

GOING PUBLIC

AN ORGANIZER'S GUIDE
TO CITIZEN ACTION

"If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. *Going Public* is at once pragmatic and profound."

—Samuel G. Freedman

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FOR SHEILA

CHAPTER 3

Activists on a Manhattan Street

On a lovely May morning in Manhattan two years ago, I hustled from the PATH station below the World Trade Center (it still smolders as I write these words, on a Saturday in late September) and headed down Trinity Place to an office I worked in a block away. It was a busy, crowded, normal day, except for one thing. Police were stationed everywhere—hundreds of officers, scores of cars, and a mobile command center in the Trade Center's plaza, all the signs of a major security operation.

A Hispanic officer stood next to one of the concrete flowerpots that doubled as a barrier outside the southeast tower of the complex—one of scores that circled the center since the terrorist bombing in 1993. I asked him what was up.

"Seattle demonstrators," he sniffed. "They got some kind of chapter here. They think they're gonna do something today . . ." He didn't seem overly concerned. His black carrying pack was half hidden in the foliage in the flowerpot. Behind each planter stood an officer at his station. Clusters of cops congregated near the intersections. Police brass with names and ranks prominently dis-

played on their shirts or jackets circulated along Church Street. The cop tells me that they have all been in place since dawn. The demonstration isn't scheduled to start until three or so.

At noon, when I left my office and looked for lunch, a small "action" was under way. Five people stood at the corner of Broadway and Rector Street. Two had splashed black paint on their clothing and smeared black paint on their faces. They writhed on the sidewalk while a graying demonstrator pounded a drum and a young woman harangued the passing crowd. Twenty-five cops eyed the scene, casually leaning against buildings and stairs, their nightsticks in their belts, their riot helmets perched on their nightsticks.

It was a spectacular afternoon—bright and mild—and the entire spectacle seemed to move slowly, languidly. Actors, officers, observers—no one appeared to be fully engaged. I walked over to a local Starbucks, only to find it closed, with yellow police tape roping off its front entrance. In the middle of the night, someone had hurled a hammer through the window. In Seattle Starbucks facilities had been the target of extensive vandalism. It's a poor choice, I thought, more likely to turn coffee lovers away from the demonstrators than to attract new recruits to their cause.

But what *was* their cause?

The demonstrators held a hastily painted sign: "Save the U'Wa Tribe..." There was a reference to Fidelity Capital. The woman with the megaphone couldn't be easily understood. An aging fellow demonstrator banged a drum. Meanwhile, the two paint-splattered figures on the sidewalk continued to contort. For all their choreographed movement, the demonstrators seemed remarkably static. Still life: *Activists on a Manhattan Street*.

Often, as I start a training session or a talk, I ask people to describe the last public action—large or small—they participated in. I give the broadest and most basic definition of an action: it's when more than one person, focused on a specific issue, engages a person

in power directly responsible for that issue, for the purpose of getting a reaction. Twenty seniors meeting with a powerful politician about the cost of prescription drugs is an action. Eight parents pressing the local school principal to improve pedestrian safety around the local school is an action. Three thousand leaders meeting with the mayor of Baltimore demanding that the city pay living wages is an action. After posing my question, I watch people grow silent and begin to ponder. They usually need to reach all the way back to the late sixties or early seventies to come up with an answer. They sometimes confess that they have never participated in an action.

Some people believe that action is passé—like wearing bell-bottoms or displaying a peace sign. Or it may strike people as terrifying and appalling—the kind of action taken by the terrorists who murdered the innocent workers of the World Trade Center or the action of a criminal standing right behind you on the long ride down in the elevator of a housing project late at night. Action is something to outgrow, to avoid, and to defend yourself against.

Others look for substitutes or alternatives to action. They join advocacy groups and write charitable checks. They attend conferences, discussion clubs, and workshops about crises or issues—AIDS, racial tensions, school construction costs, immigration, sprawl. They watch the evening news, CNN, or MSNBC, and in-depth programs about the conditions in our cities or other countries. They surf the Net and chat with those who share their views. But none of this is action.

Some view action as another form of entertainment, the specialized product of a new class of professional actors. We easily slide into the familiar and comfortable role of spectator, critic, or channel-changer.

What crystallized for me that day in Manhattan was this: what I was observing was not an action at all, but a reenactment. This

reenactment—and so many others we see on television—was more theatrical than political. It was not just scripted, but plagiarized, an odd attempt literally to recreate the pain of a tribe somewhere in South America. These reenactors shared many of the qualities of those who dress up in Union or Confederate garb and reenact the greatest battles of the Civil War with obsessive attention to detail, right down to the buttons used and underwear worn by the soldiers themselves. Tony Horwitz's fine book, *Confederates in the Attic*, provides a sensitive and disturbing account of this world.

What began, perhaps, as an attempt to honor the actions of others, had lost contact with its source and had become disturbingly self-involved. Jaroslav Pelikan, the renowned religious historian, wrote, "An idol purports to be the embodiment of that which it represents, but it directs us to itself rather than beyond itself." These demonstrators were doing just that, directing the noonday crowd, the police, and the media that never appeared, to themselves, not beyond themselves. They were political idolaters.

The cops in lower Manhattan were beyond bored. They had seen this all before. They had studied the tactics of the past and fine-tuned their security, media, and public relations responses. They were smart enough, for the most part, to avoid repeating their own past overreactions. They practiced more creative, subtle, and sophisticated responses. They had learned how *not* to react—thus depriving the civil rights reenactors, environmental reenactors, or global warming reenactors of the satisfaction of a response.

Meanwhile, the great American middle—moderate and pivotal, the supposed audience of this action—has rightfully tired of this spectacle. Most Americans can't imagine themselves doused with black paint, lying on a sidewalk, amid hustling shoppers and observant cops. If this is "action," if this is public engagement, if this is what you need to do to get attention, recognition, and response, then most people will just dash past, play solitaire on the

office computer, or pray that their college-aged kids grow out of this fad and apply to business school.

While it makes perfect sense to reject these reenactments, it is dangerous to reject the habit of genuine public action. It's damaging to the health of a democracy that developed out of the creative and measured actions of thousands of ordinary men and women. Americans in the late eighteenth century engaged in hundreds of actions, large and small, from local confrontations with British tax collectors to the formation of a shadow government, before they resorted, grudgingly, to the titanic action of a protracted Revolutionary War. The well-being of American workers only began to improve when workers acted to organize their plants and shops. Our freedoms have been deepened and renewed by the everyday and often unrecorded actions of citizens who demanded voting rights, civil rights, and better schools.

But constructive and creative action doesn't just happen. Rosa Parks didn't wake up one morning and spontaneously decide to sit on a seat near the front of the bus. She thought about her nonviolent but high-risk action and debated it with other leaders. She trained at the Highlander Folk School, in the mountains of Tennessee, where civil rights leaders and organizers systematically educated themselves on the strategies and tactics of others in history who had sought social change.

In effect, she studied the forgotten phonics and lost language of public action. She mastered this vocabulary, with depth and discipline, and then "spoke" to her fellow leaders and followers, to the media and to moderates, in a unique and innovative way. She demonstrated, once again, that an ordinary American could learn about action, could lead the action, and then could transmit the lessons and limitations of that action to others.

Our national vitality—the critical counterpart to our national security—depends on our willingness and ability to brush up on these lessons and skills.