

Welfare Without Warmth

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IN LONDON IN 1940 the bombs had begun to fall, the shelters were filled but there was a small nucleus of men and women — tramps and dead-beats — who, though in need of shelter as everybody else was, were too verminous, aggressive and difficult to share with the rest of the community the safety of the Tube stations and the crypts. The Westminster City Council had to find a place for them and it converted two railway arches under Charing Cross Station, made them into a shelter, put up bunks, made a small canteen and an office and asked four pacifist men and two girls to run it. I was one of the pacifist men. The Council would pay the cost of running the shelter and we would do the job for nothing. In fact, we did receive from a voluntary society 2s. 6d. per week and our board and lodging, so really everybody had a good bargain—the tramps and dead-beats were out of the way and the pacifists were employed doing work which the Council could hardly ask other people to do in a period of labour shortage and national crisis. We took this

up with alacrity and began at once to make friends with our derelict customers. We felt a certain sense of belonging; they were isolated from the community because for various reasons they had been unable to cope with life and had become so individualistic that restrictions of any kind, even the simplest, were unbearable. We accepted them as they were; we attempted no reclamation, we preached no gospel, we asked only that their clothing and their bodies, if verminous, be cleaned. Many found even this too difficult to accept and left. We ran the disused railway arch as a shelter for derelict humanity. We asked nothing and achieved little, but what we did achieve was a certain respect one for the other that I have never quite found again. I believe this respect was possible because we did not violate each other in any way. We did not cajole or persuade. We allowed friendship to grow naturally; we accepted their derelict state and did not seek to change them. Yet so many over the year did change, they lost their fear and anxiety and

were able in their own time to move slowly, step by step, towards a more healthy state of mind and attitude. How was this possible? These were literally outcasts; these were the men and women who had hit the bottom. It was possible, I think, because the climate and atmosphere of the Arch was completely relaxed. In this place they found rest and time to think without officials talking to them, advising them and hurrying them on from step to step.

I can think of one example. An old man of 70 who had been walking the streets and living rough for years, suddenly developed a very unpleasant abscess on his stomach. One night he showed me this and asked if I could give him some ointment to dress it. I was so alarmed at the sight of this abscess that I called a Sister from Charing Cross Hospital to look at it. She immediately said he must be admitted to hospital and have the abscess surgically treated. I told him this news and he said, "I only want a bandage and some ointment." I replied: "You must go into hospital and have the thing looked at properly." At this he bundled his bits and pieces together and, mumbling to himself about no one wanting to help him, everybody wanting to interfere, he left the Arch and disappeared into the night. Weeks later he returned and showed me his stomach quite healed. "What happened?" I asked. "I pricked it with a pin," he said, "when it got

too big and it healed all right and, as it is better, I thought you would have me back and not have to worry about me." What a lesson this was! He stayed away until he was no longer an embarrassment. He returned only when he knew we could accept him as he was.

Of course, there were many aggressive and angry people living in the Arch who left us because they were unable to live even in this reasonably free atmosphere. Their leaving was a sad blow to us. We thought then that any overt rejection was beyond bearing. We had not, in those early days, learned the lesson that some men need to be entirely free and that they found even our Arch suffocating and oppressive.

After long years of this odd existence my thoughts naturally moved away to new work, better paid, with prospects of promotion and financial security. The war was ending and men everywhere—soldiers and pacifists alike—were beginning the task of readjusting to normal life. You cannot go on living for ever on 2s. 6d. a week, sharing a bed with one of your colleagues who was on a different shift, and though I longed to take the atmosphere of the Arch away with me and transplant it in a new job, the opportunity has never occurred and I cannot but feel some disappointment at the fact that I have never been able to establish any comparable relationships since those days. I have worked with delinquent children in

Approved Schools, in prisons for 11 years, and for the past two years looking after discharged offenders. Surely an opportunity has been there? Surely some of the countless hundreds that I have seen and dealt with might have responded as did the tramps of those war years? And yet, sad to relate they have not. Many have been friendly, many more have used me for their own ends, some I have used for my own ends, but with none have I established a relationship that could be described as natural. The obvious reason is because I have been in a position of authority and have belonged to a system. Authority and systems tend to impose themselves, and once one individual imposes himself or herself on another the relationship is unreal and largely unproductive. The gulf is fixed and the bridging of the gulf is almost impossible in terms of human relationships. Once a gulf is established, trust and confidence as between equals evaporates. This does not mean that relationships on a We-They basis are without value; they have value but are not of the essence of friendship which I believe is the basis of the support to which we all need to cling.

Professional social workers have rejected this intimate trusting relationship as a harmful one. They now talk of "professional" standards, "professional" relationships—one must not become involved with one's clients. This, of course, is arrant nonsense.

How can one person have a relationship with another without being involved? It is interesting to note the terminology of the social workers who talk of "clients." This they think is a term which denotes a relationship which is professional—the social worker-client-relationship—what does it sound like to you? It sounds all right if you are the social worker, but what if by some mishap, you are the client? This new relationship is not only practised widely but is encouraged. The "mystique" of the hospital is a good example. Patients are left in ignorance of what is happening to them; to tell patients, it is said, would be harmful to their health and recovery, but to withhold information and to do things to people without any reasons being given is surely more harmful. Do we not need to see patients as individuals? I quote a case well known to me of a young girl, married with three small children under five, her husband in prison. She was evicted from her rooms and sought shelter in a hostel for homeless families under the Local Authority. In this dingy place she received little help and understanding. She was beside herself with anxiety, and she and her children became ill with dysentery and were taken to the local Fever Hospital. One member of the Hostel staff told her she would not return to the Hostel when she was better, she would go to a "Half-way" House. Someone else told her she would have to go back for

a little while and another one told her the children would have to go into care, after all, would not that be best? In fact, all the staff were passing on these messages to the girl and none of them really knew what was going to happen to her. She is one of many. What nobody seemed to realise was that this girl with three babies, quite alone, rejected and helpless, was completely at the mercy of these officials. She needed just one person to show her some love and, more important, some person to listen to her. Everybody was so busy telling her that they forgot to ask her. In fact, they ceased to see her as a person.

The constant concern of the social workers is the apathy and disinterestedness of their clients. They complain of the problem families having so many children. We have Planning Clinics, they say. They can be helped, they can be told of ways of prevention. Of course they can, but the truth is that they won't go to these Clinics and the reason they won't go is that they do not understand the language that is spoken there. They are frightened of the clinical atmosphere and the people in these places are far too busy telling them and not asking them and, more important, not listening to them. I spoke the other day to a young mother, 26 years old, with five children and pregnant again. Did she want to be pregnant? Did she really want a sixth child? Of

course she did not. Her husband had been in prison and on his release we had talked about this, together they had planned to avoid any more children, but of course it did not work out. They lived a life of misery in their three rooms, overcrowded, dull and were constantly short of money. One night, with a few bob to spare, the two go to the pub; the atmosphere is warm and friendly, the juke box is on, life becomes bearable for a moment. The alcohol is soothing—things, after all, are not so bad, and home they go, happy for a moment, loving each other in a natural gay way and the night is young. Of course, in the morning it is too late, life is no longer bearable and the thoughts of a further pregnancy frighten her. But this is the way of their existence and, to help one has to be alongside, to become part of their lives, to be available always in need or crisis, in fact to re-live something of the spirit of those days in the Arch; to ask nothing and to expect nothing, to achieve little. In fact, to wait and listen and be around until a natural confidence and trust grows up over the days and weeks; until a social worker and the person in need can speak to each other in terms that they both understand. It seems that the more skilful we become in techniques and the more deep in our studies of human behaviour, the wider the gulf becomes. We are, in fact, too expert. We know too much about the less important things, and too little about living

and surviving in the jungle from whence comes the greater part of the social workers' cases. It seems ironic now that we appear to need so badly to go back to elementary lessons, to get closer and to live and move and have our being with those we seek to help. The clinical, unemotional professional approach satisfies only those who practice it. It is a comfortable role for the emotionally crippled. We have all wanted to take on this new role, it is a clean and tidy one. We sit at our office desks, we drive our motor-cars to the homes and hovels of our cases. We write up our case histories which are usually very precise and clear in diagnosis but much less sure about treatment methods. An eminent psychologist recently commented: "We have no shortage of diagnosticians, but what of the treatment?" And so the story goes on. We help the neurotic and the superficially ill, but those in real need, those who are really a problem become more isolated in the community day by day. Perhaps because of their obvious inadequacies they are no longer tolerable in an affluent society, or perhaps it is because

we have lost the art of listening and waiting and being with them through their difficulties. There is a great gulf fixed between them and us. Perhaps their needs are too offensive for us to stand, and we may be happy to keep the gulf as it is. There have been some attempts to come to terms with those desperately in need. Charles de Fourcauld, the great French mystic, and his religious order of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, working with the Arabs in the desert, living and dressing as Arabs, working alongside the men in the fields, helping the women and the children in the homes. Father Borelli in Naples with the urchins, first living and moving as an urchin himself—these are the men who really show the way.

Perhaps we have now come full circle and the answer to the desperately poor and needy is in our identification with them. Few will be capable of such dedication, but when the need is there and someone answers the need in this way, we can only stand aside and attempts to come to terms with to be right and meaningful, and that somehow the rest of us have missed the boat.

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