

A Personal Word for You

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It is exciting for me to communicate with each of you the ideas and principles which are both undergirding and inspiring our work to rebuild the foundation for a caring community here within our city. It is also an important discipline because this effort must elicit from us our clearest thinking as well as our strongest energies. So I thoroughly enjoy this opportunity to present to you the philosophy, theory, and strategy of Shreveport Community Renewal in each issue of *Renewal News*.

The only slight frustration I feel is in seeking to communicate the continuity of thought which best explains our plans and the creative sources from which they spring. But every now and then it is important to go back and review the basics in community renewal which we previously examined. So allow me to summarize in this issue the foundation which we have seen necessary to build in order to accomplish the task before us.

First of all, it is absolutely critical to understand the essential nature of society. The great historian, Arnold Toynbee, helped us here by showing us through an exhaustive comparative study of history's twenty-eight civilizations (twenty-seven of which have collapsed!) that society is not an organization, nor is it an organism, but rather, it is "***a system of relationships.***"

Now that is a crucial truth, because if society becomes "sick," then you cannot heal it by organizing it! No organizational structuring restores basic harmony in the midst of societal discord for the simple reason that it does not address the basic nature of the malaise or sickness affecting society. No presidential commission, no governor's proclamation, no city commission's ordinance will cure a sick society. You cannot cure relationship sickness through organizational efficiency.

Likewise, you cannot cure society organically. If you launched a massive effort to restore to harmony a society laced with fear, crime, family disintegration, and social dysfunction by providing better streets, houses, and income, failure would follow disheartening failure. Since society is not an organism, then if "sickness" occurs, you cannot cure it organically.

Toynbee's theory, I believe, is absolutely right. Society is a "system of relationships." That understanding is basic to all of our efforts, because it means that if society becomes "sick," then it is sick in its system of relationships. In a "sick" society, the caring infrastructure, which is essential to and characteristic of true "community," has evaporated. **Therefore, to get a sick society "well" one must systematically restore the system of relationships critical to the very existence of society.**

This, of course, is the stated purpose of Shreveport Community Renewal. Our purpose is "***to rebuild the system of caring relationships, restoring 'community'*** to our city. And there is no doubt that this task is fundamentally basic. As Toynbee compellingly showed in [A Study of History](#), his comparative study of those twenty-eight civilizations, everything depends upon having that system of relationships stable and strong.

Second, we must realize that we are living within the "collapse phase" of this system of relationships. This admission is vital to our efforts because it awakens us to the urgency of the situation confronting us. Is there any doubt that the cohesive mortar of a caring infrastructure is crumbling around

us? Look back. The great seers of the race, some of them looking almost eighty years into the future, called the shots for our present dilemma.

Sir Patrick Geddes writing Cities in Evolution in 1913, Oswald Spengler in his sweeping book, The Decline of The West, in 1918, and even the great Albert Schweitzer in his two volume work, The Philosophy of Civilization, in 1919, all saw *then* what is befalling us *now*. The system of relationships is melting. We haven't been robbed, we've been embezzled!! We did not even realize that the system of relationships was being taken from us. Look back!

We used to go to sleep with the windows open and the big attic fan drawing the night air through the thin screens covering our windows. We would latch a thin screen door with skinny eye-hook latch and never wake up during the night. As children, we used to roam for miles and always feel safe except for the frequent dirt clod wars with other kids. Every adult knew every kid and every kid knew every adult on the street. And if someone had said in the 40's or 50's that they were going to buy a burglar alarm system for their house, why, we would have thought that they were absolutely crazy!

The system of relationships is crumbling and our primary task is to restore systematically the system of relationships. And that brings us to the strategy of Shreveport Community Renewal. Our plan is simple. We must intentionally and measurably rebuild the caring infrastructure necessary for "community" to exist. This means approximating the historical conditions necessary to produce persons who are no longer fundamentally *self-centered* but are predominately *other-centered* and able to live in relative harmony with one another.

The four conditions which we must produce are these: a strong multi-family support system; a strong adherence to moral and ethical demands and prohibitions; a strong tradition of group identity bringing stability and hope; and a strong sense of transcendent value giving purpose and meaning.

These are the four foundations of history's most successful "factory" which produced persons able to live for thousands of years in relative harmony. That "factory," of course, was the village structure. Our task is to apply ourselves to fulfill these conditions in practical and workable steps. This requires rigid discipline. But it also means a great adventure! In our next issue, I will show the "how" in rebuilding the New Village for our time.