



Celebrating the Third Place

Inspiring Stories about the
"Great Good Places"
at the Heart of Our
Communities

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RAY OLDENBURG
AUTHOR OF THE GREAT GOOD PLACE



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PRAISE FOR

The Great Good Place

“The great value of this book is that Mr. Oldenburg has given us an insightful and extremely useful new lens through which to look at a familiar problem.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Well-written, informative, and often entertaining.”

—*Newark Star-Ledger*

“Examines gathering places and reminds us how important they are. People need the ‘third place’ to nourish sociability.”

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—*Specialty Coffee Retailer Magazine*

Celebrating the Third Place

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coined the term “third place” and is
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Pensacola, Florida.

RAY OLDENBURG

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MARLOWE & COMPANY
NEW YORK

CELEBRATING THE THIRD PLACE:

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Published by
Marlowe & Company
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-56924-612-2

eBook ISBN: 9780786731107

Designed by Pauline Neuwirth, Neuwirth & Associates, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Distributed by Publishers Group West

to Roberta Brandes Gra

Celebrating the Third Place

Introduction

a young lady's father sits at the big round table in the little diner taking his morning coffee just as he has almost every day for the past ten years. His friends are there with him. His daughter thinks it's a wonderful place and was moved to tell me about it in writing. Among the many goings-on she described, the following best illustrates the reason for her admiration:

During my senior year; our band had been chosen to march in the Rose Bowl Parade. A friend of mine who was also a band member could not afford the nine hundred dollars required to make the trip. He was from a broken home, and was forced to live in a taxicab for three years and watch his mom snort cocaine. Having done drugs since the age of ten, this seventeen-year-old recovered addict presented an amazing story. He cleaned himself up on his own, and moved into the home of a drug counselor at school. He began going to church, participating in extracurricular activities, and tried to make up the academics he had avoided for so long. The drug counselor's home was average-sized, but housed a family of six. There was barely room for my friend and absolutely no money. He slept on three couch cushions, which was a luxury compared to the taxi. With all the help this family had provided for him there was just no way they could afford to finance his band trip. I expressed my concern to my father. The following morning, he spoke to his all-male coffee group about my friend. It only took a quarter of an hour to convince them. One pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and laid it on the table. Several followed his lead, laying hundreds, fifties, and twenties out on the round table. Within just a few minutes, there lay nine hundred dollars. My dad went to the school and deposited the money into my friend's account. No one ever knew where the money came from. That's the way they wanted it.

It is the kind of thing Tocqueville marveled at when he visited America in the 1830s, the capacity of Americans to do what needs doing without depending upon government. Essential to informal collective effort is the habit of association, and essential to informal association are places where people may gather freely and frequently and with relative ease.

That little diner is just such a place. It is what I call a "third place," a setting beyond home and work (the "first" and "second" places respectively) in which people relax in good company and do so on a regular basis. Many Americans, though not nearly enough, still give allegiance to a place they visit before or after work and when home life permits. Some have coffee there before work. Some have a beer there after work. Some stop in for the Luncheon Special every Thursday. Some drop by whenever it's convenient. It is their version of the once popular television series *Cheers*.

Such association is not as essential for good works as it once was. Our society, alas, has become much like Tocqueville's homeland, in which governmental agencies are expected to do whatever needs doing. Yet what government does is done remotely and impersonally; its focus is on our weaknesses and dependencies and its policies define us accordingly.

We may not need third place association to build a town hall anymore, but we sorely need it to construct the infrastructures of human relationships. Ever since the solidifying effect of World War I passed into history, Americans have been growing further apart from one another. Lifestyles are increasingly privatized and competitive; residential areas are increasingly devoid of gathering places. To the extent of our affluence, we avoid public parks, public playgrounds, public schools, and public

transportation.

Awareness of these trends and of the sharp decline in the number of third places in the United States prompted me to write *The Great Good Place* a decade ago. That volume details, illustrates, and analyzes informal public gathering places both here and abroad. It identifies their many social functions and their unique importance as focal points of community life. Now in its third edition, *The Great Good Place* has become basic reading among a growing number of groups encouraging revitalization of our urban areas and of public life.

That book and the publicity it received also brought me into contact with many people who own and operate third places or otherwise have intimate knowledge of them. It became obvious to me that these people have stories to tell that can take our understanding well beyond what I offered in the first book. It remained only to contact them requesting their participation.

Contributors were given free rein as to style, length, and format in the hope that these latitudes would allow them to bring their places to life in these pages. And so they have. Much, I think, will be accomplished by their efforts. There is a lot of how-to in these chapters and much that is inspirational. Some will find resolve to open a place or to remodel with a third place vision in mind. Still more will resolve to find a third place and the human connection it brings.

The collection as a whole should broaden the reader's view of new possibilities for third place association. Earlier versions have faded, such as candy stores, soda fountains, gun shops, and mail taverns. Coffeehouses and health spas are on the rise, but other versions are needed.

Importantly, these accounts will give the reader a fine sense of what constitutes the *real thing*. Developers build houses and call them "homes." They build socially sterile subdivisions and call them "communities." It's called "warming the product." It's also happening with alleged third places. Officials of a popular coffeehouse chain often claim that their establishments are third places, but they aren't. They may evolve into them but at present, they are high volume, fast turnover operations that present an institutional ambience at an intimate level. Seating is uncomfortable by design and customers in line are treated rudely when uncertain of their orders.

Visiting Celebration, Florida, my wife and I arrived at its version of a friendly diner three minutes late for breakfast and were told it couldn't be served. "Three minutes," I protested, "Are you certain we can't have breakfast?" The man was quite certain. To my wife's embarrassment, we left to find breakfast elsewhere. The "friendly diner" struck me as much a fake as the "Town Hall" across the street. The Disney people have their policies and small towns have their ways and ne'er the twain shall meet.

A popular restaurant chain locates its establishments along the more congested commercial strip but nonetheless insists that they are your "neighborhood" restaurants. Other restaurants, sometimes even in neon, claim to be "gathering places." As Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley recently note, "People are honestly trying to balance the frantic privacy of the suburbs with some kind of spontaneous public life."¹ One may expect to see increased pandering to this need with the result that third places may be marketed but not delivered.

THIRD PLACE AS A VICTORY

Victories achieved as the result of a struggle against the odds and the odds have been increasingly stacked against third places since the end of World War II. The best third places are locally owned,

independent, small-scale, steady-state business, and both government and incorporated chain operations have wreaked havoc upon them.

It is no coincidence that chains and unifunctional zoning emerged in tandem. Unifunctional zoning prohibits commercial establishments in residential areas such that Americans “have to get into the car for everything” and when they do, they drive to strips and malls where only the chains can afford to lease. Before unifunctional or negative zoning dictated land use, little stores, taverns, offices, and eateries were located within walking distance of most town and city dwellers and those places constituted “the stuff of community.”

Those small businesses typically drew most of their trade from within a two- or three-block radius and survived quite nicely. The chain operations could not have competed with them on their own terms. A “McBurger” on every block would not produce the volume and turnover such establishments require in order to flourish. Negative zoning thus set the stage such that these cloned and impersonal chains thrived, and they did so by killing off the independents.

The personnel and the policies that the chains bring to town are a far cry from what local independents offered. Many of the people who operated the mom-and-pop stores were “public characters,” as Jane Jacobs called them—people who knew everyone in the neighborhood and cared about them. Those folks kept an eye on the children, kept an eye on the neighborhood, and kept people informed on matters of mutual concern. In contrast, chain personnel turnover is high and “wasting time” with customers is discouraged. No matter how bad the weather, letting people in before the appointed minute is just as unthinkable as adjusting the menu to local tastes.

Successful third places are also harder to achieve because several decades of poor urban planning have encouraged people to stay at home. “Nesting” or “cocooning” are reported to be favored by increasing numbers of Americans. As the public sphere became more inhospitable and enervating to get around in, the private sphere improved. Homes are better equipped, more comfortable, and more entertaining than ever before. This domestic retreat presents a challenge to Traditional Town Planning or the New Urbanism, which purports to restore community and public life by offering a proven alternative to the anti-community tract housing that spread like a plague after World War II.

The New Urbanism incorporates principles of architecture and layout similar to those developed in the 1920s when we knew how to build communities and proceeded accordingly. But is the architectural remedy sufficient?

In a recent feature in *Preservation Magazine*, Alan Ehrenhalt focuses on a public square well located and designed to attract the townspeople—but it doesn’t.² His account reminded me of an automobile trip I took a few years ago, during which I made stops at the Clock Tower Square in Marion, Illinois, “The Hill” in St. Louis, the town square in Bloomfield, Iowa, and a little town square within-a-town in East Superior, Wisconsin. All were the kinds of settings idealized in New Urbanist planning. All were visited during those first warm days of spring that used to draw people out like bears from hibernation. All of them, unfortunately, were also suitable places for rifle practice. Nobody was out and about.

The strong suggestion is that it will take more than front porches, reduced setbacks, and mixed use planning to re-create public life. Front porch use was popular before television and air-conditioning but has not been popular since. And people have become even more reclusive since universal ownership of computers has become national policy.

I spoke with a man the other day who regularly walks his dogs around an expansive residential circle. Lately, he’s been seeing fewer of his neighbors and began asking what’s happened to them. The answer usually is that they’re on the Net, some playing the market, some in chat rooms, some

spending countless hours playing FreeCell or solitaire.

~~This is not to suggest, however, that people won't come out. It is to suggest that towns and cities that want life on the streets and a community spirit to prevail will have to take steps to promote it.~~

A good example is that of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which suffered years of economic stagnation and a devastating storm, and for which re-vitalization took concerted effort. Shortly before Harrisburg made its comeback, I gave a public lecture at the North Street Café and Trading Center and was informed that that third place had recently opened and had been given an award by Mayor Reed for contributing to the betterment of the city.

It was not the way city hall usually treats independent, start-up businesses. Typically, a parade of inspectors is better at harassing than helping, and if the business is successful there are not likely to be any official thank-you's.

I have no doubt that the mayor's hospitality toward new business reverberated in the hospitality the city now offers to all who live or visit there. Always a walkable city, its public sphere is now great fun to enter. Young Jim Maturani and Michael DeFazio, who opened on North Street, have since been joined by many others who bid welcome to those "on the town" or just seeking respite from daily routines. This medium-sized city hosts a public life that larger centers may well envy.

Harrisburg's architecture confirms New Urbanist thinking and it was protected in the same manner as the French Quarter in New Orleans. Economic stagnation discouraged corporate expansionism and urban renewal, thus preserving an urban landscape built to human scale and made interesting by a fine-grained pattern of mixed land use. Its seventeen-square-mile downtown remains walkable and charming and all the more interesting lately because there are people around in numbers not seen in years. Harrisburg illustrates the dual need for an inviting physical setting and *the* efforts of people who know how to implement hospitality.

As a final comment on the victorious character of successful third places in America today, remind the reader that we personally experience the difficulty in the loss of our free hour. Working adults formerly enjoyed an hour of "community time" after the workday was over and before they were expected home. It has been replaced by an hour of "commuting time." The former warmed us to our fellow human beings, the latter conditions us to hate them.

Why did we lose our free hour? It all had to do with planners who focused on cars and the movement and forgot about people and how they live. Unlike European autobahns, our interstate highways were routed right through our cities such that local travelers found the roads congested by people who didn't even want to be in town. Street systems were designed in such a way that most roads carry too little traffic while others carry too much. Unifunctional zoning encouraged urban sprawl such that not only do Americans have to drive everywhere they go but, their necessary destinations are farther away from home than are those of peoples in other countries are from their homes. Finally, the auto industry managed to kill the trolley systems and put forty vehicles on the road in place of the one vehicle that carried the same number of passengers. Road rage may be understandable, but it is directed at the wrong people.

It is no longer easy to establish a good third place, but those who manage to do so are, to that extent, all the more heroic in their efforts to hold on to community for the rest of us. This book tells theirs and they speak to us from where they live and from what they hold dear in life.



Students build composting bins at Annie's Gift and Garden Shop.

1. Katz, Bruce and Bradley, Jennifer. "Divided We Sprawl," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1999): 42.
2. Ehrenhalt, Alan. "The Empty Square," *Preservation Magazine* (March/April 2000): 42-51.

Annie's Gift and Garden Shop

AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS

MOST THIRD places enjoy a location where pedestrian traffic is heavy and many regulars live but minutes away Annie's, however; is located out in the rural countryside and the reader will learn how she cleverly lures people into her place and quickly convinces them that she is interested in much more than making money.

Raised in a small tobacco town in the South, Annie was deeply influenced by a small restaurant that served as the local gathering place. It was one of those wonderful spots in which "everybody knows your name" and cares about you. That little restaurant, Fred's Place, embodied her dream of what to offer the public, even though her plant nursery differs sharply in both its offerings and location. Like Lynne Breaux, whose story also appears in this collection, Annie Cheatham is a woman steeped in the traditions of southern hospitality and determined to bring it north. She has succeeded famously

In the spring of my sophomore year at St. Mary's College, I got pneumonia. St. Mary's is a small Episcopal women's college in Raleigh, North Carolina, and in 1961 the infirmary occupied an old house on the campus. Two nurses staffed the facility, and I was the only patient. I was unhappy there didn't get well, and after a week my parents took me home to the hospital. The doctor ordered glucos and antibiotics, and as soon as I was well enough to eat solid food, my parents asked what I wanted. "A hot dog from Fred's," I said. That night the second floor hall of the Johnston County Memorial Hospital reeked of Fred Adams' chili sauce, and I was one meal closer to recovery

Fred's Place was a small restaurant on Third Street next door to Creech's Drugstore and Stalling Jewelry in Smithfield, a rural tobacco town. Fred's was narrow and long, about fifteen by forty feet. was poorly lit. A long bar stretched the length of the room. Small café tables lined the left wall. Fred worked alone behind the bar on the right.

Fred served hot dogs, sodas in glass bottles, potato chips, and fried pork rinds. He only bought quality wieners and steamed the buns until they were spongy and soft. His mustard and relish were spicy, but the chili sauce was what made his hot dogs special. It had ground beef in it, chili pepper, and tomato sauce—common ingredients in any cookbook recipe. But it had something else, a secret from Fred, and I never found out what that was. It was the best chili I have ever eaten on a hot dog.

Everybody ate at Fred's at one time or another. Lawyers in suits arguing cases at the county courthouse slipped into Fred's during the court's lunchtime recess. Tobacco farmers in stained overalls ate at Fred's. My father picked up a Fred's hot dog whenever Creech's called with a prescription or just before having his hair cut at the barbershop on the corner. In the hospital with pneumonia, I wanted a Fred's hot dog because Fred's meant home.

Bernice's Beauty Parlor, Talton's Grocery, the Fashion Shop, and other public places in my hometown of four thousand also meant home. They not only provided services we needed, they also provided a sense of community. Adults in these places knew me and they cared about me, not in an overbearing or intrusive way, but enough so I noticed. I wasn't invisible. I had a name and people used it, sometimes to steer me back in the right direction. I've always been grateful for being known in that way. I liked the intimacy, and ever since then, I've looked for places that offer that kind of arm's-

length caring. I rarely find it. When I started Annie's Garden and Gift Store, I was determined to create it.

I had to face the differences. Annie's is not Fred's or Creech's, and Amherst, Massachusetts is not Smithfield. Annie's is not even located in a downtown. The store sits on a six-acre parcel on a major state road, Route 116, at the edge of Amherst township. Small agricultural enterprises surround it—a fish farm, organic vegetable farm, and another, part-time, farmer who raises a dozen cattle a year. Annie's uses two acres of the six; clover is planted on the rest and the cattle farmer cuts and bales it in June and October.

It is no longer the late 1940s and 1950s and Annie's is not located in the rural South. Our customers are New Englanders, as friendly as southerners once you get to know them, but more reserved and reticent at first. They live in small communities scattered up and down the Connecticut River, each with its own town center. People are busier now than they were when I was growing up, and our customers don't have the leisure time that my parents' generation had.

But Annie's did not emerge from a vacuum. And those early experiences in Smithfield informed me as I envisioned my new business. My business would be a place, like Fred's, where people would be known. That is what I remembered about my hometown; that is what I longed for myself. But it would be more than that. Because I am a teacher, it would be a place where people learned, became more competent and proficient. Because I am a student of religions and spirituality, it would be a place of beauty and rest, a sacred place in a busy world. Because I am a writer, it would be a place that plays with words. And because I believe in and practice organic gardening, it would be a place where a healthy connection between gardens and nature would be evident.

Our first challenge was to attract customers and make sales. I opened in 1992 when the New England economy was deep in a recession. Businesses were closing, not opening; banks were calling in loans, not making them; and employees were leaving the area for the South and the West. But like every entrepreneur who's ever started a business, I was convinced that I had a good idea and that I could beat the odds and make it work. I knew organic gardening; I knew people loved gardening; I knew how to make beautiful places; and I guessed that others were just as hungry for places like Fred's as I was. Surely we could put together a combination that would succeed.

Drivers on Route 116 were our most obvious market. The road is heavily traveled, but our building is not part of a strip mall. The only reason for anybody to stop at Annie's is because we have something they want. From the start we knew we would have to grab the drivers going by who were on their way to someplace else. We knew that we cared about them, wanted to know them, and that we had something special to offer them, but we had to get them in the door before they would know that.

Every dime we had was going into restoring the dilapidated building and landscaping the grounds, but I knew that I'd have to spend money on a sign board with large changeable letters if we wanted to communicate with the drivers passing by. A few weeks before opening, we took the plunge, ordered an expensive set of letters and hung the board. We started by wrapping our messages around the sign— one phrase on the south side, the punch line on the north. "Only fourteen more days to open," we'd say on one side. On the other, "Honk if you think we'll make it." We kept this theme until we opened. "Ever start a business?/Come in and tell us how" "What's the secret to success?/Details, Details, Details." "Only five more days to open /Miracles do happen." "Grand Opening Today/Whew, We made it!" On opening day, smiling people came in to investigate, and we were in business.

Since that day, our sign has taken on significance for members of our whole community. We respond to requests for birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, and memorials. We read local papers and congratulate award winners. These strangers may or may not be customers, may or may not drive

down Route 116 that day. But someone will see the sign and call the honoree, and by day's end, a bunch of people will be out there taking pictures and posing.

We use the sign to make fun of ourselves and our products. "Annie told me to change the sign/So did." "Too hot, closed early/Gone swimming." "Trees marked to move/Help pay for our vacation." Faith Deering, a regular customer, recently recalled one of her favorite sign stories. "My son Dan and I were driving home one evening. Both of us were tired and cranky and neither of us was communicative. When we got to Annie's store, we both craned our necks to read the message, and he said, 'Come in/Tell me what to have for supper.' Dan responds positively to calls for help and he loves cooking, so he immediately said, 'Pull in, Mama, and I'll tell her what to cook!' After a good conversation with Annie, we left feeling far cheerier and full of ideas for our own family suppers. I have often wondered how many people's moods have been shifted or attitudes changed by a few words on that sign."

We are also reflective and philosophical on our sign. "What is profit?/Top soil, leaf mold, compost." "Breathe/Keep breathing." "Do you have the answer?/What is the question?" And we play with the national news. After Monica Lewinsky turned in her stained blue dress and incriminated President Bill Clinton in a sex scandal, we put all blue flowers on sale. After a state of the union message, we wrote, "My fellow Americans/What is the state of your union?" During the Senate hearings and vote for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, we took a stand: "I believe Anita Hill

We tackle local news. In the spring of 1996, an adult pornography shop opened in a nearby town and the owner put a two-foot-wide banner across the front of his store saying, "Topless Coming Soon." He got a lot of media attention and offended many people, but nobody could stop him. We decided to have some fun with the story, and on our sign we wrote, "Topless birdbaths/Topless statuary." A local paper ran a story about our spoof; customers came in laughing, and bought a few things, the tops and bottoms of birdbaths.

We communicate with drivers with other signs as well. A sign across our one-acre field reads "Annie's Employees' Fitness Center," a spoof on other local businesses that build gymnasiums for desk-bound workers. And every November when darkness begins to lengthen on our New England days, we write "Light Comes" with lights on the side of our building to signify the coming of the solstice and the turning toward spring. We keep it lit until early March. Faith Deering reflected on what this sign meant to her when she first saw it. "In the early darkness of January evenings, 'Light Comes' caught my eye. It was reassuring and hopeful, a beacon I looked forward to on my daily drive from Amherst to home. As the winter wore on, I became intrigued and wondered about the creator of the sign. The store was closed for the season"—We used to close for the winter months; now we are a year-round business—"so I left a message in the mailbox expressing the pleasure I got from the words."

Annie's signs are community bulletin board, political soapbox, Zen center, pun-of-the-week poster, and awards banquet rolled into one. With them we nag, brag, love and adore, call names, point fingers, weep, and pray. In an age of information overload, our signs demonstrate an intelligence inside the business, a wit, a political and spiritual consciousness. "Somebody is thinking in there," our passersby might say.

Once people come into Annie's, they quickly find that they are our first priority. We want to know about our customers. We lean across the counter and ask about vacations and school activities, illness and recoveries, births and deaths. Because of our southern hospitality, our warmth and openness, our customers reveal themselves to us. One customer called the day she learned she had cancer to order an indoor fountain; another cried as she described a grave site where she wanted to plant bulbs; another

came to tell us his first child had been born the night before; another to introduce us to his three sons on Father's Day. Paola Di Stefano explained how Annie's staff responds when she comes in. "I'm always greeted warmly and by name, and the staff's desire to help me and answer my questions goes way beyond what I'd expect of any store. They have loaned me tools, called me with information that I had requested, inquired about my garden, my health, a tool I'd bought several years earlier, and garden fantasies that I'd shared but never expected to put into practice. It feels as though they have a memory of me."

Whenever you go to a place where people know and like you, you open yourself to others who are there. This happens at Annie's all the time. Customers run into people they know and pass information back and forth. Regular customers answer questions of new gardeners when our staff can't answer them. Often we see people exchanging phone numbers or business cards. For several years, Fair Deering, an entomologist, displayed an educational exhibit about monarch butterflies—five or six chrysalises in a jar and a flyer about the life cycle of monarchs. We all got caught up in the drama of the emergence, even the UPS delivery-man who checked the jar every day after he'd handed over our packages.

Many of our customers feel a sense of ownership. One customer, Nancy Felker, volunteers to "fluff up our mulch" in the landscaping by the road. She loves this work, it makes the roadside display look fresh and tended, and passersby see what maintenance can do to liven their gardens. A group of women and men called Annie's Angels formed in the early years. They transplanted seedlings, loaded fertilizers for customers, swept the store, tilled the garden, cut flowers for bouquets. In exchange, they earned credits toward purchases, the equivalent of a 10 percent discount. For three years, twelve people blessed Annie's in this way, and one Angel, Beth Best, ended up working for us.

We strive to make a place where people feel at home, and like Fred's, Annie's is modest and unpretentious. The store is thirty feet by forty feet with a shed roof and a six-foot overhang on the front. Built for a farm stand in the late 1970s, the structure had no central heating, and until I moved in 1991, no plumbing. Our two greenhouses are hoop structures covered with plastic sheeting, common among farms in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts.

We have made the most of this simplicity. Painted in warm, Italian colors—terra cotta orange, light blues and greens, creamy yellows—our little shop invites rest. Every season we decorate our entrance differently—in winter with greens and wreaths, in spring and summer with flowers and vines, in fall with cornstalks and pumpkins. As you walk through our entrance, you see on your left a small water garden landscaped with local, mossy stone. We change the flower displays around the porch throughout the season to keep color there, and in December and through the long winter, we hang white lights on the trees and shrubs surrounding it.

Once you are inside the store, you enjoy delightful and surprising niches and alcoves where Annie's artistic staff tuck treasures—bronze statues, tabletop fountains, dried flowers, and healthy houseplants in beautiful pots. And scattered around the property, in the store and in the greenhouse, are wooden and concrete benches and chairs for you to sit on to view gardens with perennial ornamental grasses, giant reeds and vegetables, or plants in indoor water ponds.

Annie's has become fuller over the years, a fact not missed by Ann Dorr, an accountant and regular customer. "Like gardens everywhere, Annie's is a work in progress," she said. "On opening day, all the features weren't up and in place. You landscaped the front one year, added the water garden the next. That's what we do in our backyards. We cut another path; we wait a year until we can afford a piece of garden sculpture; we move things around. A garden evolves. Customers can relate to it and be inspired by Annie's evolution."

We pay attention to details and we show this by the creativity and beauty of our displays. We highlight the uniqueness of a product with lighting, placement, and with groupings. We mix textures and colors, heights and shapes. We also have an unusual mix of products from all over the world. Garden stores are often filled with functional items, tools for work. Annie's is filled with items that are functional, but because of the way we display them, we imply that there is more to them than work. There is beauty, there is spirit, there is love of growing plants and being in nature. Julie Groves said, "It's hard to say what is so special about Annie's. It's always just so delightful, somehow, in a down-to-earth sort of way. I suppose there are plenty of people like me who delight in beauty but aren't so good at creating it for themselves. Annie's is ineffable, meaning inexpressible—too sacred to be spoken."

Our customers sense our love of the natural world, and some of them come to Annie's as though to a wellspring. They sniff the dried lavender, they listen to the sounds of water dripping into a pond, they touch ash handles and forged steel tines on tools. They walk underneath arbors, around stone Celtic crosses and into greenhouses. When they leave us, they feel restored. Paola Di Stefano said, "I abandoned traditional religion at a young age, and I have found in the natural world the cycles of birth and death and rebirth that help me to understand myself, my community and the world around me. My visit to Annie's is like seeing these cycles through a magnifying glass. Sometimes I stop by just to feel refreshed, purified, and peaceful."

Annie's replicates, then, some of the characteristics of Fred's and my hometown. We are unpretentious and warm, playful and upbeat. We know our customers and care about them. Still, what is Annie's secret chili recipe? What lures customers to Annie's when competitors like Agway and Wal-Mart are within five minutes' drive? Established independent garden centers are equally close and specialty growers are ten minutes away. Just as you might ask, What's special about a Fred's hot dog, you might also ask, What's special about Annie's?

Ray Oldenburg, in his book *The Great Good Place*, describes characteristics of places like Fred's and Annie's. They are on neutral ground, welcome all people, are accessible, modest, and playful. Customers develop a sense of ownership for the places, feel restored, at ease and rooted there, and regulars talk freely about their lives, their community, and the world. Great good places unite the community, serve the elderly, bring adults and children together in a relaxed setting, foster democracy, provide places for people to have fun. All of these qualities enhance and encourage friendship, understanding and tolerance.

Even though Annie's demonstrates many of these characteristics, I knew we had to do more than to know people, or to make them laugh when they drove by our store. I started asking myself, "What is most of us need? What are we all longing for?" I did a mental survey of the people I know. Most are working hard and have too little time to relax. Most have enough money and are comfortable physically. But many are taking antidepressants or herbal stress remedies. Most complain that they don't have enough time to be with themselves, or with the people who mean the most to them. As I thought about these people in these situations, I wondered how Annie's might reduce the strains of their lives.

To be in the gardening business is to be lucky, because, as Paola Di Stefano said, gardening connects you to the natural world. It brings you in touch with cycles and weather and problems you can't solve quickly or easily. When you plant a tree, you can't make it grow faster than it wants to grow. You have to be patient, wait and watch. It may take two or three seasons to amend acidic soil in a garden that's been neglected for a number of years. Gardening shows you the processes of nature that are slow and powerful. Ann Dorr said, "Gardening is a nurturing business. I don't think it is a

accident that I drifted back to gardening after my special needs child went back to school. I was smart enough to know I needed to stay busy, (and gardening takes up all available time!), but gardening also fills up, to some degree, that nurturing void.”

Annie’s is a business devoted to organic gardening. We have always promoted sustainable practices, low chemical use, and careful monitoring of plants and their health. How could we combine the spiritual aspects of gardening naturally with the spiritual longing in our customers? How could we develop our business into a place where our customers could rediscover themselves?

Feeding people is one way to do this, and food is often served in great good places. You sit down, you stay awhile, and before you know it, you’re talking with one of the regulars about the recent election or complaining about your job. Eating together brings people together. I had seen it happen at Fred’s. I always wanted it to happen at Annie’s. I was already producing Annie’s Own line of jams and jellies, pickles and chutneys, and selling them from the store. From there I had no trouble envisioning people sitting at small café tables drinking tea and eating biscuits served with my orange marmalade. I could hear the chatter and the laughter that would come from such a scene, and I knew it would succeed.

In 1993, we opened a tearoom at Annie’s. We didn’t have a kitchen, but we got a restaurant permit from the town, bought eight café tables and twenty chairs, and hung a sign. Our vision was to serve herbal teas made from organic herbs we grew in our garden. This would promote gardening, organic methods, and sustenance—all high values at Annie’s. We bought scones and biscuits from a local bakery, opened the marmalade, made coffee and tea each morning, and for the next eighteen months our customers had a place to eat.

The tearoom never generated enough business to keep going, though the people who used it appreciated having a place to meet friends. Sales of our hard goods and plants were growing and we needed the retail space in our 1,200 square foot store. We slowly reduced the number of chairs and tables until none were left, took down the sign, put away the cups and saucers. The next question was: How can we feed people without giving them something to eat?

There is real food, and there is spiritual food. At Annie’s, we dole out the latter by giving away a poem with each sale. The idea came from my habit of sharing what I love, and I love poetry because it makes me slow down. I can’t hurry and read a poem. If I do, I won’t understand it, then I feel frustrated. I also love poetry because I love language, and poetry is word play at its peak.

Since many poets write about gardening and nature in lyrical, humorous, accessible language, I started telling friends about poems, taking poems to dinner parties and reading them aloud, copying them down and mailing them to friends far away. One day I was telling a customer about a poem and she said, “I’ll make you a copy and send it to you.” And then I thought about giving poems away to everyone. Also I was looking for something to give the customer outside the exchange of money for merchandise. That exchange wasn’t enough for me; it left me feeling empty. I wanted something I could hand over that was extra and free, something that would help the customer slow down and relax.

Our community is poetry-friendly. Amherst was the home of Emily Dickinson; Robert Frost taught at Amherst College. Many poets live and write in our area, and poetry readings are common. When I told my friend and poet Mary Clare Powell about my idea, she gave me some of her poems to hand out. Dara Wier brought poems by Theodore Roethke, who’d been a student of hers at UMass. A few years later, she wrote a poem of her own entitled “Evidence of Annie’s All Over Town.” Henry Lyman, poet and executor for Robert Francis’s estate, brought me poems by Francis. James Tate, Sharon Dunn, Gene Zieger, Margaret Robison, and other local poets delivered poems. Customers suggested their favorites, and Wanda Cook wrote six haiku poems about her garden and brought them

in. Since 1994, we have given away thousands of poems.

~~Beautiful words and fresh images can nurture people like gardening and nature can. Interesting combinations of words can surprise and excite readers as quickly as can a beautiful flower or a delicious tomato. Our customers respond to these poems with enthusiasm, taking the poems home and posting them on refrigerators, passing them to friends, inserting them in gifts, reading them to students and their children. Poems are a simple way for Annie's to enrich our customers' busy and fragmented lives.~~

Still, a poem is a personal, individual experience. Since we've been in business, we have always sought to engage our customers in experiences they could share with other people. We have especially wanted to encourage children to garden and to be aware of the natural world. From 1992 to 1994, we challenged children and adults to a radish contest. We gave one free packet of radish seed to each family or contestant, and told them to come back in six weeks with their product.

The children and adults were more creative than we expected, and contestants came not only with planted radishes, but also with huge papier-mâché radishes, radish poems and paintings, T-shirts with radishes stenciled on them, radish raps, radish necklaces, and a radish pifiata filled with candy for all the other contestants.

In 1995, we invited children to participate in another event that Susan Lehtinen, a customer from Amherst, introduced to us. Susan brought me an article from the children's magazine *Family Fun* titled, "In Celebration of Mud Season: Let your kids jump, roll, and delight in nature's messiest stuff." The article described castles made with mud, mud pools in plastic swimming pools, a crazy obstacle course, a mud pie bake sale. Susan knew we liked to engage children in gardening and nature projects and she knew we had land.

Our half-acre field is wet in the spring and we can't plant anything in it until the soil dries in April, so we agreed to sponsor a Mud Festival in late March. Susan and I planned activities—a slalom run using bamboo stakes as markers, a tunnel made of sawhorses, two thirty-six-inch hoops to jump through made from old Christmas-wreath rings. Susan brought her kitchen timer, and we organized relay races, a tug-of-war, mud ball throws, and mud pie constructions. Faith Deering brought insects that live in mud and earthworms for an earthworm race.

Some children didn't like the feel of mud on their feet, but enjoyed making mud pies and racing earthworms. Other children couldn't stay away from the mushy stuff. By the end of the afternoon, most were barefoot and covered with mud. We washed them off with the hose and gave everybody honey candy. Susan was pleased with the outcome and our field benefited from much needed aeration. Martha Thompson often visits Annie's with one of her children. She said, "I've enjoyed Annie's over the years for its relaxing, receptive, and creative atmosphere. My children have always felt welcome and wanted at Annie's." And Paola Di Stefano, mother of two, said, "My children love to visit almost as much as I do—to sniff and pat, to cradle a piece of bunny statuary, to color a picture, to talk to Moses and feed him doggie treats, to stick a little finger under the trickle of a water fountain, to get lost in the labyrinth. A trip to Annie's is always greeted with the same enthusiasm as a trip to the fair."

In 1998, we stumbled onto the idea of a sunflower labyrinth and it turned out to be a great blessing for us, for children, and for all our adult customers. Labyrinths are ancient patterns laid out on the ground with a path that leads to a center. They are not puzzles like mazes are, with tall walls and dead ends. A labyrinth gives you a path to follow and, if you stay on it, you get to the center. Because you are not going anywhere, it is a meditation on patience and trust. You walk in and you walk out, just like breath itself.

I had read an article about labyrinths in the *New York Times* and thought, “I need that,” but I didn’t see the connection to Annie’s. Then a few weeks later, Michelle Wiggins, our gardener, and Ann Gibson, my partner, and I were talking about what to plant in our half-acre plot. The field is visible from traffic, and I wanted as much color there as possible. I suggested sunflowers; Michelle suggested sunflower labyrinth. I remembered the story in the paper and knew it was the perfect solution.

Ann and Michelle chose a simple design, a seven-course pattern from the palace of Nestor (thirteenth-century B.C.) in Pylos, Greece. The labyrinth had a diameter of seventy feet with 1,000 feet of path. They planted the seed rows four feet apart so Michelle could till between the rows to keep down weeds. Ann, also an artist, placed one of her sculptures made of willow and maple saplings in the center and surrounded her piece with stones. By early August, the flowers had begun to bloom. We sent a press release to the local papers; they all ran some kind of announcement and one paper featured the labyrinth on the front page with a color photograph of the sunflowers. We started fielding calls from people who’d never heard of us before. The response was astonishing.

Why, in this hectic time, are our customers and their friends walking in and out of a circle? People walk our labyrinths for different reasons—meditation, play, to be with friends, to watch honeybees collect pollen, to see chickadees collect seed, to be with their children. They are all searching, as I am searching, for peace of mind and beauty, for self-knowledge and understanding. I don’t know if they or I will find these in our labyrinth, but our labyrinth gives them another place to seek it. And because Annie’s provides this kind of place, our customers know how much we care about them and their well-being.

Many retail businesses in our area keep animals on the premises, and our dog Moses was a part of Annie’s from the time he was born in 1992 until he died in May 2001. Moses was a forty-pound mongrel with beagle markings who loved children and adults. He greeted customers with enthusiasm, turned over on his back for children to scratch his chest, chased sticks thrown by anyone. Children and adults came to Annie’s just to see Moses (many brought dog biscuits), and children often drew his portrait for our children’s bulletin board. Occasionally a customer picked him up and took him for a walk in a nearby nature preserve. One couple photographed their two kids, arms around Moses, in front of our winter decorations, and used the photo for their Christmas card. Ann Dorr said, “Moses was a very important part of Annie’s. Strangers came in, saw Moses, and immediately relaxed. This was a far cry from shopping at a sterile superstore.” When he died, we announced it on our sign and dozens of customers sent condolences.

At Annie’s, education is our most precious commodity. I am a teacher. I like to watch people learn and I enjoy encouraging people to solve problems. Gardeners are perpetual learners, and there is so much to know about plants, soil science, pest control, design, harvesting, and crafting. Cooperative extension services have been cut, and new gardeners don’t live near relatives who can teach them the basics. Since 1991, we had addressed ourselves to this need by producing a newsletter about gardening and crafting, and by leading over thirty workshops a year. Our workshops focus on specific plant types (bamboo, roses, bulbs, perennials, etc.), gardening techniques (organics, container and water gardening, for example), spirituality (aromatherapy, fountain design, garden writing, herbal medicines), and crafting (wreath making, herbal salves, etc.).

Many speakers have led workshops at Annie’s on heirloom plants, unusual daffodils, edible flowers, landscaping with stone, making rustic trellises. In the middle of winter, we’ve invited poets to read their poetry about gardening and nature, and during spring singers/songwriters have serenaded our customers. Local English Morris Dance troupes bless Annie’s each spring and fall with bells and songs of praise. We have sponsored field trips to the New England Flower Show in Boston and

private gardens in Vermont and western Massachusetts. We tap the resources around us, look for competencies all around our region, and bring that intelligence to Annie's.

Learning to succeed at something—whether it is flower arranging or seed starting—gives confidence. This confidence spills into other parts of our lives. If I can design a perennial border, I can approach that client whose account I want. If I can make my own Christmas wreath, I bet I can make other things with my hands. Ann Dorr said, “I have learned so much at Annie's through the workshops. I count on them to give me new ideas, remind me of a few basics, and generally inspire me for the season to come.”

As our customers become more competent, they become better customers. They appreciate handmade items and understand how much skill is involved in making them. They embrace the value of a well-grown, pest-free plant and look forward to continuing its care in their own organic garden. They know how to manage diseases and don't ask us to supply harmful pesticides and herbicides. Informed, intelligent, and confident customers make us a better business.

Better businesses reach out. Our community includes people who are not well off or comfortable, and Annie's responds to them in a variety of ways. To benefit a local women's shelter one year, we sponsored a Gingerbread Woman Contest at Christmas. We have supported our local food bank and survival center by contributing a percentage of our sales for a day or a week, selling their cookbooks, and Christmas cards. We donate goods to parent/teacher associations, libraries, and scout troops. We underwrite public radio, a college chorus, the university's fine arts program, and local theater groups. Ann Dorr says, “When you held the Amherst Survival Center benefit, I came in and picked up the brochure to find out what their hours were. I had been meaning to get some clothes over there for months, and Annie's inspired me to get it done. That commitment to community impressed me, and made me more committed.”

At Annie's, we try to be a good neighbor. We listen to the cries of the spirit, the hungers of the body, the longings of all ages to be seen, to be known, to be loved and challenged. We respond in ways a retail business can—with beauty, with attention to detail, with honest education, with interesting products at good prices, with patience, with creativity, and with humor. Keith Hollingworth has thought about this aspect of Annie's and said, “I am an artist, a painter. One question I ask my students is, ‘What is beauty?’ They struggle with a definition and each one is specifically unique, but a consensus emerges of a feeling inside, a good, wholesome, intangible, transcendent feeling. It is a feeling of the moment, of here, now, and of place. Annie's is a place of the special moment.”

Annie's has evolved from the work of a group of people. It is not the creation of one or two people. Our staff has made Annie's responsive, funny, creative, and alive. Everybody who works at Annie's plays with the sign. Everybody learns about plants. Everybody contributes to problem solving. My favorite question is “What do you think?” and we ask that of everyone who works at Annie's. We have been lucky. The right people at the right time have come to work on this project, and our success is due to their commitment and vision. They make Annie's magic; they are Annie's secret ingredient.

Will people hunger for businesses that address these needs in the new millennium? Will any of this matter? I don't know, but I believe so. We human beings haven't changed all that much since I was growing up in Smithfield. Places like Fred's and Creech's, and now Annie's and all the other examples in this book, will always be places we remember as special and formative. In them, people know our names, and use them. In them, we have a place and we know it. Through them, we find our way in our society. Third place or third base—both are close to home.



Rugs are imported, displayed, and sold out of the Third Place Coffeehouse by local weavers

The Third Place Coffeehouse

RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

IN 1996, Richard Futrell wrote me explaining how he'd come to open The Third Place coffeehouse in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was a man in quest of an answer. Unlike some authors presented here who hail from habitats of hospitality in the Old South, Richard spent his college years in a northern city where he found people anything but hospitable. His reading amounted to "a desperate search to figure out why people act the way they do at a time when there are more people around them than ever before, they have plenty to eat, plenty to do, they are relatively safe and well taken care of. Basically was trying to figure out why people have become so unhappy and downright nasty."

While employed as a retail sales manager; Richard adopted a policy of "killing 'em with kindness," and was determined to win over anyone who would "come in off the street bound and determined to spread their misery in my shop." On one memorable occasion, a "mean and nasty" older woman was won over and left with a smile only to return a few minutes later with an ice cream cone in each hand "one for me as an apology for her behavior and a token of appreciation for mine."

Richard needed a place where he could work his magic, not only to the betterment of a few individuals here and there, but to the betterment of the human community. He realized it wouldn't be easy but worthwhile endeavors rarely are.

My introduction to The Great Good Place occurred in the early 1990s as I scoured the labyrinthine stacks of the Chicago library I was a young man in search of answers. Standing at the library's huge gothic windows, I looked out on the crowded, bustling city and wondered, "Why are all those people so lonely?" We, as citizens of one of the largest and most crowded cities in the world, are literally living on top of each other. We bump into each other on the streets, stand in line together at the bank, and sit in each other's laps on the train. With so much daily contact, how could we possibly be so lonely?

This is what I wanted to know. I had studied psychology in college and worked in the field for years, and the most common complaint I heard was "I am lonely." When I talked to my friends who had recently been scattered across the continent during the great post-college diaspora, I heard the same thing—lonely, isolated, bored. It was a general malaise! A national phenomenon! And I, with my youthful enthusiasm and naïveté, was going to find the answer. And I thank you Ray Oldenburg for leading the way.

REALITY

Seven years and many seventy-hour weeks later, I think I am still pretty thankful to Ray for the inspiration and direction offered in his epic tome of revolutionary social theory, The Great Good Place. The truth is I was very lonely at the time myself and, as a student of social theory and frequenter of the myriad coffeehouses in Chicago, The Great Good Place simply struck a chord in my bored Gen-X heart. It spoke to me. I was inspired.

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