

You Must Understand the Problem First

WHAT do you perceive as the most urgent problem facing mankind? If the professional pollsters were to make a widespread survey on that question they might get too many different answers to tabulate easily.

Writers for U.S. News & World Report put that question to a gathering of 16 Nobel prize winners recently, men who were described as "some of the nation's top thinkers." Their responses emphasized a variety of problems without producing a consensus.

"Preserving peace and dealing with poverty in the United States and the underdeveloped world are a great concern," said a Nobel prize winner in physiology and medicine. He also mentioned illnesses that doctors cannot prevent, such as alcoholism and drug abuse.

A chemist declared he was concerned about the public dissatisfaction toward science. "People recognize science as doing great things for their lives. But when it comes to appreciating science and having sympathy for it, they mostly don't.

They associate it with the mad scientist making monsters in dimly lit laboratories rather than understanding what the activity of a scientist is really like."

A physicist complained: "People no longer seem to believe, as Americans once did, that any sort of problem can be solved."

A second physicist said, "A rational way of running the world would be to reduce the number of people." He didn't say how.

A third physicist declared: "Energy is the nation's greatest long-range problem."

A medical doctor said a decline in education is the greatest problem the United States faces. Another was intrigued by the use of drugs for control of mental illnesses, admitting there is potential danger for abuse in regulating behavior by this means.

One Nobel prize winner commented: "The very survival of the human race under the threat of nuclear weapons is the great challenge confronting the global society."

While citizens not rated as "top thinkers" might not disagree with the scientists, their lists would be different. Top ratings likely would go to personal problems the scientists didn't mention.

For most families, the top-ranking daily problem is getting together enough cash, after taxes, to pay rising costs of housing and feeding themselves. The scientists spoke up for solution of problems of peace, poverty, inflation and energy, but their perspectives of global attitudes and our personal daily difficulties are not the same.

None of the scientists mentioned the decadence of moral and ethical standards, a problem which many citizens believe is undermining civilized society and its institutions. Steadily increasing crime is an outgrowth of this trend and no solution is in sight.

One of my grade school arithmetic teachers had us stand and state each problem before attempting to solve it. "If you don't understand the problem, you won't find the solution," he said.