

COLD ANGER

A STORY OF FAITH AND POWER POLITICS

MARY BETH ROGERS

With an Introduction by
BILL MOYERS

FEATURED
ON BILL MOYERS'
"WORLD OF IDEAS"

ROGERS

COLD ANGER

UNIT PAPERBACK

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So Cortes talks frequently with his leaders about the ambiguities of power—about the kind of power that tends to corrupt and the kind of power that comes from knowledge. He believes that knowledge can be the path to power for people within its organizations.

"Power ultimately depends on consent," he says. "And we're teaching how you go about getting consent. The problem in government is how you delegate the work to the experts, the professionals and bureaucrats, without delegating the power. We want people to become expert enough to challenge the experts and maintain the power all the while."

Cortes says he also returns to power again and again in his workshops because many of the church members who make up his organizations are uncomfortable with the idea of power. He tries to get them to separate power from brute force and violence and to look at it in terms of cooperation rather than coercion. Cortes gets his leaders to read Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's book *Love, Power and Justice* because Tillich believes that love and power have to be joined to produce justice. "Tillich talks about how love without power leads to sentimentality, while power without love leads to cynicism. You have to operate with both and it creates a tension that's not always comfortable," Cortes says.

"We had people analyze their own experience with power one time, and it was usually bad because they were on the short end of it," he says. "They simply never had the joy of exercising it! We just want them to have a little joy."

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Anger Gives You Energy

Los Angeles, 1986

"Pastor Sinnott, please leave the room and wait in the hall!" Edward T. Chambers, teacher, issues the command, and the Reverend Thomas Sinnott, student, follows it.

Chambers, director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, is teaching a seminar on power at Mount St. Mary's College in the hills overlooking Los Angeles. Tom Sinnott is a Lutheran minister from New Jersey, and he is one of about 100 people from across the nation who are attending the IAF's training program for church leaders and community activists.¹

During the next 10 minutes, Chambers orders other people to leave the room as well—a youth gang social worker from East Los Angeles, a school teacher from El Paso, a lawyer from East Brooklyn, a Methodist minister from St. Louis. All obey the order. After all, Chambers is the head guy, the leader, the man in charge of the program. But the program is about power, and about how most middle-class and poor people give consent to have it taken away from them.

"We teach not only how to get power, but how to use it," Chambers begins.

All eyes are on Ed Chambers, who dominates the room physically as well as emotionally. In his 50s, tall and barrel-chested, Chambers has the stiff-necked posture of intense pride. When

he lectures, he sometimes calls forth a moral authority gleaned from his studies with the Benedictines at St. John's College. Or, if it seems to work better, he falls back on plain old street-smarts, picked up from almost 30 years of organizing poor people in the slums of Chicago, New York City, Rochester, and other places. His scowl is so deliberate that it looks like he paints it across his face for effect. But there are flickers of warmth beneath his severity, and when he smiles he can't keep from looking like kindly Robert Young in *Father Knows Best*, who becomes stern and authoritative only because he has to teach young Bud and Kitten the difference between right and wrong. Or, in Chambers' case with this class, the difference between power and powerlessness.

"The only purpose of our organization is to amass power—but we are not interested in brute power . . . we are about relational power," he says. "There is a difference between strength and bullying. Power can afford to be practical, flexible, wise, patient. Power can administer justice. When you have power, you can afford to be generous. Power moves ~~orderly~~; it doesn't crush. The misuse of power sets the seed of its own destruction.

"The drive for power and love come with becoming a whole person. Love is needed to be, but power is needed to act. We give away our power by consenting to people who act like they have authority."

For Pastor Sinnott, standing outside the door and straining to hear the lecture, an electric flash of insight rushes through the circuits of his brain. Why is he standing in the hallway while everyone else is participating in the lecture? Why did he, an ordained minister, automatically accept Chambers' command to leave the room? For what purpose? And who the hell is Ed Chambers, anyway! An enraging click of awareness propels the minister back into the classroom, and Ed Chambers, with a smile breaking across his face, stops his lecture as Tom Sinnott enters the room.

"Congratulations, Pastor Sinnott," Chambers bellows as the minister reclaims his chair, his gaze fixed suspiciously on Chambers who is in turn searching the faces of the people in his classroom, waiting to see if they understand what is happening. Then he addresses them.

"What you have seen is someone taking charge of his life; you have seen courage, even a revolutionary act. Pastor Sinnott is changing history by taking action. He is changing what is happening to us here and now. That's just what Rosa Parks did when she kicked off the whole civil rights movement by seizing what was rightfully hers—the right to choose where to sit on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama," Chambers says. "She broke a habit of unquestioning acquiescence to authority that robbed her of her dignity and rights. That took courage, and courage marks the beginning of power."

The men and women who sit in the classroom are smiling now, and the other people Chambers had ordered from the room sheepishly return.

"We have created a teachable moment about power here today. This is how we learn," Chambers says. "We make people act it out. We play roles. As you play the role is how you are at home. It is a mirror for you. Because all of us are so trained to give consent to authority, I probably could have emptied the room a few minutes ago. Because I assumed an authoritative role, you handed over your power to me. If Pastor Sinnott had not acted, there is no telling what I might have done to you."

Chambers is obviously delighted with the minister. Not all of his classes get the point, and many times in his training sessions several people spend the entire hour standing in the hall. Yet what happened today is what he strives for—a personal and direct experience that cannot be doubted. And the telling and retelling of personal experiences—both of power and powerlessness—is the way people come to understand what happens to them and why.

"We are trained to give consent to people in authority. First it is our parents, then teachers, then bosses and politicians," he explains. "But when you become mature, when you are informed, when you know yourself, you begin to take responsibility for your own actions and you begin to make decisions about when you will and will not consent to someone else's power. Our society is based on informed consent of all the people. We play by the rules when we have the chance to participate in making them. But when we've been left out of the rule-making and when authority is used arbitrarily against us to shut us out or deprive us of what we need to live, we can

withdraw our consent . . . we can begin to amass our own power to change the rules. Some in religion may call it spirit—the holy spirit. But I call it power. God gave us this power over our lives. It is a gift, and we shouldn't give it away to others."

During the week I spend in Los Angeles with Ed Chambers, Ernie Cortes, and other IAF members, they create a number of "teachable" moments—direct experiences—about power, the nature of politics, the importance of relationships, and the uses of anger. All are designed to bring home to people the importance of taking responsibility for their actions—of looking deeply enough into themselves to develop the courage necessary to seek power. The Iron Rule—never doing for people what they can do for themselves—is central to the training.

"I enjoy seeing people who don't have anything get something. I like to see it in their eyes," says a young black man at the training session who runs a church-based charity in Mississippi.

But most people who express this well-intentioned feeling for others don't have the slightest idea what to do about it. And so, with the best of intentions, they act *for* people instead of teaching people how to act for themselves. This is where the IAF networks in Texas, California, New York, Maryland, and other states seem to differ from hundreds of other community organizations that have sprouted from the same motivational seeds. The IAF organizations concentrate on the development of skill and insight that allows people to act for themselves, to transform themselves from passive participants who are content to have things done for them into actors who initiate change in their inner as well as outer lives. This transformation of inner attitudes and behavior seems to be critical to the success and longevity of the IAF organizations.

For every public event where the purpose of the organization is to get a specific result—a rally to lobby a local city council to put a fire station in a neighborhood of modest homes, or a delegation of leaders who meet with the mayor about moving the location of a municipal airport—there may be dozens of private sessions to learn, analyze, and understand what might occur and why, and what it might mean on both a personal and political level for the people who participate. It is a very thoughtful process and one in which consequences of political behavior are carefully weighed in terms of broad social goals,

deeply felt values, and personal growth. The training sometimes even moves to a deep personal level that forces people to confront and know themselves as a prerequisite to confronting politicians and becoming effective in the political process. Occasionally, that kind of training can be downright uncomfortable.

In one classroom at Mount St. Mary's, Ernie Cortes has asked two ministers, one white and one black, to sit in front of a group of 30 people and conduct a "role-play." Their task is to practice a "one-on-one" meeting, the technique used to recruit new leaders and get church people involved in the organization. The major purpose of the recruitment meeting is to establish a personal relationship with a potential leader, to find out what the individual really cares about, and to show him or her that there might be an effective way to get it through the political process.

The black minister has a wide white mane of hair with matching whiskers that gives him a certain dignity even while dressed in his Bermuda shorts and white Reeboks. The young white minister looks less like a man of the cloth than a serious bespectacled graduate student at home in the college atmosphere. They begin their conversation awkwardly; it is hard to initiate a private conversation in front of 30 political activists and clergy, and particularly in front of Cortes. But the two men gradually overcome the strange role-play aspects of their situation. They begin by talking about their common frustrations with the ministry and the admonitions from the Bible they are trying to follow. It is slow, theological—and surprisingly superficial. But after five minutes, they seem to forget the people in the classroom and concentrate on each other.

"When you stand to preach Sunday after Sunday, you feel like the surgeon who performs perfect surgery, but the patient dies," says the black minister. "My powerlessness as a pastor . . . the powerlessness of the people I preach to is so frustrating. I struggle to make the gospel live, to become actual in peoples' lives rather than to operate under doctrines and principles that have no life."

Then the white minister begins to talk about the incidents in his life when he could not connect with the God he tries to serve. It was not in church, he admits, but in ordinary situations, such as sitting at the kitchen table, trying to comfort

someone in trouble and realizing that the problems were beyond his capability to solve. He confesses his powerlessness to help.

"All week long during this training, I've flashed back to times, incidents when it could have been different if I had known what to do," he says. "Somebody's child can't read, and you go to school with the parent to see if you can help, but it's too late to help because something should have been done years ago and you only touch one part of the system. You try to be effective and you can't be. You invest energy and you don't get anywhere. It hurts."

The conversation suddenly becomes personal, and the pastor's hurt shows in his eyes and softens his voice. People in the classroom are quiet, struggling to understand the emotions unleashed as the pastor moves from theological generalities to the specifics of his feelings. He has provided an opening to himself—a vulnerability—that allows us to feel what he feels and perhaps to understand something of his nature. And sitting there in the classroom, we realize that this kind of opening could allow a connection with him to develop, perhaps the beginnings of a relationship.

The opening of "self" by this pastor paves the way for another glimpse into the one-on-one process in the next role-play Cortes arranges. This time, the participants are a young black teacher disillusioned with her career in the Los Angeles schools and a prominent black Methodist minister from Houston. Again, the role-play starts on a superficial level. Then the self-possessed stylish woman begins to provide some clues about herself and her frustrations that indicate she might be ready to open up, to establish a connection. But the minister doesn't follow up. He carefully withholds even the smallest hint of his own feelings and is almost unresponsive to the teacher. The role-play is on the verge of breaking down when Cortes intervenes. In a gentle voice, he asks the minister if he would be willing to tell the group about his son.

And the minister, whose physical bulk might enable him to go straight from his Sunday pulpit to the Astrodome to play linebacker for the Houston Oilers, snaps to attention as if Cortes had sneaked up on him and yelled "gotcha!" Then, his

shoulders drop and he takes a deep breath, shifting in his chair and looking Cortes directly in the eyes. He begins speaking softly, with obvious resignation. "I have a 6-year-old son who had meningitis when he was 5 months old, and he can't speak or dress himself now."

The impact of the minister's simple, sad words on the people in the room is stunning. For me, this man's imposing bulk and bearing seem inconsequential now that I've witnessed his distress. He struggles to continue speaking, and his voice slowly picks up volume and force. "I'm angry," he says. "And I have to wrestle with the fact that this happened to me. I don't like this feeling. I've got to channel this feeling into something constructive."

The young teacher in the role-play gropes for something to say. "Did you get involved in this kind of political organizing because you wanted to feel victorious about something?" she asks.

"Hell, no!" the minister shouts. "I don't need victories. I get victory every Sunday when I walk away from the pulpit. What I want is to do something about this feeling of being power-less . . . for myself . . . for others."

Cortes steps into the center of the room and focuses all of his attention on the minister. "Who do you get angry with?" he asks.

The minister hesitates, looks at the ceiling and all around the room, anywhere but at Cortes. He scrunches up his face and finally mutters an almost inaudible reply. "The power structure . . . the corporations . . ."

"What do you mean?" shouts Cortes incredulously. "The corporations didn't give your child meningitis!" Then, more softly and very deliberately, he adds, "When I was a child and my sister died, I didn't get angry with the corporations, I got angry with God!"

Quietly, with a half-smile on his face, the minister nods in recognition. "I guess I've cursed Him once or twice," he says. "Then I have to turn around and proclaim Him on Sunday."

"That's hard, isn't it?" Cortes comments.

"Yes, it's hard."

The room is silent.

"But I was lucky," the minister begins speaking again, softly

talking about the practical problems of raising a handicapped child. "I had insurance. But now when I go with other families to the hospital with their children, and they don't have any money, that's when I really get angry with the doctors and the politicians."

"Well, pastor," Cortes says, "anger gives you energy."

"But I don't need a cannon to kill a mosquito."

All of us are silent as we leave the classroom. I wonder about this exchange. What am I really seeing? What does it mean? Why does the minister's doubt express something more spiritual to me than certainty? Why does it have such power? And why do I have the urge at this moment to act, to make it right when someone else has been wronged? And why do most of us leaving this room seem to share these feelings?

If you take part in the kinds of political organizing proposed by Ernesto Cortes, do you have to go deeply into yourself, to take emotional risks with others in order to be certain about the changes you want to bring about in the life of the community, to right the wrongs? Is it more than mere politics?

In the hallway, I overhear the comment of a middle-aged man from New York whom I had been watching during the session. He is a veteran political organizer from the old days with Saul Alinsky in Chicago and New York. Because of his reputation and demeanor, I judged him an indifferent sophisticate, a knowledgeable cynic, a political skeptic like myself. Then I hear his voice shape words I had not heard in years.

"I think we've just seen the holy spirit at work."

7

The First Revolution Is Internal

Austin, 1986

I wait for Sister Christine Stephens in the coffee shop at the Ramada Inn, one block from the State Capitol building. She is about 20 minutes late for our appointment, and when she finally arrives, it is only to pause long enough to apologize for the delay of her airplane and to excuse herself for a few minutes more to make a telephone call. The call is to check with the lieutenant governor's office about his itinerary for an upcoming tour of the *colonias* in the Rio Grande Valley. Lieutenant Governor William P. Hobby Jr. wants officials from the state's water agencies to see the neighborhoods where people live without adequate water and sewer systems, and Stephens is making arrangements for the trip. But at the last minute, Governor Mark White, who is facing a stiff challenge to his reelection bid, decides he wants to go along.¹ And now, with the governor's staff and press entourage, arrangements have to be made for 50 people. What started out as a simple visit by water officials has turned into a political circus, which Stephens must manage. As I watch the tall, no-nonsense, graying woman in a blue business suit, there is no doubt in my mind that she can handle it.

Christine Stephens is an anomaly—a Catholic nun turned political organizer. She and at least four other sisters from