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A PERSONAL WORD FOR YOU from Mack McCarter

“How can we rebuild our neighborhoods?” “How can we feel safe again?” “How can we learn to live together in harmony and love?” These are the very basic and the very urgent questions which I hear throughout this community as I meet with people and with groups all over Shreveport and Bossier. These queries are but the open windows to deep anxieties shared by all of us. They reveal a fearful concern common to our community and those of other cities in America. But these questions only circle a central but usually unasked question. And that question is this: “Are we going to collapse?”

I believe that the most pressing issue of our time is to find a way to build a model for stopping the collapse of our communities; one which can construct safe, caring, and nurturing communities which incorporate a method and a capacity for continuous inner renewal. Imagine living together in societies where love and friendship are continuously growing and as the years pass each generation experiences the greatness of relationships ever more freely. That is true progress. It is a continuous and a cumulative improvement.

Now here is another central question. “How can we begin to find our way in building a model which has this capacity to arrest the collapse cycle of our cultures and which is able to transform this collapse into renewal power?”

I am not only convinced that this can be done within history. I am convinced that we will be participants in its realization! But first we must face and surrender to the truths which can free us from our blindness to our own inadequacies and our bondage to repetitive failures. Here are some of those truths which must form the foundations for reconstruction:

ONE, Every historical human society, or civilization, has collapsed. Toynbee catalogued twenty-seven civilizations in history all of which have imploded. Ours is the twenty-eighth and we are clearly in the “decline” phase of that birth/death cycle. Why is this happening repeatedly? Look at the next truth;

TWO, Society is a “system of relationships” between and among persons connected geographically. This is the critical truth which we must comprehend. Unless we understand the basic nature of society itself, then we cannot understand what it will take to “heal” a “sick” society. Twenty-seven societies have become “sick” and died. It is critical to diagnose this deadly malaise and find a way to cure it. So;

THREE, A society becomes “sick” when a majority of its people or a dominant minority of its people live a life-style which is pervasively self-centered and non-cooperative. A sick society becomes sick because there is a breakdown in its fundamental structure. The system of relationships which forms society begins to erode. This happens when the dominant minority (the ruling class) or a majority of the people live a life style that says, “I want to do what I want to do, when I want to do it!” Our lips might be singing “We Gather Together To Ask The Lord’s Blessing,” but our lives are paragons of the “virtue” of selfishness. When we sense something is wrong then;

FOUR, Historically this selfish sickness grows unchecked within a society once a certain level of stability is achieved until it destroys the society. This “sickness unto death” to use Kierkegaard’s arresting phrase, only develops when a society, after massive effort, has achieved a level of living that is relatively harmonious and comfortable and safe within the society itself. While responding to the challenges of building and growing, the hidden illness lies dormant within a society. But when a collective security has been achieved through cooperation then the germs are activated which bring collapse. When this happens, each succeeding society has made one or more of a series of fatal errors;

FIVE, Recognizing the loss of past vitality, society mistakenly begins to exalt individuality as a cure. In not realizing that society is a “system of relationships” between and among persons living cooperatively together, but in fully realizing that “we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven,” cultures have thought by encouraging persons to achieve strength for themselves that the old strength which “built” the society would return. (It was not the “rugged individualist” that built America, it was rugged individuals working together that built America.) By choosing “individuality” as a cure, the disease is spread exponentially. But that is not the only wrong turn taken, there is another;

SIX, Recognizing the loss of past harmony, society mistakenly turns to her institutions to sustain the past stability. When the generations of the builders of society have passed on, there has been a successive diminishing of the knowledge and the methods of building a cooperative system of relationships in each generation that has followed. There is also a progressive dependence on the venerable institutions of society to build the system for us. But three truths show the fatality of this thinking for the society itself. First, institutions are a result of the system of relationships and can thus never be the birthing cause. Second, because institutions are a collective of individuals, they will reflect the nature of the constituency from which they are formed. Therefore, in a sick society, you have “sick” institutions incapable of “fixing” the problem. In a selfish society, the institutions are likewise “infected” with the fatal disease of self-centered preservation rising above cooperation. We forget Jesus’ words, “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it.” Selfish institutions arise in selfish societies. And third, certain cultural institutions can sustain “community” once it is in place, but they can never create and birth community. There must be geographical connectedness, or there is no “community.” Without living together in literal close cooperative proximity, there can be no renewing community. Without this geographical component, all attempt to restore community becomes the building of “virtual” communities. These virtual communities are abstractions {literally: torn from life} and they lead us into the dangerous delusion that they are therefore real and have the power to sustain us. History in fact has shown that no cultural institution in a decaying system of relationships has the power to stop the implosive collapse of a society.

SEVEN, Recognizing the loss of past “power,” society mistakenly seeks salvation in technology.