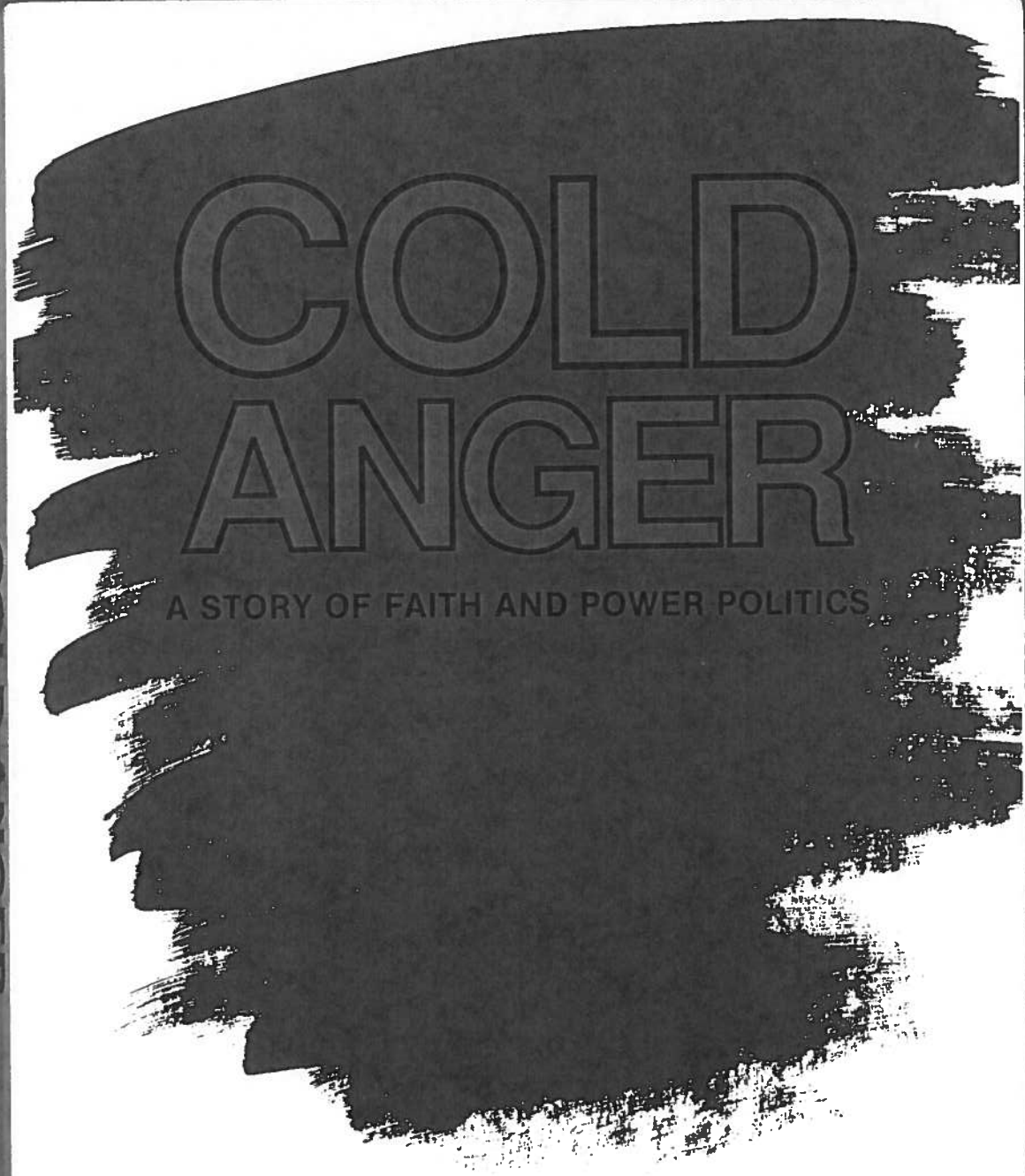




COLD ANGER

A STORY OF FAITH AND POWER POLITICS

MARY BETH ROGERS

With an Introduction by
BILL MOYERS

FEATURED
ON BILL MOYERS'
"WORLD OF IDEAS"

ROGERS

COLD ANGER

UNIT PAPER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7

The First Revolution Is Internal

Austin, 1986

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

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

religious orders are among the dozen full-time paid organizers who recruit and train leaders for the Industrial Areas Foundation organizations in Texas. Stephens has worked with organizations in Houston and San Antonio and has primary responsibility now for Valley Interfaith. Like all IAF organizers, Stephens' task is to identify potential leaders from local churches and work with them to develop public skills and private self-confidence. Another major task is to help those leaders develop a political strategy that will build the power of their organizations and help make the changes local residents feel necessary to improve their lives. Stephens' reputation as a skilled organizer and strategist prompts our meeting today. In her mid-40s, Stephens is one of the senior IAF-trained organizers in the nation and is a formidable presence in Texas.

I understand that in the IAF jargon, Stephens and I are about to have a one-on-one, which means that there is motivation and purpose behind what appears to be a simple conversation between two women over coffee on a spring afternoon. I want Stephens to give me information about Ernesto Cortes and his organizations in Texas, and she wants to find out from me how her groups are perceived by the politicians I know. Because we are both deeply involved in Texas politics and know that our paths are likely to cross again, we each want to be comfortable with the other. We want to establish between us some basis for trust, some private relationship that can be the foundation for future involvement.

Stephens speaks slowly and deliberately, reflecting her caution about consequences—any consequences stemming from any action. The caution is the seed of her strength as a strategist and her weakness as a quick initiator of action, she claims. "To be an organizer or a leader in our effort, you have to initiate relationships. You have to see yourself as the actor always and never as the passive person," Stephens says.²

Christine Stephens is comfortable with her role as an organizer, as an initiator of relationships. But in 1976 when she began this kind of work, she felt awkward and unsure about her ability to extend herself. "I didn't understand it and I didn't think I could do it. I couldn't even tell people I was an organizer. I couldn't get the word out of my mouth," she says, making a face and laughing. "When I first started as a leader,

I remember being frightened out of my wits. I didn't know how to get out of myself. I was too stiff. I had a certain image of myself. I've been a nun 24 years. I'm through and through a nun. When I went into the order, we were still wearing long skirts and habits. We were taught the demeanor and conduct of a proper nun. We were taught how to walk, how to swing our arms, how to walk down stairs in long habits."

Stephens was 23 years old when she entered the Community of Divine Providence religious order. As a social worker, she concentrated on poor members of Catholic parishes, and when she first met Ernesto Cortes, she headed the local office of a Catholic charity, the Campaign for Human Development, which was operated by Houston's Catholic Diocese. Some of Houston's Catholic and Protestant church members had just formed The Metropolitan Organization (TMO) and had hired Cortes to help achieve for Houston's poor what COPS had accomplished in San Antonio. Stephens was serving as chair of the local sponsoring committee, and Cortes quickly spotted her leadership potential. He began working with her to develop it.

"We had a hard session one time about my leadership style, how I made a presentation in public, how I came across to people. No one had ever done that with me before. I hated it, but I wanted to learn those things. I was scared stiff and Ernie had to push me," Stephens remembers.

Cortes gave her books to read on power and philosophy, public policy and politics. He also kept pushing her deeper into herself to understand how and why she operated as she did. What began to impress Christine Stephens about Cortes and the IAF was that for the first time in her life, someone valued and respected her anger. Although she was a nun to her core, Stephens was also an angry woman, once disrupting a meeting of Tenneco shareholders to protest the \$1.25 hourly wage paid to farmworkers on lands owned by the company. Her sense of righteous indignation was aroused by the slightest hint of unfairness, and she waged a continuing war with herself to keep her temper from triggering her tongue.

Christine Stephens grew up in a working-class family in Houston where her father was a union pipefitter and her mother struggled with debilitating rheumatoid arthritis that destroyed her body and sapped the family's spirit. Life centered

around Stephens' ailing mother, who grew weaker and weaker, her bones literally crumbling within her frail body. "My mother had been a beautiful woman, but toward the end of her life even her jaw bones began to disintegrate. She lived through a mastectomy and a heart attack, but she had tremendous courage. She also had a terrific temper that seemed to keep her going," Stephens says.

Mother and daughter shared that temper, and they frequently had tremendous rows. The young Christine would argue to exhaustion for what she considered right.

"My anger probably comes from the way my family handled the emotional aspects of my mother's illness," she says. "There was a lot of denial. As my mother got worse, my dad took early retirement to take care of her. He felt that his sheer will power could keep her going. And when she finally died, he was so hurt because he couldn't save her. He was just devastated by her death."

The pressures that bound Stephens to her family were economic as well as emotional. She wanted to attend the University of Texas at Austin, but the family could not afford it so Stephens lived at home while on a scholarship to Houston's University of St. Thomas.

"My family lived in the same house off Telephone Road in southeast Houston for 40 years," Stephens says. "We had three cars over a lifetime. We bought things to keep for life. When the next-door neighbors moved out of the neighborhood for a better house, my mother had such contempt for them. That kind of quest for better things was not part of our lives."

As Sister Christine Stephens talks about her family, fears, and aspirations, I realize that with the exposure of her vulnerability, she is providing an opening to me, an invitation for me to see "inside" the strong self-confident woman across the table, and to understand that it has not been an easy transition for her from daughter to nun to political player. But the invitation is also for me to respond with some hint of my own vulnerability so that she can better understand me, and that is hard for me to do. I am like most people, who clam up and change the subject when strangers come too close to long-hidden feelings and fears. Yet in the conversation with this Catholic nun, the

process of intimate paring and probing is not invasive. It is selective and sensitive, probing rather than prying. It is like maneuvering a freshly crafted key into a door lock, which, when it fits, seems to open you as well as the other person. As Christine Stephens talks, I feel that I know her in ways I fail to know friends of 20 years. I realize how meetings like this develop relationships and alliances, how they provide an essential human connection that is necessary to build an enduring political connection. In an informal, unstructured way, it is what people always do when they build relationships based on shared aspirations and experiences. The IAF one-on-one is merely a systematic way of organizing this process.

In the IAF organizations, one-on-one meetings like this are used initially to recruit new leaders, to get church people to work with others for political action. The major purpose is to show potential leaders that there might be a better way to achieve the things they care about deeply. But discovery of the depth of that caring has to come first, and a special kind of person is the target.

Organizers like Christine Stephens look for people who are rooted in the community—not self-appointed leaders such as social workers or low-grade politicians—but lay leaders in church organizations, the PTAs, school, or service groups. They seek people who have already demonstrated in other settings a capacity for leadership, a concern for others, and a vision that would allow them to risk change. Once identified, organizers meet individually with these men and women and listen to them. It is a process akin to courting.

"The purpose of the initial one-on-one contacts with potential leaders is not so much to sell them on us, but merely to propose that they look at us and consider the possibility of a relationship with us," Ernesto Cortes says. "When you sell, you tend to be arrogant. You know it all. You build up yourself and you quit listening. You're not attentive."

In proposing, rather than selling, Cortes believes you have to have flexibility, curiosity, patience, and a little vulnerability. And that involves some self-revelation as well as propositioning. The best organizers and leaders learn how to reveal themselves in small doses as part of the process of drawing out

others, as Christine Stephens does with me. The successful one-on-one becomes a give-and-take relationship, not a one-sided interview.

The process of relationship building within a political context did not develop overnight. "We did one-on-ones early in COPS, but they were different," Cortes says. "Sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't. And I didn't know what made it work or not . . . I was still in uncharted territory as far as thinking it out and working it out for myself."

But in the years since 1973, when Cortes started COPS, the one-on-one has become a fully analyzed tool within the IAF. "You don't just discuss what people do, or their ideology or the theology of their actions," according to Cortes. "You must go deeper. Ultimately you must get to the level of how people feel about what they do. You want to understand the sources of their anger, or their love, or their interest in something beyond themselves."

Even after church members decide to take an active part in the organizations, the relationship building continues, much like a slow, steady rain that smoothes the rocky rough edges of emotional and political inexperience.

Mary Moreno tells of coming home from an MCA meeting one evening to find her telephone ringing off the wall. It was MCA organizer Tim McClusky, who peppered her with questions about the meeting and the role she had played in it. How did she think it went? How did she feel about what she said? Is this the direction she felt the organization should take?

"Tim would push me a lot . . . he'd hear me out and cause me to think about how I felt," Mary says. "Then he would talk about the bigger picture and how it all fit. He was teaching. He took the time. I could go back to him later with questions or ideas. But you can't do that with organizers unless you've built the relationship first."³

This belief in relationships, in a form of personal nurturing in a safe setting, permeates activities among organizers, leaders, and followers within the IAF organizations. "The organization provides a way to grow and develop," Ed Chambers believes. "You have to be nurtured to survive. But we've devised a one-on-one relationship meeting where the purpose is public business. If you become a key leader, I promise we will help you to

organize, to get up and speak before 2,000 people or do a press interview and feel good about yourself and have the organization think you did a good job."

The responsible use of public skills, then, stems not only from the self-confidence that comes from mastering the techniques, but from a self-knowledge and connection with other people that is designed to show leaders how relationships work with each other, and with those who hold power.

But where does it all lead?

"The personal growth and development of people is why we do what we do," Chambers stresses. "That's what broad-based organizations do for people—change their lives and integrate their values and vision. The first revolution is internal. It requires commitment to operate on your center."

A significant amount of time and energy in the IAF national training programs is devoted to inciting the first revolution—the internal one that comes with an awareness of self and self-worth. And flowing naturally from that is the focus on individual relationship building. People who have a strong sense of self can afford to take the risks involved in relationship building. The IAF attempts to provide the skills to do just that, but what people learn instead of rules and procedures is how to be flexible, conversational, and insightful. It is almost like good therapy—slow and difficult. And successful, only if you work at it. It is also incredibly frustrating for people who believe that politics must be all action.

As Cortes was explaining the one-on-one in a training session one day, an impatient young man from Baltimore began to complain. "I take all of this talk for granted. Let's get down to the business of organizing," he admonished Cortes.

Visibly angered, Cortes spun around and thrust himself in the young man's face and shouted, "But this is it! It is all here. This is the action. This is the test of whether or not we're doing what we say we are. This is where you learn it all. *This is all we have to offer!*"

Then Cortes backed away and began to explain. "If we don't go anywhere, it's because these one-on-ones don't develop. Organizers burn out if they don't do individual meetings. Pastors lose interest if they don't do this. This is where the spiritual action is. We didn't invent it. It's been done from time

immemorial. Part of *being* is the ability to share ourselves—it is part of our personal grounding for public action. It is not just what we think, but what we feel. It's getting to the roots of our personal being."

For IAF leaders, the root of "personal being" is not only understanding feelings in themselves and others, but in coming to terms with their own fundamental self-interest, and then learning to act on it. "Self-interest requires that you recognize yourself, that you say 'I count,'" Ed Chambers believes.

The concept of self-interest that Cortes and Chambers talk about was initially a source of confusion to me. I kept thinking about selfishness and special-interest groups in politics, which push their particular goals to the detriment of the community as a whole. Were the IAF organizations any different?

After listening and watching, I realize that what Cortes and Chambers are really talking about is a concept of self-interest based on both the physical and psychological needs for human growth. They focus on what people need to develop a sense of "self," essentially what people need to be human. And, of course, it begins with the basics for survival—food, shelter, and safety—which are often unmet needs among the people they seek to organize. Yet the IAF organizing approach recognizes the need for more than just the basics. To become fully human, people need skills for meaningful work. For self-respect, they need some control over their lives. For fulfillment, they need a sense of accomplishment. And for their own integrity, they need to feel that they matter, that their worth as human beings is recognized and that they have some visibility in the overall scheme of life, power, and politics. The development of self-interest, then, is a move not toward selfishness, but toward wholeness. It is a move toward harmonious living with others and competency in dealing with the complexities of life. It is indeed an internal revolution!

As I listen to Ed Chambers, Ernie Cortes, and Sister Christine Stephens, I begin to understand that the public actions of the IAF organizations and the manner in which they promote them are selected as much for how they provide for the self-interest and growth of individual men and women as for the importance of the issue itself. If the action that leads to a health clinic in a poor neighborhood provides opportunities for lead-

ership, visibility, growth, affirmation, recognition, and respect for the neighborhood people who propose it, then it is worthwhile—a double hit: a service to keep people healthy and a process to learn how to be effective politically. But if Ernie Cortes, the community organizing expert, gets it for them in a closed-door meeting with a few politicians and city bureaucrats, the people affected don't learn that they are capable of acting for themselves. The Iron Rule has not been enforced. Cortes, the expert, acting alone, does nothing to develop the self-interest of the leaders who build and hold his organizations together. They become dependent on him every time they need something. When the time comes for him to leave, they would have neither the skills nor the insight to help themselves. So while it is often frustrating for a politician to meet with a dozen or so network leaders to discuss a zoning case or the intricacies of a state-federal matching formula for funding a water project, it is the way IAF leaders learn and develop a sense of their own worth.

"What we're trying to do is to allow people to become expert enough to challenge the experts," Cortes says.

This kind of approach over a long time can have a profound effect on the people who participate, particularly for people shut out of power because of their income, race, lack of education, or ignorance of social graces. It can change them, and through them, their families—perhaps even their neighborhoods and communities. But being able to make those deals depends on developing relationships with people who hold power, as well as with each other.

"We teach people that the relationship is more important than the issue," Cortes says. "If people's conception of self-interest is narrow, then it's okay to screw you if we're on different sides of the issue because we're enemies. But if we see the relationship as important, there is another dimension to it. Being right is not always as important as being reasonable. And being reasonable means that you review, look at your interests in a different way because of your relationship."

IAF leaders like Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes believe that involvement with major political events can help develop both the spiritual and psychological integration of self—through a connection with other people and a mastery of skills and

knowledge. But in their view, people can't do that until they come to terms with their own self-interest and their relationship with other people.

"For you to grow and develop, you have to get out of yourself into the skins of others," Cortes says. And in session after session, Cortes teaches hundreds of new political leaders in many states that every time they engage another individual on a deep level of human understanding, they also develop themselves spiritually and politically. He teaches these men and women that their leadership ability and recognition within the IAF organizations and the political arena as a whole depends not on protecting turf or holding power closely and wielding it arbitrarily, but on their ability to *expand* the numbers of their fellow leaders in the interest of the growth of the organization. Cortes promotes the one-on-one as the tool to do just that.

"It is the most radical thing we teach," he says.

Spiritual
+
Political

Part Two

*Hope reminds us not to absolutize
the present, not to take it too seriously,
not to treat it too honorably,
because it will not last.*

Walter Brueggemann
Hope within History