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A PERSONAL WORD FOR YOU from Mack McCarter

On the front page of this issue of our newsletter we have verbalized our purpose here at Shreveport Community Renewal as *striving to rebuild the neighborhood system of caring relationships necessary to restore a safe, loving, and nurturing community*. We plan to keep this statement as a fixture on the front page of every subsequent issue of *Renewal News*. This helps to ground us in our daily work and it integrates our energies around a vital center so that we may stay pointedly focused in our mission.

It also helps each of you to see that the bustling activities which you read about each month in the *News* are vitally linked to the fulfilling of some key component in this challenging adventure!

I also want you to follow this broad river which can be seen in our purpose back to the unseen springs of history and hard thinking which have given it birth. A major tenet under which we work is the premise by historian Arnold Toynbee that the fundamental nature of human society consists as a “system of relationships” between and among the persons which comprise that identifiable collectivity known as “community.”

This is an absolutely key concept because it gives us a handle with which to approach the building process necessary to produce a whole and healthy society. *We simply cannot begin the work of fixing something when we have little or no understanding as to its basic nature*. Physicians deeply study the nature of the human body at its fundamental and elemental level of composition. They study the bodily systems in operation. They learn the body in its optimum condition in order to address “sickness” with the goal of restoration to normalcy. Toynbee’s thought has been a major influence on my life and it is integral to the activity of Shreveport Community Renewal because I believe that he has accurately defined the basic nature of human society. It is a “system of relationships.”

Therefore if society is “sick,” it is sick in its “system of relationships.” This idea helped me to see that if we are to get “well,” then we simply must find a way to restore *systematically* the system of relationships in such a way that a cooperative and harmonious community is rebuilt. Now let me share with you another formative idea of Toynbee and the outgrowth of my own thinking in relation to his premises. (Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great church historian of Harvard once said, “The early church won over the pagan world because they were willing to out live, out die, and *out think* the opposition! While I am not a deep thinker, some of you are! And if these embryonic thoughts of mine can jog your contemplative capacity to incisive reason concerning our situation and its resolution, then so much the better! We need clear thinkers now more than ever!!)

How is human society “built?” In identifying and studying comparatively the twenty-eight historical civilizations or “societies,” Toynbee believed that the key process necessary to producing a workable “society,” comprised of *individual* human beings each and all thoroughly infused with highly personal foibles, wants, needs, tastes, desires, thoughts, and directions, was what he called “***the challenge and response***” phenomena.

Now imagine being presented with the opportunity and the dilemma of trying to weld together the diverse personalities of many humans into a cohesive and workable community! It just doesn’t happen by accident or by natural occurrence. Some peoples developed working and advancing societies and others did not. The difference, Toynbee believed, was the confrontation of “the challenge and response” phenomena.

When people were faced with a “challenge” whatever the nature, if they responded as a “group,” then the very response began to forge in them a sense of commonality so critical to the advent of community. With each challenge faced, the ***exercise of group response served to strengthen those ties and therefore to build a relatively harmonious but certainly cohesive society.***

In just the same way, the body builds muscle. It is through the challenge of resistance in lifting weights that the lifter builds strength in his arms. Add more resistance, then more muscle is built. But overwhelming challenge can abort the building process. Some peoples failed to advance due to challenges so great that a conquering system of relationships could not be built amidst the dispersing power of outside forces.

Yet for those peoples who met challenge after challenge, wrapping layers of binding ties which could not be broken from outside pressures, each challenge served to temper those relationships as fire hardens steel. So successful response built closeness. And generation after generation meeting challenges meant that eventually a platform for a relatively harmonious society successfully living together was established.

But now, once that platform was established how was it that each society began to crumble and eventually fall? After generations of “builders” why could we not be “*maintainers*?” All historical societies, according to Toynbee have fallen except this present civilization and we have begun the “decline” phase from which no society have ever recovered. Why collapse after so much effort?

This is the critical question which I believe must be answered intelligibly. I have some thoughts that may be of some value in this area which I want to share in next month’s *Renewal News*. This is crucial, so stay tuned!