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THE NEW WORLD
KEMPER TOWN MEETING

It has been great being here at Kemper the last several days and having a chance to see the kind of community that has developed. You know there is a sense in which this is a false community. That is the first way that I tend to think of it, but when you really begin to look at what we have developed here, we are a community. We are a town, we are a village that has been created in the short period of a couple of days. We have the same problems and the same experiences that any village faces across this globe, or this nation today. We are already experiencing those, in terms of both the kind of structures that are around us and our own interior struggle. Today we are out to see how a group of people like us can participate in the decision-making process and participate in the rebirth of this 200 year old nation as it moves into the next 200 years of its life.

When I started thinking about Kemper and the whole city of Chicago, I began dialoguing with my father's town. He came from a small village of 603 people located in Central Texas. He took me there a number of times when I was a child. Decision making in that town was relatively easy. There were about four different nodes where people gathered and where decisions were informally made. Two of those were churches: the Baptist Church on the north side of town, and the Methodist Church of the South side of town. People gathered at those at different times to make decisions about their lives. The combination cafe and saloon on the East side of the Town Square was another node. The fourth node was the grocery store/post office located on the South side of the Town Square. After people had talked through issues for a fair amount of time at one of these nodes you could sense it was time for a decision. The mayor would get together with his councilmen, they would call a meeting and everybody articulated the decision that had already been made. Their values were already set. They had their customs established. They knew who they were going to talk to. That was already set for them, so decision making was relatively simple.

It is not like that today for most of us. Today life comes to us in a much more difficult manner. We are impacted by the radical, rapid change of things around us. I picked up a recent TIME magazine, which devoted the whole issue to a discussion of the collapse of moral values in American society. It highlighted the collapse of the family, the inadequacy of schools, and the ineffectiveness of prison rehabilitation. It pointed out that we really do not know how to relate to the community that we find ourselves in today. I began to think about going to the fireworks display tonight in Chicago, a city of 6 million people. That is quite a contrast to my father's hometown,

and the tin cans and fire crackers he used to celebrate the Fourth of July. The magnitude of the shifts that have occurred is phenomenal. The question that came to me was how do we participate in the celebration tonight? The kind of gap that has been created in our relationship to every massive social institution creates a despair over how we can authentically participate today. Yet the challenge that we find is similiar to the challenge that the pioneers faced hundreds of years ago as they traveled West across the plains. One day they were confronted by a huge mountain range there. That was a challenge. Some of those people turned back. They saw that range of mountains and decided that nothing could be done. If everybody had done that, this nation would not be what it is today. Others began brooding about how to meet those mountains and whether they would go over this one or around that one to get to those new homesteads they were establishing for themselves. We are at a point like that today. We are pioneers in a wilderness of social change in which social situations are being radically altered.

When people in my Father's hometown were making decisions, it was relatively simple because they had time. Today the complexity of life does not allow for that same kind of leisurely decision making to take place. A new kind of town meeting is now in order, like the one we will be participating in today. We need a new model or image today to hold the social processes going on in what we call society. Several years ago, I participated in a community development project in northwest Houston, called Larkin Street Community. It was a port of entry for a number of whites from East Texas and Louisiana who could no longer live on farms. They were being forced from the farms to Houston and they hated it. Their story was that they were getting ready to move out of the city. Then a number of Mexicans, Chicanos, arrived from the Texas Rio Grande Valley. They were looking for some kind of opportunity and found themselves in a situation that they couldn't deal with. In the same community, there was a well-established black community. The number of blacks in the ghetto just to the east of us had expanded and had now become part of the Larkin Street Community. Those three groups, plus a smattering of Chinese, Japanese and Fillipinos, made up that community, and I found myself trying to deal with that mixture. That was back in the days when I was a real social activist, and wanted to really deal with everyone's problems. I began talking with people and figuring out what needed to be done. What I discovered was that as soon as I got one problem solved, and went off to deal with another one, within a matter of weeks, the first problem appeared again. So, I had to turn away from the second problem and come back and try to work with the first one again. That happened over and over again.

That seems to be happening for a lot of us today. We are trying to solve one particular issue that we see, whereas what is needed is that we have to deal with the whole social process of our

society. In Larkin Street Community, if you did not deal with the public transportation lack, there was literally no way you could get around in the city. The city grew up in the age of automobiles, and was spread out across 500 square miles. Typically, one might drive as many as 40 miles to get to work and 6 miles to get to the nearest shopping center. It was impossible to walk. Yet that was the situation. You had to deal with the whole transportation situation. However, you couldn't get transportation unless you had a job. There was no way to buy a car unless you had a job. Insurance rates were high and everyone had to pay the same high interest rate, which compounded the problem for low income groups. As male unemployment continued, the women had to go out and work as charmaids. The men languished around the neighborhood with nothing to do; the youth, seeing this, became frustrated and upset with life and dropped out of high school. They began breaking into homes for spending money and excitement. The whole social process was involved. We will be dealing with the depth social interrelationship of issues in our workshops this morning to explore how we can deal with the complexity that faces us as a nation and a community today.

We had a big lawn in front of the home where I grew up, which had a thick carpet of St. Augustine grass, a type that only grows in the South. In the middle of that there were many weeds. One of my chores was trying to get rid of the weeds. I went around laboriously picking off all the little stocks, only to discover about a day later the grass hadn't grown, but the weeds were back up again. Later I got smarter, got out the lawn mower and just mowed over them. The same thing happened; those stalks were right back up. My Father finally told me I was dealing with crab grass. If you don't get at the root, you never get rid of the crab grass. There is no other way to kill it. This morning we want to look at the social issues that face our nation and community. Those are the things that we can see and what most of us want to try to deal with immediately. The next step will involve clustering those social issues. That will be a process of discovering the kernel of issues that have given substance to all of the surface issues that are irritating us. Then we will look at the kind of challenges that face us as a nation.

At lunch time we are going to have a great time with fine entertainment from the community. This afternoon we will look at the challenges in relation to the proposals that will meet those challenges. The way to solve problems today is to work as a body of people. We will create statements that hold our proposals for practical future action. They will not be proposals that come from an academic commission or a grand institute or a governmental study. They will come out of our own lives, our own participation and our own unique struggles with what this nation needs to be. It will be our proposal for what this nation needs to do.

-----Don Raschke