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The child in the basement

By DAVID BROOKS

Maybe you're familiar with Ursula Le Guin's short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." It's about a sweet and peaceful city with lovely parks and delightful music.

The people in the city are genuinely happy. They enjoy their handsome buildings and a "magnificent" farmers' market.

Le Guin describes a festival day with delicious beer and horse races: "An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute."

It is an idyllic, magical place.

But then Le Guin describes one more feature of Omelas. In the basement of one of the buildings, there is a small broom-closet-sized room with a locked door and no windows. A small child is locked inside the room. It looks about 6, but, actually, the child is nearly 10. "It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition and neglect."

Occasionally, the door opens and people look in. The child used to cry out, "Please let me out. I will be good!" But the people never answered and now the child just whimpers. It is terribly thin, lives on a half-bowl of cornmeal a day and must sit in its own excrement.

"They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas," Le Guin writes. "Some of them have come to see it; others are content merely to know it is there. They all know it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children ... depend wholly on this child's abominable misery."

That is the social contract in Omelas. One child suffers horribly so that the rest can be happy. If the child were let free or comforted, Omelas would be destroyed. Most people feel horrible for the child, and some parents hold their kids tighter, and then they return to their happiness.

But some go to see the child in the room and then keep walking. They don't want to be part of that social contract. "They leave Omelas; they walk ahead into the darkness and they do not come back."

In one reading this is a parable about exploitation. According to this reading, many of us live in societies whose prosperity depends on some faraway child in the basement. When we buy a cellphone or a piece of cheap clothing, there is some exploited worker — a child in the basement. We tolerate exploitation, telling each other that their misery is necessary for overall affluence, though maybe it's not.

In another reading, the story is a challenge to the utilitarian mindset so prevalent today.

In theory, most of us subscribe to a set of values based on the idea that a human being is an end not a means. You can't justifiably use a human being as an object. It is wrong to enslave a person, even if that slavery might produce a large good. It is wrong to kill a person for his organs, even if many lives might be saved.

And yet we don't actually live according to that moral imperative. Life is filled with tragic trade-offs. In many different venues, the suffering of the few is justified by those trying to deliver the greatest good for the greatest number.

Companies succeed because they fire people, even if a whole family depends on them. Schools become prestigious because they reject people — even if they put a lifetime of work into their application. Leaders fighting a war on terror accidentally kill innocents. These are children in the basement of our survival and happiness.

The story compels readers to ask if they are willing to live according to those contracts. Some are not. They walk away from prosperity, and they make some radical commitment. They would rather work toward some inner purity.

The rest of us live with the trade-offs. The story reminds us of the inner numbing this creates. The people who stay in Omelas aren't bad; they just find it easier and easier to live with the misery they depend upon. I've found that this story rivets people because it confronts them with all the tragic compromises built into modern life — all the children in the basements — and, at the same time, it elicits some desire to struggle against bland acceptance of it all.

In another reading, the whole city of Omelas is just different pieces of one person's psychology, a person living in the busy modern world, and that person's idealism and moral sensitivity is the shriveling child locked in the basement.

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SPEAKING WHILE FEMALE

By SHERYL SANDBERG AND ADAM GRANT

Years ago, while producing the hit TV series "The Shield," Glen Mazzara noticed that two young female writers were quiet during story meetings. He pulled them aside and encouraged them to speak up more. Watch what happens when we do, they replied.

Almost every time they started to speak, they were interrupted or shot down before finishing their pitch. When one had a good idea, a male writer would jump in and run with it before she could complete her thought.

Sadly, their experience is not unusual.

We've both seen it happen again and again. When a woman speaks in a professional setting, she walks a tightrope. Either she's barely heard or she's judged as too aggressive. When a man says virtually the same thing, heads nod in appreciation for his fine idea. As a result, women often decide that saying less is more.

Some new studies support our observations. A study by a Yale psychologist, Victoria L. Brescoll, found that male senators with more power (as measured by tenure, leadership positions and track record of legislation passed) spoke more on the Senate floor than their junior colleagues. But for female senators, power was not linked to significantly more speaking time.

Suspecting that powerful women stayed quiet because they feared a backlash, Brescoll looked deeper. She asked professional men and women to evaluate the competence of chief executives who voiced their opinions more or less frequently. Male executives who spoke more often than their peers were rewarded with 10 percent higher ratings of competence. When female executives spoke more than their peers, both men and women punished them with 14 percent lower ratings. As this and other research shows, women who worry that talking "too much" will cause them to be disliked are not paranoid; they are often right.

One of us was dismayed to find similar patterns when studying a health care company and advising an international bank. When male employees contributed ideas that brought in new revenue, they got significantly higher performance evaluations. But female employees who spoke up with equally valuable ideas did not improve their managers' perception of their performance. Also, the more the men spoke up, the more helpful their managers believed them to be. But when women spoke up more, there was no increase in their perceived helpfulness.

This speaking-up double bind harms organizations by depriving them of valuable ideas. A University of Texas researcher, Ethan Burris, conducted an experiment in which he asked teams to make strategic decisions for a bookstore. He randomly informed one member that the bookstore's inventory system was flawed and gave that person data about a better approach. In subsequent analyses, he found that when women challenged the old system and suggested a new one, team leaders viewed them as less loyal and were less likely to act on their suggestions. Even when all team members were informed that one member possessed unique information

that would benefit the group, suggestions from women with inside knowledge were discounted.

Obviously, businesses need to find ways to interrupt this gender bias. Just as orchestras that use blind auditions increase the number of women who are selected, organizations can increase women's contributions by adopting practices that focus less on the speaker and more on the idea. For example, in innovation tournaments, employees submit suggestions and solutions to problems anonymously. Experts evaluate the proposals, give feedback to all participants and then implement the best plans.

Since most work cannot be done anonymously, leaders must also take steps to encourage women to speak and be heard. At "The Shield," Mazzara, the show runner, found a clever way to change the dynamics that were holding those two female employees back. He announced to the writers that he was instituting a no-interruption rule while anyone — male or female — was pitching. It worked, and he later observed that it made the entire team more effective.

The long-term solution to the double bind of speaking while female is to increase the number of women in leadership roles. As more women enter the upper echelons of organizations, people become more accustomed to women's contributing and leading. Burris and his colleagues studied a credit union where women made up 74 percent of supervisors and 84 percent of front-line employees. Sure enough, when women spoke up there, they were more likely to be heard than men. When President Barack Obama held his last news conference of 2014, he called on eight reporters — all women. It made headlines worldwide. Had a politician given only men a chance to ask questions, it would not have been news; it would have been a regular day.

As 2015 starts, we wonder what would happen if we all held Obama-style meetings, offering women the floor whenever possible. Doing this for even a day or two might be a powerful bias interrupter, demonstrating to our teams and colleagues that speaking while female is still quite difficult. We're going to try it to see what we learn. We hope you will, too.

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The beauty of backyard cottages

By THOMAS BARRIE

Who could have a problem with something called a backyard cottage? Well, as it turns out, Raleigh could. The City Council voted to remove them from the 2013 Unified Development Ordinance.

And yet backyard cottages are a historical housing type enjoying a resurgence in North America. Also called elder cottage housing, in-law apartments, mother-daughter units, companion units, guesthouses and alley flats, they are second, small living units in the backyards of single-family homes. They are also called accessory dwelling units, but an ADU can be an apartment in an existing house, whereas backyard cottages, as their name suggests, are separate, significantly smaller units.

Backyard cottages used to be common but, beginning in the mid-20th century, were increasingly zoned out and became in many cities illegal. Raleigh used to allow them, and many examples can be found in its older, inner-city neighborhoods. However, in the 1970s, at the height of urban blight, suburban flight and absentee landlords, they were prohibited. That was over 40 years ago. Now the city is very different and attracting residents drawn to its cultural amenities and entrepreneurial spirit who are looking for housing options in central locations.

Opponents of backyard cottages worry they will negatively affect the character of their communities. Frequently cited concerns are that they will result in increased density, traffic and parking; increase loads on city services, infrastructure and schools; create absentee landlords; and be substandard or incompatible housing. All of these concerns deserve our critical attention.

Many cities, some of which we consider to be our cultural and economic peers, have legalized backyard cottages. Austin, Texas, for example, recently updated its zoning ordinance to make it even easier to create backyard cottages. Some cities, such as Santa Cruz, California, not only allow them but also promote them. Like Raleigh, it is a college town, and a number of years ago officials created a program to add affordable units within urban growth boundaries. Backyard cottages had been legal but restricted, so they loosened the regulations and then actively promoted them. Subsequently, the number of rental units dramatically increased, and vacancy rates plummeted.

Other cities — such as Seattle, San Antonio, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco and Boulder, Golden and Aspen, Colorado — have adopted backyard cottages into their development ordinances. In North Carolina Charlotte-Mecklenburg recently updated its legislation to allow them, and Asheville, where cottages were never taken off the books, has in recent years sensitively added them to their downtown neighborhoods.

Backyard cottages can provide stable housing as family needs change over time. They can provide a place for a parent or boomer kid to live, or where homeowners can live as empty nesters (and rent the primary unit), or where a caregiver can live so the homeowner can age in place.

Backyard cottages can also be a low-impact way to add affordable units to a municipality's housing stock. They can provide rental income to subsidize mortgage payments and, if they already exist on the property, may even help people qualify for a mortgage.

And they are sustainable. They use fewer materials and require less energy to heat and cool, thus reducing utility costs and carbon emissions. Additional housing units in inner-city neighborhoods can also mitigate sprawl and support public transportation. Backyard cottages can also bolster cultural sustainability by allowing people to age in place, increasing economic diversity and providing security and companionship for the elderly.

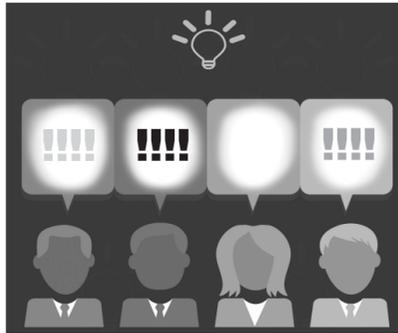
A sticking point when Raleigh considered backyard cottages was state legal precedents that make it difficult to require that owners occupy the main property. Some cities have this requirement, but some, such as Portland, Vancouver and Asheville, do not. And there are other means for ensuring inhabitants are good neighbors, such as requiring separate meters for each unit, registering each unit and rigorously enforcing tenant laws. Most cities specify minimum lot size, set backs, height limitations and maximum square footage. Some require off-street parking and that they match the style of the primary residence. Most important is good design, which can produce smaller, low-impact units that still offer generous living possibilities.

When backyard cottages came before the City Council, many councilors voiced support but thought the provisions had not been sufficiently vetted or potential impacts researched. Consequently, they retained the option of revisiting the issue.

There is plenty of dependable data regarding the effects of backyard cottages and plenty of support for them in Raleigh neighborhoods such as Mordecai. Some cities, such as Seattle, conducted pilot programs in designated neighborhoods, and some, such as Austin, restricted backyard cottages to certain neighborhoods.

Backyard cottages may not be right for every neighborhood and may not result in a lot of units, but they can provide housing options for a city that really needs them and align with goals identified in the city's comprehensive plan and its scattered-site policy for affordable housing.

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