

PART IV: The Habit of Reflection

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PREFACE: WHY ORGANIZE?

I am an organizer. It's a strange word—"organizer"—a word from the past, a black-and-white photo of a person passing out fliers to workers leaving an auto plant.

But it's 2002, and I am an organizer. Not a consultant to so-called faith-based programs. Not a facilitator. Not an adviser. Not a service provider or do-gooder. Not an ideologue. Not a political operative. Not a pundit. Not a progressive. Not an activist.

I'm clearly not a lot of things. In my organizing, I use other old-fashioned words like "leader" and "follower," "power" and "action," "confrontation" and "negotiation," "relationships" and "institutions." These words still form the phonics of the larger language of politics.

With these basic tools, the plots and subplots of public life, no matter how intricate, begin to make sense. Characters come to life. Motivations emerge. Relationships reveal themselves. Themes and story lines become clear. The reader can begin to talk back to the teller of the tale, can begin to judge, or can pick up a pen and create a different world. In the public arena, participation and action and change can take place.

But I won't begin to make sense unless I follow the advice of my former college professor and poet laureate, the late Robert Penn Warren, and tell some stories. We took a walk one day on the Connecticut roads near his Fairfield home. It was a brisk winter afternoon, and his dog was yanking him along. As we walked, he provided a gentle but thorough critique of a novel I was working on at the time. He kept coming back to a simple theme: "Just tell the story. Forget everything else and tell your story." He was repeating what he had already written in his wonderful book-length poem, *Audubon: A Vision*, "Tell me a story. / In this century, and moment of mania, / Tell me a story / . . . Tell me a story of deep delight." So, many years later, I will follow the advice of this wise teacher and tell you some stories from my life, the beginnings of my life as an organizer.

I grew up on the west side of Chicago in the fifties and learned that we live in a world of power—raw power—long before I knew the word. My mother and father bought a tavern when my sister and I were quite young. As a six-year-old, I served shots and beers to the men who sat along "my" section of the bar. My customers were Italians, Irish, and fellow Croatians. They walked down the hill a block away from the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad yard at noon—for a couple of shots, a couple of beers, and sandwiches and soup made by my mother in the kitchen. My father built a small platform behind the bar so that I could serve my crowd.

I remember this as a glorious time in my life—a time when I was admitted to an adult world of strength and laughter and toughness. (My parents remember this as a period of unremitting pressure and endless work.) The time ended on a sunny afternoon. The young man from the mob came in to pick up his monthly payment. My father explained to him that, because by mother had taken ill, we were short. As my father and the young man talked,

all the other men at the bar became silent, looked down at their drinks, or stared straight ahead. The young man told my father that he knew what he had to do. My father nodded. Then the man turned around and walked out. Slowly, conversation picked back up. Someone ordered a shot of *vo* and a Schlitz. That night, my father closed the bar—Gus's Tavern—for good.

No matter where you turned, you ran smack into people with power. The power of the mob. The power of the police. The power of the Cook County Democratic Party—which demanded three hundred dollars from every working man in our neighborhood who sought a city job. Three hundred dollars was a lot of money in those days. And all that it bought was a place "on the list." No one knew for sure, but the sense was that a small percentage of people eventually got jobs. The rest paid off, sat silently, and had nowhere to go and no one to complain to when their payoff didn't work.

Life on the street was no different. As a white, working-class boy, I grew up fighting black, working-class boys. We jumped them. They jumped us. We feared them. And we wanted them to fear us. Our lives were strictly circumscribed—divided by *el* lines, railroad tracks, and major thoroughfares. Cross any border and you had to be prepared to pay the price. Every aspect of our upbringing taught us either to avoid or to confront one another.

Our lives were a series of serious and sudden skirmishes. One afternoon, two friends and I were sitting on a curb. In the distance, three blacks, about our age, walked along Ferdinand Street, toward us. They ambled, it seemed to me then and in memory, incredibly slowly and casually. As they approached, the toughest of our three, Mike Stepkovicz, now dead, pulled out his knife, opened it behind his back, and waited. No one moved until they were right in front of us. Then Stecks, short and stocky but quick as a snake, grabbed the lead boy, put the knife to his neck, and asked him where the fuck he thought he was going. The boy's eyes

were wide, unblinking. No words came out of his mouth, although his lips moved. The rest of us just froze. As quickly as he struck, Stecks let the kid go and told him to head back the same way he came. We watched them walk away, faster now, back toward Pulaski Road, south toward Lake Street, out of our turf, out of our sight.

And there was the much more complicated power of large institutions—particularly the Roman Catholic Church. Our parish, Our Lady of the Angels, anchored our lives. It's where we prayed, socialized, played bingo, went to school. This same parish—and scores like it—often turned a blind eye to the needs of the working-class whites who packed its schools and sanctuaries.

I watched as my mother tried to convince our local pastor to do something about the real estate hustlers who were panicking white families to leave the neighborhood by warning of the impending flood of black buyers. These hustlers spoke every language we spoke—Croatian, Italian, German, and Czechoslovakian. They called every day, many times a day, and then into the evening, and then all through the night. They roused bone-tired factory workers from their beds to alert them to how much their home had lost in value that week, to make them one last offer. Exhaustion and fear grew. Neighbors moved suddenly, without a word of warning. Then panic spread. The real estate agents bought low from our families and sold high to black families eager for a better and safer life for their children. They ravaged entire sections of a once great city—several times over. They drove families like mine from neighborhood to neighborhood, two, three, and four times, further west and northwest and southwest toward the suburbs, losing more equity, hope, and faith each time. Then they bankrupted black and Hispanic buyers and steered them into new ghettos.

My mother went to the pastor and described all this. He nodded and said he would get back to her. He never did. We found

out later that he essentially redrew the lines of the parish to exclude our four square blocks, which turned from nearly entirely white to nearly entirely black in one traumatic and violent summer in the late sixties. We didn't move for three more years because my Croatian grandmother, who owned our house, and who would have survived the bombing of Vukovar, refused to leave.

My mother's actions introduced me to a different kind of power—an attempt by someone to defend herself and her family, to enlist other families in the effort, to research an issue and understand it well, to take that research and analysis to a place where she thought her work would be welcome. She did all this with a positive spirit. She related as openly to our new black neighbors as to our fleeing white friends. Deeply disappointed by the inaction of the pastor, she didn't use that disappointment as a reason to retreat from all public matters or to reject her local parish or her larger church.

It would have been understandable if she had rejected them. She had already survived one tragedy. On the first day of December in 1958, the parish school, packed with sixteen hundred kids, caught fire. Ninety-five people died that day—ninety-two children and three nuns.

I recall the sights and sounds of that first of December nearly every day of my life. A siren, a news story, a charred building in Brooklyn, schoolchildren waiting on line or racing around an asphalt playground, inanities from the mouth of a public official trying to avoid responsibility—it doesn't take much to jog my memory.

Once again, I am one of fifty or so fourth graders sitting in a crowded classroom copying the perfect script of Sr. Mary Edgar . . . "Geography. Read page fifty-eight . . ." She is tall and thin and strictly upright, just like the tall and elegant letters on the board. Then, the fire alarm rings, late in the afternoon, just before

dismissal, which makes us all groan and grumble quietly. We will have to walk outside without our coats and wait until the entire school empties and then go back in and dress for the end of the day. In other words, we will leave later than usual.

But today there will be no going back for coats and books and backpacks. As we file into the hallway, we look up the wide stairwell leading to the second floor. Midway down, smoke, thick as muscle, blocks our view. The groaning and grumbling stop. We hurry out to the sidewalk in front of the school and follow our leader along Iowa Street toward the church. As we walk, we glance back, see smoke pouring from windows.

In the church, we are commanded to kneel and pray—600, 800, 1,000, 1,200, and more frightened kids, more packed in every minute. We can hear windows breaking, muffled screams, and thuds from the school fifty yards away. Someone in my group of friends says, “Let’s get out of here, see if we can help.” So we slip out of the pew. We rush, crouching, down the aisle—a small pack of ten-year-old boys sneaking through the crush of arriving children.

A moment later, we find that we have hurried into a holocaust. Sirens wail from every direction, as if the whole city is keening. The next hour is a blur. We are wandering among the bodies beginning to crowd the sidewalk in front of the school. We are sent into a nearby house. Later, we are running, coatless, bookless, home, running six blocks against a rising tide of parents and brothers and sisters and neighbors, who are pouring toward the school.

The crush of fire trucks and ambulance snarled traffic right into the rush hour. My father, like hundreds of other parents, heard this terrible news about the school but could not get home because of the tie-ups. Finally, when he rushed into the house, hours late, covered with lime dust from his day as a plasterer, he

looked like a ghost, as did my younger sister and I. He had seen so much death and near-death, from Omaha Beach to the Battle of the Bulge, but nothing had left him feeling so desolate and helpless, he said, as the endless hours of that afternoon.

Out on the street, in front of the school, a young priest named Jack Egan performed last rites and comforted the barely living and consoled the parents who were already beyond consolation, and would remain that way, some of them, haunted for the rest of their lives.

When ninety-two children die in one neighborhood, along with three religious women who taught them, the entire community mourns. In this case, the “community” extended beyond the streets and avenues of the west side, beyond Springfield and Avers and Harding and Thomas, beyond Augusta and Iowa and Erie, beyond the modest row houses and crowded bungalows and gray two-flats, beyond the decade and the century in which it occurred. In this case, the community included the rest of the city, Catholic schools everywhere, and people of all cities and states. The children of the city were dead—the kind of kids who lived in every American city at the time. Their photos filled the entire front page of one of the city’s newspapers a few days later. The event had the impact of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire—another instance of tragic loss among working-class women in a New York City knitting mill. Fire safety rose to the top of the national agenda. Dioceses and schools districts campaigned for sprinkler systems and other fire safety solutions.

But there was a terrible twist to this tragedy. The OLA fire wasn’t caused by an abusive employer showing disregard for his workers. In the city of Chicago, in 1958, Roman Catholic schoolchildren, in their local parish school, in a Roman Catholic city, led by a mayor who attended Mass each and every morning, died unnecessarily. The institution that sometimes gave life, through adoption ser-

vices; saved life, through their health care and hospitals; supported and enriched life, through their schools and seminaries—this same institution exposed its most faithful followers to firetrap conditions and the possibility of injury and death.

When the west side of Chicago—and scores of neighborhoods like it in many American cities—began to burn again, in the mid-sixties, just ten years after the OLA fire, when parish after parish experienced a near-total turnover in a matter of months, when hundreds of thousands of hardworking ethnic Catholics were driven from their homes and hundreds of thousands of hardworking blacks and Hispanics were steered in, I saw the same kind of deadly disregard—only this time a little less dramatic, less stunning to the senses. This time, it was politicians benefiting from the profiteering of real estate hustlers. This time it was arsonists working for panic peddlers and landlords. This time, it was stunned and frightened pastors and rabbis drawing and redrawing the lines of their shrinking congregations until they had no people left to serve. This time, tragedy didn't strike in an hour on a December afternoon; the burning went on for a decade—a long, slow smolder that caused far more damage than the spasms of violence experienced in the late sixties—and left hundreds of neighborhoods and scores of cities trashed.

For every example of an abuse of power, I experienced, often by accident, an alternative way to wield power. A few years after the fight with the three black kids on Ferdinand Street, I found myself stepping tentatively into a black Baptist church—taken there by a Jesuit Scholastic who taught at my mostly white Roman Catholic high school. We were neither avoided nor confronted there. We were welcomed, acknowledged, accepted, and encouraged. We were then treated to a wonderful worship service—the first of many in my life as an organizer. Here, too, was power—organization and talent, leadership and discipline, external impact and real

change. And here was music and humor and warmth that I had not yet felt in any other church.

Not long after my mother's encounter with our local pastor, I read about Fr. Jack Egan in the Sunday paper. It was now the late sixties and Egan was serving as the pastor of Presentation Parish, just two miles south of our home. He was also one of the guiding spirits behind a growing black homeowners group called the Contract Buyers League. With leaders like Ruth Wells and Clyde Ross, another young Jesuit named Jack Macnamara, and a staff of college-age summer interns, Egan and company were working to correct the conditions that occurred when homes were sold on contract at exorbitant prices to minority buyers. A contract sale meant that the buyer had no equity *until he or she made the last payment*. At any time before that, the buyer could lose everything if a payment was missed or even late. This process thrived because the federal government allowed lending institutions to withhold conventional financing—a process called redlining—from working-class communities all across the country. It was sanctioned by the great Cook County Democratic Party, which sacrificed the financial stability and peace of mind of hundreds of thousands of its most loyal followers for the payoffs, prostitutes, and cases of bouillon provided by the mortgage bankers, title attorneys, real estate sharks, and savings and loan executives.

Face to face with this formidable array of opponents, in an archdiocese that brooked no action or dissent at the time, stood Jack Egan and Jack Macnamara and the indomitable leaders of Lawndale. They organized hundreds of homeowners every Wednesday night in the basement of the parish church. They picketed savings and loans in Cicero while heavily armed federal marshals separated them from rabid white crowds. They challenged the major Chicago banks that held the contracts for these speculators to reveal the extent of the abuse. And they eventually forced those

who profited from this urban erosion to repay hundreds of homeowners' families.

So, before I went off to college, I saw power in several forms. I saw the mafia punk in the bar—just another soldier in an army of power abusers who burdened our family and humiliated our father and tried to break our spirit. And I saw my mother preparing for her meeting with our pastor, black homeowners like Ruth Wells picking up the pieces in Lawndale, and a young minister in a Baptist church preaching a sermon on civil rights in a city both hostile to his message and elaborately organized to frustrate him.

I sensed that you couldn't just "reform" the abusers of power, legislate against them, sue them into submission, or sway them with the merits of your case. I sensed that you had to battle them—power against power, institution against institution—to check them and counter them and ensure that your vision of society and community, rooted in the best blend of democratic and religious traditions, had a chance to grow and survive from season to season and year to year.

And I began to see—although this notion emerged more gradually over many years—that organizing, participating, and acting were essential to the health of your own institutions, your own congregation or faith, your own political party or union, your own association or citizens organization, not just the institutions run by those you believe to be neutral or hostile to your interests. All institutions tend to drift. There's always the danger of the easy wink between the pastor and the fire inspector, between the lobbyist and the senator, between the corporate contributor and the chief of staff, between the not-for-profit executive and agency head. No technical reform or legal sanction or government regulation can stop this. No degree of separation and individual avoidance can insulate a person from the consequences of these insider trades and institutional shifts.

So leaders and organizers face a tough challenge: maintaining a conservative's belief in the value and necessity of stable institutions, along with a radical's understanding of the need for persistent agitation and reorganization. We are called to love, engage, and uphold our most cherished institutions, while watching them, questioning them, and pressing them to change, all at the same time.

The women and men who resist the temptation to choose one extreme or the other, or who don't just opt out, are every bit as important to the defense of this democracy, in times of crisis and times of peace, as the dogged citizen soldiers who landed on Omaha Beach. Many are already in the field and gaining ground. Millions more are willing to fight, even itching to, but feel as if they lack the training or the language or the skills to do so effectively. And many of these new American leaders, these soldierly citizens, just don't know where to sign up or how to start. This book is about how to do just that.

About fifteen years ago, the Senate was considering a series of issues relating to immigration. Leaders and organizers from our groups in Texas, New York, and California were concerned. Four leaders from New York—two Roman Catholic priests and two Hispanic lay leaders—and I took the early shuttle to Washington and arrived about fifteen minutes before the hearing was scheduled to begin. We wandered through hallways—tunnels without subways, one of our leaders said—until we spotted a long line of people along one wall. More than 150 men and women moved toward the large double doors of the hearing room.

Guarding the door was a tall, affable security officer who leaned over every so often to those preparing to enter. He said something to each individual or group, nodded his head at the answer, and then waved them in. When we got to the guard, he leaned toward us and asked, "Lobbyists or staff?"

We were all silent for a moment. Then, I said, "Citizens."

"Ha!" he roared, to all those who had formed behind us and to the world at large, "Get this: we got some citizens here!" The hallway echoed with knowing laughter.

The second story took place around the same time, in New York City. A Lutheran pastor and eight members of his congregation were planning to go to City Hall to attend a session of what was then the most important governing body there—the now-defunct Board of Estimate. The congregation hoped to acquire a nearby abandoned building and renovate it for church programs. It learned that the city was about to dispose of the structure to another group and that this disposition would be an agenda item during the day's meeting.

I asked the pastor if I could tag along. I was new to the city at the time, had never been to the Board of Estimate, and wanted to get a sense of how things worked there. When I arrived at City Hall the next day, I was impressed by the elegance of the Board of Estimate chamber. It had high ceilings, eight chairs stationed behind a raised dais, fixed wooden pews for the citizens waiting for the proceedings to begin, and a thick altar rail separating those attending from those presiding. On the far left end of the altar rail was a small Dutch door, with a sign saying "DO NOT ENTER," in stark stern letters.

The pastor and his people were all carrying bag or box lunches with them, along with books, newspapers, magazines, and knitting materials. Everything about them—their supplies, their comfortable clothes, their soft shoes—communicated that they were expecting a long day. When I inquired, they clued me in. The meetings often ran from ten in the morning, which time it was, until two or three the next morning; that there were 520 items in an agenda that looked like the course catalog for a major university; and that you never really knew when your item would be dealt with—on first call, which meant while the sun still shone, or during the dreaded second call, when meant in the wee hours.

I groaned silently, glanced toward the dais again, and noticed that every five seconds or so someone was pushing through the

door with the DO NOT ENTER sign on it. I asked the pastor who those people were. He said, "Must be staff." But I had never seen staff so well dressed, confident, and prosperous looking. They would march through the door as if it weren't there, mount the dais behind the eight chairs, and kibitz with one another, with the board members, and with other younger people who did look like staff to me.

I asked the pastor, "Why don't we go up there and find out what's going to happen to your building?"

"We can't," he said. "The sign says DO NOT ENTER."

Before you get the wrong idea about this pastor, let me tell you right here that this is one of the toughest and bravest men that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. He rode a bicycle around the mean streets of East Brooklyn, at all hours, to visit the sick and lonely and troubled, who often seemed to find their way to him. He was a stocky Texan with a long German name who wore a beret and carried a Bible and was undaunted by the broken elevators in Howard Houses when he received an emergency call at three in the morning. But this tough Texan would not go through the little Dutch door that day.

So I went. Pushed the door. Strode past the guard. Climbed the short stairs. Sidestepped through the crush of people to position myself just to the side of the Brooklyn borough president's representative. I asked his chief of staff about the item that brought the Lutheran leaders there that day. He leaned back, without looking at me, and growled, "We're tabling it. Go home. We'll deal with it at next month's meeting." I relayed the message to the pastor and his people, who were thrilled to learn of their reprieve. They packed up and returned to their jobs, families, parish duties, and community. The clock read a quarter past ten.

This is my business. I encourage, coach, and agitate citizens to play their rightful roles and claim their rightful places in the public

arena of our nation. It's an arena that sends mixed and contradictory messages to people. Although it boasts the promise and symbols, the bureaucratic structures and legislative processes, of full and open participation, it is positively packed with paid lobbyists and paid staff. Its doors and rooms are plastered with signs that warn DO NOT ENTER. It is a place where people are routinely told to be patient, told to wait, told to come back next month, where people are crowded out, discouraged from voting, and are frustrated in their attempts to be complete and responsible citizens. It provides pews for the people to sit in and watch but erects multiple barriers to meaningful engagement.

There's a powerful and fundamental tension between our political rhetoric and rituals and our everyday actions and practices—a tension written into our founding documents and present in most of our public crises. The organizer lives with and within that tension, challenges citizens to confront it, and schemes with them to honor the best of our political traditions by pushing the political world as it is in the direction of the world as it ought to be.

I am one of about 150 full-time professional organizers working with the Industrial Areas Foundation, founded by the late Saul D. Alinsky in 1940. We have helped build and staff more than sixty citizens' organizations in twenty states and the District of Columbia. Our groups are made up of nearly three thousand congregations and associations and tens of thousands of ministers, pastors, rabbis, women religious, and top lay and civic leaders. Several million Americans, from Brownsville, Texas, to Brownsville, Brooklyn, call themselves members of our groups. These members are African American and Hispanic, white and Asian. They are individuals on the edge of homelessness, as well as families in upper-middle-class communities in Montgomery County, Maryland, or north suburban Chicago. They are Democrats, Republicans, and

Independents, more often than not in the moderate middle of the political spectrum.

They do not have an opportunity to do what citizens did in 1860, in a period when public debate was of the highest quality and public engagement at its most intense. They don't walk or ride great distances with their neighbors, stand by the thousands in the hot sun, hear Douglass and Lincoln debate, then argue among themselves about the issues of the day. But they do the next best thing: they spend untold hours mastering and using the full range of public arts and skills. They learn how to listen to others, to teach and train their members and followers, to think and reflect on the issues and pressures of the day, to confront those in power who obstruct or abuse them, and to build lasting relationships with allies who support or reinforce them. As leaders in large and effective citizens organizations, they practice how to argue, act, negotiate, and compromise.

These are normal and commonsensical people, people who have rich and full lives in their families and congregations and in their workplaces and communities. They are not activists, for the most part. They are not ideologues. They appreciate the market, often work in the private sector, and value the important place that the market occupies in any vital society. But they don't worship it, don't put profit above all else, and don't believe greed is good.

These citizens don't genuflect before another modern idol—the bureaucratic state. They don't dream of a society of large programs and pompous administrators. They don't believe that bigger government is necessarily better. They don't value paper and procedure and patronage. In fact, they and their families suffer most when cities, counties, and federal agencies are run and staffed by political hacks.

Nor do they see themselves as another faction, party, or sect—

Nader raiders or Perot followers. They don't pledge allegiance to a single issue or single leader. They don't believe a secular messiah, no matter how gifted or talented, can fix all that ails them. They are not just trying to elect one of their own and squeeze her or him into the small room behind the door that says DO NOT ENTER.

In fact, these people, often overlooked, are themselves "leaders" in almost every sense of the word. They have the trust and loyalty of others who follow them. They have passion and persistence. They know how to put a situation in perspective and laugh at it and themselves. They care about their local communities and interests but also search for ways to contribute to their cities, counties, and nation.

And they operate in an area of society that many Americans either doubt the existence of or can't name. Management guru Peter Drucker called it simply "the third sector." It's the large and growing sector of voluntary organizations—of congregations, associations, sports leagues, and service groups. It's a sector that figures out how to do what the market or state have either shown no interest in doing or have failed to do well. It's a sector whose product—the growth and development of people and their voluntary institutions—is often not recognized, often underappreciated, occasionally patted on the head and offered token "offices of faith-based solutions," and at other times actively undermined.

It's a sector that succeeds, when it does, not just because it is "faith-based." Some groups are and some are not. And many so-called "faith-based" organizations perform quite poorly. It's a sector that succeeds, when it does, not just because it is smaller and more local. While the best third sector groups are local, many are not small at all. It's a sector that succeeds because its leaders have learned how to manufacture and manage power—the ability to act—consistently and effectively. Not the power to abuse others back. Not the power to dominate. Not the power to replace the last

bully with a new bully. Not the power to keep others from entering. But the power to demand recognition and reciprocity and respect, the power to create and sustain meaningful public relationships.

Unlike almost everyone else in the public arena, except perhaps utility executives, they don't shy away from using the problematic word "power." Here's a recent example. The assistant to a university president called. We had scheduled a meeting with the president, and the assistant was preparing a briefing sheet for him. She had already done some research on us, so she began by saying that she understood that our group was a kind of community development organization. I said that it was no such thing. It was a power organization.

"A what?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard me clearly.

"A power organization—a citizens power organization."

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"Power."

"It's the ability to act—on a whole range of issues, in a variety of ways. . . ."

It would have been easier to let her description—innocently offered and partly true—stand. Just as it would be easier to explain to any curious person or inquiring reader that we are a housing organization, an education reform coalition, or a faith-based group. We would then fit more neatly into the current map of the world. But the predictable world pictured there is flat and incomplete. It lacks curves and contours and entire continents of political reality still undiscovered and unexplored.

This became clear to me many years ago, when an associate invited me to a gathering of housing organizations in Brooklyn. When we arrived, we had a difficult time finding seats in an auditorium packed with three hundred executives and staff members from local development groups. I was stunned and a little per-

plexed; I had no idea that there were so many people managing so many groups. The vast majority seemed decent, earnest, honestly interested in tackling the enormous challenge of rebuilding devastated communities. They had briefcases and development plans and phone and fax numbers neatly printed on business cards. They went to offices and answered calls. They chaired meetings and attended conferences. They raised money from foundations and won contracts from government agencies. They even identified buildings or sites that they sought to control or develop. But the reason I was surprised by the size of the crowd was that, at the time, no one was building or renovating housing on any scale whatsoever. Sadly, the people in the room had everything but the essential thing—the power to produce.

When you say that you seek power, want power, you are heading into terra incognita. You are no longer a do-gooder holding hands with your brothers and sisters and singing “Kumbaya.” You aren’t an earnest private in Colin Powell’s volunteer army looking for a fence to paint or a chance to help those in need. You’re not satisfied with just having access to power, thrilled by the visitation of a politician to your congregation. You see no reason to operate through intermediaries and flaks handpicked by the insiders and sanctioned by the media.

When you say that you have power and intend to use it, you signal your dissatisfaction with the way the two other major sectors in society—the private sector and the public sector—are handling certain matters. And you present an implicit challenge: you are ready and willing to show the other sectors how to tackle those matters more effectively.

Of course, then you stop being a spectator, a critic, or a high-minded activist with a rational analysis, supporting data, and six enlightened recommendations. You get off the couch and out of the strands. You enter the arena and place yourself squarely in the

mix—as a fellow owner of what may or may not happen, as someone willing to be *held* accountable, not just hold others accountable. You become more engaged, more suspect, more threatening, and more exposed.

But it’s all just talk—this use of the word “power,” just like so many other rhetorical claims—unless it is reinforced by the habit and practice of organizing. That’s why, when we are called by the neighborhood or religious leaders of a city, we tell them that we won’t come to solve a housing problem or an education problem or a low-wage problem. No, we say we’ll try to help them solve a more fundamental problem—a power problem. No matter how terrible the conditions may be and no matter how intense the current crisis, we will spend a year or two or three with them *not* addressing these immediate and important issues and concerns. We’ll use that time to build the organization and to develop a firm base of power, so that the group will someday have the punch and impact needed to instigate and preserve lasting change.

That’s what Ed Chambers, the occasionally gruff and blustery director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), who was Alinsky’s protégé, told a group of tough and impatient leaders in 1978, when they called from East Brooklyn and said that they wanted to organize. Alinsky was extraordinarily effective as a tactician, writer, speaker, and gadfly. He was the first theorist and exponent of citizens organizing in urban communities. In fact, he was so effective at stirring people and provoking reaction that I still get angry calls from disgruntled people wondering where they can find that SOB Alinsky. They seem disappointed when I point out that Alinsky died, in California, in 1972. While Alinsky had many gifts and strengths—among them the ability to make indelible impressions—he did not create organizations that endured.

That was Chambers’s critical contribution to the world of citizens organizing and to America as a whole. He had a talent for

teaching people how to organize power that lasted. He had faith in their ability to build a machine that had a soul. So, when the call came from East Brooklyn, Chambers agreed to fly there from his headquarters in Chicago and meet with a team of embattled ministers and community leaders.

In the spring of 1978, East Brooklyn was the South Bronx minus the presidential motorcades. It was a place of stunning devastation, glaring needs. Gunfire crackled every night. There was fire, abandonment, and rubble. In the words of one visitor, Boston's Mayor White, it looked like "the beginning of the end of civilization." The leaders that met with Ed Chambers that day were eager, even desperate, to do something, anything, now.

Chambers heard the leaders out. Then he told them precisely what they did not want to hear. Forget the issues. Don't pick a galvanizing cause. Avoid charismatic leadership. Instead, he urged them to take the time to recruit more local congregations and associations in the area, so that they would begin to reflect the racial and religious diversity in a community of nearly a quarter of a million people. He preached financial independence that began with each and every member institution, no matter how poor and pressed, shelling out significant yearly dues to the fledgling organization. Only after the local leaders and institutions committed their money—dues money, hard money—should they pursue softer foundation funding. He set a high target: \$250,000 in money raised and money pledged. And he insisted that they never seek government funding for their core budget. Finally, he challenged them to take the time to learn about power and how it really works and to focus more on the growth and development of local leaders.

Chambers hammered away: recruit institutions; find allies; pay dues; train leaders; don't do for others what they can do for themselves. Some in the group grumbled. How could they ask their followers to pay dues to an organization that wasn't ready to address

issues? Chamber answered their question with another question: how could *they* ask people for tithes and offerings to support their local congregations? Because they believed in what they were preaching and teaching. Because people, no matter how poor, always found ways to pay for what they truly valued. And when they paid for it with their own hard-earned money, not the government's, not some foundation's, they owned it. And ownership—of a home, a congregation, an organization, a nation—encouraged participation and responsibility, accountability and commitment.

The activists squirmed, fumed, and rebelled. Without an issue or cause or crisis, no one would act, no one would move, and no one would work. You have to "prove" to people that success is possible before asking them to join, pay dues, or attend training. Chambers conceded that that was the conventional wisdom in the progressive and radical worlds. But in this case the conventional wisdom was dead wrong. Loose groupings of interested individuals didn't have a prayer of addressing major crises—housing, crime, schools, jobs, and others. Each crisis was, at bottom, a power crisis. The power of the mob, the power of drug lords, the power of corrupt borough machines, and the inertia of the police bureaucracy could only be challenged by another, deeper institutional power.

Unconvinced, unsatisfied, a few people stalked out or didn't return. But the majority of the leaders reluctantly went along. As one leader later said, "Well, we'd tried just about everything else—model cities, poverty programs, causes for this, causes for that. None of it worked. So we didn't have much to lose." Except time. Ed Chambers spent eighteen months working long-distance with the mature and intelligent leaders of what would become East Brooklyn Congregations. They recruited twenty local institutions. They raised, to their complete surprise, nearly \$250,000 in dues and grants. They sent hundreds of leaders through local training sessions and fifty through the 1AF ten-day training. They

ran meetings that started on time and ended on time and lasted one hour. They did all of this work themselves, without a paid staff person, in one of the nation's poorest communities, at the very worst of times, while buildings continued to burn and bullets continued to fly.

This period devoted to building a powerful and durable base—what we in the IAF called the sponsoring committee phase—is what most other organizations, parties, agencies, movements, unions, and civic associations tend to forget, skip, or give short shrift. But it's precisely during these months and years that a community can begin to develop new depth and new breadth, can sort out the majority of hard and persistent workers from the small minority of loudmouths, can tap into talent already present but usually overlooked, and can engage allies and supporters waiting in the wings but not knowing how best to contribute. It's right here, in this gestation phase, that a new culture of public life and public action and clear accountability can begin to form and spread.

In the nearly twenty-three years since, some of the same leaders who sat in a church basement and skeptically eyed the six-foot-five, 250-pound IAF director when he first preached the fundamentals of power organizing have used that power to transform their community. They pressed the city to replace three thousand missing street signs, stop signs, and one-way signs—to put the area, quite literally, back on the map. They negotiated with the parks department to upgrade every park and playground. They leaned on the Transit Authority to renovate the subway and el stations. They made sure that lots were cleaned, streets swept, and drug locations raided. They identified the need for two new primary health centers—and had them built. They pressured the Board of Education to build two new high schools—smaller, safer, more responsive to parent and student needs—and cosponsored them. They increased the registration and turnout of voters, in spite of a

series of dreadful and uncompetitive elections. They rekindled a spirit of the possible in a place that had grown dark with cynicism and despair. And—most visibly—they designed and built nearly three thousand new, affordable single-family homes.

An organization with a core budget of three hundred thousand dollars a year, a staff of four, and a modest headquarters in a local apartment complex halted two decades of burning, deterioration, and abandonment by building a critical mass of owner-occupied town houses and generating a chain reaction of other neighborhood improvements. EBC built on every large parcel and abandoned block in the area—140 vacant acres. The market value of the housing built now exceeds \$400 million.

The group succeeded in large part because its leaders creatively applied the lessons absorbed during the sponsoring committee phase to the challenge of rebuilding a wasteland with homes affordable to working families making as little as twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Instead of beginning by asking government for funding, the leaders of EBC first raised \$8 million of no-interest revolving construction financing from their own church bodies—the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. They would never have had the chutzpah to approach their bishops for million-dollar loans if they hadn't decided to pay their own dues and generate their own core budget and discipline themselves to avoid government largesse.

They pushed this principle further. Instead of asking for the most public subsidy available from the City of New York, they asked for the *least* amount of subsidy that any group requested—a no-interest, ten-thousand-dollar-per-home second mortgage with lien. In fact, when the EBC leaders, primarily African American and Hispanic, poor and working poor, approached the city's housing commissioner with their request, he said that he would

provide more than they asked for—twenty-five thousand dollars per house to each buyer. A truly bizarre negotiation then ensued, with the EBC leaders demanding less, in the form of a loan, and the city offering more, in the form of a grant. The city officials began to whine, “Why, we give the Rockefeller Partnership housing program twenty-five thousand dollars. How would it look if we gave you less?” This logjam dissolved when the EBC leaders threatened to tell the *New York Times* about this silliness.

Then they pushed it further still. When Ed Chambers and I recommended a down payment of thirty-five hundred dollars on a home then costing fifty thousand dollars, the leaders said no. They voted for a *higher* down payment of five thousand dollars so that they didn’t experience a repeat of the dreadful FHA scandal, in which homes were nearly given to families who felt little or no sense of ownership and often treated their properties as if they still belonged to the government, not to them. As a friend of mine said when I told him this story, “They’re smart. They’re avoiding mental rental.”

From the start, these leaders never made the mistake of thinking that the housing program was more important than the power organization. The effort was not viewed as an opportunity to build a large bureaucracy. It wasn’t a patronage program. It wasn’t an avenue into the profitable world of housing management and consulting contracts. The two general managers hired to do this work—first the incomparable I. D. Robbins, then the astonishingly effective Ron Waters—worked for EBC, not the other way around. They were expected to build homes with a minimum of staff, with modest overhead, and at the lowest possible cost. The EBC Nehemiah effort was seen as an *action of the organization*, a measure of its power, and a test of its ability to pressure, push, and leverage its vision and will against sluggish housing agencies and bankrupt housing theories.

All of this flew in the face of those who fancied themselves experts in housing, urban development, and civic activism, then and now. One political leader said, “You’ll never do this. Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.” Another said, “Forget it. If you build them, no one will buy them. If they buy them, they won’t maintain them.” Many housing and foundation executives wondered, aloud, “But who is going to *manage* these people?” Our answer was that they were going to do what all other American home buyers do—manage themselves. We weren’t about to do for others what they could do for themselves.

During this same period—nearly a quarter of a century—other groups of leaders in other cities and states were also altering their landscapes. IAF leaders in Baltimore invented and launched the nation’s living wage movement. They wrote and passed the first bill requiring municipal contractors to pay their workers a living wage. IAF leaders in Texas applied their power to force cities and states to extend the basic necessities and amenities of modern life, water and sewers and sidewalks, libraries and street signs and playgrounds—to the forgotten corners of San Antonio and Houston and the Rio Grande Valley. They designed and produced the nation’s most successful experiment in parent participation and public school improvement—the Alliance Schools Strategy. IAF leaders in Philadelphia imagined a new approach to the reconstruction and revitalization of older, shrinking American cities. IAF leaders in the South Bronx gave birth a new public high school that promises to become the second highest performing school in the borough—right behind the exclusive Bronx High School of Science. These leaders, and thousands like them in other cities and states, have used a combination of power, pressure, and patience to create the conditions that make it possible for people to move from the margins into the social and economic mainstream. They have begun the construction—or reconstruction—of a largely unnoticed

social highway system every bit as important as the nation's interests.

Because these leaders are not protestors, partisans, or helpless victims but some other and more complicated and very different thing, they do not fit easily into the media's prewritten stories. They generate more substance, more production, and more participation than many others, but their names cannot normally be found in a reporter's Rolodex. They succeed, but they succeed in unexpected ways and in unexpected places.

This book will describe those ways and visit some of those places. It will make more public the patterns and habits developed and tested, through trial and error, by a generation of IAF leaders and organizers over the past twenty-five years. Each of the four parts of the book will concentrate on one of these four habits—the habit of relating, the habit of action, the habit of organizing, and the habit of reflection.

I'll try to show just how far the steady and disciplined practice of these habits can transport citizens from the dry and bloodless formulas of the left and the right, from dusty reports presented in dull academic symposia, and from meaningless sound bytes and irrelevant exposes manufactured by the media's celebrity industry.

Taken together, these four habits form a new culture of organization accessible to anyone interested in the drama and friction, the power and the glory, of a fuller and more colorful public life.

PART I

The Habit of Relating