

LETTER TO LUCY

Dear Lucy:

It was certainly a pleasure to be on the Cape for the Christmas holidays and visit with you and the rest of the family. Thanks again for all the goodies.

As you know, for most of my adult life I've been looking forward to coming back to Osterville to live. Now retirement time draws closer, it could soon be possible.

I am, however, beginning to wonder if that's really what we want. Not because we don't love the Cape and not because of the negative tax aspects of living in Massachusetts instead of New York State, but because while we were home this last time, I heard so many reports of vandalism in the village. I'm questioning if Osterville can offer the peace and freedom from harassment we've been anticipating all these years.

When I was in the bank, I noticed a broken window. "Kids,..." the teller shrugged. While picking up some cottage cheese at the convenience store, I noticed the door was being replaced. "Those kids...", the man behind the counter replied to my question, "picked up a trash can and threw it right through."

Asked if he knew who'd done it, he said, "By the time I got outside, no one was in sight." A week later a window in the same store was smashed. All around the village I heard tales of a rash of other incidents. The old Dry Swamp Academy, for years a Community Center, is apparently a prime target. One person mentioned rock-laden snowballs being thrown over the roof of the Baptist Church to land on, and shatter, windshields of cars parked in front. Windows at the rear of the church have been broken. The laundromat near the A&P is wrecked, its washers ruined and dryers destroyed.

Perhaps the most distressing story concerned old auto tires being rolled down the incline in front of the Community Center, aimed to damage the Christmas creche in the fork of Main Street and Wianno Avenue.

The more questions I asked, the more I learned. One incident involved the attempted theft of a battery from a car parked in a lady's garage. The lady, who is over 80, went out in the morning to do an errand. Her car wouldn't start; neither lights nor horn worked. She called her service station and a

man came prepared to install a new battery. He found the terminals disconnected. Apparently the thieves were scared off before they completed the job.

A few stories were more positive, but these, too, reveal a less-than-ideal social base. Some of the young adults have solved their own problems successfully. One such said he'd missed small tools and knew who'd walked off with them. He made a point of talking with a particular youngster and left a strong impression bodily harm would be done "some dark night" the next time it happened. He's had no more trouble.

Similarly, when gasoline was siphoned from his truck's gas tank, its owner collared the kid responsible and promised him if any more gas was stolen he'd pour a gallon over the kid's head and torch him.

Such tactics are outside the law, but the kids seem to clearly get the message. It's unpleasant to realize the only way to defend yourself from thievery and vandalism in Osterville may be for citizens to take matters into their own hands.

Local residents who've not yet been directly victimized (although they're certainly victimized indirectly because their own insurance premiums rise in proportion to amounts companies pay to settle claims; property taxes reflect not only costs of maintaining a police force, but also repairing damage to public property; costs of doing business include repair of vandalized property and prices rise accordingly), cluck their tongues and ask "Where are the police?" Then they forget the problem until they hear of another incident.

And where are the police? According to several sources, the police have specific information regarding the identity of some, if not all, of the perpetrators and, in at least one instance, a policeman was sitting in his cruiser, watching, when one of the above-described incidents occurred but took no action.

One possible reason for inaction on the part of police may be the reluctance of citizens to file formal complaints against the vandals. Unless people-businessmen or others will press charges, the police are rendered impotent. It takes time, and time is valuable, to appear in court and testify. Courts are loathe to find kids guilty, primarily because there are no faci-

lities for appropriate punishment. Even when a juvenile or young adult is found guilty, he is likely to be required only to make restitution. And if he does not, there's no recourse.

The kid is back on the street the next day. He's angry and aggrieved. He's inclined to take revenge. His peers may be persuaded to avenge him. A complainer may be singled out for special attention.

Furthermore, from what I understand, some of the kids involved are children of prominent professionals living in the village. They have large extended-families. Pressing charges against a kid from such a background could have serious economic consequences for someone depending on the community for his livelihood.

The result is that many people in Osterville are afraid. They are afraid more serious attacks will be made upon their property or even upon their person. They are afraid of economic reprisals. They can't shut up shop for hours on end to stand around the courthouse awaiting a trial that, in all probability, will be continued to some later date.

The situation becomes serious when people of any age break laws with impunity, the law loses effectiveness. When any segment of society gains power to hold another segment in a state of fear, we face terrorism. The kids become terrorists holding the entire community hostage. Iran isn't the only place student terrorists are in control. There's a parallel right there in Osterville.

And when citizens must take the law into their own hands because laws no longer work to protect the public, and when threats of bodily injury effectively free them from harassment by their neighbors' offspring, the community becomes unattractive to law-abiding peace-loving folks like us. It's but a short step from threat to violence. Promises must be kept if they are to be respected.

As I contemplate moving home to Osterville, the village where I was born and where I spent the first twenty years of my life, I'm asking myself, "Do I want to go back?" If the vandalism and vigilante situation isn't brought under control rapidly, we might be wiser to pick another place to live.

I'll appreciate it a lot, Lucy, if you'll keep me informed about this possible determining factor in my plans for the future.

Again, it was great being together for the holidays and I'm looking forward to seeing you again before another year rolls around.

Love,
Oliver