

Building Power
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Last weekend, for a few brief minutes, I *owned* the 405 freeway. Carmaggedon turned into ay, carumba, what a treat! I was among 80 students and a dozen trainers at a 10-day seminar on broad-based organizing held at Mount St. Mary College in Brentwood, north of the 10 and west of the 405 freeways. Students had a break on Saturday afternoon, and I had time to run an errand by car.

I slalomed my way down the narrow, winding streets of Brentwood to Sunset Boulevard, turning east on Sunset toward the 405 freeway. I wondered whether the southbound onramp would be open, as promised by the map in the Los Angeles Times. It was! With rock and roll music blaring from my radio, I rolled on south to the 10 freeway, with no other cars in view ahead of me or behind me on either side of the 405. I could have zigzagged back and forth across the lanes. I could have done doughnuts. I could have parked the car in the middle of the freeway and walked. I will long for that freedom the next time I am stuck in a traffic jam. ;)

Mount St. Mary College is the only Catholic college primarily for women in the Western United States.¹ It was founded in 1925 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. In 1928, the property in the Santa Monica Mountains was purchased. You may have been to the Getty Museum, a hilltop architectural wonder that provides grand vistas from downtown Los Angeles to the ocean. Well, Mount St. Mary College looks *down* on the Getty Museum. During the day, I watched the funicular cars transport Getty visitors from its parking structure up to the museum on top of the hill. At night, I was entranced by the twinkling lights of the city and the soothing darkness of the ocean.

I am attempting to slip subliminal advertising into my remarks, hoping that you will want to visit the college before August 14. August 14 is the date when a superb traveling museum exhibit

¹ See <http://www.msmc.la.edu/about-msmc/index.asp>.

will leave Mount St. Mary College. The exhibit, called "Women & Spirit," showcases many artifacts from over 400 communities of nuns which have never before been on public display. Growing up Lutheran, I did not appreciate the many contributions of Catholic nuns. If that lack of knowledge resonates with you, do visit the "Women & Spirit" exhibit before it moves on.

Back to the training. The training on broad-based organizing was conducted by the IAF, the Industrial Areas Foundation.² The IAF is the parent organization of the IESC, the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee, which is connected to this congregation. "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 . . . [among] 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."

For 10 days, I sat in a classroom for nearly 10 hours a day. The trainers dismissed class at 9 p.m. It had been a while since I sat in college style student desks, with their rigid Formica-like writing surfaces. Students were divided into five groups, and each group remained together throughout the training. Letters from the Greek alphabet identified each group – alpha, beta, delta, epsilon, and omega. I was part of the delta group. We called ourselves the "Delta Force."

One quarter of my class of 20 appeared to be at least 50 years old. Half the class appeared to be in their 20's or 30's. Most of us were born in the United States. One person was born in Canada and another was born in Sudan, Africa. Christine from Africa talked of celebrating the birth of the nation of South Sudan the previous weekend in Omaha, Nebraska, where she settled as a refugee.

² See <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>.

About one third of my class were Latino/a, and the rest were white, including three for whom being Jewish identity was central to their identity. We stayed in dormitories at the college, a blast from the past in some ways (the square footage of the dorm room was familiar) though the chaparral vegetation out the window was quite different than the Madison, Wisconsin cityscape out the window of my college dorm room in 1974.

I will say a word about broad-based organizing and the “sponsoring committee” part of the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee’s name. Broad-based organizing contrasts with community organizing in that broad-based organizing relies upon institutions as members, not individuals. “Sponsoring Committee” means that the IESC is not quite an Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate yet. Once we have raised enough power through recruiting institutions and once we have held a founding convention, then we will be an IAF affiliate.

Why did I invest 10 days of my time and \$1,000 of my professional expenses budget to learn about broad-based organizing? This story provides a clue.

“Once upon a time, a pilgrim set out on the long journey in search of peace, joy and love. The pilgrim walked for many weary miles, and time passed.³ Gradually, the young, lively steps became slower and more labored. The pilgrim’s journey passed through landscapes that were not always happy ones.”

“Through war. Through sickness. Through quarrels and rejections and separations. A land where, it seemed, the more people possessed, the more warlike they became – the more they had to defend, the more they needed to attack each other. Longing for peace, they prepared for war. Longing for love, they surrounded themselves with walls of distrust and barriers of fear. Longing for life, they were walking deeper into death.”

“But one morning, the pilgrim came to a little cottage at the wayside. Something about this little cottage attracted the pilgrim. It was as though it was lit up from the inside. Full of curiosity, the pilgrim went inside. And inside the cottage was a little shop, and behind the counter stood a

³ Story of unknown origin, told by Margaret Silf in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003, p. 157

shopkeeper. It was hard to judge the age – hard even to say for sure whether it was a man or a woman. There was an air of timelessness about the place.”

“What would you like? asked the shopkeeper in a kindly voice. What do you stock here? asked the pilgrim. Oh, we have all the things here that you most long for, replied the shopkeeper. Just tell me what you desire. The pilgrim hardly knew where to begin. So many desires came rushing to mind.”

“I want peace – in my own family, in my native land and in the whole world. I want to make something good of my life. I want those who are sick to be well again and those who are lonely to have friends. I want those who are hungry to have enough to eat. I want every child born on this planet today to have a chance to be educated. I want everyone on earth to live in freedom. I want this world to be a kingdom of love.”

“There was a pause, while the pilgrim reviewed this shopping list. Gently, the shopkeeper broke in. I’m sorry, came the quiet reply. I should have explained. We don’t supply the fruits here. We only supply the seeds.” [end of story]

The Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee, does not supply fruits. If the IESC supplied fruits, then the congregation might be justified in thinking of itself as a consumer and wanting the best deal possible for its \$100 budgeted for the IESC in this fiscal year. However, instead of supplying fruits, the IESC supplies the *seeds* of leadership development, as well as a strategy for gaining relational power. The congregation is not a consumer of fruits but rather a farmer of power, a farmer in a cooperative. My Grandpa Hendricks was a member of the cherry growers coop in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. Tomorrow I’ll fly there for a vacation. I’ll stay in the home where he lived and died. I understand why farmers need to be part of a coop.

The IESC looks for four primary qualities in leaders: anger at injustice, humor as a way to gain perspective, curiosity about people and the world as it is, and imagination regarding the world as it could be. Relational power is how those of us without an abundance of wealth or an

abundance of political power can work together with other citizens to strengthen democracy and to counter the bulldozers of corporations and the politicians who do their bidding.

Broad-based organizing has no place for “yes men” or “yes women.” I am not an ideological “true believer” in terms of always agreeing with the IAF. I sometimes disagree with some positions and strategies of IAF affiliates. However, I am emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually invested in the IAF *process* for influencing positive social change.

Why? In recent decades, the power of corporations has increased, government has become more dysfunctional, labor union participation has declined, and individuals have taken to “bowling alone,” to use the image of sociologist Robert Bellah. Individuals cannot change unjust systems. Only institutions can change systems and bend systems toward justice.

All this talk can seem abstract, more philosophical than practical. I will close with a dream that is taking shape in my heart. It relates to helping mobile home owners who are facing foreclosure. As background, over a couple of years, the IAF affiliate to the west (which is called One LA) has developed a proposal to address the issue of home foreclosures. Foreclosures are devastating families and neighborhoods. The One LA proposal calls for banks to reduce a portion of loan principal.

In some ways I am more conservative and in other ways I am more radical than One LA. I am not enthusiastic about the loan principal reduction approach to addressing foreclosures for four reasons. First, if we want to empower the most vulnerable, I suspect that renters as a group need more help than homeowners. Second, it does not seem fair for some homeowners to receive a loan principal reduction if all homeowners do not receive them. Third, to the extent that the American dream includes ownership of a single family home, the American dream is not economically or environmentally sustainable. Fourth, homeowners who are deeply under water might be better off walking away from their home and their mortgage. That is what the wealthy do.

So I was feeling like “odd woman out” regarding the loan principal reduction emphasis of One LA. How could I remain emotionally engaged? I was casting about for some way to connect to the issue, and then it came to me: a focus on *mobile home* foreclosures. That would allow me to

build relational power among vulnerable people (often low income, and/or disabled, and/or retired, and/or people of color). I came up with two dozen stakeholder groups who I might begin to contact. [show yellow lined paper]

To conclude, there is a place in broad-based organizing for free thinkers who march to the sound of a different drummer. I am Exhibit A. Regarding social justice work, this congregation has a solid track record on two thirds of what it takes. It has a solid track record of education on issues. It has a solid track record on providing direct service to low-income people through the Community Meals program. The missing one third is involvement in broad-based organizing. Dozens of Unitarian Universalist congregation nationwide participate in organizing as a path to leadership development and as a strategy to increase power. We can join their ranks.

May our passions be tested in the crucible of work with other people and institutions. May we give our passions the power they deserve to help make the world a better place and to help make ourselves better people. May it be so!