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February, 2002

Powerful Thoughts

An eminent organizer once said that training an organizer is really about teaching someone "to think." Organizers have a unique way of thinking. To become and effective organizer means to learn how to stop thinking in one's usual way and to instead "think" like an organizer. To change how one thinks involves first becoming aware of what causes us to react the way we do, to identify the "triggers" which precede our thought-patterns. What are the assumptions from which our pattern of thinking emerges? Learning depends on self-awareness, and to become self-aware as an organizer requires a discipline of self-reflection.

One critical area of learning for most organizers has to do with their thinking about power. How we think about power has a great influence on how we train leaders, how we use the power of our organizations and how we approach creating change in our communities. Power is central to our organizing model, and how we think about power is one of the key linchpins to our success or failure as organizers.

Ambivalence about Power

As organizers, we believe in the necessity of power. Some organizers are not intimidated by powerful people and move gracefully in the power arena. But these organizers are few. Most organizers experience a deep ambivalence about power. At the core of our ambivalence about power is the feeling that power is corrupt, or dirty. This assumption surfaces in how we view powerful people and how we interpret their actions. We assume that people in power positions are more likely to be primarily self-serving and to hold only self-interested motives. We perceive them to be greedy, ambitious, and unconcerned about the plight of the less fortunate. We may assume that their lack of a response to our concerns is because they do not care, or because they only really care about the concerns of wealthy communities.

We may also think that being near power will make us dirty, or corrupt. If we get involved in a regular, working relationship with powerful people, then we will become part of the system and will too easily compromise our values. We may believe that it is better to stay on the outside of the power arena and remain pure.

Just as we fear the corruption that power may bring, so do we fear the influence of money. Power and money go hand in hand. We may feel that as long as our organizations are small and have few staff, we will avoid becoming compromised. We may even pride ourselves that our organizations have less funding than other community agencies. By having less funding, we are less corrupt.

This orientation to power influences how we interpret a political situation. We project our negative feelings about power on to a politician or a political environment and allow

those feelings to color our perception. We jump to conclusions, reading impure or negative motives into the actions of public officials, and do not take the time to investigate what may truly lie behind their actions. We may assume that there is a conspiracy underway, a collusion among powerful interests, when no such conspiracy exists. We may award more power to political officials than they really have. We can give them omnipotent qualities, assuming they can fix most anything if they were to choose to do so.

This orientation also influences the role we play in the power arena. Because power is dirty, our only stance we can take visa vis powerful people is an adversarial one. We will tend to see a political environment from the point of view of absolutes. We either entirely win or entirely lose; compromise represents a debasement of who we are and what we stand for. We may feel like it is more pure, or more prophetic, and thereby better, to fight and lose, then to fight and win a compromise.

How the Powerful View Power

The above perspective on powerful people stands in stark contrast to how public officials typically view themselves and the roles they play in our communities. By exploring their perspective, we are able to better understand how we project our own fears and insecurities on to powerful people.

The vast majority of public officials see their roles as elected officials as a form of public service. Most elected officials, particularly at the local level, receive little compensation for their work and spend countless hours in public meetings. They often sacrifice their family life and their business careers to their public role. Elected officials who hold higher office are typically paid a salary. Yet they too could often make more far money in the private sector.

Many elected officials feel the same way we do about issues and concerns facing low-income families. Conservative elected officials may sympathize with our issues but may feel that government is not the way to solve them. Liberal elected officials often want to do what we are asking of them but are hemmed in by budget constraints. Any single public official typically has less power and influence than we like to think. He or she may share our concerns, but rarely can a public official accomplish much unless there is momentum generated by other elected officials, current events, or the media. Public officials are pressured by various interests all the time, and seek to respond to them to varying degrees. They live with the day to day reality that compromise is an essential part of the political process.

This is not to say that elected officials are necessarily our allies; what I am saying is they are not always our enemies. Elected officials tend to reflect the opinions and perspectives of people who vote all of the time. Because of the need to raise funds for their campaigns, they spend a large amount of time with the wealthy and with organized interest groups. They are removed from, and often unfamiliar with, the needs and concerns of families in low-income areas and rarely hear from such families. They

respond more to well organized, and wealthy constituencies. But they are not necessarily corrupt or unsympathetic.

Power and Self-Image

When we look at the enormous difference between how we view elected officials and how they view themselves, it becomes clear that something is amiss. This huge gap in perception demonstrates that our thoughts about power are not entirely rational.

I would suggest that our ambivalence about power may often be traced back to our self-image, or self-identity. Our self-image does not typically surface in our awareness except in times of crisis. It functions at a subconscious level in our lives as a hidden source of many of our joys, pains, frustrations and hopes. In the choices we make, and the way in which we present ourselves, we strive to fulfill the picture we hold of ourselves. We seek to close the gap between who we are and who we believe we should be in many small ways, on our daily lives. This gap is often a source of tension.

As people committed to justice, we have a great need to think of ourselves as "good people." Many of us believe, that in order to be a good person, one must live a life of sacrifice, self-denial, and service to others, as in the model of Jesus. To save your life you must lose it. At a deep level, we believe that by denying the self, we will be pure and uncorrupted. Those of us with this sort of self-identity are drawn to roles and professions that enable us to be "good people;" the helping professions. We become counselors, social workers, ministers or community organizers!

When we get close to power and the power arena, we grow wary and fearful because power itself threatens our self-image. Power is self-serving; we seek to be self-giving. Power is self-concerned; we strive to be concerned for others. To preserve our self-identity, we must fight and resist power. We create caricatures of "good people" vs. "powerful people." These caricatures enable us to put ourselves in the good people category and to safeguard our self-image.

Some religious thinkers and secular activists have sought to take this rejection of power to the point of arguing that being effective in the political arena is of little consequence; what is of consequence is the action itself, the symbolic witness. They carry out protests designed to make a moral statement but which have little impact in the political arena. Not only do they have little interest in political effectiveness, but they may, in fact, prefer losing; losing confirms the righteousness of their cause. They build a community of like-minded activists who set themselves apart from the public and the political mainstream. Their witness can serve as an important challenge to the dominant culture. Yet for families living in poverty and crime, such a witness is insufficient.

Our fear of power may also stem from our own lack of confidence. To pursue power is to boldly affirm one's being. It is to take the risk of stepping off of the sidelines and entering the game. At a deep level, we may be afraid to take this risk; we may feel like we are not worthy to be powerful. We may seek to cover up this sense of unworthiness

and this fear of stepping forward with rationalizations. We rationalize that it is better to be pure than be powerful. We feel like we are noble when we keep fighting for a useless cause. This is what Nietzche referred to as the "resentment of the weak."

Having such a polarized understanding of power can enable us to maintain a child-like perspective on the world. A person who has an overriding need to be righteous and to place him or herself above the messiness of humanity is fleeing from life's ambiguities. While we may find shelter in our definitions of the good vs. the powerful, we can also become distorted, and out of balance. This distortion may be seen in the lives of activists who float from one protest to the next and who simplify every political situation into "the good" vs. "the bad".

Power Vs. Service

Seeing power as dirty is often accompanied by the belief that power and service exist on two ends of a spectrum, power on the bad end, and service on the good end. In this way of thinking, we cannot have power and be of service to others at the same time. To be of service to others means precisely to give up power and the ambition for power.

If we look at this perspective critically, however, it becomes clear that we are posing a false dichotomy. Powerful people can, and frequently do, use their power to serve the common good. As we explored earlier in this article, many powerful people see their public role primarily as a form of service to others.

The idea that to be of service to others means being without power is also false. If we believe that, in order to serve others, we must be outside the power arena, then we are limiting our actions solely to the individual and charitable realms. We cannot address questions of justice at a deep level without wielding power effectively. We cannot sit on the sidelines of the power arena, playing the role of critic, and expect to influence our society at a systemic level.

Powerful Thoughts

Becoming an effective organizer is about more than learning the skills of the organizing trade: it is about becoming a more powerful person. Our ability to help leaders reflect on their own power grows as we encounter our own fears and try on a more powerful self. As leaders and staff engage in an organizing process that requires them to step forward and exercise power, they begin to shift in their own identity. They begin to define themselves differently; they explain their job to others in terms of power, not only in terms of ministry or service. They see elected officials as peers, and no longer attribute to them omnipotent qualities. Organizers who learn to see themselves as powerful actors in their communities build powerful organizations that get things done.

Organizers who cling to their old way of thinking about power are not successful in the long-term. They hover around the edges of the power arena, raise up issues, have a prophetic moment, and then move away, or go on to the next issue. They engage

decision-makers sporadically and with little respect. They tend to cut issues in such a way that they are not winnable. Because they know little about the power arena, they fumble about when identifying the appropriate target and often take the wrong approach to the target. They do not read newspapers daily, and do not relate to people who can help illuminate the relationships among power brokers in their local community. Because they do not "scan" the power arena on a regular basis, they miss opportunities, go down dead end roads, and do not deliver for their members.

One way for organizers to grow in their understanding of power is to put into practice and to reflect on our organizing principles. I would suggest that four of these principles are key.

First is the principal that <u>power rests in relationships</u>. The more relationships we have with people in the power arena, the more powerful we are. The number of people who are central to the power arenas in our cities is quite small. It is a fairly simple matter to identify who they are and to develop strategies to engage them over time. If we avoid the power arena, or spend little time there, we will have little power.

Most political activity is based on "insider relationships," the behind-the-scenes deal making that forges alliances, and creates political consensus. Yet politics is also driven by "outsider relationships," individuals and groups who are not part of the political world but who bring pressure to bear on it. I would suggest that significant political change occurs when there is a powerful synergy created by insider and outsider politics merging together. Organizing traditionally has been part of outsider politics, yet as we develop more relationships in the political arena, we develop the capacity to leverage these ties and do insider politics. Our political capacity grows tremendously as we learn how to practice both of these kinds of relational politics and develop the judgement to know when and how to do so with integrity.

A related principle to "power rests in relationship" is that <u>relationships are like muscles; we either use them or lose them</u>. If elected officials only hear from us during action time, we are not exercising the relationship regularly enough to keep it strong. To keep powerful people engaged in our work in a more regular way requires attention; we have to pay attention to the relationship, and then develop various strategies to create regular engagement.

The third principle is that <u>relationships are based on quid pro quo; they are reciprocal</u>. Strong relationships are never one-sided, only benefiting one partner. In a productive relationship, both parties benefit. While this principle is central to our model, it is one we rarely follow in our relationships with public officials. The number one complaint of elected officials who work with us is that we do not reciprocate. We drag them out to actions, get them to do things, and then beat them up for not doing enough.

It is true that we do not engage in the usual way relationships are reciprocated in politics; with financial support, or with campaign endorsements. But we can have a reciprocal relationship with an elected official which does not violate who we are, or our non-

partisan status. There are ways in which we can reward elected officials who are providing leadership on issues we care about. We can provide elected officials with the opportunity to be heroes in their own communities; we can provide cover for them when they have to make difficult decisions which we support; we can generate positive publicity.

We can also look for opportunities to work with political leaders on issues we have in common, knowing that at some point, we may organize against them on other issues. Through our work on health care at the state level, for example, we have often found ourselves working on a common agenda with county supervisors who are looking to increase the number of insured families in their area through the expansion of state-funded programs. At the local level, however, we may find ourselves at odds with the same elected officials over county budget priorities.

To have a reciprocal relationship with an elected official requires us to first pay attention to developing a quid pro quo relationship, and secondly, to be creative. For example, we can spend time with elected officials trying to understand what they see as the obstacles to our creating progress on a particular issue and then create a mutual strategy to move an issue forward. We may find that an elected official will become willing to lead the charge on an issue if he or she knows that we will be working to move the other members of the City Council in the same direction. We may find that the only way to win an issue is by increasing the city's revenues through a tax increase. Over time, as an elected official sees that we understand the reciprocal nature of relationships, we find that he/she will be far more flexible and responsive to our agendas than if we only have a one-sided relationship.

A discussion of the quid pro quo nature of politics naturally leads to a concern for co-optation, as it should. Political leaders reward and punish, and their rewards are often used to co-opt, or silence, potential opposition. Rewards are used to bring people "inside the tent," to making them part of the insider game and to take away their outsider edge.

While these concerns are real, it is important to remember that we can only be co-opted when we allow ourselves to be. Just being around people in power does not necessarily mean we are going to be co-opted. Many of our concerns about co-optation surface from the same fear of power that keeps us out of the power arena.

Our organizing process has certain elements that safeguard the organization from co-optation. The involvement of leaders in decision-making and strategy development, the engagement of people who are "closest to the problem," and our commitment to remain non-partisan in the electoral process are all critical to maintaining the integrity of our organizations as we move into uncharted waters. Also critical is to make sure that our organizing is "pain-driven:" from pain emerges the prophetic voice.

The fourth principle is that <u>strong relationships involve tension</u>. Tension is the sand in the oyster that creates the pearl. Tension and conflict are an essential part of the political environment. In a democratic system, the big piece of sand in the oyster, that which

creates the pearl of highest value, is when people confront and hold accountable the people they have elected to represent them. This action of confrontation and accountability is essentially the purpose of an "action" in our organizing model.

Most people shy away from tension and conflict. To enter into tension and conflict is to take a great risk, the risk that we will endanger a relationship or will be perceived as a bad, or mean person. Many of us live our lives without ever learning how to use tension to our benefit. Yet the use of tension and conflict is indispensable in the public arena. Elected officials expect us to raise tension with them and will not respect us if we do not. People in the power arena know that public relationships are more elastic than private ones and are not typically endangered by conflict.

The kind of direct confrontation through an action meeting is not, however, the only way to create productive tension in a political environment. We can create tension in many other ways; the more ways we learn to create tension, the more effective we become. We can create tension through bringing exposure to an issue through the media. We can line up our allies in support of our agenda so that those who are opposed or lukewarm to us see that they will lose if they oppose us. Another strategy is to use our relationships with elected officials to move another political leader. In the California Project, for example, we have been able to move our issues to the top of the priority list of the Senate President and the Speaker of the Assembly, who have then fought for these issues in negotiations with the Governor. We can threaten to win the issue through another vehicle, such as through a ballot initiative or by going over the head of the elected official.

The political cycle has moments of time when elected officials are more vulnerable to outsider strategies, such as during an election season when politicians become very sensitive to the media and public perception. There are times when we can exercise tension in a subtle way and get a response. Yet there are other times when politicians are well-insulated and need to be confronted directly in order to create movement. The challenge for us is to learn both subtle and direct ways to create tension, and to know what is called for by a particular situation or moment in our environment.

Power as a Way to Bring Life to Values

I recently attended a foundation-sponsored organizers' meeting where each organization present had to create a visual picture of their work using crayons and markers on a piece of flip chart paper. One organization drew a circle with the word POWER in the middle, and then around the circle wrote "churches," "schools," and "unions" The organizers explained that their goal was to build power through organizing people in these different institutions.

That drawing reminded me of the comments of an experienced leader in Oakland from several years ago. A group of leaders and I were having an extended discussion on power and strategies, when this key leader stood up and said, "I'm tired of all of this talk about power. I'm not here for power. I'm here to get something done. I'm here to make some change." Later, the leader told me that she was concerned that our intense focus on our

own self-interest, and on building our own power, could eventually lead to power struggles inside our organization

As I have reflected on this leader's comments over the year, and have continued my own tutelage in power and the power arena, I have come to the conclusion that she was right. Power is not at the center of our work. Values are. I am obviously a strong advocate of the need for organizers to learn about the use of power. But I agree with that leader that ultimately we are not about power in and of itself.

The power arena is not neutral; it consists of competing interests, and underlying these interests are values. Our use of power serves to bring to life the deeply held values of our faith traditions: justice, the common good, and human dignity. Power is not an end but a means. The values of justice and dignity are always present in our communities but often lie dormant. Organizing can serve to awaken these values and make them operative in our public life.

The values we seek to propel into the power arena compete with other values. A dominant value in the world of power is economic self-interest, or in other words, profit. Corporations seek to wield power as a way to further their own economic interests. Economic self-interest, in and of itself, is not bad. Yet when not countered by other forces, companies will seek to increase their profits with little consideration of their impact on families, and ultimately on human dignity. An extreme example of an unchecked profit motive can be found in the tobacco companies, who for years have sought to get people, and children, all over the world, hooked on cigarettes, all the time knowing the health dangers of tobacco.

As we seek to develop leaders, we compete with another set of values that center around individualism and consumerism. We tend to think that our fate is largely a product of our individual effort and inherent talent; we are less inclined towards social analysis and more inclined towards blaming the individual, and in idolizing persons who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. We are also deeply steeped in the values of consumerism, and materialism. The advertising industry spends billions of dollars in developing the consumer side of our lives. It is remarkable that we are more capable of distinguishing among brands of deodorant than we are of choosing candidates for public office. Most of us do not even know who represents us in our state legislature, or in the Congress; even fewer have ever called or written a public official. While our lives as consumers are rich and highly developed, our lives as citizens, as actors in the public realm, are atrophied.

As individuals, we are able to live out our values in our private lives. To bring values into the public arena in a transformative way, however, requires a community of people to wield power. Ultimately, when we organize with a positive orientation towards power, we gain the opportunity to do more than talk or preach about our values as a faith community. With power, we can implement real changes in our communities based upon those values.

To use power strategically as a means to enliven the values of justice and dignity has little to do with becoming corrupt or getting dirty. To the contrary, to be a steward of those values compels us to learn as much as we can about the power arena and to propel those values into the public debate in an effective and real way.