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Broken windows and rainbows: remembering James Q. Wilson

Joe Ferullo | Mar. 7, 2012 NCR Today

The death of a sociologist this past week reminded me of a drive I'd take as a boy with my father, in truck full of Italian bread approaching Yankee Stadium and the South Bronx.

From the age of about 9, I'd wake up every Saturday morning at 4 a.m., get dressed in the dark and hop in my father's bread truck with him. We'd load up at the bakery and make our rounds, mostly in our Bronx neighborhood. But one store took us into Washington Heights, across the East River in Manhattan. We'd drive along the Major Deegan Expressway until we could see Yankee Stadium looming ahead to our left -- then we'd make a right off the highway and through a tangle of South Bronx streets toward the river and Manhattan.

Those few blocks were lined with burnt-out and abandoned buildings -- empty tenements, torched warehouses -- and people who milled about aimlessly on the streets even at that early hour, as if waiting for a decent roof to tuck in over their heads.

For years, social scientists advocated that government pour money into these areas, assuming that income was the only problem, that fear and despair had a price and that price could fix everything that came with poverty.

Not James Q. Wilson, who died recently at the age of 80 [1]. He created the "broken windows" theory of neighborhood rehabilitation.

Wilson said it wasn't poverty alone that caused crime and decay, but rather, chaos, a breakdown of common civility that built up one small step at a time. A broken window by itself, he wrote, is no big deal -- but a broken window unfixed was a signal: It told the good people in a poor area that no one cared and it told criminals that small crime would go unanswered and unpunished. It invited more crime and bigger crime, which created fear and retreat by the good people, and this in turn sparked still more crime and chaos.

All from a single broken window. Wilson urged police not to overlook the petty bad actors who helped unravel the quality of life in a neighborhood -- they were on the frontline of a larger problem. Fixing broken windows sent a signal: The community was watching.

Wilson's ideas were disparaged by many academics in the '60s and '70s, who still felt money was at the root of every problem. But Wilson -- and others, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan -- saw that character counted for more, that authorities needed to help the good people in their battles for their homes. Slowly, his ideas caught on.

One morning in the late 1970s, my father and I turned off the Major Deegan and onto the side streets. My dad let the bread truck roll to a slow stop as we stared up at the tenements around us. The burnt-out shells were different suddenly: Shattered windows had been covered in plywood, and over that, colorful decals had been placed. The decals were brightly colored cartoons of lived-in windows, with flower pots and bird cages and big cats staring down at the sidewalks below. My father shook his head and wondered what the hell the city of New York was up to now. Who would these decals fool?

But they worked. They told people that somebody was watching, the city cared and was at least trying to make things better. It was a very small first step, but it was a first step. By the 1990s, New York Police Chief William Bratton fully embraced Wilson's ideas -- and crime in the city plummeted. He then came out here to Los Angeles, and the same thing happened. In city after city, Wilson's ideas were put into action, and the result is the re-growth of urban areas long thought unsalvageable.

Other factors contributed to the fall in crime, but James Q. Wilson led the charge. He believed in cities and believed in the people who lived there. I was a city kid, still am. And I have never forgotten those odd cartoon-colorful windows.

Like a rainbow after a flood, they were sign of better things to come.

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Links:
[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/03/nyregion/james-q-wilson-dies-at-80-originated-broken-windows-policing-strategy.html