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The Relational Meeting*

ROOTS

FOR

RADICALS

Organizing for Power,
Action, and Justice

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with Michael A. Cowan

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The Relational Meeting

“Whatever one’s philosophical or even theological position, a society is not the temple of value-idols that figure on the front of its monuments or in its constitutional scrolls; the value of a society is the value it places on human relations. . . . To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built; this undoubtedly depends upon legal relations, but also upon forms of labor, ways of loving, living, and dying.”

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

The Most Radical Thing We Teach

You just finished the main chapter on *why* we organize. This chapter is the key one on *how* we go about doing it. Relational meetings are the glue that brings diverse collectives together and allows them to embrace the tension of living in-between the two worlds. I organized full time for eight years without understanding what I was experiencing or being able to explain it. It was only when I tried to teach others that I had to reflect and outline an approach to building power organizations. To me, the relational meeting is the best IAF offers. Properly understood, it’s not a science, not technique, but an art form. It’s one organized spirit going after another person’s spirit for connection, confrontation, and an exchange of talent and energy.

In the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions, we find God holding relational meetings at critical moments. The stories of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), and Muhammad in the cave on Mount Hira (Koran 96) are classic accounts of relational meetings called by the Creator that set three spirits on paths that changed the world. When people asked the Buddha in his later years what sort of being he was, he replied, “I am awake.” A good relational meeting wakes somebody up.

Modern IAF defines the relational meeting as an encounter that is face to face—one to one—for the purpose of exploring the development of a public

relationship. You’re searching for talent, energy, insight, and relationships; where these are present you have found some power to add to your public collective. Without hundreds and thousands of such meetings, people cannot forge lasting public relationships based on solid social knowledge or build lasting citizens organizations. Other parts of organizing, like caucuses, conventions, and demonstrations, only have lasting effects if they emerge and take their lead from what happens in relational meetings.

James Madison said, “Great things can only be accomplished in a narrow compass.” The IAF relational meeting is narrow in compass—one person face to face with another—but significant in intention. It is a small stage that lends itself to acts of memory, imagination, and reflection. It constitutes a public conversation on a scale that allows space for thoughts, interests, possibilities, and talent to mix. It is where a public newness begins.

A solid relational meeting brings up stories that reveal people’s deepest commitments and the experiences that gave rise to them. In fact, the most important thing that happens in good relational meetings is the telling of stories that open a window into the passions that animate people to act. In a relational meeting with an African-American leader, an organizer asked why she seemed so willing to take risks, why she was willing to step up and lead when others held back. She is, by nature, a shy woman, not at ease in the public arena, happier in her home and among her family members. In response to this simple but pointed question, she told the following story.

When I was a young girl in North Carolina, my sister and I began to attend the local Roman Catholic church. In those days, blacks sat in the back pews. Now I was a very large young girl, rather heavy, and so was my sister. When we went to that church, I saw no reason why my sister and I should sit in the back. So one Sunday we went right up and sat in the first pew. The pastors and ushers were upset. The pastor came over before Mass and asked me if we would please sit in the back, like all other blacks. I was scared as I could be, but I just couldn’t see where God would care where we sat, so I said no. Finally, the ushers came and carried me and my sister to the back. Carried us right down the aisle of the church.

On the next Sunday, my sister and I sat in the front pew again, and the priest came and the ushers came and they hauled us off again, huffing and puffing. On the third Sunday, the same thing happened. By this time, we were pretty well known. Two black girls who got carried away to the back of the church every Sunday. My family, my

mother particularly, was frightened at what we were doing, but she said we were doing the right thing.

On the fourth Sunday, the priest and ushers didn't do a thing. The Mass started, the choir sang, we took our seats, and from then on we sat where we wanted in that church and in any Roman Catholic church we ever attended.

After tens and hundreds of relational meetings, every experienced IAF leader and organizer carries in his or her memory a set of precious stories like the one you just read, stories that sustain us through difficult and often thankless work.

Discovering a New Foundation for Organizing

Beginning in Chicago's racially polarized neighborhoods in the late 1950s and early '60s, Dick Harmon and I crafted the art of the relational meeting in the streets and taught it to organizers in Saul Alinsky's training institute. Saul's way of organizing, which we had inherited, was influenced by electoral politics and the CIO labor organizing of John L. Lewis. In this approach, where one person equals one vote and all votes are equal, the ability to mobilize large numbers of people is the key. Under Alinsky, organizing meant "pick a target, mobilize, and hit it." In the modern IAF, it's "connect and relate to others." Issues follow relationships. You don't pick targets and mobilize first; you connect people in and around their interests. The inspiration for most of the best public tactics I've ever created came from relational meetings.

It was a chilly Friday night in the fall of 1959 in Chicago's racially changing St. Sabina's neighborhood on the Southwest Side. I had asked for and finally got the name of a key bomb thrower committed to keeping Negro families from moving into the all-white neighborhood. When I called the person whose name I had, he suspiciously agreed that I could come by at 9:30.

It was dark when I nervously rang the doorbell of a small white bungalow. I was greeted with "Let's go to the kitchen," where four items were prearranged on the table—a full bottle of Jim Beam, two shot glasses, and a pistol. I began the meeting by pointing out that violence just frightened white mothers, who put up "For Sale" signs the next morning. "They're not gonna raise their kids on a battlefield," I told him. His response was to have a shot and, as he raised his glass to his lips, he made it clear that I was to do the same.

About a half hour passed this way, when the back door screamed open suddenly, and three big guys silently walked in and joined the meeting, standing. The house's owner said, "Have another shot and tell them what you're telling me." After two or three minutes of my analysis, one of the standing guys interrupted me with, "This guy is a nigger lover." I sensed that the relational meeting was over, and I was next.

Instinctively, I countered (where it came from, I'll never know), "You guys are stupid. You don't even know who pays me to do this full-time." Then I volunteered, "Monsignor P. J. Molloy of St. Leo's [a tough, keep-'em-out local priest]. Let's call him now," I said, motioning toward the telephone.

We went back and forth for another hour and a half. Finally, I stood and said, "I gotta go." I left to silence and wobbled to my car but was alert enough to check underneath it then, and every day for the next two weeks, before starting it.

The beginnings of the IAF relational meeting weren't churchy or academic, but in places like that kitchen on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

After engaging in 250 or 300 relational meetings in the mid-1950s on the racially changing Southwest Side of Chicago, it dawned on me that I had stumbled onto a very useful tool, something that Alinsky had not figured out. These dialogues had provided me with a blueprint for organizing toward a free and open society, a way to break through racial segregation democratically. Here was an alternative to violence, disruption, and fear. It wasn't until I was confronted in the late 1960s with creating a training institute that I fully digested this experience. Teaching rookies how to organize through the selective, systematic use and careful evaluation of relational meetings made me realize that I had discovered a treasure. Building on the social knowledge I had gained under Alinsky during the 1950s allowed me to teach and develop the relational meeting in the 1960s. For the last forty years, senior IAF organizers have modeled the art form for trainees. In local and national trainings, leaders have been taught to do them. We have come to understand the relational meeting as the basic tool for all effective broad-based organizations.

Laying the Foundation for a Broad-Based Citizens Organization

In the process of constructing a broad-based citizens organization, thousands of one-on-one meetings will be held.

Upon returning to Chicago to build a broad-based organization in 1994, I did half a dozen relational meetings with a charismatic priest who had started with Alinsky forty years earlier. Fifteen minutes into

the sixth one, I sensed an old man with old connections, old stories; a worn-down veteran, but still having lots of passion. Painfully, I took a risk and followed my instincts. I said, “The problem, Jack, is you. You can’t be center stage. The young priests can’t develop—you’re in the way.” His face dropped. I paused. After a minute or two he said, “Ed, what should I do?” I said, “Give me the names of 12 to 15 successful young pastors in the city and suburbs.” “Why the suburbs?” he asked. “It won’t work without them,” I answered. This painful relational meeting had triggered in me the next step. Three months later we had the nucleus of a sponsoring committee, with Monsignor Jack Egan, the IAF treasurer, on the sidelines, where he stayed until he died.

In bringing the United Power organization to birth in metropolitan Chicago from 1995 to 1997, the organizers and initial leaders conducted 9,000 to 9,500 relational meetings over two years; about 25 percent of those were duds. Every good meeting in the bunch involved relational power, intentionality, and mutual recognition. Holding a number of relational meetings on a weekly basis is the main work leaders must do to sustain and develop their organization. The relational encounter is the radical source of all successful solidarity in a democratic society.

The relational meeting is a thirty- to thirty-five-minute opportunity to set aside the daily pressures of family, work, and deadlines to focus deliberately upon another person, to seek out their talent, interest, energy, and vision. Don’t violate this time frame. People do that all the time because they want conversation or chitchat. There are shelves full of books on how to keep people talking. No matter how interesting it is, don’t violate the thirty-minute rule. In a relational meeting, you’re checking people out, piquing their curiosity, and looking for talent, not for friends or “dialogue.” Time discipline will help keep you focused on public business. If the first thirty minutes goes well, don’t keep going—schedule another meeting. In the meantime, check out the people they send you to. If they’re duds, don’t go back. The relational meeting is an art form that forces you to work within a time frame. Something in the nature of these meetings requires discipline about time. These are moments of intensity that cannot be sustained.

Here’s a piece of social knowledge for you on time and power. In relational meetings with big power people, they’ll keep the first twenty to twenty-five minutes on you. Ordinary people will let you keep the focus on them for the first twenty to twenty-five minutes, then they’ll want to know something about what makes you tick and what you want from them. If you don’t believe me, try it. That’s how you get social knowledge.

The implication of asking for a relational meeting is that the other person’s perspective is of value, that listening to the stories and insights, the memories and struggles, of another is more important than hustling their name for a petition or getting them out to vote. In contrast to prestructured, carefully controlled and impersonal strategies like opinion surveys and focus groups, the relational meeting is a risky, reciprocal event. The relational meeting is a two-way street. The person requesting such a meeting isn’t a sponge, soaking up information about the other person’s life. He or she must be prepared to be vulnerable about his or her own social passions, values, frustrations, and concerns because inside relational meetings, people will turn the tables with their own questions:

- Who are you?
- What do you want?
- Why do you do what you do?
- Who pays you?
- Are you running for office?

Effective leaders in their own right will want to know something about what makes *you* tick. They will test, probe, and agitate you. You need to be able to reciprocate, to have the ego, clarity, and flexibility to respond to someone else’s initiatives. That’s why we need to see the relational meeting not as a rigid structure but as a plastic form that can be bent, shaped, and changed spontaneously in response to unpredictable demands and possibilities. No two relational meetings are alike.

While the dominant culture tells us that cell phones, beepers, fax machines, e-mail, and Internet chat rooms have made face-to-face communication obsolete, organizers and leaders who regularly do the intense work of relational meetings understand that these disciplined conversations touch our depths in a unique and irreplaceable way, even if one never sees the other person again. In relational meetings, the “why” questions so often avoided by people have a space in which to surface.

- Why are things like this?
- Why am I doing what I do?
- Why don’t I spend more time on what I *say* is most important to me?

Having these disciplined, existential dialogues is no waste of time; it is one of the highest and most valuable ways to spend our time. There is no electronic substitute. There is no chance for community without the relational meeting.

The Art of the Relational Meeting

A relational meeting isn't selling or pushing an issue or membership in an organization. We must listen rather than talk and ask questions based on what we are hearing. What is the other person thinking and feeling? What makes them tick? What's their number-one priority? Your basic tools for the meeting are your eyes, ears, nose, instinct, and intuition.

Short succinct questions are the key.

- Why do you say that?
- How so?
- What's that mean to you?
- How come it matters?

You must be prepared to interrupt with brief, tight questions like these, but not to make your own speeches. Once you ask a probing question, shut up and listen, and be alert for the next question. The artistry of relational meetings has to do with this in-and-out movement.

In relational meetings, we look for interests, talents, and connections across the spectrum of race, class, religion, and politics. Those who initiate them are particularly alert for people in the “moderate middle” of the political spectrum, who must be found in large numbers to form the core of an effective broad-based organization. The relational meeting is the entry point to public life. It is never done merely “to get to know” another person. Face-to-face meetings that lead to the development of an ongoing public relationship form the core of collective action for the common good.

The relational meeting isn't chitchat, like the usual informal exchange over coffee or drinks. In casual meetings, we take people as they present themselves. We don't push. We don't dig. We don't ask why or where a notion came from. We don't probe an idea. We don't raise possibilities. We don't ask questions that engage the imagination: “Well, what if you looked at it this way?” “How would your parents have reacted?” “How would you feel if you were the other person?” In everyday, casual talk, we don't show depth of curiosity or interest, and we don't expect curiosity and interest to be demonstrated toward us. Those who become proficient in holding public relational meetings learn that they must be “on” while they do them—intentional, focused, and prepared to agitate and be agitated in turn.

The relational meeting is not voyeuristic. It's not an occasion to pry into the private life of the other person. The difference between prying and probing is important. When people pry, they show excessive curiosity; they try to

force the other person open. Curiosity becomes an indiscriminate end in itself. A probe is more focused. It is an attempt to find the other's center.

In a relational meeting, probing reveals the underpinnings of someone's public action or inaction. If a neighborhood resident is angry about the abandoned building on the block and has attempted to organize others but stopped short of direct action, it's important to discover why. The personal reasons that motivate action are revealed in stories: a grandfather who immigrated during the Depression to establish a family in America; a mother who served as a model of courage and strength during the anxiety and deprivation of wartime; a brother gone bad who exerts a negative pull that the person is resisting. Stories like these don't rest on the surface, to be picked up in casual chatter. Only concerted and intentional encounters will bring them to light.

The relational-meeting approach is selective. Unless I get fooled, I have relational meetings with leaders only. And I go up the food chain, toward more power. You can't get to power without a credential.

In 1986 while on an organizing trip to Johannesburg, South Africa, I requested and got a relational meeting with newly elected Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was friendly enough, but the archbishop was agitated by the refusal of President Botha to meet with him. After several minutes of listening to him, I said, “If I were Botha [God forbid], I wouldn't meet with you either.” He spit out, “Why do you say that?” I said, “Because if he recognized you, he might have to recognize all the other black South Africans.” Apartheid wouldn't allow white power to recognize blacks. Boldly, I said, “You should have had 10,000 black South Africans outside the Johannesburg Cathedral when you were made a bishop in the Anglican Church.” He responded, “We had some blacks present in the cathedral.” “Bishop,” I said, “had you come out after the installation and addressed 10,000 black Anglicans militantly, Botha might have given you a meeting.”

Archbishop Tutu and I parted on friendly terms, but that was a confrontational relational meeting. I had challenged him on power, courage, and not understanding the opposition's interests.

Why have relational meetings with leaders only? First, a leader is someone with relationships who can deliver his or her followers. The point of relational meetings in broad-based organizing is to find leaders and connect them up, not to duplicate preexisting relationships or replace leaders. Second, people who are followers will tend to dump their problems on you, which is deenergizing for you. Interested followers will be invited to assemblies and actions

and be given the opportunity to grow into leaders inside a broad-based organization over time, but you can't build an organization of organizations around followers. In real estate, the mantra is "location, location, location." With relational meetings, it's "selection, selection, selection." If you get caught with a follower, there's an easy way out. Just say, "Take me to your leader."

The relational meeting is not a search for those who share our faith, class, politics, or other views. Ideologues on the right or left tend to seek consistency and certainty. The disaffection with electoral politics of the vast moderate middle of American society is in large part a reaction to the increasing insularity and narrowness of far-out liberals and right-wing conservatives. Both groups end up preaching to their ideological clubs, using their own language, their own fabricated theology, and their own single agendas. Both extremes communicate, "If you want to join us, you have to be like us—follow the party line." Neither extreme sends the message that its agenda has some fluidity, that its tone or strategy might be altered, that newcomers are expected to bring something to the group's agenda. Neither group does much organizing, in the sense that the term is used in these pages. Instead, they pressure people by means of direct mail, television ad campaigns, op-ed pieces, focus groups, and market research studies, with an ever watchful eye on public opinion polls. But polls cannot measure people's intensity or passion for change, nor can they bring people into real relationships.

Finally, the relational meeting is not a technique or an electronic shortcut, but an art form. Relational meetings aren't social science surveys for gathering data, or one more focus group for dissecting the public. In sharp contrast to the purpose of isolated and arbitrary opinion polling, relational meetings let us discover something of the wholeness or spirit of the others.

- Who are they?
- Who are their heroes and heroines?
- Whom don't they like?
- What is their dream for their family or congregation or neighborhood?
- What would they call a life well lived?
- Can they deliver their institution?
- Are they open to public life and organization?
- Do they have some appetite for action?

Like art, the relational meeting has a certain form and requires certain skills. But relational meetings have to be used flexibly and creatively by those initiating the meetings rather than following a rote method in a formalized

manner. Those who become skilled in the art of the relational meeting have learned to use their whole selves—body and spirit, charms, compassion, wits, humor, and anger—in these intense, focused encounters.

To summarize these points, the relational meeting

- is for the purpose of developing a public relationship
- focuses on the spirit and values of the other
- requires an intentional focus that goes beyond ordinary conversation
- necessitates probing and agitating the depths of the other
- demands a measure of vulnerability on both sides
- applies selectively, with leaders only
- bridges the barriers of race, religion, class, gender, and politics
- is a form of art that requires patient development and use of particular skills

When a good relational meeting occurs, two people connect in a way that transcends ordinary, everyday talk. Both have the opportunity to pause and reflect on their personal experience regarding the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be. And in that moment, a new public relationship may be born, through which both will gain power to be truer to their best selves, to live more effectively and creatively in-between the two worlds. Most of the tactics for action that I've come up with in the last fifty years came partly from something somebody said during a relational meeting.

After the Meeting

At the end of the individual meeting, the leader or organizer asks herself or himself some serious questions.

- Does this person have any animating passion about the state of our world as it is or as it ought to be?
- Does he or she have any anger, grief, memory, and vision about the state of our public life?
- What about a sense of humor?
- Is there a healthy tension between his or her values and reality?
- Did the person ask me anything or exhibit any curiosity about me? Was he or she properly wary of my reasons for seeking a meeting? Was he or she skeptical?
- Would personal problems in family or work prevent this person from participating in and contributing to a collective?

- What would he or she bring to the building of an organization of organizations?
- Who are the person's connections? To whom did he or she refer me?
- Is this person integrated—able to cross racial, religious, and class lines?
- Was there the beginning of some trust or liking between us?
- Is this someone I should contact again next month or forget?
- How should I follow up?

Developing the disciplined habit of setting aside a brief time for careful reflection on questions like these and jotting down a few key words in a notebook or on index cards to be reviewed before the next meeting is critical to reap maximum benefit from the time and energy involved in scheduling and carrying out relational meetings. Otherwise, after 50 relational meetings, you'll forget what happened in meeting number sixteen.

A Challenge to You

The relational meeting is a sophisticated approach to effective organizing in any area of life. It's simple, but it's not easy. It's a small stage on which the two worlds of is and ought come together for a moment. If the tension between the two worlds that I laid out in the previous chapter, and the possibility of relational meetings in this one, have captured your imagination, the next step is to develop your experience-based social knowledge of the relational meeting. To do this, you must act. Ask for a meeting with someone outside your usual circle of family and friends. Give yourself a credential. Make a phone call to get a date and time at the other person's convenience. Take thirty minutes to seek out that person's interests and values as they relate to the larger community you both share. Be prepared to be open about your own concerns and priorities. When the meeting is over, use the questions above to reflect on what happened. Imagine the person you met with in a collective with others acting for change on some issue that touches his or her self-interest.

After about thirty of these meetings, you'll begin to get the idea. Why not try it? What's the worst thing that could happen? They throw you out! Get a public life. Take a risk. You may like it.