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Are We Really City Folk?, 1979.

Are We Really City Folk?

Daniel Jeremy Silver

February 18, 1979

It's a shame to intrude the real world on such beauty, but I want to talk about the city and that's the real world, I'm afraid. Man has lived upon this earth for almost three million years. I understand that that little four-foot skeleton named Lucy which Dr. Johansen uncovered in Ethiopia and which inhabits ^{one} of the research laboratories at our Museum of Natural History is about of that generation and is certainly one of the upright predecessors of man. The archeologists tell us that the earliest site which can be called a city are several places which they have uncovered in the area where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers ran into the Persian Gulf, places that go by the names of Sumer, Akkad, places that can be dated to about the fourth millennium B. C. E. six thousand years ago. Man has existed upon this earth for three million years. Men have lived in cities for six thousand years. The very most that we can ^{say} then is that our experience as urban folk is recent, brief. And when we add to that the simple fact that until the last several generations never more than ten percent of the earthlings lived in cities, we can recognize how new this experience is and what amateurs we are in the art and organization of urban life.

Now, I've spoken to you these past months about the more immediate problems of our city, Cleveland, and I am pleased to believe that some of what was said here helped to focus the larger community debate, but, really, until this pulpit was publicized somewhat the city tended to be concentrating its attention on political vaudeville, on the gossip about what our political figures were doing or not doing, and the awkward way in which they were doing it rather than upon the underlying issues. In recent weeks, fortunately, the papers have begun to deal with facts and figures, issues of polity, and I think the general public has become aware of the fact that the sale of the Municipal Electric Light Plant is not the pot of gold which will suddenly

make right all that is wrong; and that even if the one-half percent increase is passed in the income tax these monies by themselves will not solve all of the problems of the city. But what I'd like to do this morning is to posit this question: What happens when the immediate fiscal problems are resolved? What happens when the books are brought in order? What happens when more responsible and responsive leaders are in place? What happens then to Cleveland, to other great cities in the nation?

Well, the answer to that question, I would suggest, requires a philosophy, a vision if you will, some understanding of what a city is and what a city can be and what a city must demand of its citizens, and it is to that philosophy and that vision, that hope, that I want to address myself to this morning because I think that it is a problem of concept which we have not begun, really, to grapple with. We simply assume the cities are and they will take care of themselves. We have no plan, no blue print, no vision of what we hope to achieve.

Now, what is a city? If you look at the earliest strata of the Bible you discover that the term our ancestors used for the city was shaah, which means a gate. The city was originally a place with a gate, a walled community. The original purpose of a city was as a fortress. In ancient times everything was unsettled and there were always robbers and brigands and enemy abroad in the land and people came together in cities in order to protect their homes and their persons and their valuables from the predators. The first city was defined archeologically by its wall and the first function of the city was as a fortress. Later on in the Bible the more familiar word eer, city, appears and it becomes the common word, the common noun, that designates the city. We don't know what its etymology may have been. It seems to have been a borrowed word, from Moabite or Akadian, but it is very clear that in Biblical thought the city was a place defined by a wall and by the various and variegated activities of its citizens. A city was a place in which there were craftsmen

and governors and merchants and mercenaries. The village was a settled place. The village was a place which had retained its umbilical relationship to the land and to agriculture. In the village society was homogenous. Everyone was an agriculturist and the grandchildren would live exactly as the grandparents had lived. Education was limited to those very simple skills that you needed to sow and to harvest. There was rarely the intrusion of a new utensil or a new piece of equipment or a new idea into the village. In the village there were no great divisions of class or wealth. Oh, there was a village head man and he governed and he dispensed justice and justice was very personal, very immediate, but whatever his whims and his willfulness, he was governed by a heavy cake of custom, a set of ideas to which everybody gave immemorial assent. The village was a very dull place. The village was a very comfortable place. Emotionally the village was a very secure place and most people who have ever lived have lived in villages.

In the city there was a throng. In the city there was color and there was bustle and there was also class division; and there were also vivid contrasts between the wealthy and the poor, between the powerful and the weak. In the village education had been in simple agricultural skills. In the city people had to know to cipher and some had to know to read and write. People were more complex. Merchants would come to the markets from other places bringing other ideas, other points of view. Children could leave the parental home and the customs of the home and live a different kind of life. There was bustle and there was alienation. There was a chance to advance themselves and there was a need to cut one's roots. Emotionally, spiritually, the city was a very disquieting place in the mother of civilization. Civilization begins when people begin to challenge the inherited ideas. The city places great demand upon its citizens because in the city we can become anonymous. We cut the ties and

and cut the roots. We lose the womb. We gain opportunity, but we lose security.

Now the world tends to think upon our people, upon Jews, as an urban community, an urban people. And yet, like most people, our experience with cities is relatively recent and most Jews have lived over the centuries on farms and villages and in small places. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, all lived in tents and when the community moved about they were semi-nomad; and when they settled any place they established what the Bible calls mahane, a tent city, an encampment. There were no walls, no public buildings, no stone placed upon stone. Our first experience with the city comes with the conquest of the Holy Land. The Canaanites, whom the Israelites displaced, were urban folk, they lived in cities. And the tribes, when they fought the battle of Jericho, were besieging a settled place, a walled place. The walls came tumbling down, but there were walls, and for the first time in the tenth and ninth century B. C. E. the Israelites began to live within the walls and live in cities. And as with all people who have migrated into cities, they developed a love-hate relationship with the town. They loved the color. They loved the pomp and circumstance. They loved the sound. The village is silent. The city is full of sound and speech and activity. They loved the opportunity. They were moved by the great public buildings, the temples, the palaces, the treasuries, the homes. And they were moved to do things that they had never done before ~~to seek what others~~ did not have, to enjoy leisure when others had to labor and be enslaved. The city was the place in which injustice entered into the life of these tribespeople. And one can read the great prophetic literature of the Bible as one long diatribe against city life, that is, against the corruption, the moral corruption and the loss of morale, which were seen as concomitants by Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah of city life. It was in the city that Jew began to abuse Jew. It was in the city that an elite developed, classes

developed, injustice developed, corruption developed, vulgarity developed, conspicuous display and conspicuous consumption developed. The city was loved. The city was hated. The city folk were seen as corrupt, and in the city, as in our cities, in Jerusalem, in Bavaria, Oshtod, Jaffa, the cities of ancient Israel developed the very same phenomenon we see in Cleveland: storefront churches, simple priests, simple preachers, who argue give me the old-time religion, let's go back to the old ways, to the farm down south and the hills where there were no great divisions, where there was neighborliness, cooperation and openness and trust and honesty. And there they invade now against the impersonal institutions of the city, the corruption, the bureaucracy, the priests, the princes, the power, the people who bedevil the little people, the poor. And even such a sophisticated prophet such as Jeremiah comes to the belief that, really, by their very nature city folk are corrupt. Run to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem, he said. Search about in her public places. See if you can find a single man, if there be a single person who does justice and seeks the truth. And his moral call, his religious message was give me that old-time religion, give me the old-time ways.

"Stand in the ways and see and ask after the old paths which is the good path and walk therein where therein shall you find peace for your souls."

When men and women have moved into the city they have developed a love-hate relationship for the city. The city is ideas. The city is color. The city is high culture. The city is corruption. The city is class war. The city is anxiety, loneliness, anonymity, frustration. And just as our fathers, being spiritually sensitive and attuned to morality, sensed the corruptive powers of the city, the Greek philosophers whose sharpened awareness of political structures, became aware of the political instability of the city. The city was the place where the mob was just around the corner always. The city was the place where, as Plato said, one must not trust the demos, the democracy, because the people are too anxious, too frustrated, too undependable,

they are not rational, they cannot be trusted, therefore, we need an elite, an oligarchy, the imposition of rule from above.

When you live in the city and live never far from fear, fear for your person, fear for your economic security, fear that somebody will try to manipulate you to their advantage, fear that when you need justice you have to work through a bureaucracy which is impervious to your plea and to your needs. There is a depersonalization to life in the city which breeds fear and anxiety. And I have long believed that a speech of our mayor which is seen as so abrasive, so excessive, by many of us is an effective concretization of the anger and of the anxiety of what he calls the little people, the people who voted for him, the people who are most separate from the sources of power, the people to whom doors are always closed, who feel the impersonality of the city, who live day in and day out with the anxiety of the community. Dennis Kucinich's language has shaped their frustration and given them vent and they approve of it and applaud it, it is what they feel very real to them.

And before we tut-tut and put down these people as new immigrants who have not yet learned the art of city living and that we would never use such language and have none of these feelings, let me remind you that probably the only reason none of us engage in that kind of language, that frustration and anxiety seem not to surface as easily with us, is that we have, everyone of us, fled the city. We had the option, the option to leave the street, the fears, the anxiety, the bureaucracy, the impersonality, the concentrations of power and people that we could not adjust to and we took that option and we moved out. And if we are not always close to despair and to frustration it is because we returned to the village. We returned to a unit of small size, a unit in which we felt comfortable, a unit which had the homogeneity, a unit which had the personality, the size which we found we could manage.

One of the problems with most discussions about urban and suburban life is that suburban life is looked upon as a single thing. We are all suburbanites, but, in point of fact, what we did was not to create suburbia. We created Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights and Pepper Pike, Orange and Moreland and so on and so on. There are a hundred suburbs around every major city and it is that fact of numbers which is critical. We could have bought together vast expanses of land and built single-family homes on that land and called it suburb, but, in fact, we insisted on the village, on a hundred little villages around every city. Why? Because we found that the factor of size, of impersonality, was one that we did not want to deal with because we did not want to feel that we were anonymous, that our voice didn't count, that we did not know the mayor, we could not consult a councilman, that justice could be dispensed by somebody we did not know, that we would have to deal with vast bureaucracies.

Four out of five in this area live in one of these little villages, the suburbs, and I would believe that four out of five who still live in the city would opt for these villages if they had the economic wherewithal to do so. The American people are villagers. We have never made a commitment as a nation, the majority of us, to city life; and I would suggest to you that there will be no effective way of dealing with the problems of the city until the majority of Americans accept the reality, the possibility, the necessity of city living, until we cease being villagers.

I am struck by the fact that in the more than two decades that I have been in this pulpit when inevitably the problems of the city are discussed by the people we know, they are talking of what? Of downtown renewal, that is, of the renewal of that small part of the city which is of consequence to them; or of some kind of regionalization of services which are critical to them: sewage, water, medical facilities, education at the higher levels and the like. We are essentially village folk who want

the advantages of the village and, occasionally, the advantages of the city for the city is a place of high culture, of finance, corporate headquarters, of advanced education. It is the place of civilization and so we want a University Circle. We want a symphony. We want a museum. We want downtown offices where our lawyers and the bankers and financial advisers and corporate executives could meet together for the issues which are of economic consequence to the region.

I fail to remember a single instance in which any large number of people, like us, rally out of concern for the bleak, the dismal, the blighted life of the neighborhoods of the city of Cleveland. We ^{have} thought of the city as something which is useful to villagers and in terms of the need of the village. We have consciously and deliberately and consistently refused to consider the city as a place in which people like us must, should, will live.

I was on a plane some weeks ago flying back from a meeting in New York. A New Yorker sat down next ^{to} me, discovered that I was from Cleveland. I heard the usual litany of Cleveland jokes and then he began to boast of how New York had solved its problems. New apartments were going up in Manhattan. The cost of office space had increased, there wasn't enough of it available. There were a number of the corporations which had moved their headquarters to the countryside who were returning to the city. There was a new vibrancy to life. And all of this I knew to be true, but he was not talking to me about New York City. He was talking to me about a small part of Manhattan Island. He was not talking about the blighted areas of the Bronx; the dismal areas of Brooklyn which remain blighted and dismal and subject to arson. And he did not say to me the Federal government moved in to guarantee the loan of the city and its economy because of the poor people living in the reaches of Queens or of the Bronx. He was saying essentially the Federal government, the State government

moved in to support the small area of Manhattan in which so much wealth and so much civilization and culture are concentrated, the things that the villagers care about.

What is true of New York is true of every major city in these United States. There will never be a meaningful urban policy until there are urbanites, until there are people who care what city life is all about until we begin to live from within the city, and to recognize what it is that cities require to survive.

Now, why can't all Americans move out into the village? Economics says they cannot. In an overpopulated world we cannot, year after year, eat up more of the farming land for single family homes on small plots or larger plots and expect to feed our country and the world. It is clear that agricultural exports are going to be one of our major sources of national wealth. It is clear on a moral ground that it is immoral for Americans not to use every bit of aerable land as effectively as we can to help to feed the world. We cannot continue to eat up the countryside if we want to have food on our tables. It's as simple as that.

The only other solution then is implosion, to live in areas of concentrated population, to learn to live cheek by jowl a lot of other people; to learn the arts of urban life. We are still people who want to live on the prairie and not to be fenced in. Go to London. You look at a bus stop. You find the people neatly and patiently standing in queues. It's worth your life to try and get on a bus in a crowded area of Cleveland or of any major city. Urban life requires patience. Urban life requires a respect for the privacy of others. Urban life requires a degree of self-control. Urban life requires that the sense of vast numbers be counterbalanced by neighborhoods, by a sense of one's own place and the personality of that place. It requires institutions which remain open and responsive, do not become bureaucracies, vast, impersonal bureaucracies unto themselves. And America has not begun to deal with the necessities of urban life.

We live in communities where a call to the fire or to the police will bring a rescue squad in a matter of seconds. It may take minutes or quarter hours or hours in the City of Cleveland. We know that if there is a holiday on a Monday, as there is this week, and the garbage that was in our backyard that would normally be picked up that day will be picked up the next day. In the City of Cleveland a week or two or three or more may pass by. When we pick up the telephone and complain to the mayor of our little village something is done. Our vote is one of a few thousand. Our dollars in this campaign are important. If we pick up the telephone in the City of Cleveland and complain we will probably get a secretary or a tape and that will be the end of it.

One of the solutions that I believe in for our area is, of course, regional government. Regional government will eliminate the need for the poorest to pay the cost of our rejects, of poverty. The regional government will in and of itself not solve the problems of the city, the area, of urban life. It will simply raise the possibility of even larger concentrations and more impersonal concentrations of power. Even as we move in that direction we must move towards the direction of opening our institutions and making them more responsive, of creating neighborhoods which have a degree of autonomy for the things which are of concern, to explore and experiment with new forms and new structures of life and that experiment, dear friends, has not yet begun in these United States and you will not solve the problem of cities until we learn to live in them, until we force our cities to create an environment in which people like us, ultimately, can live with a degree of security and a degree of pleasure.

What I have said is, in a sense, sad because a city is one of the great treasures of any nation. It is a place where civilization occurs. It is a place where all things which advance a society can be encouraged because it is a place where minds meet, people mingle, where you can see things and have experiences and enjoy a level of culture which cannot be enjoyed, known, seen in any other part. A city is the great

museum. The village is a few local amateurs showing their half-baked canvasses in a local supermarket. A city is a great symphony orchestra. The suburbs are for our friends getting together and imposing on their friends a string quartet. A city is the great corporation and the village is the mama and papa store. We are going to have to learn to live in cities. In the Bible a city is called ere of , city and the mother, the mother of the village, the mother of the outskirts. In America the city has been a disaster area and it has been a disaster area because you and I, really, deep down, don't want to live in the city and until we do, it's as simple as that, until we do the cities will stumble along, will fall on their faces, and remain the disaster areas that they are now, unfortunately.



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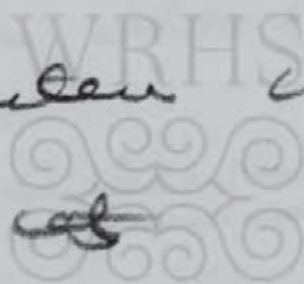
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