

The Police Foundation

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Nine months ago, or however long it was, when I was asked if I would give this lecture my mind conveniently summoned up a series of extremely useful topics for an address. Or so they seemed at the time ... in the interval I have experienced a diminution in inspiration and a corresponding desire, of overwhelming proportions, to postpone giving lectures until I am at least 80 years old. By that stage I have a strong feeling that I would be in a far better position to teach my grandchildren to suck eggs, rather than as at present to find myself giving egg-sucking lessons to a Guildhall full of metaphorical grandparents. (By the way, have you ever stopped to consider the origin of that old saying? Presumably egg-sucking was such a common diversion in the old days that anyone who tried to show their grandmother how to acquire the technique was roundly scolded for supreme tactlessness...) Another advantage of giving octogenarian lectures is that you are more likely to be excused for talking rubbish than when you are 34 and ostensibly in command of all your faculties.

When I was asked to give this lecture I remember at the time feeling very strongly about the reports I had read concerning elderly and handicapped people being attacked, robbed and beaten up, frequently in their own homes, in wheelchairs, and many of them frail old ladies. I fell to wondering what on earth had happened to our so-called civilized society when elderly ladies, in particular, could be so treated by people who appear to be the age of their grandchildren. I wondered about the multitude of factors which contribute towards such behaviour. I wondered why there was apparently no comparable behaviour during the terrible years of a previous period of depression in the 1920's and 30's. I wondered how the police are expected to cope with this ugly phenomenon, in their extremely difficult role as guardians of the laws enacted by parliament. I wondered, too, what possible means society has of improving the situation by the way in which the offenders are treated.

Starting with the first of my wonderings - it is interesting to note how long this country has been urbanized, with all the problems that brings. It has been urbanized for fully half a century longer than any of its main competitors. It is hard to believe, but owing to the industrial revolution the proportion of the working population in agriculture had fallen to 9% in the UK by 1900. It did not fall to that level in the USA until 1957; in W. Germany until 1970 and in France until 1977. As a consequence of people in Britain being removed from the land for generations (without even any folk memories surviving of what it was like to live on or near the

imagery which gave the Saint his halo. Among the Greeks and Romans the old were venerated and one has only to think of grey old Nestor who, though too old to fight himself on the great plain of Troy was nonetheless there, worth legions of men, because of the wisdom he brought to the conduct of the campaign. Amongst the primates, too, we have the classic example of the great apes, amongst whom the older the ape the higher he is raised physically on the boulders and trees of their keep and the more is he consulted in moments of climax and crisis. In our own society we seem to have disturbingly reversed this natural element in our human make-up. More and more families are bereft of their elderly members as they move into special homes for the aged - excellent as these places are and with dedicated and devoted people to care for them. But there is no substitute for the family context where the younger generation is now deprived of the sources of their own enrichment and the development of the kind of awareness which comes from a close contact between young and old. I hasten to add I am only too aware of the reasons which have led to this situation developing, but with every advantage there is a corresponding disadvantage lurking in the background. In the case of the elderly no longer being with the family the disadvantage is that there is no-one to spend time with the children and relate to them while the parents are both occupied elsewhere. The cases of inexcusable brutality and callousness, which we read about almost daily and with which the police and the courts are obliged to deal, are probably an unconscious function of the loss of humanity our society has suffered in its urban mutation. There are no doubt many other factors which help to encourage such behaviour and one of them is likely to be the alienation from our society felt by numbers of young, black, British people, born in this country but deeply demoralized by the fact that the colour of their skin alone prevents them from being treated the same way as their white contemporaries. This, however, is the subject of another lecture at a later date. What I want to say at the moment is that whatever are the factors involved it is important to realise that we in society as a whole are, to all intents and purposes, accessories before and after the act of brutality against the old. It is also important to appreciate that one of the fundamental axioms of civilization is that no matter what is done to us, as far as the consequences are concerned we, and we alone, are responsible for our reactions and must see to it that we do not use injury to ourselves as an excuse for inflicting greater injury on others, above all the most defenceless of others.

Now I must confess that I come to the most difficult stage in the process of reflection upon which I embarked, if you recall, earlier on in this lecture. That was

find ways of including a far greater number of young than was possible in 1982. In fact, at the risk of being accused of talking rubbish, (because I have seen it happen before!) I would suggest that such a scheme ought to include as many school-leavers as possible throughout the entire country. But above all, I would urge the Home Office to consider ways of treating the young offender in the way I have suggested so that an element of the natural order of things, which has been eaten out of our social structure by the indiscriminate cancer of urbanization, can be renewed before the situation becomes considerably worse. Of course there is no guarantee that such an approach will produce the desired result, but my guess is that a considerable proportion of offenders would emerge with a different approach to life and to the way in which they relate to others.

In concluding, I want to emphasise that I know there are several different ways of looking at this problem. Mine is just one way - but I present it for what it is worth, in the fervent hope that it has provided some food for thought. Whatever happens, ladies and gentlemen, I am bound to be wiser at the age of 80. What a pity most of you won't be here to benefit from that wisdom!