

Two Things Holding America Together

In [her Friday column](#), Peggy Noonan traced the travels of Chris Arnade, a photographer who spent 2016 traversing the nation, taking pictures of struggling Americans along the way. (You'll find his work in the Guardian and the Atlantic.)

Noonan's columns that probe American life tend to be insightful and poetic, and this one was no exception. But what stuck out most to me was the assertion that Mr. Arnade had found two institutions in particular that seem to be playing "a deep role" in holding America together.

The first is small churches, often Pentecostal and Evangelical. They're in a dead strip mall or on a spur off a highway and they give everyone an embrace. "Any church that has a sign that says We Welcome Everybody, that's where I go." He looks for the ones "that are often literally on the edge of town." One in Alabama was a former Kentucky Fried Chicken. "It's clear they don't have a lot of money. They tend to be more welcoming because they're used to people walking in off the street." Though a stranger he is often hugged. He has been invited to speak from the pulpit. "I am a bit of an outcast being a progressive who finds a lot of value in faith beyond just my faith, but faith in others. We progressives, we only seem to celebrate faith among poor blacks, not poor whites."

The other institution that helps hold people together is McDonald's. Mr. Arnade didn't intend to discover virtue in a mighty corporation, but McDonald's "has great value to community." He sees an ethos of patience and respect. "McDonald's is nonjudgmental." If you have nowhere to go all day they'll let you stay, nurse your coffee, read your paper. "The bulk of the franchises leave people alone. There's a

friendship that develops between the people who work there and the people who go.” “In Natchitoches, La., there’s a twice-weekly Bible study group,” that meets at McDonald’s. “They also have bingo games.” There’s the Old Man table, or the Romeo Club, for Retired Old Men Eating Out.

Churches and McDonald’s. It’s an interesting and odd combination, but Noonan’s article does a nice job of explaining why these institutions have been a source of help and comfort to so many Americans.

Arnade, a progressive who holds a PhD. in physics from Johns Hopkins, is an interesting character and a must follow [on Twitter](#), and not just because he takes great photos. In an age of narrative-driven journalism, Arnade is doing the unthinkable: he’s listening.

For Noonan, Arnade brought to mind the great Depression-era photog [Walker Evans](#). But it was [photojournalist Dorothea Lange](#) who sprang to my mind.

In any event, Arnade is doing something unique, important, and terribly interesting. If you’re interested in hearing what regular folks are saying and getting a glimpse of their lives, do yourself a favor and follow him.

You’ll meet [Cecil Stokes](#) of Baltimore, a former steel worker who now spends every morning in McDonald’s. You’ll see [hollow faces](#) asking anyone who’ll listen for \$5 “for gas.” You’ll see a minister [preaching before an empty congregation](#), save for his wife and a lone elderly person. (“It was very nice despite that,” writes Arnade.)

It’s powerful stuff. And real.

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