

We Who Believe In Freedom

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

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Last fall, during the presidential election, a lot of fuss was made about what it means to be a “community organizer.”

“Is that a real job,” people derisively asked. “Do community organizers actually *do* anything?”

My favorite response to that debate was a button worn by a friend and colleague, which simply read “Jesus was a community organizer; Pontius Pilate was a governor.”

Humor aside, the job of a community organizer is often hard to pin down, because the job description depends so much on the particular community being organized. People organizing public housing residents in the toxin-filled neighborhoods of South Chicago do a different job than do people organizing recent immigrants in Portland, Oregon. Those organizing a multiracial, interfaith coalition in Durham, North Carolina, have a different job to do than those organizing in almost-entirely Latino/Latina neighborhoods in the South Bronx.

The differences have to do with the particular cultural traditions of the community in question, their needs and social location, the history of group relations within the community and in the surrounding city or county or state, and most of all, the community’s access to power.

You see, the common denominator of the work of community organizers is an understanding of how power works in our society, and a dedication to helping all people get access to the power that they deserve—the access that is their civil right.

In order to appreciate community organizing, it is necessary to understand that despite what our nation’s Constitution actually says (or has been amended to say or interpreted as saying), not everyone has the same access to power in this country.

In the last ten years, nowhere has this been more evident than in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast, where rebuilding and restoration efforts have followed lines of race and class in eerie ways. Whether one visits the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans or poor, rural areas of southern Mississippi, it is evident that our nation has failed to give the people of these communities an ability to make demands on our government—the same cannot be said in the richer, whiter French Quarter and Garden District.

Take a larger view and one can contrast the rebuilding of New Orleans after Katrina to that of, say, San Francisco after the earthquakes of 1906 and 1989 or even Indonesia and Thailand after the 2004 tsunami.

Despite being home to the fifth-largest port in the United States, and part of a port complex that handles some 70% of grain exports from American farms, the city of New Orleans has not been able to re-build enough homes and schools to provide the labor force that such an operation needs to survive.

This is, of course, one of the reasons I'm so proud to be accompanying twelve members of our Fellowship's youth group (along with seven other adult volunteers) to New Orleans next week. We will be volunteering with a network of community organizations one of whose goals is precisely to organize the people of New Orleans so that they have the political power to rebuild their city.

In putting up a few walls and painting classrooms, we will be giving the powerless of that city sorely-needed backup in their quest to enjoy the same privileges and rights that so many of us take for granted.

Ella Baker, civil rights activist and organizer, knew this first-hand. Born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1903 and raised in North Carolina, Baker was the granddaughter of slaves. Given access to education, Baker became a journalist and educator, moved to New York City, and later immersed herself in the community life of Harlem.

Baker worked with an incredible list of organizations over the years—from the NAACP to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. If a group was a major civil rights organization in mid-20th century America, it is likely that Ella Baker worked with it at some point.

In New York, Atlanta, Greensboro and Raleigh, Ella Baker learned how to work behind the scenes, organizing people and getting them access to power—the power they needed to make change: to bring about civil rights legislation, to get that legislation enforced, to end not only *de jure* segregation but *de facto* segregation as well.

Ella Baker stayed behind the scenes not because she was forced there, but because she believed fervently that the communities with whom she worked should find their own spokespeople. Her job was to help them navigate the systems of power and privilege, and not to lead them to a promised land.

She believed that true societal change demanded that people working for civil rights create organizations with as little hierarchy as possible. She said, "You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders." (Baker in Wikipedia)

“Ella’s Song,” also known as “We Who Believe in Freedom,” was written by Sweet Honey in the Rock founder Bernice Johnson Reagon as a tribute to this amazing community organizer. Singing Ella Baker’s own words, Sweet Honey makes beautiful harmony out of her philosophy of social change:

*“The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young, who dare to run against the storm.*

*“Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny.*

*“Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize
That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives.” (Reagon)*

Saul Alinsky was another community organizer who believed in the development of grassroots power—in fact, many give him credit for inventing what modern-day Americans call “community organizing” by bringing an analysis of institutional and systemic power to bear on struggles for justice.

Alinsky was born only a few years after Ella Baker, to Russian Jewish immigrants in Chicago. He was a radical who believed in working within systems to change them—and not in overthrowing them for the sake of doing so.

He understood the promise of the American system, and the need to bring together diverse groups of people to solve problems together. His organizing strategy relied on helping the middle-class understand that the empowerment of poor communities was in the best interest of everyone in our society and on helping white communities understand that helping communities of color achieve the political power to make change helped everyone.

His organizing crossed the lines of race, class, religion and many other boundaries.

In 1940, Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, as an umbrella organization for groups working to organize inner-city communities. He found that his work in Chicago was easily translated to groups in Baltimore and Queens, and then to other cities around the country.

The Industrial Areas Foundation describes its work this way:

“The leaders and organizers of the Industrial Areas Foundation build organizations whose primary purpose is power - the ability to act - and whose chief product is social change. They continue to practice what the Founding Fathers preached: the ongoing attempt to make life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness everyday realities for more and more Americans.

“The IAF is non-ideological and strictly non-partisan, but proudly, publicly, and persistently political. The IAF builds a political base within society's rich and complex third sector - the sector of voluntary institutions that includes religious congregations, labor locals, homeowner groups, recovery groups,

parents associations, settlement houses, immigrant societies, schools, seminaries, orders of men and women religious, and others. And then the leaders use that base to compete at times, to confront at times, and to cooperate at times with leaders in the public and private sectors

“The IAF develops organizations that use power - organized people and organized money - in effective ways. The secret to the IAF's success lies in its commitment to identify, recruit, train, and develop leaders in every corner of every community where IAF works. The IAF is indeed a radical organization in this specific sense: it has a radical belief in the potential of the vast majority of people to grow and develop as leaders, to be full members of the body politic, to speak and act with others on their own behalf. And IAF does indeed use a radical tactic: the face-to-face, one-to-one individual meeting whose purpose is to initiate a public relationship and to re-knit the frayed social fabric.” (IAF)

While most of the IAF affiliates around the country are in large urban areas—there are several operating in New York City, for example—the IAF is willing to see if organizing suburban communities can follow the same model.

And so, on April 1 (this Wednesday), I will be attending an initial organizing meeting for clergy from around Westchester County. We will be meeting with Michael Gecan, author of *Going Public* and long-time community organizer with the IAF.

In that meeting, we will be exploring the possibility for building an interfaith, grassroots coalition for social change right here in Westchester.

I am hoping that these efforts take off—and that this Fellowship will be a founding member of the organization born over the next few months.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are increasingly finding the benefits of working in broad-based, congregation-based coalitions. Over a hundred UU congregations are now members of these groups, from Durham to Tucson, Long Beach to Stamford, New Orleans to Minneapolis, and Manhattan to Milwaukee.

Some of these are IAF affiliates, and others work through similar networks like the Gamaliel Foundation, DART (Direct Action Research and Training) and PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), among others.

The Rev. Burton Carley, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Memphis, and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Board of Trustees, writes this of such coalitions, increasingly collectively known as “congregation-based community organizing” efforts:

“Part of the mission of UU congregations is to move outside their walls and join in the building of bridges across the barriers that separate people from one another. It is the work of restoring, creating, and maintaining right relationships....

Congregation-based community organizing offers a means to be part of the restorative work to which people of faith are called. It also deepens and expands the possibility for us to be in right relationship with people outside our own congregations—to form, through citizen politics, a covenant that makes the many one and heals the ‘us-versus-them’ polarization of people.” (UUA)

I believe that this type of grassroots community organizing holds great promise for change in our county. It is impossible to say exactly what the focus will be—the agenda cannot be set until the people are gathered to make it. But we might look at affordable housing, educational opportunity, environmental sustainability, living wage legislation, funding for libraries, or substance abuse and mental health treatment, to name only a few of the issues other groups have addressed in their communities to date.

It also holds great promise for teaching us a new way of creating social change—a new way of healing the world whose brokenness we are called to address.

My friend the Rev. Kate Lore, the Minister of Social Justice at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, wrote this reflection on her congregation’s involvement in a congregation-based community organizing effort in that city:

“Our [congregation] has been involved in an IAF affiliate called the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good (MACG) for the past 8 years. Our MACG core team has done good work at First Unitarian over these years.

“We have introduced the notion of relational work to the governing board, the choir and many other church groups. We have brought First Unitarian into community-wide negotiations around affordable housing and good jobs, health care issues, school funding and the ramifications of the Meth epidemic in local Portland neighborhoods.

“Throughout it all, we’ve played a major role within MACG, as leaders of work groups and forum participants. Consequently, we have developed over 60 new leaders.

“Over the past 5 years, 66% of new members have listed the social justice ministry of this [congregation] as a primary reason for joining. They routinely state a long-held yearning to be part of a [religious] community that ‘walks its talk.’ Overall membership at First Unitarian Church of Portland has almost tripled since the arrival of Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell in 1992. Time and time again, her passion for social justice is listed as the main reason for this surge in numbers.” (UUA)

The way Kate sees it, working for the betterment of the entire community of Portland taught her congregation new ways of being with one another—new ways of governance, of leadership development, of outreach to new members, and even of singing with one another; new ways to listen

to deepen their commitment to one another and to be authentic in connecting their values to their actions.

More importantly than the possibility of growth and the increased energy that will come from better and deeper relationships with a diverse coalition of justice-seeking people, the work of community organizing teaches us a way of making justice that is based fundamentally in humility.

In order to be successful at this work, the first agenda item is listening.

And the key concept necessary to do that listening is humility.

In participating in a grassroots community organizing effort, we will have to learn that our own “pet issues” might not be the most important issues the community is facing. We might have to understand that before we get to the list of things we’re particularly passionate about, we might have to work on a few other items first.

As a group, Unitarian Universalists are not used to not being at the top of an agenda. We will have to get used to that if we move forward with this work.

And, I would argue, that is a blessing in disguise.

I hope that as you learn more—and I will report back from the meeting on April 1—that you agree. Let’s do this together.

For we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it’s won.

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