

ROOTS FOR RADICALS

Organizing for Power,
Action, and Justice

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Relationships: Private and Public

"The more realistically one construes self-interest, the more one is involved in relationships with others. . . . The more one is involved in relationships with others, the more conflicts of interest, or of character and circumstance, will arise."

BERNARD CRICK

Relationships: Private and Public

In the IAF organizing tradition, the foundational concept is relationships. In this chapter, I'll distinguish two basic types, private relationships and public ones. The distinction between the private and public domains is important, in fact crucial, and I contrast them here for purposes of understanding. In the world as it is, people are more or less in one mode or the other most of the time. Real understanding of private and public relationships comes from reflecting on experience.

The privateness/publicness of human life is both/and, not either/or. We are made this way by the Creator through our parents. In the previous chapter, I said that human beings are born with creative capacities called sexuality and politicalness. Sexuality is at the core of our being and relationships. It is the innate, wired-in instinct to be related to others in bonds of affinity. Our sexuality is part and parcel of all that we do and all that we are, but intimate sexual self-expression is only appropriate in the private realm of relationships. Cultures differ in the kinds and degree of sexual expression considered appropriate in public, but too much publicness in the expression of sexuality universally signals a problem of some kind.

Politicalness is also part of all that we are and do, but it is in the quintessentially public realm of life. Standing for the whole—engaging in strong debate, reasoned compromise, and focused action for the common good—requires that we participate in the public domain. When human politicalness is relegated to private relationships, which is one of the main effects of the dominant culture of individualism, it is distorted into narrow, private, ego-

driven struggles. Private life is too small a stage for developing our political capacity.

Public and private are always in tension inside our skins. The trick is to learn not to mix them inappropriately—there are limits and boundaries. That learning comes hard in a culture where a multibillion-dollar advertising juggernaut deliberately and constantly mixes them up by stealing images from the private realm ("Reach out and touch someone," "Home for the holidays") and using them to sell stuff in the public marketplace. Co-opting sacred private realities like the bond between husband and wife or the shape of your body for the purpose of selling products is a hallmark of unbridled capitalism.

Private relationships are foundational and inform all others. They are personal, unique, intimate, and many times secret. The small circle of private relationships typically includes self, spouse, children, extended family, and a very few close friends. When these relationships are supportive and nurturing, they feed and sustain us throughout our lives; when they are not, they continue to undermine us. The sixteen to eighteen years at the beginning of our lives should be invested in forming us. The key institution in the realm of private relationships is the family.

The glue of the private domain is self-giving love. In this mode, we are bound by commitments, as well as by blood and genes, to understand and support one another until death do us part. The relationship between a mother and son or a father and daughter is unique and not duplicable. This is where we first learn reciprocity and self-sacrifice, mutual obedience and fidelity, where we gather the formative social knowledge of what it means to be in a relationship. It is our basic training ground in love and power, and here the love mode is stronger. Private relationships are covenants, unconditional promises of mutual commitment.

Public relationships, by contrast, are open, formal, capable of withstanding scrutiny, above board, and accessible to all. The glue of public relationships is also different. Here the ground rule is *quid pro quo*—you help me, I'll help you. This is where we learn about making and keeping public promises, and about how to hold and be held accountable. Enlightened self-interest, not mutual self-sacrifice, is what makes public relationships work. Here the power mode is stronger than the love mode. This is the world of exchange, compromise, and deals—the world of contracts, transactions, and the law.

Everybody wants and needs to be liked. It is an essential form of recognition, but it belongs primarily in the private realm, at home, where people are among those who take them for who they are. But this need does have a counterpart in public relationships. When people move toward powerful in-

dividuals in public life, they tend to want to be liked by them, but when that desire plays too large a role in their public actions, their integrity and power will be compromised.

Three thousand members of IAF's East Los Angeles Organization waited to pin the mayor, to hold him accountable. Mrs. Margarita Rodriguez, a Hispanic leader, introduced him, saying, "I present to you the mayor of Los Angeles, the Honorable Thomas Bradley." Bradley took the podium and said, "Thank you, Margarita." She spun in her tracks and returned to the microphone. "It's Mrs. Rodriguez to you today, Mr. Mayor." The mayor apologized.

By acting publicly in order to be liked, people invariably violate their group or organization's self-interest, usually by failing to hold public power-brokers accountable at critical moments. Margarita Rodriguez followed her instincts, making the distinction between private and public clear to the mayor and the members of her constituency.

What people need in public life is to be respected, which is similar to, but different from, being liked. That is why it is crucial to learn to act for respect in public, to be disinterested about being liked there, to look for liking in the private realm. Effective action sometimes brings both respect and liking, but the first is what matters in the public realm. The most recent in the continuing series of public figures who got liking and respect mixed up inappropriately was Bill Clinton, who thought he could mix public and private with impunity, be President and just plain Bill. He will not be the last. Prophets, visionaries, and ordinary people who value justice and democracy can't be too concerned about being liked in the public realm, but they must insist upon being respected there.

In the private mode, self-giving love is the centerpiece. This is where social bonding happens first and most intensely, generating trust, loyalty, and mutual obligation. Mutual fidelity and obedience are part of the practical chemistry of private relationships. Private life is largely about responding to the personal needs of those involved. To expect these nurturing ideals in public relationships is misleading and misguided. In the public mode, the ability to act—to be able—is the fulcrum of how social change happens and self-interest is realized. The dynamic is give and take. Public relationships involve the exercise of power, *quid pro quo*. They are not about unconditional private loyalties but rather about making and keeping public promises, initiating, compromising, and accountability.

The leaders of the new East Brooklyn organization were impatient and challenged the organizers: "We've been meeting for more than a year. When are we going to do something about all this blighted property?" The organizers knew that the organization was too young and not powerful enough to take on an issue of that size. Mike Gecan and I sweated to come up with a feasible alternative. I mentioned to him how hard the absence of street signs made it to find my way around when I came into the neighborhood. He said, "It's like that all over here." The absence of street signs gave the police and fire departments an excuse for not coming into the neighborhood. We started a three-month campaign involving several actions with the borough president of Brooklyn to get street signs replaced. They appeared three months after our last action, a wonderful symbol of new beginnings in East Brooklyn. That beginning led to improved grocery stores, thousands of Nehemiah homes, and community-controlled schools and a medical clinic.

This is the kind of compromise that public relationships require. Nobody gets exactly what they want when they want it, but everyone gets something in their interest.

The immutable "law of change" that I covered in Chapter One operates in both the private and public arenas. In the private domain, people long for peace, harmony, and certainty. If they are lucky and determined, they get a taste of unity, stability, and mutual understanding over time with family and friends. They learn to let down their guard and "just be." They drop their masks. When private life works well, the law of change means that moments of tension are resolved fairly in a climate of mutual trust.

In the public world, by contrast, people must be disciplined, alert, on guard, and conscious of what *persona* they must bear, what behavior is appropriate to the role they are representing. Public life demands calculation, weighing the possibilities and costs, the risks and benefits, associated with available choices. It's what the business world and work world are all about. Here the law of change means struggle, conflict, and controversy, punctuated only briefly with fleeting flashes of God's mercy and justice appearing, here and now. Once again, there is no easy way to get change in the public realm.

In the private world, choice is severely limited. Nobody asked you if you wanted to be thrown at birth into a particular history, culture, politics, and economics, and no one consulted you about who your parents, siblings, and extended family would be. People are born into particular, concrete, diverse, ambiguous circumstances and must play the hand they have been dealt. Like Job, they can bemoan the struggle, but at the end of the day they must cope with what they got.

To act on self-interest is required for self-development, and enlightened self-interest allows a self to emerge fully. Self needs other. Contrary to the dogma of privatized individualism, greater freedom is available in the public realm than in the private. Moving beyond the narrow limits of family, ethnic clan, and class means having more opportunities for relationships, jobs, education, ownership, etc., than can ever be realized in private or only with others like us. If you can celebrate only your own ethnic and religious heritage, you'll mix poorly in public relationships or not at all. This mixing of differences, energy, time, talent, and sweat is exactly what broad-based organizing is about. Embracing plurality—deliberately cultivating a blend of beliefs, ethnicity, and class—brings public strength to a collective like nothing else can. Strong broad-based organizations always move toward inclusion, striving to look like the larger constituencies they stand for. When they succeed, they take the “divide and conquer” strategy away from power brokers.

Human power and freedom only expand when people develop their politicalness within a large, diverse collective in public life. Inside public collectives, people insist upon and can hold multiple loyalties, some in conflict with one another, as the following story makes clear.

One Saturday morning, a man who had been active in the Organization of the Southwest Side approached me in our office there. He said, “Ed, I believe in what you’re doing here; that’s why I’ve been involved. But I need you to know that I’m not just a police officer, I’m on the red squad. We’ve been watching you closely for the past three months.” That explained the fact that the glove compartment of my car and my apartment had been rifled several times in the past six months. I thanked him for telling me. He stayed in the organization, and neither of us ever said anything to the other leaders. I began to understand that public life is messy, and loyalties are divided.

Like this leader, all of us are both/and, more or less, as is/should be.

Democratic freedom is always relative, a matter of more or less. While the opportunity to claim a public life is critical for everybody, it’s an especially strong antidote to the historical sexism that limits women’s participation to the realm of private relationships and the institutionalized racism that relegates nonwhites to the sidelines of power arrangements.

The distinction between private and public sheds light on many things, including the state of synagogues, churches, and mosques today. There is a communal dimension to religious institutions, a necessary concern about personal acceptance and belonging (often called fellowship). The holy books

make plain that churches, synagogues, and mosques are called to the public mission of changing the world. Today, however, religious institutions often cave in to the dominant culture’s privatizing pressures and become havens for individuals seeking respite from the pressures and stresses of life. Today’s mega-churches have a new golden rule: “Don’t make any demands on people.” They make people welcome. They make them comfortable. They find out what their needs are and service them. They support those who come, but don’t challenge them. In other words, they violate Alinsky’s Iron Rule by doing for others what they could and should be doing for themselves.

This surrender to individualism privatizes institutions that are called by their own sacred teachings to be a strong public presence. Religious institutions down through the ages have too often dichotomized private and public and then treated the private as sacred while dismissing the public as profane. When it takes hold of people’s imaginations, this division of private and public into sacred and secular undermines the power of religion’s publicness. Another version of this privatization occurs when secular materialists, who deny the reality of the spiritual dimension, preach and advertise the needs of number one as the be all and end all of existence.

There are habits and strengths of character that can only be learned and developed in private relationships, the virtues of self-sacrificing love. There are others that can only be learned and tested in the public arena, the virtues of enlightened self-interest. These complementary virtues are grounded in the development of our sexuality and politicalness, respectively. Unless both dimensions are integrated in our personalities, we are fragmented and disoriented. When we get public and private relationships mixed up, both suffer; when they are held in creative tension, both flourish.

(Don’t make the mistake of equating “private” with “personal.” Both the private and public domains are personal, because what’s personal is what we invest our hopes, passion, talent, time, and energy in. What we take personally is what we care about.) Kept in the proper balance, and this is an ever shifting one, public and private relationships enrich each other. People who are fully alive invest themselves in private and public and know the difference.

In the culture of individualism today, people are largely deprived of the opportunity to develop public virtues, to exercise their political birthright. They are constantly pressured to obsess about private matters (my weight, my sex life, my promotion). Thus, the need is urgent for broad-based citizens organizations, where people can develop their politicalness. The people trained by IAF leave with an appetite for public life. They are willing to enter the public square and create a space where thought and meaning can be acted upon, and in that process they grow because there’s a whole process of re-

search, action, and reflection. In that process, they get social knowledge; they become powerful because social knowledge is deep and rich in values and thus trumps scientific knowledge, academic knowledge, and political knowledge. Informed citizens need that kind of knowledge to take on the received culture, of which we are all a part. The received culture must be challenged and changed.

Citizens see themselves as active, informed members of civil society. If they take citizenship as a vocation, then they do solve problems. And they operate inside the Iron Rule—they don't do things for people that people can do for themselves. They mobilize others with energy and talent like they have to go into action, and they're willing to pay dues to the organization that organizes that, so that no outside sources control it. They leverage their institutions to make that happen. It's the combination of leaders with their institutions that can move things politically. The challenge is how to move politically to realize some of the destiny you want for your family, your community, your city, your state, and your country. Electoral politics is the lowest form of participation. It's important, but without public life it's meaningless, because you don't get a say in who the candidates are. You've got to be a millionaire to run for the presidency or the senate of the United States.)

Keeping Private and Public Straight

This analysis of two kinds of relationships comes down to one thing: understanding and respecting boundaries. As I said at the outset of this chapter, public and private are always in tension inside our skins; the trick is to learn not to mix them inappropriately—there are limits and boundaries. I want to be clear about which kinds of behavior are appropriate and necessary in relationships and why.

Clear thinking matters here, because IAF's experience has taught us that most of the difficulties that broad-based organizations have reflect problems in the private lives of their leaders and organizers. The distinctions between private and public have been developed and taught during IAF national training over the past thirty years, and sometimes people go back home and apply the training in unexpected ways, with interesting results.

An irate call from San Antonio came into the IAF national headquarters for "Mr. Chambers." When I got on the line, an angry voice said, "What are you teaching my wife in that training of yours? I didn't want her to go in the first place, and now she says she's not cooking every night unless some things change around here. What the hell are you

guys you up to, anyway? I asked to speak with his wife. She said, "I'm doing an action on him, just like you taught us." I explained to her that actions were for the opposition, not your husband. "Oh," she said, "I'm very sorry. I'll only use what you taught me in public."

Many participants in national training come to see the public/private distinction as a treasure, a fruitful insight into what's working and not working in their lives. But their appreciation of the private/public distinction is often delayed, as if they can't let it in right away. My conclusion is that people's typical first reaction is actually twofold. First, clarity about public and private seems not only accurate but also important to them. Second, they are embarrassed or even ashamed to realize that they have been getting public and private mixed up. It takes a little time to integrate this.

As you reflect on these pages, if you find that you have been mixing up public and private, it's not your fault. You get no help from television, modern advertising, politicians, and even most religious leaders. Apart from IAF, formative institutions are not teaching and reflecting on what you have just read. Don't get discouraged. Just learn to ask yourself, "Where am I, more or less, right now, private or public?" Then act accordingly. Reflect on what happens as you get clearer, then teach the next generation.