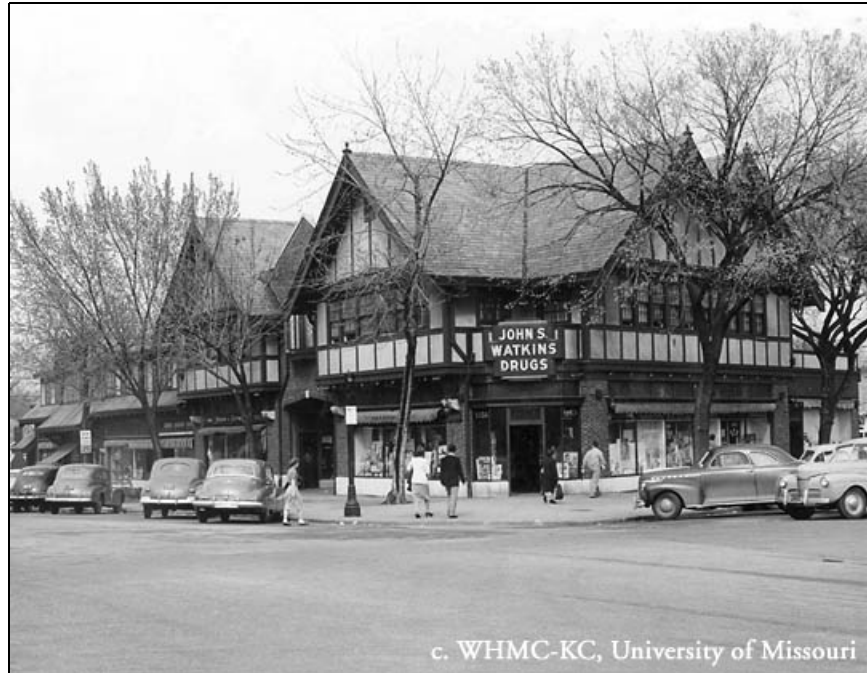


# **One Man Views the Heartland: A Critical Study of Character and Community**



c. WHMC-KC, University of Missouri

*Western Historical Manuscript Collection  
Kansas City*

## **Charles N. Kimball Lecture**

**Rabbi Michael Zedek**

Rabbi Emeritus, B'nai Jehudah Congregation  
CEO, Jewish Federation of Cincinnati

October 23, 2000

## The Charles N. Kimball Lecture Series

is a tribute to our late friend and civic leader, Dr. Charles N. Kimball, President Emeritus of the Midwest Research Institute, to acknowledge his support of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City and his enduring interest in the exchange of ideas.

Charlie Kimball was a consummate networker bringing together people and ideas because he knew that ideas move people to action. His credo, "Chance favors a prepared mind," reflects the belief that the truest form of creativity requires that we look two directions at once – to the past for guidance and inspiration, and to the future with hope and purpose. The study of experiences, both individual and communal – that is to say history – prepares us to understand and articulate the present, and to create our future – to face challenges and to seize opportunities.

Sponsored by the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, the Series is not intended to be a continuation of Charlie's popular *Midcontinent Perspectives*, but does share his primary goal: to encourage reflection and discourse on issues vitally important to our region. The topic of the lectures may vary, but our particular focus is on understanding how historical developments affect and inform our region's present and future. The Lectures will be presented by persons from the Kansas City region semi-annually in April, near the anniversary of Charlie's birth, and in October. Additionally, presentations may occur at other times of the year, if opportunities present themselves.

WHMC-KC appreciates the substantial financial underwriting and support for this Series provided by the **Charles N. Kimball Fund** of the Midwest Research Institute and by other friends of Charlie Kimball.



**1911-1994**

# INTRODUCTION

to the October 23, 2000 Charles N. Kimball Lecture

## David Boutros

Associate Director, WHMC-KC

Good afternoon. I am David Boutros, Associate Director of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, the sponsor of the Charles N. Kimball Lecture series.

Many of you are aware that the mission of WHMC-KC is to collect, preserve, and make available historical documents concerning the events, culture, and people of Missouri and the Midwest. You also know that we take seriously another aspect of our purpose – to promote an understanding and use of our history in preparing for and living the present and future. The study of history is not simply exercising one's memory or having a sense of nostalgia. It is a critical process of finding patterns and trends, of identifying models of successes and failures, of preparing for chance opportunities.

This lecture series is one means of accomplishing that mission. Established to honor Charles N. Kimball, we hope it serves to encourage thought and discussion about issues important to our community. Our publication on our World Wide Web pages ([www.umkc.edu/WHMCKC/](http://www.umkc.edu/WHMCKC/)) of both the Kimball lectures and of Charlie's Midcontinent Perspectives series is another means to that end – to preserve and make readily available thoughtful perspectives by committed leaders of our community.

Also to that end, I am pleased to inform you that we have recently created a new "electronic publication," ***Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols***, intended to provide insight into the reflective and deliberate process used to create a sustainable community in Kansas City. Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) can arguably be viewed as the single most significant influence on the development of metropolitan Kansas City in the twentieth century. His concepts of community and his business and civic activities had direct impact on the creation and growth of key institutions such as the Nelson Gallery of Art, the Kansas City Art Institute, the Kansas City School District, the University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri-Kansas City), and the Liberty Memorial, among others. Moreover, the urban form of Kansas City was and is defined by the Nichols developments, the method of their management, and the philosophy behind their design.

Lastly, I would like to alert you to another project we have undertaken – a comprehensive oral history program entitled, *150 Years...150 Stories: An Oral History Project for Kansas City*. Our plan is to videotape individuals about their experiences and knowledge on a wide range of themes about the whole metropolitan area. We are currently raising funds for the project, and I shall keep you informed about its progress at future lectures.

In closing I would like to note the passing of Donald H. Chisholm who presented his, ***The Philanthropic Philosophy of Arthur Mag*** as part of the Kimball series on October 21, 1998. As Chuck Curran said in his introduction to that lecture, "In terms of

both professional and civic accomplishments, Don Chisholm is the quintessential Kansas City leader.” I know you all share in his family’s and the community’s loss.

Now to introduce today’s speaker, I give you Rev. Robert Hill, senior minister at the Community Christian Church. Rev. Hill...

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## **Dr. Robert Lee Hill**

Pastor, Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

I've been blessed beyond measure to know Rabbi Michael Zedek for the fifteen years of my ministerial career here in Kansas City, Missouri. From my perch you could not have chosen a better individual to honor the legacy and further fulfill the dreams of Charles N. Kimball. For Michael, if he is anything, is a people-person who loves worthy ideas as well as a person of high ideals who loves people, both qualities that Dr. Kimball so nobly embodied in his civic leadership.

For the record, please note that while Michael has seemingly vanished to another locale – Cincinnati, Ohio, where he holds forth as the CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Cincinnati and frequents Graeter's, the repository of what he claims to be "the world's greatest ice cream" – he is not vanquished in his influence on Kansas City.

It would have been simple enough for this Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Hamilton College, and a Fulbright scholar, this graduate of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute to come to Kansas City in 1974 and two years later be raised to the position of senior rabbi. The general membership and leaders of Temple B'nai Jehudah will testify how he made his influence known and felt on them for 25 years. Their continuing "leading light" status in the greater Kansas City metropolis is testimony enough of Michael's leadership. But he didn't stop there.

It would have been enough if he had merely led his congregation – through brilliant teaching and powerful preaching, through caring mercy and vigilant prophecy, through tender attention to the least in his midst and to regarding no one finally at least but fully brother and sister and sojourner on the trek of life. But he wouldn't, he couldn't stop there.

It would have been enough if he had only involved himself in civic leadership responsibilities such as being chaplain to the Kansas City Police Department, and a member of the Mayor's Task Force on AIDS, and the Mayor's Municipal Task Force on Race Relations, and chairing the Mayor's Red Flag Commission and co-chairing Project Harmony, and attending and organizing enough worthy-cause fundraising dinners to make him swear off chicken from his preferred diet for the rest of his life. But he didn't stop there.

It would have been enough for Michael to gain the admiration and applause of his closest peers and an adoring public with accolades from a host of sources, such as *Ingram's Magazine* (Local Hero Award, 1992), and Health Midwest (Outstanding Citizen Award 1994), Rockhurst College (*Pro Meritus* Award, 1995), and Metropolitan Lutheran Ministries (Friend in Deed, 1998), and ReStart (Liberation Award, 2000). But he dared not stop there.

Finally he went and became our friend, someone we respect and ultimately enjoy.

Someone who knows and has taught well the twin temptations of any clergy: Moses' temptation – to love God more than he loves the people; and Aaron's temptation – to love the people more than he loves God.

Someone who is – counter to what anyone might think from listening to this fast-talking former New Yorker – truly humble. He is simply “One Man,” as the title of his presentation today so aptly puts it, speaking from the heart to and about the heartland, about what he knows and admitting what he does not know, about matters of great import and consequence. But he didn’t and doesn’t stop there.

Finally, he had to go and become my friend, my brother, and my rabbi. We are in for a treat, and maybe even a few tricks, in this season of such, as we welcome this blessed and blessing one, Rabbi Michael Zedek.

## **One Man Views the Heartland: A Critical Study of Character and Community**

**Rabbi Michael Zedek**

October 23, 2000

It would have been enough if we'd had only the introduction. Thank you very much, Bob. I respect so many of your qualities, including your ability to spread the truth in unusual directions. But I thank you with my heart, and I appreciate inordinately not just words, but also our connection.

I'm also very grateful for this opportunity. It may be the last time I'm invited to speak in Kansas City. That's a warning of what is to come; for I intend to explore some of the challenges in our community, rather than simply undertake a litany of praise about all the wonder and joy, all the marvelous things we know about Kansas City. I thought it was important to go in another direction.

Let me begin with a story of a gentleman who found himself hopelessly locked inside the bathroom of his very handsome Johnson County home. Fortunately there was a phone, so he called the Fire Department for assistance. Upon arrival, they immediately solved his problem by taking an axe to the uncooperative door. His freedom secured, the man nonetheless complained, "Why didn't you at least try to open the door from the outside?" "Listen, Mister, when you call the Fire Department, we bring hoses and axes. Chances are we are going to use one or the other."

Forgive me then, for I am a rabbi, one who begins with what else, a biblical reference. Specifically in the layers of commentaries with which Jewish tradition confirms a love affair with the text, the sages note a distinction between the words of a pagan prophet named Balaam and the giant of Hebrew Scriptures, Charlton Heston.

For Balaam, as you will recall, is hired to curse the Israelites. Yet he offers fulsome words of praise. Contrast that with poor Moses, who spends considerable time and temper in critical disputation with his exceedingly reluctant and often disobedient flock. On some level, the rabbis suggest that just doesn't seem right or fair. So their response offers an ancient variation on the oppositional theory that only Richard Nixon could initiate American efforts to recognize Red China. I suspect you're surprised to find that that was already in the Bible. They go on, "if their enemy Balaam were to criticize, so what? What would you expect? Who would pay attention?" Similarly, since Moses loves the people, what would we anticipate but to hear hyperbolic and parental praise? And yet his is the voice of criticism precisely because he loves, and since his comments come from that nobility of purpose, come infused with credibility and commitment, therefore, his critique can be heard and responded to. So his message, one with currency still today and every day: We can do better. We must do better.

All of that in the manner of an apology before the fact, for I love this town and, especially, its people. And because I do, my concerns – be that praise or criticism – are neither casual nor without pain. Further I share the critique as part of the circumstance and challenges to come, even if for the moment at least, Karen and I have moved away,

but not by any stretch do we feel we've gone. That is, my heart and my criticism belong to and in the heartland.

What follows, then, may be categorized (and I hope it will be heard) as a lover's quarrel.

So let me begin gently with a tale from Arab folklore, one that describes a fool named Hamdi. Albeit like many a fool, at least in literature, he possesses uncommon wisdom.

One day in his small village, Hamdi receives the assignment for three weeks running to present the lesson or sermon at Friday afternoon prayers. The townsfolk are delighted at the prospect of the sport and silliness, the opportunity for ridicule that awaits as they fully expect Hamdi to play his part and be the fool. So the first Friday, he mounts the rostrum, looks out at the expectant audience and inquires, "Good people, do you have any idea what I'm going to talk about?" Of course they respond, "No." And he says, "Well, if you have no idea what I'm going to talk about, there's no reason I should waste my time," and he leaves. The second week: "Good people, do you have any idea what I'm going to talk about?" Realizing what happened the week before, they all say "yes" and he says, "If you already know what I'm going to talk about, there's no reason to waste my time," and he leaves. The third week creates a very serious problem. Half of the people respond to his question with a resounding "yes," and half the people say "no." So Hamdi suggests, "If those of you who know what I'm going to talk about will tell those who don't, we'll save a lot of time," and he leaves.

More than just a good story, the tale reminds we are good people, and we live in a good town. But what do we look like, especially should we embrace the effort to be an even better place? I mean by that not only something out there, be it a slumbering Power and Light Project (I now understand all but dead) downtown, or the Sprint campus still sprouting in what used to be referred to as *far* Johnson County. No, we begin with something about the character of this community, and more intimately, something about ourselves. For so much depends on attitude. How we think often determines what we see and certainly what we may imagine or dream. Perception is a very convincing reality.

Consider a story about a newcomer who visits the rabbi's study. "Rabbi, I'm new to town, I'd like to ask you a question. Tell me, what kind of town is this?"

Now this being a Jewish story, the rabbi of course begins, "That's a very interesting question, but first let me ask you a question. What kind of town did you come from?" "Not a very nice place really, people wouldn't go out of their way to help another. They were quite unfriendly." And the rabbi's response, "Well, I think you'll find this place pretty much the same."

As fortune has it, the next person to visit the rabbi is also a newcomer, and he asks the same question and the same response. To which the newcomer says, "It was a wonderful place. People were really quite remarkable." And the rabbi's answer, of course, is, "I think you'll find this town pretty much the same."

And the answer is we are both kinds of town. In fact, maybe every place harbors that type of dualism and schizophrenia. For example, no one could dispute this



community is far from immune from substantial and virulent racism. Indeed a restraint on progress for all revolves around that awful and curious “American dilemma,” as Thorsten Veblen so euphemistically described our racial divisions. Simply put, racism pervades too much of our public and private lives, some legacy perhaps of Civil War days, Ozark roots, free state/slave state tensions, media sensationalism and our individual fears, stereotypes and insecurities. And yet consider my dear friend Emanuel Cleaver, arguably and still the most popular local political leader, and surely *a*, if not *the*, most articulate voice for our community’s successes. As well, what about Alan Wheat? For despite skin color, no doubt Alan could have served indefinitely as representative from the Fifth District, and he could not have done so without substantial (so-called) majority group support.

The other side of our state line is not immune to these moody pendulum swings. Remember a peculiarly conservative, more accurately an “intemperate” restrictiveness – a tendency of just recent days when the notion of fine dining and Johnson County was an unquestionable oxymoron. Of course I refer to “no liquor by the drink,” even for a time – God-forbid the heavens be shamed – as an attorney general tried to enforce that prohibition on commercial airlines flying over Kansas airspace. And yet the same state – no one could dispute a very Republican state – long resisted (although to reveal my prejudice) ultimately succumbed to the siren call of capital punishment.

And the occasion of the festivities in connection with our 150<sup>th</sup> provided moments to reflect on my own first impressions. In fact while reading the *Kansas City Star* commemorative edition, I was taken by one article that described an incident at the Prairie Village Hen House, until I realized the reporter was recounting an event I had shared with her.

Specifically, I mentioned the experience of a congregant, freshly relocated from New York City. In the frozen food department (you may know that unless you be, like former President George Bush, grocery scanner challenged), that section stretches out toward the Colorado border. Clearly as she retold, my friend had no idea where the item she was seeking might be found amidst so much frozen stuff, when suddenly she felt a tap on the shoulder. Her immediate response was to drop her purse on the assumption she was being mugged. Much to her surprise and relief, a friendly voice, not even an employee by the way, inquired, “May I help you find something?”

For we are nothing, if not a polite town. I remember just a few years back *USA Today*, even before they established us as a major center for obesity (second only to Philadelphia), did a nationwide study to determine the most helpful communities across America, and no surprise, we acquitted ourselves quite well.

My initial experience on arriving in Kansas City in July of 1974 confirms the data. Admittedly being fresh from New York probably colored my expectations and impressions. But as I emerged from St. Joseph International Airport, or as it also has been called, Kansas City Inconvenient, my first thought was where is the litter? I mean doesn’t anyone live here? Then, too, there was so much public statuary, and all without the benefit of graffiti. Very suspicious, what could such backwardness portend? But the capstone of those first days had to have been my visit to a Seven-Eleven store, my purpose, simply to purchase a carton of milk rather than draw conclusions in sociology.

So I presented myself at the counter only to be asked, “How are you today?” “Excuse me? What do you mean how am I? What’s your angle, buddy?”

But truth is such pleasantness is easy to get used to. It’s even contagious. More substantively and problematic, everyone comments on our being (and we are) a very friendly place. But at least for many newcomers, there can be a “seduced and abandoned” aspect to that initial warmth.

And while I have no statistics to compare, I suspect Greater Kansas City ranks quite high on any comparative charts with regard to the percentage of our population who have lived here most, if not all of their lives. Additionally I have a notion that our area has a substantial proportion (that is more than our fair share of the bell-shaped curve of things) of multi-generational families.

Anecdotally, I recall some twenty plus years ago. Our older daughter’s preschool carpool had just arrived. Then 3½ years old, Susan insisted that her grandmother, visiting from the East Coast, just had to go out with her to meet the four other youngsters. As any good grandparent, she obliged only to hear Susan not so much introduce her Grandma, as insist, “You see, I have a grandmother too!” For amazing to us, or an unrecognized commonplace to others, every other child in that station wagon (the minivan had not yet been invented) was living in the same community as at least one set of grandparents.

That kind of long-tenured and multi-generational investment may contribute to a certain sleepiness, a don’t-rock-the-boat, everything’s-fine-as-it-is attitude. And I assure you there may be more significant aspects to this family thing, including some thoughts for a bit later in these remarks. For the moment, I want to point out that many newcomers, to their surprise and disappointment, misread our friendliness. For they (we) often wonder what happened to the next step, an invitation to dinner, for a party, to meet other friends. All the while I imagine the more long-term residents don’t even realize that anything untoward is occurring. For is there another large community where more people have more lifelong – going back to high school and even earlier – friendships?

That’s a wonderful phenomenon. But it often creates more than moments of isolation for us late arrivals. For we often form alliances with fellow newcomers or, as well, folks with less investment in a community’s well being, the proverbial shallow rootedness of company transfers and transients whose communal agenda or investments in citizenship may rarely extend beyond concerns for a child’s soccer league.

But a different aspect, even an asset of life in the heartland may be demonstrated by what I call “Zedek’s theory on life in New York.” No doubt Manhattan – the big one – is a great, exciting and challenging city. So much so that I believe that if one resides in New York and is a good person, then a particularly curious phenomenon may occur. Much like the resistance method underlying the effectiveness of Nautilus weight machines, there is so much resistance to being nice that should one persist, one’s nice muscle development is accelerated. The result is that we find in New York a substantial accumulation of some quite remarkable persons. Unfortunately, a not insignificant portion of New Yorkers would be described by midwestern folk as rather unpleasant, surly, and rude.

My notion isn't that such is or isn't accurate. Rather such is the unrecognized stance so many residents of Gotham take just to protect themselves psychologically, to survive in that endlessly challenging city.

That is, out here we have the existential questions of self and soul with which to wrestle. New York means those intimate matters of the soul, plus the conglomerate of circumstance and challenge that can often get in the way – from constant traffic jams and potholes, to noise, crowds, muggings, cabdrivers, car horns, pickpockets – all of which may conspire to produce neurotic behaviors on an unusually massive scale. But then I recall the words of a New York based psychiatrist, Dr. Aaron Stern. For those unfamiliar with the name, his most widely known achievement is being responsible for the movie rating system, G, PG, etc. He once wrote, “Neurosis is the highest form of adaptation in a society.”

A different manifestation of this distinction may be especially of the moment. Among the many things that early on I noticed as distinct to life in Kansas City, people here tend to believe that right thinking folk with right action can solve just about any problem. And we shall persist in that conviction despite substantial evidence to the contrary. In New York, cynicism often pervades to the extent that a dominant strain of thought offers there is nothing anyone can do about that particular situation other than observe, critique, and, if possible, find a way to avoid further contact.

It's the difference between a problem and a situation, between a conundrum that has solution and a Shakespearean dilemma, about which resignation is the only wise course. And the point is our Midwestern naiveté suggests (to me) that even when we are wrong (we aren't going to fix [fill-in-the-blank] your particular issue), what a wonderful and worthy way to be wrong. For even if we be mistaken, we might make some movement, some progress anyway. For we want things to work and work well.

Perhaps a small symptom of this circumstance is demonstrated by a refrain with which every newcomer soon becomes familiar. With regard to our endlessly varied and often volatile weather patterns, there is the mantra – you could even beat me to its articulation – “This isn't typical Kansas City weather.” No matter the temperature, precipitation or season, I've come to learn that “this isn't typical Kansas City weather,” clearly defines our weather. As the *Kansas City Star* commemorative issue put it, “Is there anywhere else where the four seasons so often pop up in one week?”

And while we are probably unable to impact our weather, that isn't the case about a whole range of concerns to which I intend to address the remainder of these comments.

As every citizen of our metroplex learns, the 1900 rebuilding in 90 days of the burned old Convention Hall has an almost (eliminate almost) a mythic aspect as a way of defining our community's “can do” Kansas City spirit. The *Star* suggested rebuilding Convention Hall impressed the nation and put us on the “can do” map. But the question must be asked is this myth as an emblematic and controlling story, or just another synonym for falsehood?

So what have *we* been doing? Again prejudices on display as an unabashed advocate for urban living: is 119<sup>th</sup> Street the best we can do? It's hard to believe that such utilitarian blandness offers itself as a product of planning and design. It may not

surprise that for those, like me, who want the city part of our metroplex to do well, to be attractive, that it warms my jealous heart to drive out that way. I like to imagine that 119<sup>th</sup> Street offers itself as a compelling advertisement for the urban core.

Criticism aside, we are all invested in and beneficiaries of what folks do, what we build and who we think we are, throughout the region. That means Kansas City matters to the quality of life for a resident of Lenexa and Lee's Summit and Liberty and Mission Hills, and yes, grudgingly perhaps I admit, vice versa.

In fact I suspect the "can do" Kansas City spirit stands in contrast – more honestly, opposition – to that perplexing motto that probably leaches through our state line barrier. I refer, of course, to "Show Me."

Recall the glory years of the Royals and the battles with the divisional rival Chicago White Sox. Fans at then Royals Stadium would politely, sometimes enthusiastically applaud, that is, react to achievement on the field, but we would never set the spark ourselves. Perhaps you remember how rattled our boys would get at old Comiskey Park, as even before the first pitch, the stands and the fans would buzz, literally rock with the energy of chanting, "na-na-na-na, na-na na-na, oh boy, good-bye." We don't behave that way, unless, perhaps, to cheer the *defense* of our beloved and underachieving Chiefs.

More seriously, was there ever a less entrepreneurial battle cry, ever a greater clarion call to let others do the work than "Show Me?" We'll stay on the sidelines, observe and then maybe, just maybe we'll nod approval, and if really motivated, we might just pick up what others have learned and done after they've done it. "Show Me."

Yet the *Star* trumpeted, quoting now, "our pioneering spirit," citing "an executive with corporate experience from coast to coast [who]...finds a barn-raising attitude here, even though many Kansas Citians are generations removed from the homestead."

In fact, that's the point. Barn raising is a wondrous activity. But it is decidedly not pioneering. You may recall that marvelous scene in an old Harrison Ford movie, Witness, as he hides among the Amish of the Pennsylvania Dutch country. I recall being moved beyond words at how a community with purpose can do extraordinary things. But the thing they were doing, the thing we too often do as well, required not only a supremely valuable sense of purpose, but also a totally agreed upon agenda. However, progress doesn't happen, innovation will not occur, if everybody must agree, sign on, give approval, if not applaud, before we can begin.

Would there be a Stower's Institute if its founders had needed initial applause, let alone heeded the advice, often unsolicited, that they received? Would we have Hallmark, or have had Marion, if those founders had bowed to communal or conventional wisdom? Far too often, especially in civic life, what I call the "tyranny of consensus" has been our guiding principle. For if we must wait until everyone agrees, then we empower the most obdurate, the most recalcitrant among us. The prime example: consider Union Station. Wonderful, of course, but it only took what, 28 or so years? So I read in Friday's paper, "Frustrated by years of spotty development in the urban core, the Civic Council hopes to promote faster consistent growth by building a consensus of Downtown stakeholders."

Consider what we do, and too often, to those who would get out and lead. Pioneers know they may, and often will, get shot at. But in Kansas City, too often, that means in the back. Getting out in front too often means getting silenced or out-of-town. Remember the Liewiekes? My God, what energy, and vision! Consider the slings, arrows, and indictments flung at Frank Morgan, may he rest in peace. What of Stan Durwood? Was there ever a man with more ideas who took more criticism for them? It's probably a blessing that he's not here to see what isn't going to happen Downtown. Can anyone doubt if left to do so, he would have had or found a way to dream on?

More recently, Bill Nelson knows the treatment. How dare he imagine, dream, disturb our convictions and slumber! Downtown arena indeed, development on the East Side of town, what are you talking about?

So even when that Norman Rockwell, roll up the sleeves, "can do" quality gains ascendancy, it most often has been, at least in the last 30 or more years, on projects or efforts that sabotage a sense of place, *gravitas*, and connection. So the world-class stadia are out there, so the airport is *way* over there, Kemper is somewhere else, and the Missouri River, only recently discovered.

It's as if 2/3's rule for illustration, there is in the Heartland an inherent distrust of urban living. Is there another city that can present itself as a more exceptional example of sprawl, as we grow ever larger in area and simultaneously drop in our relative population among cities? Is there any other metropolitan area – I'm asking, I really don't know – that has gone so long without a North-South corridor *à la* Bruce Watkins Drive? Not only a road, but also it intends to be an insistent artery for connection. All the while, innumerable opportunities to achieve some places of population density were dismissed to the "435 beltway's call," or as they name such roads in France – and I think this is significant – *périphérique*, on the periphery.

In fact in every decision in which the choice was between density and diffusion of the community, diffusion always won. So no single definable location really serves to bring us together, including what the *Star* calls, "the city's central meeting place." The Plaza doesn't even have a plaza: that is, some area for people to gather, assemble, even perhaps to rally for or against something. So the *Star* points out, alas, "The Plaza is a place for people to gather without necessarily being together."

The whole phenomenon calls to mind an exceptional volume of some years back, Habits of the Heart, by Robert Bellah and a host of other noted sociologists. The book describes a pendulum type tension, a dichotomy in the American spirit, one between a communitarian impulse and an embrace of isolation, between, "I couldn't do without you" to "I did it my way and nobody helped!" Some of that latter spirit what the poet captured in the refrain, as the pioneers pushed further along the lone prairie, "'Elbow room,' cried Dan'l Boone."

One consequence then is we suffer, and I believe it is a suffering, from an area-wide isolationism. We build further out, in often ever-larger fortresses. We occupy our dream homes and often find ourselves with disturbing visions, if not nightmares of isolation and ennui. For these modern castles may be lacking moats, but they always come equipped with security systems and, nowadays, home entertainment centers so you need never leave home again.

So we want our solitude and cry out for connection. For architecture matters, sprawl matters. Indeed there may be no greater issue in American culture than what will bring us together. New technologies may provide virtual meeting places but still we hunger for face-to-face encounter. That why very little and mega churches are flourishing. Why the movement – may it increase – to recapture Brookside rather than living in areas (communities seems too strong a description) in which as general principle, no sidewalks are required or, often, it seems, allowed. And while I'm walking a proverbial plank, or burning a few bridges, I may as well add some additional fuel.

Perhaps you've noticed something that's patently clear to new arrivals, at least until they start behaving this way too. It often sounds as if just about everyone in the Kansas City area works for the Chamber of Commerce. You know the litany: we have more miles of boulevard than...more fountains than any city except...we call ourselves "major league, world-class, a prime-time city." And in such recitations, we are at least as likely trying to convince ourselves as sell that vision to others. For we are anxious, insecure about our place and value. Two examples: the first I hope you won't dismiss as vanity only, but from my first days in Kansas City, I would regularly hear people inquire "when are you going to leave?" Immodestly, I suspect that circulated because I was presumably a good rabbi, meaning I'd move on. Less egocentric, this may represent some multi-generational transference from the days of the old Kansas City Athletics. The team behaved like and was often thought of, like its predecessors, as a minor league affiliate of those hated New York Yankees. In effect, when we had a really good player, he'd end up traded to the despised Bronx Bombers – look it up, it's true.

So insecurities exposed, we fall back on a variation of "this is a nice place to live, but I wouldn't want to visit." Namely we insist, with lots of evidence, that this is a great place to raise a family. At worst that translates into the faint phrase of "we're boring." But at its best, that may provide a path upon which to go and to grow. So why don't we just decide to be that? Break molds for it. I can't emphasize enough, cross state lines to do it! "Bi-State" – embrace that commitment with passion, commitment, bold leadership, and dollars. Let's make that a real central vision, our mission, but not with just a master "everybody has got to get onboard plan." We need to encourage vigorous and diverse action.

Similarly, herein one person's perspective of some items that might get us closer to that land of, forgive me, *Ahs*. (It sounded better when I read it myself). And forgive in advance the lack of elaboration, perhaps another time, including some moments in the questions to follow.

We need strong leaders and leadership. That means people in charge, especially a strong and empowered mayor. It is remarkable how we expect our mayors to lead us and then complain when they don't, but don't allow them the power to do it! We need an environment that encourages risk. That includes entrepreneurial funding, not only for business, but also investment in ideas, connections, and especially individuals. And yes, we need a newspaper, and I think this has gotten better, that doesn't take potshots. And certainly we must, even if it's been talked about for years, simplify planning and approval processes at City Hall. One stop shopping works and it gets good things done. And we especially need a great university. I note a recent column by Steve Rose about plans for KU's Overland Park campus. "Before this decade is over," he writes, "the University of

Kansas will give this metropolitan community the one piece of the puzzle we have been lacking, a massive presence of a major university.” While I don’t know what will come of KU’s plans, I do know their principal address will continue to be Lawrence, Kansas. If not that great university, how about at least one and better, two. Maybe Stowers and the Life Sciences Initiative will help. But without substantial endowment support, UMKC will, I fear, always be a stepchild of a Columbia-based and under-nourishing source, with consequences that aren’t only for the University. For that missing ingredient impacts all.

So to close these far from complete observations, I await your reactions, responses, including what I’ve left out, including for instance, only tangential reference to signs of vitality, energy in many of our neighborhoods. Don’t hesitate to suggest where you think I’m wrong, not explicit enough, didn’t go far enough. But before I turn to your questions, comments, and alternative speeches, I want to finish with a reflection by our sports doyen, Joe Posnanski. He writes, “We have let the nay-sayers run this town for too long, the doubters, the skeptics...well enough already! It’s time to dream a little!” And it’s time for me to conclude. Thank you.

## Questions and Answers

**Question:** I find myself confused by your last statement with the statements I made some thirty years ago trying to prevent urban sprawl. I resigned as chairman of the City Planning Commission because they refused to control outward development. I also advised the Metropolitan Planning Commission that there would be quite possibly one million five hundred thousand people by the 2000 census in the five county area. Well, I was considered a nay-sayer at that time, but ultimately I proved to be a truth-sayer because we now have urban sprawl in the five counties with practically a million-five people. Which way should I play the ball game? [Zedek: I am not sure I take issue with anything you have said...] It’s because I was considered a nay-sayer....

**Zedek:** I didn’t say it! I wonder if you were considered a nay-sayer, or were just out of step. For you were obviously out-of-step with what people thought was perfection in terms of what the American Dream would be. And there’s always the notion of “be careful what you dream for, you may just get it.” You know Oscar Wilde’s old notion, “There’s only one thing worse than not getting what you want, and that is getting what you want.” I happened to drive out 119<sup>th</sup> Street today, and looked at all those various stores. You have to decide to go there. You can’t just accidentally walk there. And we thought that was what we wanted. Part of the reason, clearly, and that’s why I started with and did not elaborate on racism. Part of the reason, clearly that’s happened, and we all know that, is because we wanted to escape black people. Who wants to live “there?” And we’re the victims of our fear. We create, how was the phrase you used about Frankenstein? Do you remember what I’m referring to? We created this Frankenstein monster and....

Tom, you want to make a comment?

**[Tom Levitt]:** First of all I wonder is Kansas City's treatment of newcomers any different from any other city – Atlanta, or Minneapolis, or Los Angeles, or San Francisco or Boston. I wonder if Kansas City is really remarkable in that at all?

**Zedek:** I suspect you're correct. My point was that Kansas City has that seductive friendliness which seduces newcomers to think that...and then it doesn't get followed up. And my own thought is that there ought to be some effort to try to do that, just go out of our way to bring somebody along, to bring somebody in. If that hadn't happened for us, if someone who was resident, long-term here, I don't know who...our circle of friends would have been exclusively newcomers. And that's the distinction. If you want to be invested in what happens in a community, I think the cross-fertilization of those of us who are new and don't know "you can't do that," with those who are invested heavily in the life and quality of a particular community because you're going to live here, might just produce a synergy that's even better than what we currently have. That was the effort, and thanks for the opportunity of clarifying it a bit.

**Question:** I certainly support the rebuilding of the city ... but is it not possible that the criticism of the suburbs is another form of elitism? Isn't it possible that all the people who live in Johnson County and Blue Springs on 20,000 square foot yards and new houses are just the same as their parents or grandparents or people who live in New York? Don't they want the same kind of good life that has been pursued in America for one hundred years? Isn't it perhaps also true that Kansas City, Missouri, is vibrant and strong economically and able to rescue its downtown precisely because it is what Vickie Noteis calls an "elastic city"? Because it has grown to the north and there are good strong suburbs to Kansas City, Missouri, in part because of the location of the airport in one direction and the location of the stadiums to the east created some competition to the construction in Johnson County. And the rebirth of Lee's Summit and Blue Springs and all the areas outside have created an interesting Downtown. And isn't it also possible that the interest of four Senators of this area from Kansas and Missouri and the construction of the fabulous highway system that we will create a markedly strong economic and cultural vibrant city for years to come?

**Zedek:** Thank you for that alternative speech. I think all of that is possible, and all of that is probably what is happening. I just simply believe that the well being of all of us is impacted when we have a healthy center, as opposed to an empty shell in the center, and I think more needs to be done along those lines. I don't dispute the notion of people wanting to live "out there." I do dispute that what one seeks out there can be found in that isolationism. I think they (we) need connection. However, whether it be elitist or simply a critique because I was motivated toward critique, the one thing I would comment on most definitively with which I wish you were right, from the day I arrived here, I heard people talk about the extraordinary clout we have because we have four Senators instead of two, and two Representatives each at least. I've yet to see that manifest itself in substantial ways that bridge that state line, instead of it being a barrier or wall. The one exception thus far is the bi-state cultural tax for Union Station, and look how long, literally how long it took. To me, it's absolutely amazing that Indianapolis is currently perceived to be a more vibrant center of life than this great city. Part of that, we know, is because of the one Government form, and because they have a strong



Government form, it's County/City Government as one. That's never going happen here, but it is kind of telling in some ways. I would love us to have four Senators, when?

**[Jeannette Nichols]:** Another perspective on the fact that we have these peripheral roads. My understanding was that city manager McElroy sat there and said "you may go to the east and you may go to the west but you're not going to build an interstate right through the middle of this beautiful city. You're going to be able always to drive without living on the interstate." And I think some people like it. I agree that families live way out but then decide to move back in because they would rather be closer to the core. My husband commissioned an aerial shot of this not too long ago and had 28 cultural institutions within a mile and one-half radius of where we are right now [UMKC]. I know that suburban life has built much too much sprawl, and that is very costly. But we get our arts in the core of the city, and a lot of other things. Look at all the houses that have been or are being restored. My husband is 89 and can find every house in which he has lived and I can look around and see everywhere that I have lived. I think we care about the core.

**Zedek:** I don't dispute it. When we lived here we lived in the city and we would still, and we're going to be in Cincinnati. I just am concerned about making sure we focus on, emphasize, and build on those strengths. Not just for those of us who are going to live in the city. I think that's part of the connection piece that I'm so concerned about. I think for whatever reasons the Federal Government promoted the interstate highway system, etc., etc., it was made to take people away from cities. Because there is in the American spirit a distrust of the city. It can sometimes be trusted. Certainly in Missouri there is a long tradition of distrusting our cities.

**[Jonathan Kemper]:** Two questions – one easy and then one hard. First the easy one: the Jewish community itself has migrated to the south and west, I wondered if you could give some comments on that – that's the easy one. The tough one is – the hard one: when are you coming back?

**Zedek:** Jonathan, that's a very sweet, tough question, thank-you. With regard to the Jewish community, it has certainly joined that migratory stream which seems to flow, especially for the Jewish community, South and West, although there is a growing Jewish community North of the river. We, on my watch at the Temple, tried – we are trying – a paradoxical strategy of being "out there" in order not to have to move everything out there. I think it would be tragic for the community at large, and for the Jewish community also, if the entire Jewish community's structures leave the city, for what it says about the city, and what it says about the Jewish community. So, we built a satellite way out there in the hopes that that will minimize the pressure for us to have to move everything out there. At the very least, because of how much it costs, I think there's a ten-year window. And the city has been on a winning streak – a lot of people have been returning, although I understand that the latest census figures question whether in fact we had the growth that we thought we had in the last period of time. But what I think is going to happen in terms of the Jewish community, as an example, is there will be what I call barbells of concentration. Everybody talks about – I love the demographic phrase "if current trends continue," and of course they never do precisely the way they're predicted, but there will be concentrations. There is no one Jewish neighborhood as there once was many years ago in Kansas City. There are concentrations, areas where there's significant

population. They're connected by streams, barbells. So there is, and I hope will always be, a substantial presence in the Country Club Plaza-Ward Parkway corridor. Mission Hills is going through a re-gentrification, whatever it is called, as older families move out and younger families move in. What's the name for that? Something. But there will also be a movement further and further and further out. That centrifugal force is going to continue to shape Kansas City. My concern, if anything in terms of this presentation was: let's have more of the centrifugal forces that bring things back in – or is it the centripetal that brings things back in? The force that brings *in* rather than only further and further out. And we've had some progress in that, that's for sure. I mean that whole Brush Creek Corridor, which I heard someone once describe as the College Boulevard of Kansas City, Missouri, isn't that a wonderful turning upside down of things? It's magnificent. I see Henry Bloch here. What they've done in that area is wonderful. Among many achievements, what's going on in all that area is wonderful. We need not to take for granted the incredible treasure that the city is, and that means all of us. So, I'm very hopeful about the next bi-state cultural thing.

As to your other question, we would always look forward to the possibilities of returning. Our hearts are still here and even as I have a wonderful new job, and an excitement about it, including this fascinating experience that I have shared with a couple of folks here. You know, some of you are familiar with the phenomenon called weekend? Well, I've had my first weekends in 26 years, and it's like having a vacation every week. Now, you're used to it, I'm not, and fortunately my wife still wants to be with me, so I'd better keep those going. But the idea of coming back has not been ruled out as a possibility in the future, if some opportunity presents itself. Thank you.

**Question:** I want to suggest that maybe Bill Nelson has the right idea in trying to focus on the principal institutions in the downtown core. What we have done as of World War II is to be going out to the suburbs, with the life and culture of the suburbs. J.C. Nichols for instance led that movement to Johnson County with Prairie Village and other places. But cities should learn – and St. Louis is a good example of this and maybe Indianapolis is also – that you have to start putting your cultural, meeting facilities, your sports facilities, your intellectual facilities in a downtown core, and that downtown core is the key to the force you are looking for. And Bill Nelson's leadership in attempting to propagate some of that and attempting to bring those institutions downtown is right on line with what you are for.

**Zedek:** I appreciate the thought. Cincinnati is an interesting alternative to what we've been talking about, as some of you know. A) They never left the river, and B) they've invested, sometimes with great mistakes, in downtown. You go downtown. You go downtown for the opera, you go downtown for the theatre, you go downtown to watch a baseball game, you go downtown for the football game, you go downtown to get on the river, you go downtown for the best restaurants, and you go downtown because the roads all go downtown. Now, that's not just because I care about downtown. That's because I care about the notion that people have got to come together, as opposed to just those of you who go to the Symphony, or whatever is the particular cultural elite phenomenon. It's extraordinary to go downtown and see people! Of all different stripes, and types, and interests, running into each other, bumping into each other or saying "hello" to each other

because they understand themselves as part of the same place. That I think is one of the great challenges we have.

**Question:** Some of us are attracted to utilitarian land districts. We like – and suspect that I am one of the few here who is drawn to that area, not so much because I flee racial diversity or ethnic diversity but because of the school district. My point really is there shouldn't be an either/or, it could be an “and.” I don't know why we can't have a vibrant downtown with progressive leaders and vibrant active suburban communities where people are connected.

**Zedek:** Agreed, wholeheartedly agreed, but if I can give you one small for instance of what that means to a newcomer. When I came here, it fascinated me that we had one police department for the whole metropolitan area and nine school districts. I couldn't understand that. I was stupid enough to think that didn't make sense. Everyone in the room knows why we had that number of school districts, so there would be a place that you could go to have “good” schools, as opposed to warehousing other kids.

**[Nathan Gilbert, Zedek's father-in-law]:** Prairie Village seems to be one of the last communities that has some of the features you describe.

**Zedek:** Well, I think Brookside certainly qualifies, although Brookside is under threat. (The comment was that of the areas I'm describing, he thought Prairie Village sounded a lot like what we're talking about in terms of a certain kind of nostalgic approach to closeness.) You can walk down to the shopping area. I think Brookside is. There are also a lot of interesting things happening on the East side that most of us don't know about where communities are strong, vibrant, serious, taking care of each other, and making economic strides. I think the West side is enjoying some of that as well, and certainly on Quality Hill.

**Question:** Hi, Mike. I read something that I have no idea if it is true, and it almost seems that is couldn't be true, but I am sure I read it. [Zedek: the fact that you read it doesn't mean its true, of course!] And it really doesn't seem like it could be true. I think I recall reading that there are 150,000 young people in these five counties of a million and half, these 150,000 young people without a male authority figure or father in the household. You know as you line up the layers of the drivers of the community – the dynamics of the community – I think that is a dynamic factor in the over all make up of the community. And I think that problem has to be looked at along with all the others. Of course I would love it if UMKC would have a drive like the Nelson did – that's something they ought to do.

**Zedek:** I appreciate that point. I think that's an important concern; it's a potential threat to the well being of us all in some distinct ways as to what that means for our future. I do believe wholeheartedly the following, especially since I made the reference to families. Please don't assume that I mean by family a father, a mother, and 2.3 children. There are all kinds of definitions of families, and all kinds of families I believe can function, especially if they provide inputs and environments in which they can nurture the members...a single-parent family can function. A single adult, if he or she understands himself as part of a community, can be a contributor to a family. I really do believe that. I would hate to see us become a kind of a Stepford Wives notion of “everybody that we care about is only the traditional family.”

**Question:** Imagine a position that would draw you back to Kansas City as a maestro of connections and your mission statement was to foster the bringing together of people in Kansas City, Missouri – your mission would have a budget, of course. What would you do?

**Zedek:** I wouldn't answer that on one foot. But, what I would do, certainly is: I would get together a small cadre of people and take the dreams that people have and not try to get a consensus on it, just try to get funding for it. Whether that's the downtown arena or brand-new baseball stadium Downtown, which, that's a real, real, real, long shot. But those kinds of things, clearly the Arts Center Downtown is going to be a great boon, a great boon. I would love us to put even more money in our parks. I'd love us to do a lot of stuff on the river, a lot of stuff that brings people to the river, instead of have it be an accident of "Where is it? And how do you get down there?" I think those kinds of opportunities. But I think most especially I would believe in people and I would fund them, like crazy, but that's a real "on one foot" as we say in Jewish tradition, for I hadn't thought about that. Now you've given me something for the plane ride back.

**Question:** Do you have an opinion as to where a transit system would fit in Kansas City?

**Zedek:** I hope someday the right plan will be presented and pass. Yes, that's important I think.

**Question:** You mentioned something about Bruce Watkins [Trafficway], would you elaborate on that? The reason I asked that is, I like Bruce Watkins and take it to work everyday, but it cuts the city in half and destroyed some wonderful neighborhoods.

**Zedek:** What I meant was, as a newcomer to Kansas City it was very easy to learn how to go *around* the city. There was nothing that made it easy to go in and through the city, as an invitation to go in that direction. Everything carried you away. I-35 carries you away, I-70 carries you away. I-435 is the specific that I'm referring to, that was the center of development. When I came to town, 103<sup>rd</sup> Street was very far out.

I'm not a city planner, nor the son of a city planner, but that's part of the process of it's having not happened for so long, that it came in and disrupted people's lives in a very substantive way. I think in general it is a net plus for the city and for the entire area.

**[Ted Seligson]:** I sense that you have emphasized the quality of the city in contrast to quantifying it. And that is what we have been doing not only here but also throughout the United States. Quantification that has to do with development, the return of investment, and so forth, and changes actually, and our lives which are affected by the city itself, our environment, and I fully agree with the sentiment of having a strong center. In my own case I enjoy the center part of the city and activities that are there – social activity, business activity, commercial, banking – all of this is very, very convenient. Now we are going to have to prioritize not only the community but in terms of our ideas of how we live and what the quality is that we want. I think, as Larry has said, I think that I read something, and I might be wrong, but I think I read something about 800 million dollars that is to be spent to widen or do something to I-35. I am correct or not? [Audience: you are correct.] What that will do is promote even more spread and more sprawl. I'd like that \$800 million spent right here – of course, it is

Kansas' \$800 million. But if we had to prioritize these things in a bi-state way we might have a stronger university, we might have a stronger downtown.

**Zedek:** I was really worried about what you were going say! By the way, in that context, I don't want to get lost in my comments to your question. It would be extraordinary for all of us if UMKC were understood to be a sterling, outstanding, exceptional, at the top rank university, for a city university. By the way, University of Cincinnati has done remarkable things to reinvent itself, even though it is now part of the Ohio University system. They're about to launch a billion dollar endowment campaign. It would make an inordinate difference, in inordinate ways for all of us.

**Question:** You have spoken eloquently about sprawl and all the physical aspects of the city [Zedek: I always get worried when he starts like this!], but what about the resident optimist and visionaries who now have wounded wings and crippled hopes and yet they still remain, isolated and quarantined. Their hopes taken off like wings on eagles in search of that... What do we do for those of us who remain? How do we find regeneration and renewal so that we don't have to find a Cincinnati?

**Zedek:** I do want you to know, as an aside, I did not find Cincinnati, Cincinnati found me. I had the experience of a headhunter who, in the immortal words of Mario Puzo, "made an offer I couldn't refuse." I think there is a very important point in what you've just suggested, as usual. Sometimes it does get dispirited and dispiriting, but the friendships that those of us who worry about these kind of things, and I include people in this room most definitely, that usually sustains. You get wounded and you heal, and you don't know any other way to do it. It's not because you assume success. It's the old Mother Teresa suggestion, "I wasn't called to be successful, I was called to be faithful." I think that's true. Success or failure isn't mine to determine. Which way am I going to fail? I've already got the failure part licked. I know that's going to happen. Now what way am I going to do that? I'm reminded of an event that I attended in 1975 at the old Conception Abbey. The Missouri Bar Association convened the gathering. They brought together a bunch of folks to imagine what Missouri would look like in the year 2000. It was energizing because of the networking. There might be some value in doing that sort of thing occasionally for community leadership, especially for the folks who aren't normally understood to be all the "usual suspects." I was having lunch the other day with a friend who said she was informed that what she would get used to in Kansas City always going to meet the same 200 people at every event she went to. Got to do some cross-fertilization along those lines.

I've got a plane to catch! Thank you for that comment, and that very important commentary because I can't just get on a train and immediately go to the airport. I've got to drive my rental car out there. Thank you all, and God Bless, God Bless.

# WHMC-KC

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**Cover Photo:** John S. Watkins Drugstore, on the corner of 63rd and Brookside in the Brookside shopping area, ca. 1953. *J.C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks (KC54)*, WHMC-KC.

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