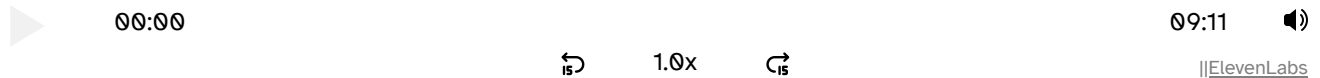


Opinion: Safety isn't only the absence of danger — it's also the presence of connection

By [G. Scott Morris](#), Special to The Daily Memphian

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY MEMPHIAN

G. Scott Morris



The Rev. Dr. G. Scott Morris, M.D., is founder of Church Health. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Memphian.

My friends Dr. Mohan and Shaila Karkera recently brought my wife Mary and me a Himalayan healing bowl from Bhutan. The bowl is beautiful — handcrafted, peaceful-looking and apparently capable of producing spiritual tranquility with a gentle tap. So far, I have only succeeded in turning the bowl over and making the dog bark, but I am optimistic it can do what it claims to do.

[Opinion: Memphis' zoning rewrite will reshape development, property rights for a generation](#)

While listening to the soft hum of the bowl, I found myself thinking about Bhutan itself, a small Himalayan nation often described as the happiest and safest place on earth.

That is a remarkable distinction in today's world. And it made me wonder: What might Bhutan have to teach a city like Memphis?

I have all too often heard people say Memphis isn't safe. But what do they mean by that? Do they mean they are afraid of being carjacked at a gas station? That certainly happens, but it also happens in every big city.

Do they mean they worry about their children Downtown at night? Don't most parents anywhere? Do they mean they are nervous when they hear gunshots, but how often do they actually hear them in the neighborhood where they live? Do they mean they no longer trust strangers? But have they ever actually trusted strangers?

Or do they simply mean they tried to merge onto Poplar Avenue at rush hour and they got cut off? That can test anyone's spiritual maturity.

Opinion: 'Poverty is never just economic'

I think when people say Memphis feels unsafe, they are often talking about more than crime statistics. They are describing a feeling that the social fabric has become frayed, that people seem angrier, more isolated, less patient, less connected.

Safety isn't just about whether crime exists. Safety is also about whether people feel they belong to one another. It is also deeply true that poverty affects safety.

When families struggle to afford housing, healthcare, childcare, transportation and food, stress rises. Despair rises. Hopelessness rises.

Communities carrying deep economic pain are more vulnerable to addiction, violence, instability and crime.

Memphis knows this reality well.

Opinion: Memphis music depends on people willing to build something larger than themselves

We are one of America's poorest large cities, and poverty creates wounds that ripple through neighborhoods and generations.

Fear also plays a powerful role in how safe we feel. Fear grows in isolation. If the only Memphis you know comes through crime alerts, social media and late-night television, you may begin to believe danger is everywhere.

Fear changes people. It narrows the human spirit. It makes strangers seem threatening. It convinces us that retreating is safer than engaging. It tempts us to lock the door, stay inside and assume the worst about one another. And while some fear is justified, constant fear becomes corrosive.

One of the best ways to reduce fear is surprisingly simple: Know people. Walk your neighborhood. Sit on your porch. Go to church. Volunteer somewhere. Learn the names of the people who live on your street. Eat at local restaurants where someone recognizes you. Talk to people who are different than you.

Human connection doesn't eliminate danger, but it often reduces unnecessary fear.

Opinion: Federal Trade Commission shuts down AI scam

Every night, Mary and I walk through our Midtown neighborhood with our dog Mimsy. As we walk, we wave at our neighbors sitting on the porches. We stop to talk to people walking their dogs. Someone comments about the weather. Someone asks about Church Health. Occasionally, someone reminds me I still owe them a phone call.

And during those walks, I feel safe. More than that, I feel joyful.

Not because Midtown is perfect. Not because Memphis has solved crime or poverty or division. But because feeling part of a community changes the human spirit. It changes my spirit.

Safety isn't only the absence of danger. It's also the presence of connection.

Yes, we are one of America's poorest large cities, and poverty creates wounds that ripple through neighborhoods and generations.

Herrington: My Memphis Grizzlies draft board for all three picks

Yet after years of caring for people who live on the margins of life, I have learned that financial poverty and spiritual poverty are not the same thing.

I have patients with little money who possess extraordinary joy, resilience, generosity and peace.

I will sit with someone who is worried about paying the light bill, whose car barely runs, who is helping raise grandchildren on a limited income, and when I ask how they are doing, they will smile and say, "Dr. Morris, I'm fine and blessed."

And they mean it. Not because life is easy. Not because poverty is romantic. It's not. Poverty is exhausting. But many of these patients possess something our culture often undervalues: deep human connection.

They know their neighbors. They belong to a church. They care for grandchildren, cousins and friends. Someone checks on them. Someone brings food when they are sick. Someone sits with them when they grieve. And that kind of connection creates a form of wealth no stock market can measure.

Opinion: People — not dogs — have created our stray problem

Bhutan seems to understand something similar. It's not wealthy by American standards. It doesn't have giant interstates or a Chick-fil-A every 2 miles. Yet Bhutan

became famous for measuring progress not simply through gross domestic product but through something called “gross national happiness.”

Imagine that in the U.S. on the evening news. “The stock market is down 400 points. But neighborhood kindness is up 12%, and people waved politely on the highway.”

Bhutan’s philosophy recognizes something deeply important: human flourishing is about more than money, control or consumption. It’s about belonging.

Many of the “safest cities” in America have figured out pieces of this.

Places like Naperville, Illinois; Irvine, California; Madison, Wisconsin, and Overland Park, Kansas, have advantages Memphis doesn’t have. They have higher income, lower poverty and smaller populations, but they rank high as safe cities because they invest heavily in parks, libraries, schools, mental health services and public spaces that encourage people to know one another.

Opinion: ‘A garden is the remedy to the human condition’

Safety isn’t created only by policing; it’s also created by community. When people know each other, fear tends to decrease, and when fear decreases, communities become healthier.

In Memphis, we often pursue safety externally while neglecting the internal conditions that make communities healthy.

We add cameras but lose neighbors. We increase surveillance while decreasing trust. We become more digitally connected while growing more emotionally isolated.

And isolation is dangerous.

Of course, to be safe, we need law enforcement. Communities deserve protection. Violent crime has real victims and real consequences. But if we believe policing alone can heal Memphis, we misunderstand both crime and human nature.

Opinion: Why is the state's focus on redistricting not matched by equal attention to BlueOval City?

You can't arrest despair. You can't incarcerate loneliness. And you definitely can't handcuff social media, although I suspect many of us would like to.

Perhaps we can learn from Bhutan's deeper wisdom. Society becomes safer when people believe they belong to one another. That's not merely sociology; it's theology.

Every major faith tradition teaches that human beings are interconnected. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Buddhism, which deeply shapes Bhutanese culture, teaches compassion and interdependence. Different language, similar truth.

The deepest human security doesn't come from walls; it comes from relationships.

And that's where Memphis still has hope because despite all our struggles, Memphis remains a city where people feed strangers after storms, where churches open their doors, where neighbors raise money for families they barely know, where nonprofit workers quietly change lives every single day.

Herrington: The Grizzlies have a decision to make at No. 3. It might be an easy one.

Those acts rarely appear in crime statistics, yet they are the foundation of real safety.

The safest places in the world are rarely places with the tallest walls or the harshest punishments. They are the places where people feel responsible for one another.

Perhaps that is the true resonance of the healing bowl now sitting in our home. Not simple peace and quiet, but the reminder that healing, for individuals and for cities, begins when people learn to care for one another again.

In the end, that may be the truest measure of safety any city can achieve.

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