

Staying Connected to Our Moral Sources



By [Marshall Ganz](#) - March 29, 2007, 11:04AM

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In my friend Heather's [telling of the story of the last 30 years](#), most of the problems progressives faced seem to have been due to "objective conditions" whereas most of our successes resulted from choices we made. I'm concerned that this perspective may keep us from learning key lessons - perhaps our most important lessons - from what we got wrong as well as what we got right.

As a result of teaching a class with my colleagues Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres at the law school recently on law, social movements, and social change I learned that one of the challenges social change lawyers face is overcoming legal education. What I mean is that the law, a technical system managing access to coercive state power, is embedded in both a normative context, the pursuit of justice, and in a political context, power relationships. Unfortunately, when taught, and practiced, the technical system of legal processes, procedures, and remedies often decouples from the broader normative and political context, thus generating its own values and politics. The result becomes a legal game, with enormous consequence, but which has lost touch with both its moral foundations and its political consequences.

Focusing on advocacy techniques also risks loss of connection to moral foundations and political significance. Moral sources - and the ability to express them - not only helps "get public support." It helps us understand the ends we pursue, draw energy from them, and interpret them to others in language of the heart, not only of the head. Keeping our eyes on political consequences refers not only to a specific piece of legislation, but to the ways in which we are, or are not, reconfiguring power relationships, rather than just navigating our way through them. Organization building is so important because it is one of the few ways that we can mobilize many people's time to balance a few people's money, giving us an opportunity to influence public policy, but without which, public policy can achieve only limited results. One reason that we organized a farm workers union was that years of "protective" legislation, which made those passing the legislation feel good did nothing to alter the lives of farm workers because they had no mechanism of their own through which they could get the law enforced.

Advocacy that is decoupled from its moral sources and from the project of building organized power can quickly become absorbed by the game itself, something we may have fallen into over the last 30 years. In the mean time, the conservative opposition, well grounded in its own moral sources, kept their eye on the ball - eviscerating the capacity of public institutions, of government, and, thereby, of the principal means through which we can leverage our resources.

The irony is that access to our moral sources is exactly what we need to create the possibility of winning. One of the key lessons of the social movements of the past -- of the left and of the right - is that their power grew out of the moral energy of their people (not just their organizers), their readiness to take risk, and their resourcefulness - all of which was rooted in turn, not in "self-interest" in any obvious sense, but in the values at stake. This is one of the differences between movement politics and interest group politics. David defeats Goliath not because he learns to

master the sword, but because, as a shepherd who is courageous enough to commit to the fight, he learned how to use his mastery of stones. Resourcefulness, rooted in courage, can compensate for the abundance of resources that often brings arrogance with it. This is why David can sometimes win.

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