came with the expectation of appropriate behavior. The rims were shortly thereafter reattached.

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Now, every call for law and order comes with a real need to avoid the stereotyping Kool-Aid. Public parks and libraries are open to every stripe of resident. And one man's loafing is another man's vagrancy. But the criminal justice system must deal with, either through reform or removal, those who are identified as habitual criminals.

The homeless issue is particularly complex. Miami's chronic homeless often suffer with mental health issues that demand treatment alongside housing support. But let's not allow our charitable impulse to slide into enablement. As Heather Mac Donald wrote over a decade ago, in August 1997, for the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*: "...For the homeless, the best medicine is the expectation of responsible behavior -- the expectation of work and of civil and lawful conduct in public spaces.... Effective charity asks for reciprocity from the recipient, building patterns of work and discipline; to exempt the homeless from the rules that everyone else lives by infantilizes them permanently."

Finally, there is another public sphere in which lawlessness and antisocial behaviors endanger every single South Floridian -- and that is on our public roadways. That's right, the driving habits of 99.99 percent of South Florida motorists merit a crackdown with the ferocity of Genghis Khan. Too many of us are afraid that we or our children will get run down crossing the street. We're under constant assault from motorists who casually run red lights, cut cars off, or incessantly honk at pedestrians using crosswalks.

Between 2008 and 2017, 1549 pedestrians in South Florida were killed by aggressive motorists. The victims are typically poorer, older, and minority. The car culture, aggressive driving, spotty traffic enforcement, and poor engineering all contribute to the carnage. At every level, police need to be strict about enforcing existing traffic laws.

I once witnessed some knucklehead in a jacked-up truck blare his fitted train horn at a blind pedestrian crossing the street in front of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind. The walker became so frightened, he collapsed on the pavement. Life incarceration for that driver, say I!

But this responsibility doesn't entirely rest on the shoulders of police or local politicians. To reclaim our public spaces requires effort by every concerned citizen. As the saying goes: "See something, say something." If residents see criminal or antisocial behaviors, they have an obligation to report them.

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Maintenance and support matter. For residents in Biscayne Shores, the opening of a new community center in Biscayne Shores and Garden Park -- with full-time staff, greater youth and senior programming, and enhanced landscaping with lighting -- may be just the recipe for the park's renewal.

I know there's an impulse to see a relatively affluent Miami Shores resident who's critiquing the conditions in poorer communities as an elite. But reasserting public order and civility in our public spaces will build their value and have people of all socioeconomic stripes cherish those amenities. Free, secure, high-quality parks, libraries, and streets are vital to everyone, and particularly the most vulnerable. Demanding that safety and order prevail isn't entrapment for our communities, but rather their liberation.

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