

ROOTS FOR RADICALS

Organizing for Power,
Action, and Justice

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with Michael A. Cowan

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be taken away. In a working democracy, we must not only have the power to elect people but also to hold them accountable. That's what broad-based political collectives do.

Practice the trilogy: research, act, evaluate. But you can't do it alone. Serious action on public matters requires an organization, a diverse collective of people.

6

Reflections of an Organizer

"Our first intellectual obligation is to abandon the myth of stability that played so large a part in the modern age. . . . The future belongs not so much to the pure thinkers who are content—at best—with optimistic or pessimistic slogans; it is a province, rather, for reflective practitioners who are ready to act on their ideals. Warm hearts allied with cool heads seek a middle way between the extremes of abstract theory and personal impulse."

STEPHEN TOULMIN

As doctors are to patients, as lawyers are to clients, as coaches are to athletes, so are professional organizers to volunteer leaders in public life. In the United States, Tom Paine and Sam Adams come to mind as political organizers. In the arena of religion, Moses and Paul are classic examples of organizers. Organizers are not the center, but they place themselves at the center. Their focus is the human person, the holiest work of creation, embodied in family, congregation, and workplace. In IAF organizing, we birth and parent public life and public relationships. Organizing in the IAF network is a distinct and valued profession, a vocation. The kind of organizer I'll describe here has been trained and developed in the broad-based organizing approach of the IAF over the past thirty years.

An Organizer's Journey

I was raised in rural Iowa in the 1930s and '40s. I thought life came down to family and Roman Catholicism. Midwestern Iowa was hardly the center of the universe. For us five kids, contact with the outside world was sitting on the living room floor and listening to Father Coughlin's raves and FDR's fireside radio chats. There was no preparation in those days for a role in public life. (There still isn't.) The only three career possibilities ever mentioned to me were priest, lawyer, or schoolteacher, with priest heavily pushed.

After high school, I signed up to become a priest, enrolling at St. John's University, the Benedictine college at Collegeville, Minnesota. St. John's Abbey was the Benedictine center of the Roman Catholic liturgical movement in the 1940s and '50s. After my sophomore year, I split from academia and basketball to wander Europe for a year. I was after meaning and looking for roots. My father never wanted to go home to the village ten miles outside of Castlebar, County Mayo, to the Irish shed among the peat bogs, incest, a pig in the parlor, and no outhouse. He was the thirteenth child; his mother died in childbirth with number fourteen. I didn't realize it at age nineteen, but I was searching for less theory and more real people doing something about the world as it is.

My year of bumming around war-torn Europe turned out to be worth more than four years of college and one more of so-called theology in Latin. I encountered the French priest-worker movement, liturgical pioneer Pius Parsch, and theologian Henri de Lubac. I attended the *agape* mass behind Russian lines outside Vienna. What I saw in the Young Christian Student and Worker organizations planted seeds for a different life in the U.S. for me. I was radicalized by Europe's progressive Catholic leaders.

After finishing college at St. John's and the first year of theology in the diocesan seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, I began questioning the way things were done out of my experiences in Europe. Why not do the liturgy in English and turn the altar around to face the people of God? Once or sometimes twice a week, I was thrown out of the Latin-speaking theology classes for using English and for raising the issue of the priesthood of the laity.

Over the Christmas holidays, I asked for a meeting with my bishop in Sioux City, Iowa. Borrowing my dad's car, I traveled the 180 miles to get a hearing, seek advice, and hopefully receive some clarity on what priesthood was all about. I was twenty-three years old. In the ninety-minute meeting, Bishop Mueller was kind enough and heard my complaints. There were tears in both our eyes when, without turning around, he reached above his head and took the crucifix off the wall, turned it around, and said: "Mr. Chambers, you must obey and climb up here." A thunderbolt struck. So that's what it's about. A sad ride home followed. This romantic idealist was beginning his education into the world as it is.

You don't realize the force of power until it's used against you. My awakening came a few months later, when I was waiting in line with my classmates in the outer chapel for the 8:00 p.m. tonsure liturgy to begin. I had completed first theology, and tonsure was the first ritual step toward priesthood. A snip-pet of hair was cut from your head, symbolizing your admission into the clerical state. As I waited in line with my surplice over my arm, I was tapped

on the shoulder by the rector of the seminary, who said, "Your bishop wants to talk with you." When we were in the room, the bishop overpowered me in six minutes. "We've been meeting all day about you," he said. "You ask too many questions. You hold cell meetings during recreation time to read French theologians. You talk about the priesthood of the laity. We are not going to tonsure you." I had one question for the bishop: "Why did you wait until the last moment?" From the last pew in the back, I watched thirty-five of my classmates receive tonsure, my first vision of failure.

After that, I hitchhiked from Iowa to New York City to Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker House. I was broke and hungry after four days on the road, and I found shelter at Friendship House, a Catholic interracial commune operating in Harlem in the 1950s. They had a storefront service center on Lenox Avenue and 134th St. That's how I stumbled into public life. What a school Harlem was in those days: slum lords, power brokers like Robert Moses, as well as Adam Clayton Powell, Murray Kempton, Sugar Ray Robinson, Dorothy Day, and Friendship House. I had Saul Alinsky's book and hundreds of everyday, ordinary people who taught me how to operate in public life. One of those lessons came the day Eamon Hennessey, a well-known anarchist buddy of Dorothy Day, and I were selling copies of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper for a penny apiece on opposite corners of Wall Street. Hennessey was arguing with guys in business suits while I was selling papers. After four hours, I had about 375 pennies, and he had twelve. "Here, Ed," he said, "give me the money and carry these extra papers. I'll turn it in to Dorothy." Back at Friendship House, he walked into Dorothy's office proudly proclaiming a good day's work. She looked over his shoulder and nodded at me. She knew who had sold the papers. A lesson for me on how the real world works.

I got lots of social knowledge, gained experientially. I lost my romantic idealism and began my entry into the real world of power struggles, conflict, and ambiguity. While I was on duty at Friendship House in the evenings, I noticed individuals and groups of people going down the back stairs to the cellar of our building. Curiosity got the best of me, and one evening at about 10 p.m. I went down the stairs. The black janitor in charge of the boiler gave me a sociology lesson. For a quarter you could sleep on the floor next to the furnace; other slots were a dime each. Thirty-five to forty people—men, women, and children—filled the damp, smelly basement floor. My idealism suffered another shock. Welcome to the world of the poor and hungry. I couldn't believe that humans had to live like that.

Two more years of Harlem slum living got me off the world as it should be and radicalized me to the world as is. I began to grasp experientially what

I would later find articulated by Saul Alinsky—meaning is somewhere in the tension between the two worlds.

During the 1950s, President Truman and the U.S. war machine also advanced my understanding of power, when I applied for conscientious objector status during the Korean War. Rough treatment, including a psychiatric evaluation and pressure to sign a loyalty oath, were all part of the deal. Only one sister from my family of seven siblings supported me. When the Webster County, Iowa, draft board discovered a Roman Catholic conscientious objector in their jurisdiction, they called me in, and then they called my former pastor, Father P. J. Sweeney, an ex-Marine Corps chaplain in World War II. His response—“Chambers, yeah, I know him. If you’ve got your hands on the s.o.b., lock him up”—didn’t help much. The board stood by my 1A classification. I won by thirty days, when I turned twenty-six and automatically dropped out of the draft. Welcome to public life. I missed five years at hard labor in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

My move from do-goodism to organizing took about five weeks. Handing out old clothes at Friendship House on Tuesday and Thursday nights helped wise me up. One guy showed up every week, complaining, “They stole my shoes.” One night after this had become a routine, I had my do-good assistant take over while I followed the guy with the new shoes I’d just given him. After turning the corner on Lenox Avenue, he ducked into the first hallway, promptly whipped off his shoes and gave them to a guy who handed him a bottle of Sneaky Pete—cheap wine. This is hardly interracial justice.

From Doing Good to FIGHT

Mr. Friendship, as the residents called me, had tried do-goodism in Harlem. Then I got into organizing. I started by building some no heat/no hot water tenants associations mainly with black mothers with kids. We would troop into court but have no way of talking to the judge about the injustices the slumlords were perpetrating on these women and their children. After a couple of frustrating efforts, I realized that with six black women and one white guy, the public setup required that I take the role of lawyer for the ladies. I raided the used clothing handout operation at Friendship House, put on a tie and a jacket, and walked into the judge’s courtroom followed by the ladies. I said, “Your honor, these are the tenants of a building with no heat and no hot water. The ladies will give you thermometer readings taken in their apartments at 6:00 A.M. and 6:00 P.M. for the last three weeks.” Then I quickly faded back behind them. We worked this public game for about five months and started winning against the landlords, until I got nailed for impersonating

a lawyer. The threat of contempt charges sat me down in the front row, behind the rail of the legal sanctuary. In the meantime, developer Robert Moses came along with his bulldozer version of urban renewal and tore down the buildings faster than I could organize their tenants. I thought I was building power by organizing marginalized residents; I came to understand later that you’ve got to organize everybody.

At age twenty-six I began organizing for Saul Alinsky with the Citizens Foundation for Lackawanna in a suburb of Buffalo, New York. Nick von Hoffman had found out about my Harlem work and talked Saul into hiring me. On the founding day of the new organization, I was leading a protest in one of the poor wards near the Bethlehem Steel Plant, and the crowd started getting out of control. Some leftists were trying to take over the event, so I jumped on top of a car to take charge and restore order. It worked. The action ended peacefully. Later, this strange priest came up to me and said, “That was a nice job, kid.” It was Father Jack Egan of Chicago, who had come to Buffalo for the founding event and to meet with Alinsky and Monsignor John J. O’Grady, the founder of Catholic Charities. I asked him where Alinsky and O’Grady were. He replied, “Back at the hotel having cocktails. You did a nice job today—good work!” Egan repeated as he waved goodbye. His words were important recognition for a young organizer learning by the seat of his pants. More than forty years later, I returned the recognition at Egan’s funeral.

During the black power and civil rights movements of the mid-’60s, Alinsky assigned me to build a black power organization in Rochester, New York. A group of church liberals had contacted Alinsky and raised the money for an organizing drive after a 1964 riot exploded in Rochester’s black ghetto, scaring the hell out of the white establishment. The television news bulletin on the night of the riot began: “It couldn’t happen here in Rochester . . . but it did.” Our fledgling organization, called FIGHT (Freedom, Integrity, God, Honor, Today), was trying to build a relationship with the haves of Rochester, the Eastman Kodak Company. Our strategy was to start by negotiating a small arrangement with the then-progressive Xerox Company, which had allowed a union in its operation. Kodak had no unions and no relationship with the black community. As Alinsky put it, “Rochester, New York, is a Southern plantation transplanted north.” We got our first breakthrough when the top executives of Xerox, including the president, agreed to a meeting to discuss the employment of six hardcore unemployed from the black community.

Five black Pentecostal and Baptist pastors, briefed and nervous, and I went to Xerox for the 2:00 P.M. meeting. Our leader and spokesperson was Minister Franklyn Florence, a protégé of Malcolm X, who had agreed to join FIGHT because Malcolm told him that Alinsky knew more about organizing than

anybody. As we entered the corporate boardroom, the Xerox officials stood and extended their hands for a handshake. These two groups had never met or even seen each other before. Minister Florence rudely walked past all five outstretched hands, and the others with him followed suit. I slunk in, livid with anger. Needless to say, the so-called meeting was a dud. After about twenty minutes it was over. I clammed up on the elevator on our way down to the lobby. Then I found a corner and unloaded on Florence. I used strong, nonchurch language with my group of ministers. The other five judiciously affirmed my analysis of how not to get a relationship. Those kinds of mistakes were never made with powerful Kodak. Everybody learned, and a year later we had our six hardcore unemployed blacks working at Xerox, and then we took the fight to Kodak.

After weeks of secret negotiations, an Eastman Kodak vice president signed an agreement to bring 600 hardcore unemployed blacks into the all-white Kodak workforce of about 40,000. Because Kodak owned and dominated the community, the agreement made the front page of *The New York Times* the next day. But two days later, the announcer on the 10 o'clock news tore up the so-called FIGHT-Kodak pact on live television. It was two days before Christmas. At a Christmas party for black pastors that felt more like a wake, Minister Florence cornered me and said, "Ed, you would not believe the despair in the black community right now. You lied to me. You told me that we could trust Kodak, but you can't trust whites. The agreement was just a trick." He threatened to resign. After a huge rally in Rochester by the FIGHT organization against the Eastman Kodak Company for tearing up the signed agreement, a ringing phone roused me from a dead sleep at about 3:30 A.M. "Have you got Carmichael there? We're going to kill him and you." Stunned, I replied instinctively, "He's not here; he's at the fire station." Then I hung up. We got Stokely Carmichael, Mr. Black Power, who was actually sleeping at Minister Florence's home, safely out of town five hours later on the first plane.

After three weeks of despair, the FIGHT leadership and I dreamed up a shareholder tactic. We would purchase ten shares of Kodak stock in January and go to the annual shareholders meeting in April to protest their backing out of the signed agreement. Kodak's annual meeting was always held in Flemington, New Jersey, hundreds of miles from Rochester. We decided to get 1,000 members of black congregations at the meeting by busing them overnight to Flemington. The buses were scheduled to arrive between 6:30 and 7:00 A.M. Since they were going to spend ten hours on an overnight bus ride, the folks would need bathroom facilities, a cup of coffee, and maybe a sweet roll. Why not call upon our natural allies, the church folks of Flemington,

ton, population 3,500? We got a wonderful response from the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches, which agreed to receive 150 to 200 people at each of their facilities early on the morning we were scheduled to arrive. That changed a week before meeting. One by one, the Christian congregations of Flemington called, turning their backs on their brothers and sisters in Rochester over an issue of justice. Kodak had gotten wind of the strategy and went to work on Flemington's church leaders. Three thousand National Guard troops were called out on the day of the annual meeting, enough to give virtually every citizen of Flemington a personal bodyguard with a gun.

FIGHT was desperate two days before the Kodak event. We were down to one Missouri Synod Lutheran church that was still signed up to receive their share of our people, when a call came into our Rochester headquarters from its pastor. "I'm in trouble," he said. "My church board has called a special meeting tonight to decide whether I'm still the pastor." Minister Florence, FIGHT's president, pleaded with him to hold firm, since all our folks would need bathroom facilities. He agreed to call us after the meeting. A group of us waited at the headquarters for the pastor's call. When it came, all he said was: "I won eight to seven. Come on. We'll receive you."

We arrived in Flemington at 7:00 A.M. on the morning of the stockholders meeting in 32 buses, a totally nonviolent, disciplined, orderly group of over 1,000 black congregation folks coming to protest at Kodak's annual meeting, a first against an American corporation. Since we had to keep the group busy until the meeting began at 10:00, after our stop at the church we marched to the main headquarters of Kodak in the village and posted a copy of the signed agreement on their door. When the stockholders meeting began, our church folks remained outside, while Minister Florence, with nine other leaders, Saul Alinsky, and me, marched into the meeting of assembled stockholders as shareholders. After three minutes, Minister Florence took the floor microphone and interrupted the agenda: "Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, will Kodak honor the agreement it signed with FIGHT?" The chairman replied, "No." Minister Florence announced that Kodak had one hour to reconsider. Then we turned and walked out with national TV and other members of the media following us. We were cat-called with ugly racial epithets all the way up the aisle. Outside we held a people's meeting on jobs.

When we returned in one hour, Minister Florence again asked whether Kodak would keep its promise, and the board chair just said, "No!" Minister Florence replied, "Then it will be a long, hot summer in Rochester." We marched out again, to the same chorus of racial curses. In the end, the bad publicity generated by the organized public pressure that FIGHT brought to bear forced powerful Kodak back to the table, and a new agreement was

signed guaranteeing 600 new jobs for blacks in Rochester. There was one other casualty of this fight: John Mulder, the Kodak vice president who had signed the original agreement, was isolated and left the company after six months.

After the meeting, people were hugging the Lutheran pastor, patting him on the back, and thanking him for his church's hospitality to all 1,000 protestors that morning. He called several of us aside and said, "There is another special meeting tonight to see if I still have a job." He called us the next morning back in Rochester to say: "I won again, eight to seven!" One lone conservative Christian congregation followed the teachings of their leader, Jesus, that day, while the other denominations sinned. Organized people took on organized money—and won. Many years later, Minister Florence said, "Nothing has affected my life as profoundly as the FIGHT struggle." When a Detroit reporter asked Stokely Carmichael for an example of black power, he replied in three words: "FIGHT in Rochester."

Organizing in Chicago

At nineteen, I thought that rural Iowa and Minnesota were the real world. I knew there were big cities, but I hadn't experienced them. My first trip to Chicago opened my eyes and other senses to a new reality. I got on the Chicago "L" in the Loop with people looking like me, but I was headed for the black South Side. It was rush hour, and my car started out all white. I had my head in a book, and when I looked up near 22nd Street south the car was crowded, filling up with dark-skinned people. By 42nd Street, I was the only white in sight. I stood up instinctively, feeling that a black should get the seat, not me. It was like finding myself in a different world, as if I had suddenly found myself in Africa. As I got off the train looking for Friendship House on Indiana Avenue, I realized that I had been raised in relationships with selves like me and that I had better start learning about public ones. I had occasionally heard the "n word" but had never experienced a black community of thousands where I was the minority. I spent most of my formative days, from twenty to twenty-six in African-American communities. The local blacks treated me with respect and protected me.

You think college is where you got your education. Some of mine took place there, but nothing like what I got in the world as it is on the South Side of Chicago during the racial changes of the late 1950s and early '60s. Whole neighborhoods of Irish Catholic parishes were changing from all white to some blacks, and eventually all black, as white flight began. The Catholic bastion of "keep 'em out" was St. Leo's Parish at 78th and Emerald, a parish

closed by the Archdiocese in 2002. The pastor there was Monsignor P. J. Molloy, the last of a dying breed. Cardinal Meyer made him join our ecumenical organizing drive to try and stabilize the area. Every Thursday, Monsignor Molloy had lunch with Mayor Daley at the Blackhawk Hotel downtown. About once a month, I'd get a phone call from him to drop whatever I was doing and get over to the rectory pronto.

On one occasion, I arrived about 10:30 in the morning. He'd already started drinking martinis and insisted that I have one. He was very talkative, showing off, and I was afraid that he was going to quit our organizing effort. I sipped one martini while he had a couple. Suddenly he jumped up and said, "Let me show you something." He had a private elevator in his newly built rectory, and down to the basement we went. After several minutes fumbling with a fist full of keys, he opened the sealed basement door. "Turn on the lights," he commanded. Groping in the dark, I found the bank of switches. The large basement room was absolutely empty except for something against the walls covered with white sheets. "Pick up the sheets," he ordered. Upon doing that, I found several beautiful religious paintings of nativity scenes and other things. "Monsignor," I exclaimed, "why aren't these hanging in the church?" P. J. replied, "I can't, friend of mine asked me to stash them here. It's hot art, but I have to get it out of here. Let's go have another drink." It's called social knowledge, which you only get from experiences like this.

At noon on another day, the phone rang. It was the Monsignor. "Where's Chambers? I need him. We're going to the ball game." As I drove to Comiskey Park, Molloy's only instructions were, "Go faster." I started looking for a parking lot as we approach the park ten minutes before the game. We got near the main box office, with thousands of people rushing to enter, and Molloy said, "Drive right up there, over the curb." The Chicago cops saw Molloy's car and shoved the ordinary fans aside for him until we were twenty feet from the main entrance. "Leave the car, leave the keys, get lost," he said. "Be back here by the sixth inning, Mayor Daley and I will be finished with our business." Social knowledge education 101. When it came to the world as it is, the Monsignor was a better teacher than Thomas Aquinas.

To Molloy's credit, he stood up for justice despite his personal bigotry. The founding meeting of the Organization of the Southwest Community (OSC) was scheduled to take place at Calumet High School with 2,000 South Siders, 99.6 percent white. Several days before the meeting, the credentials committee held an emergency meeting over the application of a small black Methodist congregation from the far northeast corner of the area. I had quietly talked the pastor of that church into applying for membership at the opening meeting. Then I asked Saul Alinsky to call the chancery office to urge

Cardinal Meyer to call Molloy and tell him to uphold Christian values, to wit, admit the black congregation; otherwise we would be building a segregationist organization on the South Side of Chicago.

At 7:00 P.M. on the Friday before the Sunday founding meeting, thirty-five key leaders crowded into our headquarters on West 79th Street. We had liberals, lots of moderates, and the conservatives (our language for the "keep 'em out" crowd), but nobody wanted to make the motion to exclude the black church. A Protestant minister was on an open phone line to his bishop for advice. Molloy and three other priests were there, all silent. The tension built. Dick Bukacheck, chairman of the credentials committee, intoned, "We also have a church application for admission from the northeast area. Is there a motion?" Dead silence. If there are a heaven and a hell, Judgment Day must feel like this. Finally, after what seemed like five minutes, Monsignor Molloy piped up, "I have some questions." You could have cut the air with a knife. "Is this a jack-leg preacher or a legitimate minister we're talking about?" Bukacheck answered, "He's an ordained minister." "Has he got a church in our area?" "Yes, monsignor, it's about a half-mile northeast of St. Leo's," Bukacheck responded. A long pause. "Then I move we let him in," said Molloy.

That Sunday afternoon, five minutes after the start of the founding meeting, a brave black pastor and six of his congregants walked down the aisle of Calumet High auditorium and took their seats up front. Molloy was the only one who could make that happen on the South Side of Chicago in 1958. Before he died, he mounted the pulpit one Sunday and apologized to the twelve or fifteen black families present in the pews for his bad racial language and attitudes. May he rest in peace with the other notorious Chicagoans. The Church is a religious institution with saints and sinners, but in the world as it is, it's often hard to tell which are which.

Making Organizing a Profession

Organizing in the 1950s and '60s was a low-paid, hair-shirt existence with long hours, heavy drinking, and a *machismo* style with its attendant bad habits. Then, as now, organizers learned by their own and other people's mistakes. In the early days, we had no training for leaders and a have-gun-will-travel approach for organizers.

There was no place for women in our organizing at first. I learned about rights and justice for women in the late 1950s and early '60s when organizing in the Woodlawn section of Chicago. I had been raised in a male clerical church and spent five years in a single-sex university and seminary. Scientists

now tell us that we are all female in the womb for the first fifty-seven days of our time on this Earth, but I was raised believing that male was 100 percent male and female 100 percent female. There was no ambiguity on gender in the Iowa of my childhood or the single-sex higher educational institutions I had attended, but the needs and necessities of daily organizing in poor Chicago black neighborhoods and the strength of black females led me to hire three of them to make the organizing drives successful. They were better than the males I had inherited. Everything comes in pairs for a reason.

Alinsky had a misguided fix on marriage and females. He thought neither would work in the tough world of organizing. My continued experience contradicted this mindset, and when we started the IAF Training Institute, we cut women in on the same grounds and standards we had for men. Now no institution in twenty-first-century U.S. society bans women without being dragged into court for discrimination, except the Roman Catholic Church.

Alinsky's way of organizing started changing in the mid-1960s, when Dick Harmon, who had been organizing for Alinsky in Buffalo, and I pulled back from direct organizing to form a training center in Chicago. The decision to turn organizing in a professional direction began to take shape a few years before Alinsky died. At the conclusion of the Kodak fight in Rochester, Harmon and I realized that we would burn ourselves out if things kept on like this. We had to force Alinsky to institutionalize. He resisted at first; it wasn't his cup of tea. But we understood that if we did not take steps to institutionalize organizing as a profession, IAF's insights and work would die with Saul. I called him from Rochester and said, "Saul, I'm returning to Chicago to set up the IAF Training Institute. We need more organizers. I'm thirty-seven now and I'll burn out if we don't do this." There was silence. I explained a little more. Still silence. Then he asked, "Who is going to pay you?" "You are," I answered. "You will help raise the money, and I'll do the work." More silence. "I'll call in a couple of days," he said. His secretary called two days later with a message: "Saul said it's okay to move back to Chicago." At age thirty-seven, I had internalized a universal of successful politics: Go to power *with* a decision, never *for* a decision. Aimed action behind a decision gave birth to the modern IAF.

We got lucky when Gordon Sherman of Midas Mufflers contributed a quarter of a million dollars, and Saul had a contact with another foundation that got it matched. So Saul did his end of it, and in 1969 we opened up on North Michigan Avenue, where we began formation and training of professional organizers. I didn't know that Alinsky would be dead in three years. The reason I had pushed Saul into beginning to institutionalize was that I knew that if the universals of organizing that he had uncovered and wrote

about were so critical to our society, we had to codify them in such a way that we could train men and women to organize. Harmon and I were burning ourselves out by organizing Saul's way. So we began the institutionalization, and when Saul dropped dead in 1972, the ball of wax was in our hands. By that time, the training institute was beginning to take off, and a lot of the good men that were with us then and the good women who began to join us are now running the key collectives that make up the IAF.

The early years of the institute were tough ones in America. Those were the days when movement hopes crashed as Americans started assassinating and killing icon leaders like John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. Watergate was not far away. So people began to ask, "What's the point of building movements and raising up heroes when they'll just kill them?" People in organizing had to get out or dig down inside themselves. At the institute, where we trained hundreds of people from around the country, participants began saying, "We've got to step up and mobilize and organize and take charge." We had to craft our social knowledge and experience of the universals of organizing very carefully into a mode and form that we could communicate to rookies. We also had to train in ways that would convince people with experience in the civil rights or antiwar movements that this training would allow them to take their energy and aim it into citizens organizations that would endure because they would be built around a base and the iron rule.

To teach and train ordinary people how to get a dynamic, effective public life, broad-based leaders have had the opportunity four times a year since the 1970s to attend ten days of national training with leaders from other cities and regions across the country. In these intensive sessions led by IAF's most experienced organizers, leaders tackle a practical and conceptual syllabus of social knowledge about public life, based on the collective wisdom gleaned from IAF organizing over the past sixty years. This training helps fill the vacuum of ignorance about public life in America. More than 400 people of all races, religions, and classes, and from countries throughout the world, avail themselves of this formation for public life and action each year. Ten-day training is a temporary retreat and withdrawal from everyday activity and commitments and an immersion in a university for public life. Some graduates return later to experience the formation again, but only after having returned home to act and reflect on what they have learned.

The training we developed is what allowed us to move from doing community organizing in the limited, turf-oriented sense to building broad-based citizens organizations. The training is for both professional organizers and key volunteer leaders, who learn the universals of organizing. They digest the

experiences of public life that they are having back home and then turn it into social knowledge. At IAF national training, participants absorb in intensive, face-to-face sessions what you're reading in these pages.

IAF training helps people in both their private and public lives. A lot of leaders that we have attracted and kept with us take the know-how from IAF organizing and apply it on the job, often getting better jobs as a result. They know how to have a relational meeting with the boss. They know how to ask for a job two years in advance. They know how to get the slot that only white guys have ever held, by showing that they do most of the work anyway.

The major difference between early and modern IAF is that initially we did no training. We were very good during the civil rights movement at helping build black power organizations. After the actions, we would all go home, but we never stopped to evaluate. We never sat with leaders after actions to reflect on what we were doing, how we were doing it, what we could do better, what we could have changed, what we had learned. Building social knowledge through evaluation was not part of our ordinary way of doing business.

I had tried evaluating for years working with Saul, and now I had an opportunity to incorporate ten years of full-time organizing, not from theory to practice, but the other way around, from practice to theory. How could I take ten years of experience and digest it into workshops and seminars that would help young men and women develop their public skills? When we began the training institute, we didn't know how to teach the universals of organizing. Saul could talk about them, but he couldn't concretize them. Now we teach the universals of organizing, such as these guidelines:

- The iron rule: Never, never do for others what they can do for themselves.
- All action is in the inevitable reaction.
- All change comes about as a result of threat or pressure.
- Every positive has a negative, and every negative a positive.
- Action is to organization as oxygen is to the body.
- Never go to power for a decision, but only with a decision.
- The law of change: Change means movement; movement means friction; friction means heat; heat means controversy; conflict.
- Power precedes program.
- The opposition is your best ally in radicalizing your people.
- Anything that drags along for too long becomes a drag.
- Power without love is tyranny; love without power is sentimental mush.

- Your own dues money is almost sacred; other people's money starts controlling you.
- Power can never be conferred; it must be taken.
- The haves will never give you anything of value.
- Have-nots should not be romanticized; they cheat, lie, steal, double-cross, and play victim just like the haves do.
- Peace and justice are rarely realized in the world as it is; the pursuit, not possession, of happiness takes place amid struggle, conflict, and tension.
- Avoid cynics and ideologues; they have nothing to offer.
- Right things are done for wrong reasons, and bad things are often done for right reasons.
- Given the opportunity, people tend to do the right thing.
- Life force is about natality, plurality, and mortality.

Only leaders who gradually get the social knowledge embodied in these universals into their heart and guts can operate effectively in the public arena. Creating the profession of organizing included a lot more than quality training. Decent salaries had to be paid. Health benefits and retirement plans had to be created. Proper vacations and sabbaticals had to be arranged. Most importantly, the needs and well-being of organizers' marriages and families had to be taken seriously. All these steps went in the opposite direction of the post-World War II culture of male *machismo*.

It has been a long, difficult struggle for the key organizers—Arnie Graf, Ernie Cortes, Mike Gecan, Christine Stephens, Gerald Taylor, Stephen Roberson, and the late Jim Drake—who made it happen over the last thirty years. What we learned to build is a new kind of collective in civil society—the broad-based citizens organization that I described in Chapter Three. I call the professionals whose task it is to build broad-based power democratic organizers.

Democratic Organizers

Democratic organizers are not fixers, deal-makers, spokespersons, or activists. They must have a high degree of social knowledge, native intelligence, anger, passion, and imagination. In the vernacular, they must have some fire in the belly and a willingness to go for the jugular.

I was in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas for a training session with leaders of Valley Interfaith. It was a Saturday morning with about 375 residents, many of them members of the local church where the meet-

ing was being held. It was an important session, so much so that the bishop of the Rio Grande Diocese was present. The "antis" (right-wing reactionaries) were out to stop the organizing drive.

Twenty minutes after I started, the rear door swung open and an excited guy appeared. My two associates, Jim Drake and Ernie Cortes, said in chorus, "The antis are here." Without a thought, I took three steps down the center aisle with my finger aimed at our new visitor and shouted, "Who are you?" Surprised, he mumbled his name. Then I said, "You're not invited to this meeting." He retorted, "I'm a member of this parish." I responded, "This meeting is not for you. Please leave now." There was dead silence. He turned and walked out.

As the door closed, there was a spontaneous applause. When I concluded the session, a big, barrel-chested guy came up to me and said, "I want to shake your hand. I'm the football coach here and I was skeptical about this effort, but after the way you handled that troublemaker, I'm with you all the way." The Bishop stroked me, too. "He's been nothing but trouble here for ten years." I felt pretty good.

An hour later I had to catch a flight to Chicago, so one of the women was designated to drive me to the airport because the training session was still going on. I thanked her for the ride and then dashed over to the check-in. As I bent over to put my piece of luggage on the belt for screening, I sensed I wasn't alone—three guys were following me now, and one of them was the "anti" I had thrown out. The cocky organizer was now scared. I thought, as they say in Texas, "I'm in deep shit here." They asked for my home address to mail me some literature. What if they get on the plane with me? What might they do to my wife and young daughters? I said, "I got to go. I got to go. My plane is leaving." On board, I told the stewardess I was a government agent being tailed by three men, and that I needed to stand near the door to make sure they didn't get on the airplane to Chicago. I never shared that one with my wife.

Organizing in the real world gets your hands dirty. Two memories come to mind. On the the racially tense Southwest Side of Chicago in the late 1960s, we held an election of the Organization of the Southwest Community (OSC). The chairman of the election committee was a young, right-wing real estate agent. My job was to watch him counting ballots. His candidate, a far out right-winger, missed being elected to the decision-making board of fifteen leaders by two votes. We looked at one another. I said, "I think we miscounted by three votes. This fifteenth liberal candidate was awarded those by

mistake.” We looked at each other again. “You’re right,” he said. My rationale was that we had too many liberals and not enough conservatives to keep the organization together.

In the 1980s, the first two Nehemiah homes in Brooklyn, New York, were constructed without a building permit. Getting those two houses built led to nearly 4,000 more built with proper permits. Sometimes you have to stretch morality with a venial sin. Our builder, I. D. Robbins, told organizer Mike Gecan that we didn’t have a permit only after the construction had started. Mike and I discussed our bind: We were building two Nehemiah homes on city-owned land without a permit and our main sponsor was the renowned archbishop of Brooklyn, Francis Mugavero. Do we tell the archbishop or don’t we? What a scandal for the church leader if we got caught. We shut up and prayed. This is how morality works in the messy real world. All action is ambiguous, never 100 percent good or bad.

In organizing, you will never die of boredom. It was a hot July evening in East Los Angeles in the mid-’80s. I was conducting a workshop for about 250 Hispanic leaders at St. Alphonsus Catholic Church. It was going smoothly until about 8:30, when there was a commotion in the rear. That seemed to settle down, when suddenly coming up the center aisle was a bulky Latino guy with a baton in his hand and a pair of white gloves on. I believe I was the only Anglo in the church basement. He marched toward me and then veered to my right and sat glaring at the group. Frantic Latino leaders from the rear were signaling time-out. I called for a break and went to the back, where Ernie Cortes informed me, “The gang is here, and they don’t like a white talking to their people.” With one eye on my gang visitor and attempting to stay cool, I continued the workshop for another fifteen to twenty minutes and then concluded the evening’s events because of the heat. While people milled around, I slipped out the back door to a waiting car.

Organizing will lead you into strange, unpredictable situations. In 1986, I spent several weeks in apartheid South Africa, training black South Africans. My host, Ishmael Mkhabela, invited me to spend the weekend with his family in Soweto. We drove the fifteen miles from his office in Johannesburg to Soweto. He parked the car on a little pad in front of his very modest house. There were fifteen to twenty young people on the street in front of the house eyeing the tall white guy. The house was small and had no extra rooms, so I got the shed in back with a cot. After a nice meal, I retired to my cot in the shed. About 2 a.m. all hell broke loose—shouts, gunfire, return fire, more shouts. Panicked, I thought about leaving the shed and sprinting to the house. Instead, I crawled under the cot and straightened out the blanket so that it looked unoccupied. After about a half hour, things quieted down. I spent the

rest of the night on the floor under the bed. The next morning at breakfast I learned what had happened. Neighbors had spotted two guys trying to steal Mkhabela’s car and began shooting and shouting at them. Embarrassed, I never told my guest where I spent the night, nor my thoughts on who the shooters were looking for.

Organizers are agitators, catalysts, and public-life coaches. They stand for the whole. They make things happen. They are rooted in the holy books, democracy’s founding documents, and the lives of public heroines and heroes. They are radicals in the best sense of the word. The “Why?” question is important to the professional organizer, who needs a nagging curiosity about how it is that people, events, and politics are this way or that way. They are generally feared and misunderstood for standing against the status quo. They are public people who seek collective power to act for justice. Being an organizer is not about being liked, but rather, as I have already said about public life, about being respected. Organizers march to a different drummer.

As I stressed in discussing relational meetings, the critical art of the organizer is selection. Organizing means an endless search for talent, passion, vision, and the ability to relate to other people. Organizers don’t give people information or pander to their preferences. They push them to make a world they can believe in, not accepting things as they are, but pushing for things as they could be. Strong convictions attract some and repel others, but they don’t leave people indifferent. Organizers agitate people to act on their values and interests in the world as it should be. Organizers teach engagement in public life as a means to moral meaning.

Organizers need to like tension, challenge, and people and to be able to dream new possibilities. It takes three to five years of full-time trial and error under a mentor before you “get it.” Career organizing requires a network of organizers and leaders who hold you accountable. The organizer learns by mistakes—his or her own and other people’s.

Activists and movement types are mobilizers and entertainers, not democratic organizers. Their script is their persona and their cause. They tend to be overinterested in themselves. Their understanding of politicalness is superficial or media-driven. They lack disinterestedness. They believe that the cause they lead is in the action—no dialectic, no subtleness, no ambiguity. Activists tend to be literal and narrow. They focus on problems, not issues, and their time frame is immediate. “What do we want?” “Freedom.” “When do we want it?” “Now!” “No justice, no peace.” Movement activists appeal to youth, frustrated idealists, and cynical ideologues, ignoring the 80 percent of moderates who comprise the world as it is. Moderates are not ideological.

They make decisions based on common sense and social knowledge. Sometimes they lean toward the left, sometimes toward the right.

Watch out for free-lance organizers. They gig you, they call the shot, they avoid reporting to you, they tend to have no discipline and generally no personal life. They cannot point to successes they've built. Go check them out where they say they have organized, talk to the local leaders about them, look for what they have built. Organizing is generational—not here today, gone tomorrow.

Values in Action

People know right from wrong, they just don't always act on it. We are usually trained by parents and religious institutions to suppress anger. Hot anger and rage are wrong. Apathy and resignation are wrong. There is an in-between—a cold anger—that is right on. In a document called "The Tent of the Presence," black pastors in the IAF spoke about such anger:

Anger and grief are rooted in our most passionate memories and dreams—a father whose spirit has been broken by demeaning work or no work; a brother or sister lost to violence or alcohol or drugs; a church burned down by an arsonist; a college career sabotaged by a substandard high school; a neighborhood of shops and families and affections and relationships ripped apart because banks wouldn't lend to it, because insurance companies wouldn't insure it, because city officials wouldn't service it, because youth wouldn't respect us, because teachers wouldn't teach in it. Anger sits precariously between two dangerous extremes. One extreme is hatred, the breeding ground of violence. The other extreme is passivity and apathy, the breeding ground of despair and living death. Anger that is focused and deep and rooted in grief is a key element in the organizing of black churches.

Effective public-life organizers and leaders feel that anger, listen to it, and act on it.

In public life, tension is good. Bureaucrats spend their energy trying to eliminate tension. Big unilateral power avoids it. Its mindset is something like, "Try holding me accountable. I'm above that. That's why I have bodyguards, flak-catchers, and handlers. I only meet with powerful, sanitized, safe flatterers who tell me what I want to hear. How do you think I got where I am?"

Mature organizing requires a commitment to live in-between the two worlds. It's a vocation, a lifetime struggle with disappointments, failures, sat-

isfactions, and moments of elation. Sophisticated organizing requires a historical understanding of the law of change and a creative imagination. There are ABCs of how to go about organizing. It's not the power you possess, but using the power of the opposition against itself that changes things. It's called political *jujitsu*. You must go outside the opponent's experience. You aim the action for the inevitable reaction, knowing that the reaction is more important than the action itself.

A typical day for professional organizers is not behind a desk or on the phone. They have to watch out for the phone and use it only to get dates for one-to-one, face-to-face relational meetings. When you walk unannounced into an office of bureaucrats, several of them will start picking up phones that aren't ringing to pretend they are busy. It's a universal—compounded by the cell-phone invasion: The products of the so-called electronic revolution are instruments created by the devil to keep us powerless.

The veteran organizer can sustain twenty-five to thirty relational meetings a week. Allies, potential enemies, and new contacts are all targets. The daily search of the organizer is for talent, energy, and vision. He or she understands that all organizing is constant disorganizing and reorganizing.

No one gets an organizer up in the morning, no one tells you whom to contact. No one holds you accountable every day. You are a self-starter. You use your imagination and creativity to get yourself in and out of trouble. You must be flexible and submerge your opinions. You are both a sponge and an agitator. Like the apostle Paul, you must have the ability and temperament to be to all things to all people. In the course of a week, you meet with a variety of personalities, attitudes, and prejudices—liberals, moderates, conservatives. When race is involved, you must be able to walk in other people's shoes. You must be respectful and knowledgeable about religious beliefs and customs. You must keep your private life separate from your public life. You must be genuinely interested in the other, not "tasky" or looking for your issues. You must be able to question, interrupt, and listen. Your senses are your tools—eyes, ears, nose, etc. Your most important gifts are intuition, instinct, and imagination. What you can't imagine concretely, you can't organize. You're a catalyst—looking, mixing, trying out different elements. Patience with others is critical, meeting them where they are, not where they should be, not where you are.

As an organizer, you fight becoming institutionalized. You refuse to sell. You present opportunities inside people's interests. You're always public, aware, and on guard. You're professional and don't share your private problems or anxieties. You are after a spirit connection with the other. You don't gravitate to the familiar, to those like yourself. You are not about making

friends or finding soulmates. You're disciplined and focused on talent, ideas, the common good, and what the community could be.

What to Look For in an Organizer

So where do we find these professional organizers? The best organizers are mentored and in turn mentor others. Gender, faith, race, and marital or familial status are not issues, but age is. It's best to begin a career in organizing from ages twenty-four to twenty-six, but not before a person has some adult life experience to draw upon. There are all kinds of organizers—mothers of families, labor agents, ministers, teachers, CEOs, managers, politicians, etc.

Organizers have to be developed, but I look for certain traits. One is a high degree of native intelligence. Formal education and degrees are basically irrelevant. Avoid Ph.D.s. They can't act. They get lost in writing books for one another. They are good at a certain kind of analysis but never have a workable solution in the last chapter. For better or worse, at least a medical doctor gives you a prescription. Academic types are abstractionists. Does this make me anti-intellectual? No, I'm just warning you about theoreticians and overrated so-called experts.

The knowledge that matters for a potential organizer is social knowledge, which, as I've said repeatedly here, can only be gotten experientially, but it must be reflected upon. The stories in this book show that insight and wisdom arise from both success and failure—if they are evaluated. That grandparent of yours who never finished high school whom you check with on important decisions about marriage partners, medical operations, house purchases, and so on, has social knowledge.

Potential organizers should be successful at what they do, but restless and not satisfied. You spot them, whet their appetite, get them into the ten-day training experience, let them meet other leaders and organizers, and then proposition them to change careers. Try to pay a living wage.

Organizers need good intuition and imagination. That can't be taught. Some have it; some don't. This profession is for the few, not the many. Top-flight organizers are more like poets, symphony conductors, or other creative artists than typical professionals or managers.

Organizers need some anger. *Anger* is an Old Norse word meaning "grief" or "memory." Anger is your engine, and it resides below the belly button. It gets you going, compels you to challenge things as they are. "That's not right." "Don't use that word when you talk about blacks." "What's going on here, officer?" Who told you that lie?

Organizing for Family, Society, and Plurality

The social world and the people who inhabit it are not one and the same. Society lies between people and supports them and their civic organizations. Our present world is dominated by a scientific, technological, consumerist world view driven by global capitalism. The line in the fight about how the world should be is now drawn between market values and generational ones. In this war of values, professional organizers are committed to action in the public realm and to political judgment. Their theory must be relentlessly and ruthlessly concrete because concreteness is a foundational ground for wise political judgment.

Democracy cannot work without the units essential to its operation—families, congregations, labor unions, and organized collectives of citizens who act in public life for justice and the common good. The organizer's task is to connect those smaller units of civil-society power into collectives that have the ability to hold elected officials and corporations accountable. The challenge organizers face is that the average American is an individualist who doesn't see public life as a vocation. But religious and democratic values are grounded in the idea and reality of communities of people for whom public life must be part of mission and citizenship. Public life has to be something that people work at and have vocational meetings about, something centered around the issues and values that they feel are important. Organizing means seeing to it that what should happen in accordance our values does happen. That's how this country was built, and it's the vocation of professional organizers to see that the building continues and improves.