

ROOTS FOR RADICALS

Organizing for Power,
Action, and Justice

Edward T. Chambers

with Michael A. Cowan

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- What would he or she bring to the building of an organization of organizations?
- Who are the person's connections? To whom did he or she refer me?
- Is this person integrated—able to cross racial, religious, and class lines?
- Was there the beginning of some trust or liking between us?
- Is this someone I should contact again next month or forget?
- How should I follow up?

Developing the disciplined habit of setting aside a brief time for careful reflection on questions like these and jotting down a few key words in a notebook or on index cards to be reviewed before the next meeting is critical to reap maximum benefit from the time and energy involved in scheduling and carrying out relational meetings. Otherwise, after 50 relational meetings, you'll forget what happened in meeting number sixteen.

A Challenge to You

The relational meeting is a sophisticated approach to effective organizing in any area of life. It's simple, but it's not easy. It's a small stage on which the two worlds of is and ought come together for a moment. If the tension between the two worlds that I laid out in the previous chapter, and the possibility of relational meetings in this one, have captured your imagination, the next step is to develop your experience-based social knowledge of the relational meeting. To do this, you must act. Ask for a meeting with someone outside your usual circle of family and friends. Give yourself a credential. Make a phone call to get a date and time at the other person's convenience. Take thirty minutes to seek out that person's interests and values as they relate to the larger community you both share. Be prepared to be open about your own concerns and priorities. When the meeting is over, use the questions above to reflect on what happened. Imagine the person you met with in a collective with others acting for change on some issue that touches his or her self-interest.

After about thirty of these meetings, you'll begin to get the idea. Why not try it? What's the worst thing that could happen? They throw you out! Get a public life. Take a risk. You may like it.

Broad-Based Organizing: An Intentional Response to the Human Condition

"Politics, like sexuality, is an activity which must be carried on; one does not create it or decide to join in—one simply becomes more and more aware that one is involved in it as part of the human condition."

BERNARD CRICK

The Human Condition

Rooted between the material and the spiritual, between the world as it is and the world as it should be, the complexity of the human condition shades into mystery. Nonetheless, its basic plot is simple: We are born with capacities for power and love; we must live with all kinds of people; we will die—so what have we got to lose?

With every birth, a new source of creativity comes into the world. While all human beings have something in common, no two of us are alike. As finite creatures, our existence is time-limited, and we will die. The interplay of creativity, diversity, and limits underlies the struggles, successes, and failures of human existence. All human action and growth—in our families, careers, and community involvements—take place within this existential triad: natality, plurality, and mortality. Let's take a look at each one.

Natality

Like other creatures, human beings survive physically through genes or native instincts. Since Freud we have been frightened by instinct. The so-called "sixth sense" should be honored along with intellect, will, imagination, and other respected characteristics. My life experience has led me to teach that most people have good instincts but hesitate to follow them. Risk-takers, inventors, entrepreneurs, and radicals follow their instincts. We are not only

gifted with instincts but also plunged at birth into a social and cultural world shaped by those who came before us. We must internalize and evaluate that world using our critical intelligence. The philosopher Henri Bergson put it this way: "Intelligence and instinct are turned in different directions—intelligence toward matter, instinct toward life."² Through our intelligence and instincts, we will further shape what we inherit, leaving a better or worse world for those who follow. Men and women make history.

In the great mystery of co-creation, we bring children into the world. Mothers and fathers create new, unique persons. A passage from a novel by Bernard McClaerty registers this newness through a mother's eyes.

It was so utterly common and ordinary. And yet when it happened it was a miracle. That her baby should be here, that she should be who she was, was a profound mystery. . . . Her child was so much more than Catherine's eyes could take in. Although what she saw astonished her. The fin-germails, the dark fluffy hair of the head, the whorl of the ear, they were all part of her and yet they belonged to someone else. Somebody totally other.³

A birthing room is totally changed by the arrival of a new embodied spirit, a full person with their own needs, feelings and style. The ability to generate newness, to make new beginnings, of which bringing a child into the world is the most wonderful expression, is what philosopher Hannah Arendt called *natality*. She describes this newness as "the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative."⁴

Natality enables people to initiate, to create new potentials. In public life, that is the politicalness, or active power for social change, that I've already described. The way things are and the way they could be confront each other. Action is the capacity humans have to initiate efforts to narrow the gap between the is and the ought. Action marks the difference between dynamic living and rotting away in the status quo. The relational meetings I laid out in the previous chapter and the public actions I'll discuss in Chapter Five are the two most basic ways of exercising and practicing natality in real life.

In adopting the Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers of the United States of America made their understanding of the importance of natality or newness clear:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to

secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the Consent of the Governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, having its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness.

When our government does not work, such as when the Supreme Court picks a president or corporate money and lobbyists place oil and gas above the well-being of our children, education, and low-income protection, it is the responsibility of citizens to exercise their natality by using their politicalness to organize. When the founders spoke of the right of people "to alter or abolish" their government, they were acknowledging the place of natality, radical newness.

Natality is at the core for people of faith, too. The Abrahamic religions consider the human person to have been created in the image and likeness of the God of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Recall the famous text of Genesis 1:27, sacred to all three traditions, in which we read, "So God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female He created them." Another classic proclamation of natality is found in the Hebrew scriptures when God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, proclaims, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isaiah 43:19).

In Arendt's words, "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty. . . ." ⁵ The new surprises. Through action, human natality makes ways in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, bringing changes to the world as it is that experts could not imagine. Creations like the steam engine, electricity, the automobile, nuclear power, and the Internet, as well as the mixing of cultures being forced on us by globalization, demand that society stretch beyond previous limits. Through our human natality, the "impossible" happens.

Margarita Vargas stood on the stage, looked out onto the sea of 7,000 faces in the Shrine Auditorium, saw the lights from the TV cameras, and felt her knees buckle. As she stood ready to kick off a huge campaign to raise the minimum wage in California, Margarita realized that nothing in her background had prepared her for such a moment—nothing except the three years of training she had received as an IAF leader.

Born in Mexico, Vargas had spent the last twenty years raising her eight children, just as her mother and grandmother had done. Although she had moved to the United States with her husband before the first baby was born, she had never found it necessary to learn English or become a citizen. But when her youngest child was three and the family moved to Baldwin Park, California, she found herself wanting more.

At the urging of a friend, she went to a special meeting at her church. Sitting quietly in the back of the room, she looked around. There were people there she had never associated with before: blacks, whites, Protestants, Jews. She couldn't understand everything that was going on, but she did understand that this diverse group of people wanted to do something to make the community better. Vargas had some ideas, but she was too shy and unsure of her English to speak up. Still, she continued to come to the meetings, because she was thrilled to see ordinary people taking power—power that she had thought belonged only to those in authority: government officials, corporate leaders, and the wealthy.

The stories of IAF organizations and people throughout these pages confirm that human natality does give rise to public birth-moments. Such events require a determined willingness to live with the tension between limitations and possibilities in meaningful action, to embrace the tension of the two worlds.

Plurality

Contrary to the individualism of the received culture, the self's affinity is not to itself in isolation, but to others. The realm of human affairs is rich and complex, ambiguous and tragic, because the others with whom we must work out a shared existence are not just like us. People's perspectives, interests, values, and priorities are unique to them. There is no generic "humanity" except in the realm of abstraction. In reality, people are similar but not the same; they differ, and these differences are dealt with for better and for worse in relationships. This dimension of the human condition is called *plurality*. Whenever two or more human beings are gathered, differences in experience, interests, values, and power will be present. Arendt writes, "We are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live."⁶ The plurality or diversity of humanity leaves people with a simple, momentous choice: Do they handle their differences through politicalness or through force and violence? Ever increasing globalization is forcing us to confront our plurality.

Since the time of cave-dwellers, people have had the strong habit of seeking security by congregating with those who are like them. This instinct becomes social sin when it hardens into assuming that one group's way is superior to the ways of others, with an accompanying habit of treating everybody else as inferiors. The "-isms" that plague us, like racism and sexism, are antippluralistic and, thus, antihuman.

Living with plurality requires moving from a fixed world of certainties ("Obey your parents," "Go to church," "Do good," "Our way is the only way") to facing the ambiguity of the world as it is. This means changing our focus from so-called autonomy to relationship and collective action; from separations (body/soul, self/other, them/us) to organic, yin-yang unity; from autonomous individualism to community and collective action; from static, fixed patterns to reorganizing and transforming; and from quantifiable, scientific knowledge to social, experiential knowledge. People who insist on certainty don't do well in the pluralistic public world of broad-based organizing. Participation in a diverse collective will test your certainties and change them. Going into public action with others in a diverse collective transforms people's lives. Unfortunately, most of us don't get to taste that.

Facing plurality means coming out from behind the barriers that we have inherited around race, religion, class, culture, and gender in search of public relationships based in mutual interest and respect. It means connecting with others where they are; meeting them where they live, work, and pray; venturing onto unfamiliar ground. And this requires forays out of familiar enclaves into "foreign" territory. The plurality of the world demands that people mix their energy, interests, and resources with others if their goal is to build a broad base of power to act collectively. Plurality is of the essence in broad-based organizing, because it can produce a base of organized people power, which no single issue or group can match. The haves don't want to see diverse groups organized. The haves understand the power that creates and want to keep groups divided so that they can keep control. Organized plurality can take on organized money and win.

Mortality

We all know we will die, but nobody knows when. Human beings begin to move toward physical death at the instant of birth. Existence on Earth will come to an end. This dimension of the human condition is *mortality*. Mortality means you have a funeral waiting. The earthly life, which is a gift, is limited in time and space. Augustine put it clearly: "When we finally lay down, we lay down for a long time." Only facing death squarely can free people of the illusion that there's always more time and inspire them to really live their

lives. Whether people integrate their mortality or run from it through avoidance and distractions has a lot to do with what the quality of their lives will be.

Accepting mortality means deciding what you want on your tombstone. Failing to face the fact of death leaves people unfocused, scattered, and prey to the endless stream of fads and addictions purveyed by the materialistic received culture. Time "gets away" from us. Facing Augustine's hard truth makes us focus our attention and energize our living, as the following reflections by an IAF organizer make plain.

When my father was dying of cancer, I sat many hours with him, talking to him about his own life. My father never completed the eighth grade and was bitterly frustrated at his own lack of accomplishment. He worked hard all his life and did the best he could, but his hopes and dreams were never realized because he did not have the opportunities to fulfill his potential. He ran out of time.

My father's feelings at the end of his life ignited a realization in me. It dawned on me that organizing is about more than winning on issues—it is about developing people's potential to realize their hopes. A focus on developing people changes your sense of time. Issue campaigns involve a relatively short span of time—weeks, months, a year or two at most. But if your concern is developing people, you need the time frame of a parent—twenty years, a generation. Organizing must be generational.

Confronting limits means more than acknowledging that we will run out of time. It also requires learning to live with the limitations of the world. The mature acceptance of life's inevitable messiness and imperfection forces you to live deliberately between the extremes of cynicism and ideological purity. In public life, this requires that organized citizens and people of faith seek out and initiate opportunities to embody cherished values like living wages for all workers, while accepting the fact that no perfect realization of them is possible. Such people are willing to seek compromises with integrity. They refuse to let the best drive out the better. They'll take half a loaf, if that's all that's possible in the circumstances. They accept their limitations.

Human life is continually shaped by the three existential facts I just described: We create, we are unique, and we die. Natality, plurality, and mortality are not separate compartments inside us. They are woven together in a seamless web, like past, present, and future. Plurality spins directly out of natality. Every human life is not only new but also unique and irreplaceable. For those who realize that time flies on the way to death, relationships move

to the center of life, and collective action with others who are different is recognized as the engine and oxygen that lets us spend the limited time we have creatively. If we want to develop our capacities for being creative, embracing differences, and facing the limits of our existence, we must have an instrument and a place in which to do that. In IAF that instrument is the broad-based citizens organization, and the place where it's built is called civil society.

Civil Society, the State, and the Market

The place where people come together voluntarily to act in and around shared interests is called civil society. Contrary to the usual jargon, civil society is the first and critical sector, not the so-called "third sector." The cave, family, and tribe came first. Civil society is the first and most important level of institutions. Its power is generational. It's where values and traditions are instilled and fostered. The state and the market came later and exist to support it.

Civil society trumps the state and the market in value, but most people don't think of it that way. Totalitarians like Stalin, Hitler, and Mao wiped out civil-society institutions right off the bat. Civil society is the political conscience and benchmark of democracy. Wipe it out and anything goes. The organizations of civil society are so-called mediating institutions—families, congregations, schools, social clubs, citizens organizations, athletic groups, parent-teacher associations, block clubs, unions, fraternal and social organizations, and so on. They are usually small units of power, constituted by organized people with their own money. These institutions are the glue that holds societies together. Without these relationships and this power, there is chaos and anarchy. Civil-society institutions pass on the meanings and virtues necessary for human, political life. If civil society is fatally weakened, neither the family nor the state nor the market can survive. That's why we need safety nets like social security, free education, health care, and living wages for all citizens.

In strong civil-society institutions, relationships revolve around something other than buying and selling and voting every few years. Self and other meet as unique, irreplaceable persons. Such relationships are the source of the most sacred meanings in human life because it is within them that people are connected to their place and roots, learning the stories, imbibing the customs and traditions, and discovering the vocations that give their lives meaning and value. It's here that we become persons, rather than mere consumers or voters. Here, people are not reduced to statistics, market segments, or job

descriptions. They are known and know others by face, one to one. Their presence is recognized, and their absence is felt.

The state includes official governments at local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Its primary functions are enforcing law and order within its boundaries, creating a social safety net for its citizens, and providing for the common defense against outside threats. In order to carry those out, it controls money and collects taxes from the people. The state's networks include civil-service employees, academic elites, and party operatives hired to advise on and lobby for government policies and initiatives. The attention span of state operatives is the next election. If ordinary people participate in the state at all, they do so through the ever more minimally political act called voting. The majority of Americans choose not to vote. When I do, I hold my nose.

The market includes all the institutions of business and commerce. Its reason for being is to generate profits through the production and distribution of goods and services. Its touchstone for creating those profits is efficiency through the careful, constant calculation of the costs and benefits associated with particular decisions. Market calculations create commodities for whatever sale prices the market will bear. The key market institution is the corporation, a legal fiction with the same rights as a person, which shields its officers and employees from personal culpability for the corporation's acts. Unlike persons, corporations have no natural mortality; their longevity is determined by their adaptability to market conditions. In contrast to the national boundaries of the state, the market is global in scope and reach. It knows no boundaries. While this has been true as long as international trade has existed, the global character and power of the market is expanding exponentially as the result of new technologies and international trade policies. The "new world order" so far is just a new market order. People and the common good are not even on the screen. The focus of the market is the profitable creation and distribution of goods and services. The time frame of the market is always now, this ninety-day earnings period, this quarter's rate of return. Ordinary people participate in the market as workers, clients, customers, and consumers.

For purposes of understanding, it's useful to break out the three basic components of a society as I just did, but every actual society is a blend of state, market, and civil society. In the world as it is, the three sectors blend into and out of one another. Economics and politics—the market and the state—are always interrelated. There is no economy without a political system, and vice versa. In a healthy and just society, state and market power exist in creative tension, creating accountability by constantly challenging

each other's proper competence and responsibility. One job of the state is to put boundaries on the market—in other words, to hold it accountable for the common and collective good.

Civil society makes its contribution to humankind by being sufficiently well organized, meaning powerful enough, to hold the elected leaders of the state and the public officials they appoint, as well as the moguls of the market, accountable for the impact of their decisions on individuals, families, and local communities. Arthur Okun, former head of the Federal Reserve, had it right: "The market has its place, but it must be kept in its place." Keeping the market in its place will not happen without broad-based organizing of the institutions of civil society.

The focus of civil society is the well-being of persons, families, and the city. The time perspective of civil society is that of this generation and the next: What must we do now so that the life chances of our grandchildren will be enhanced? When ordinary people participate in civil society, they do so as people of belief committed to public justice and mercy, as citizens committed to the practice of democracy. When the state doesn't keep the market in its place, but instead gets bought by it, as we see all around us in the era of Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom, civil society is all that's left to initiate change.

Broad-Based Citizens Organizations

Broad-based citizens organizations like those of the IAF are twenty-first-century civil-society institutions *par excellence*. Their members are not individuals but mediating institutions—congregations, civic associations, labor unions, and some businesses—that come together to act in concert with others on their respective interests and values in matters of common concern. IAF organizations create the space in which people can think, develop their public life, and be loyal to what they cherish. Collectives of voluntary, mediating institutions are the most progressive social instruments now available for the development of effective politicalness by everyday ordinary citizens. The term "broad-based" is used here to contrast IAF organizations with "community organizations." The latter tend to have a narrow, individual-membership base, operate within a limited turf or neighborhood, and focus on small problems.

We need a little history to understand why twenty-first-century IAF organizations are called broad-based citizens organizations. The early IAF built strong, turf-based, community organizations with clear geographic boundaries, not broad-based collectives. In those days, IAF did not understand the concept or have the organizers to build broad-based organizations on a size

and scale that the times demanded. The kind of community organizing IAF did initially was great for a small piece of city turf but was ineffective against huge corporations with political connections bought with money and arranged by good lobbyists.

In the 1980s, IAF started changing the size and scale of organizing. We began to build broader and deeper organizations. We recognized moderates and the middle class as untapped potential. Organizing only poor people couldn't produce enough power. Large citywide or countywide geographic areas were targeted. We held on to Saul Alinsky's insight of building new organizations from the pockets of power that institutions already in the field represent. As a new generation of power that institutions already in the field confidence and experience, they sought out and engaged all faiths, races, and classes. The poor, working class, middle class, and—to the horror of some ideologues—the wealthy and successful came on board.

IAF affiliates are organizations of other organizations. Individuals need not apply. When you have many small, scattered wheels, you need to create a big wheel out of them. The collective leadership of an organization is trained in the culture of effective, efficient public life. Their operative belief is that democratic justice is never handed to people but must be fought for and attained by public struggle. Because there is no nice, polite way to get change, new organizations must expect frequent confrontation and conflict. Unlike the peace and harmony we expect in private life, a public-life organization intentionally creates tension, targets, and exchanges of power as means to democratic justice. Because an IAF organization is finally about relationality, the relational meeting is its most radical tool.

Broad-based power organizations must be able to take on multiple issues because their member organizations have multiple interests. While an effective organization will ordinarily go into action only on one major issue at a time, it will always have other fights in the bank. An organization's leaders and organizers can never be totally focused on the current issue. They must always be asking the question, "What do we do after we win this one?" The fight in the bank is the next priority issue on which research is being done in preparation for the next struggle. An effective broad-based organization's life has a rhythm of planning, action, and reflection.

In a broad-based collective, member institutions do not function subordinatedly, like Catholic parishes within a diocese. Instead, each institution retains its identity, mission, and independence, renewing its dues-paying membership in the collective from year to year as long as its involvement serves its interests and expresses its values. By coming together and mixing their talent, time, money, and values, the institutions that make up a broad-based organi-

zations become a civil-society force for state and market powers to reckon with.

IAF collectives exist to act for justice with power by using sound political judgment. By contrast, service and maintenance organizations in health care, education, and religion are aimed not at justice but rather at service and mercy. The effect of their work is to ameliorate the status quo. They tend to ignore power. There are hundreds of thousands of service and maintenance organizations in the United States, but fewer than 100 broad-based citizens organizations. Broad-based collectives are the most potent social instrument now available for the development of politicalness because they are of a size and scale appropriate to countering the market's threat to overwhelm the state.

How to Spot an IAF Organization

You can spot an IAF civil-society organization by several benchmarks. For starters, it will be a dues-based operation. It is not subsidized by local, state, or federal government. It is not dependent upon foundation money or other outside funds. It begins with approximately two years' work by a sponsoring committee, which raises seed money for a serious organizing drive. After creating that breathing space, a broad-based organization will build itself over generations, continually organizing and reorganizing itself.

IAF affiliates are dues-based because they understand that power comes in two forms: organized people and organized money. An effective broad-based collective is many organized institutions with some organized money in the form of dues. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are examples of institutions that have survived for thousands of years because they understand how to organize people and money. Dues are the life blood of civil-society organizations because they create ownership and ensure a measure of independence in dealing with the powers that be. Goethe had it right: "Whosoever eats my bread, sings my song." A solid dues base will open the doors of power because heavy hitters in the state and market will recognize and deal seriously with the leaders of independent, financially self-sustaining efforts.

Dues also matter because power precedes program. When a broad-based collective has a well-organized base of people and some money, it can deal with officials and corporations with integrity and dignity intact. "We pay our own way. We are not here to ask for money for our operations. Our operating budget is \$X per year, and we raise that ourselves from our member institutions. We don't want your money to operate; we want your help to build low-

income homes." Such financial freedom gives an organization the dignity and strength to ask, not beg, for what it wants.

Broad-based organizations are led and controlled by a frequently changing leadership collective, which is mentored by professional organizers who change regularly. The paid organizing staff is small, two or three at most, sometimes only one. The IAF organization is an instrumentality created, funded, and led by leaders from the same civil-society institutions whose money pays its bills.

The second mark of an IAF organization is the presence of a talented professional organizer who belongs to a real network and has a record that can be checked out. While most of the work of broad-based organizations rests on its volunteer leaders, professional organizers are a crucial catalyst. They must have track records, be compensated well in salary and fringe benefits, and held accountable by the leadership. Alinsky thought that after five or six years, organizations either disband or become part of the establishment. The presence of his organizers in a community then was understood to be temporary. An important insight of the modern IAF, however, is that as instruments of citizen democracy, broad-based organizations are as necessary to the functioning of modern societies as efficient markets and effective states. And a small staff of professionally trained, mentored, and supervised organizers is necessary to the health of these organizations. IAF's professional organizers are talent scouts, teachers, mentors, agitators, and strategists. Their vocation is both simple and profound: to challenge and support citizens and people of belief—democratic or religious—to claim their public selves, to develop their political clout, and to learn how to stand for the whole.

An organization that fudges on either dues or the professional organizer will end up as a subsidized civic effort or a flash-in-the-pan movement that appears briefly in the media and then disappears.

Two Broad-Based Power Organizations

Communities Organized for Public Service (now Metro COPS) is an organization of parishes and other congregations originally based in the predominantly Hispanic, low-income West and South Sides of San Antonio. Founded in 1974, it is the oldest of the modern IAF organizations in the IAF network. For nearly thirty years, COPS has brought hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of new streets, drainage, sidewalks, libraries, parks, and streetlights to poor neighborhoods. It has brought about the demolition of substandard housing and the building of new housing. It has directed economic development funds toward poor inner-city neighborhoods. It has created Project

Quest, one of the nation's most highly acclaimed workforce preparation programs.

Beyond rebuilding the physical infrastructure of formerly marginalized parts of the city, COPS has transformed the culture of San Antonio's public life. It has created a public space in which issues are discussed and debated in the open, which is fiercely nonpartisan, and which allows for competition among a plurality of interests. COPS is committed to neighborhood and family values, democratic participation, leadership development, and public accountability of local and state officials.

The organization nurtures leaders and future leaders, who rise through its ranks, developing their skills and teaching others what they have learned. COPS has taught its leaders how strength lies not in specific issues or personalities but in the process of empowerment and leadership development. In this process, COPS continues to initiate in the process of rebuilding the city. Some of its successes include

- formulating the plan for a \$10 million housing trust fund to finance affordable housing in inner-city neighborhoods
- organizing the San Antonio Education Partnership to guarantee job and scholarship opportunities to high school seniors from poor neighborhoods
- leadership in the creation of Project Quest, a nationally recognized comprehensive job training and placement effort
- negotiating and supporting a \$140 million bond issue to provide continued street and drainage improvements
- blocking a proposal to sell the municipally owned electric utility to private interests, which would have resulted in significant increases in utility rates
- developing the Alliance Schools strategy for organizing to strengthen local public schools

Baltimoreans United for Leadership Development (BUILD) is a metropolitan, broad-based, multidenominational, nonpartisan organization that represents the strength and concerns of Baltimore's families through its churches. Its track record includes the following:

- a successful campaign against bank redlining that led to negotiated agreements with Baltimore banks and savings and loans, resulting in more than 500 low-income families acquiring home mortgages

- an agreement with the mayor, the corporate community, the school system, and sixteen area colleges and universities that guarantees financial aid for advanced education or a job to any student graduating from high school with a Maryland diploma and good attendance
- a campaign to raise the minimum wage paid to city workers and the employees of city contractors
- a pioneering effort to organize temporary workers

More than sixty broad-based citizens organizations like Metro COPS and BUILD make up the national IAF network. Each of them stands for the whole where they are, by winning on issues like those listed above. Because these organizations understand that power precedes program, their work begins with hundreds of thousands of relational meetings. Issues arise from there. One of the toughest things to teach a new organization is to build its power base before it goes into action. In the process of planning, acting, and evaluating on issues like these, such organizations do more than get streets repaired, schools built, people insured, seniors protected, and homes built. They weave the social fabric of a community across the lines of race, religion, geography, and class. They generate the social capital that makes life not only livable, but meaningful.

Creating Social Capital

Academics and pundits love to throw around the term "social capital" and debate its nuances, but most of them couldn't organize a block party. IAF's broad-based organizations are powerful social-capital generators.

The great driving force in today's world is unfettered capitalism. Marx captured the dynamic driving force that turns money into capital in his famous general formula for capital, $M-C-M'$, in which M is money, C is a commodity to be sold, and M' is more money.⁷ In that equation, $\text{profit} = M'-M$. Capital grows only when the $M-C-M'$ process is in constant motion, creating more profit. Capitalism is not about money, which is merely a means to an end; it's about keeping money in motion, the activity that generates profit. The more constantly and efficiently the $M-C-M'$ cycle can be kept in motion, the more capital can be generated. For example, in today's economy, nearly \$2 trillion changes hands daily in the international currency exchange market. The more constantly and efficiently the $M-C-M'$ cycle can be kept in motion, the more capital can be generated.

(The social (or political) capital of a citizens organization is its power to win on its interests. That power is rooted in the meanings, values, social

knowledge, and relationships that hold such groups together in a community of common interests. Social capital is the shared "wealth" of the body politic. By analogy to Marx, its formula might be expressed as: $\text{TEP}-\text{CA}-\text{TEP}'$, in which TEP is talent, energy, and power; CA is collective action; and TEP' is more talent, energy, and power. Kept in motion, organized talent, energy, and power generates social capital.

The social capital of a broad-based organization grows only when the organization is in action. Every relational meeting, house meeting, research action, and small or large public event leads to TEP. Broad-based organizing is a process for creating social capital and keeping it in motion. Creating significant social capital requires organizing people on a size and scale that permits them to initiate action (motion), rather than merely reacting to the pressure of others. Single-issue organizations cannot sustain large amounts of social capital and keep it in motion week in and week out. Broad-based citizens organizations are powerful instruments for the generation of social capital because its citizens are organized—in place and in position, ready to act with purpose when called upon.

The creation of civil-society capital is one moment in the continuously dynamic existence of people and their institutions, a moment that transforms their power to act on behalf of their interests. It does not involve physical, material objects in any essential way. Nothing is bought or sold. It is not tangible, for it is embodied in relations among persons and their institutions, already existing ones and the new ones they are creating by acting. Social capital can't be preserved like jelly; you use it or you lose it. People grow, learn, and change inside this dynamic of collective planning, action, and reflection. When, and only when, people participate in the collective creation of social capital, their politicalness is expanded. Otherwise, it remains an unrealized potential, a failure to exercise the gift our Creator gave us. Creating social capital is an ongoing, unending task for those committed to act for justice and democracy. Religious organizations call this public work mission and ministry. Citizens institutions call it common good and meaningful public life.

The Vocation of Politicalness

Human beings are creatures of flesh and blood. Meaning comes only when they put that flesh and blood in the service of a larger purpose. People's talent, energy, and power *will* serve some purpose; the meaning and satisfaction they experience depends on whether they're serving goals worthy of their lives. If

the purposes to which they devote their time and energy are worthy (for example, democracy, justice, love), people will flourish; if not (for example, crass materialism or self-preoccupation), people will be prone to addiction, nihilism, and despair. The question is not whether human lives serve some purpose, but only which purposes they serve.

Sheldon Wolin explained politicalness this way: "By politicalness I mean our capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life."⁸ That one needs a little unpacking. Politicalness is a *capacity*. That means that it may, but will not automatically, be developed. Being able to act well politically is like being able to sing a song or give a speech; it's an ability that remains dormant if not practiced. Developing our politicalness requires that we know and value what it means to have power, and that means developing the head, the heart, and the gut. Exercising politicalness demands that we participate in something larger than our individual projects, and that means give-and-take, compromise, and mutual respect. Being political entails responsibility. Rabbi Abraham Heschel boiled the message of the Jewish prophets down to this: "Few are guilty, but all are responsible."⁹ Our politicalness is our God-given ability to respond to our world as it is by joining with others to stand for the whole.

Our politicalness is a lot like our sexuality. We get it at birth and we have it all our lives. The capacity to be able, to have effects, on our world is as much a part of us as the capacity to form bonds of affinity with others. Politicalness and sexuality are ingrained in us, but neither of them is absolutely clear. Bernard Crick puts the point this way:

[Politics and sexuality] are both activities in which . . . the sympathies that are a product of experience are better than doctrines that are learnt from books. Sexuality, granted, is a more widespread activity than politics, but again the suspicion remains that the man who can live without either is either acting the beast or aping the god. Both have much the same character of necessity in essence and unpredictability in form. Both are activities that must be carried on if the community is to perpetuate itself at all, both serve this wider purpose, and yet both can become enjoyable ends in themselves for any one individual . . .¹⁰

So we're back again to social knowledge. Politics and sexuality are complex, ambiguous activities in which people regularly do the right things for the wrong reasons, and vice versa. As with our sexuality, there is no one right way to develop our God-given capacity for politicalness into an ability and a vocation. You have to grow into being a citizen just as you have to grow into

being a sexual partner. It's like a kid learning a sport—you don't do it without practice. IAF organizations are the instruments that let people practice and evaluate public life in collectives. Through that activity they become founding fathers and mothers in their own right in their communities. IAF broad-based organizing constantly challenges those who are doing the relational meetings and public actions to change, to become citizens.

The problem is that average Americans don't see politicalness as a vocation or have a clue about how to develop that piece of themselves. Nor do they have a vehicle for figuring it out. We have a context for developing our sexuality. It's called family and private life. But where do we learn to develop our politicalness? The fact that so few Americans could answer that question means that most of them couldn't organize change in their communities if their lives depended on it. The thing is, they do.

Living out our religious and democratic values requires that public life be part of our citizenship and mission. Our politicalness has to be something we work at, interact with others about, and keep centered in and around the issues and values that we feel are important. People who understood the vocation of politics built this country. That's how hospitals and colleges and universities were started by religious institutions. That's how the local city Democratic Party got started, by building on the fabric of parishes and congregations that were already organized. If social efforts aren't constantly organized and if people don't see that they have an ongoing mission and vocation to participate in public life, to be a neighbor, to enter into arrangements of power with people across racial, religious, and class lines, and to welcome the differences, politics dies.

IAF leaders and organizers understand from their own experience what the sociologist Max Weber meant when he described politics as being like "the long, slow boring of hard boards," an activity not for the faint-hearted or those whose attention and gratification span is limited to "now." In a famous passage stressing the real demands of the world as it is, Weber's verdict on "movement" politics, on those who exercise their politicalness haphazardly or only when they feel like it, is sobering: "They have not measured up to the world as it really is in its everyday routine. Objectively and actually, they have not experienced the vocation for politics in its deepest meaning, which they thought they had."¹¹ Broad-based organizing is the most potent form now available for the development of our political birthright, for taking up our political vocation. We must grab politicalness by its roots.