Dispatches from the Religious Left

The Future of Faith and Politics in America

Edited by Frederick Clarkson
Introduction by Joan Brown Campbell
Afterword by Jeff Sharlet

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or temporarily weak, protect individual rights, provide a reasonable standard of living and regulate private enterprise to protect the public from rampant greed and criminal behavior. Battered by the right’s relentless assaults on these core principles, progressive movement activists today do not have a coherent vision. Instead, we are driven by a vague sense of what a better society would look like, a recognition of how times have changed and persistent despair as we fight one defensive battle after another.

It is therefore essential that we address several fundamental questions right now: What is the role and responsibility of government? How can the racial imbalance of our movement’s leadership be corrected? What role should religion play in public life? How should progressives respond to globalization? And what social issues should we identify as “bottom line”? As principles that respond to these questions emerge, we must not allow political expediency to trump creativity. The voices of people of color, and young people and women of all races must be explicitly sought out. Funding may facilitate this discussion, but it will not in itself produce a dynamic vision. Think tanks alone will not develop these principles, and framing and messaging will not substitute for them. The process of drawing out larger principles must be an organic one: a step-by-step process of slowly creating broad consensus. Here, we can learn from the right’s success with active listening.

While the challenges we face are considerable, they are not insurmountable. But we must get moving so that when the tide of public opinion turns in our direction, we are not caught flatfooted, with a movement badly in need of reform and lacking the very basics needed to seize the moment and go forward. The right was ready for the backlash of the late 1970s. We must be ready for the coming backlash against the outrages of the past twenty-five years.

Thougt on Power, Organization and Leadership

Dr. Marshall Ganz

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined power as the “ability to achieve purpose.” “Whether it is good or bad,” he said, “depends on the purpose.” One of the key elements of power is leadership.

At least since Moses, social movement leaders—whether individuals or teams—have come from conflicted backgrounds. Moses, a Jew, the oppressed, was raised in the house of the Pharaoh, the oppressor. He struggled to link a desire for change, freeing his people, with a capacity to make change, as an Egyptian prince. Moses’ reaction, killing an Egyptian taskmaster, didn’t work, bringing down upon him censure from other Jews. He then fled to the desert (where you go to get your act together in the Bible) and assumed a third, quite liminal, identity as neither Jew nor Egyptian, but as the son-in-law of a Midianite priest, a shepherd.

Remaining curious, one day Moses steps off a path to attend to a strange light, a burning bush, where, it turns out, God is waiting for him. God challenges Moses to accept a call to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and free his people. Moses accepts this charge only when God promises him the help of a brother, Aaron, and a sister, Miriam. He learns that he can combine his desire for change with a capacity to make change, but only by engaging with God,
his family, and his people. More importantly, however, in Exodus 18, after he has brought his people out of Egypt, Moses is visited by his father-in-law, Jethro, who teaches him two things: that he has a family which requires his attention, and that he is burning himself out—and burning the people out—by trying to do all the work himself. Jethro then proposes a structure in which among every ten men, one is recruited to provide leadership, and among every ten of those, one, is assigned another task, and so on. In this way, Jethro turns Moses attention to the critical role of leadership development that his movement will require if it is to grow strong.

Leading social movements requires learning to manage core tensions, tensions at the heart of what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the “prophetic imagination”: a combination of criticality (experience of the world’s pain), hope (experience of the world’s possibility), while avoiding being numbed by despair or deluded by optimism. The deep desire for change must be coupled with the capacity to make change. Structures must be established that create the space within which growth, creativity, and action can flourish, without slipping into the chaos of structurelessness. Leaders must also be recruited, trained, and developed on a scale required to build the relationships, sustain the motivation, do the strategizing, and carry out the actions required to achieve success.

The need for committed, hopeful leadership on a large scale is one reason that social movement leadership is often drawn from among the young (other than Moses). Dr. King was twenty-five when he was chosen to lead the bus boycott. Cesar Chavez was also twenty-five when recruited as a professional organizer and thirty-five when he initiated the farm worker movement. Some attribute the affinity of young people with social movements to “biographical availability” (having the time, but no family). Although this may hold the “costs” of activism down, it says little about the benefits. It has much more to do with Brueggemann. Young people often come of age with a critical eye, an evaluation of their parent’s generation, and a hopeful heart, almost a biological necessity. As we can see from the presidential campaign of 2008, the combination can be explosive.

**The Power of Story**

A social movement tells a new “story.” Learning how to tell that story, what I call public narrative, is an important leadership practice. Public narrative comprises three overlapping kinds of stories: a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. A story of self communicates values that call one to action. A story of us communicates values shared by those in action. And a story of now communicates the urgent challenge to those values that requires action now.

Participating in a social movement not only often involves a re-articulation of one’s story of self, us, and now, but also marks an entry into a world of uncertainty so daunting that access to sources of hope is essential. Telling one’s story of self is a way to share the values that define the people we are—not as abstract principle, but as lived experience. We construct stories of self around **choice points**—moments when we faced a challenge, made a choice, experienced an outcome, and learned something. What is utterly unique about each of is not a combination of the categories (race, gender, class, profession, marital status) that include us, but rather, our journey, our way through life, our personal text from which each of us can teach.

Some of us believe our personal stories don’t matter, that others won’t care, or that we shouldn’t talk about ourselves so much. On the contrary, if we do public work we have a responsibility to give a public account of ourselves—where we came from, why we do what we do, and where we think we’re going. Stories of us express the values and the experiences shared by the “us” we are evoking at the time. They can be stories of participation in family, community, faith, organization, profession, nation, or movement. We tell these
stories again and again in the form of folk sayings, songs, religious practices, and celebrations (e.g., Easter, Passover, 4th of July). And like individual stories, stories of us can inspire, teach, offer hope, advise caution, etc. We also weave new stories from old ones. The Exodus story, for example, served the Puritans when they colonized North America, but it also served Southern blacks claiming their civil rights in the freedom movement.

In a social movement, the interpretation of the movement's new experience is a critical leadership function. And, like the story of self, it is built from the choice points—the founding, the decisions made, the challenges faced, the outcomes, the lessons learned.

A story of now articulates the urgent challenge to the values that we share that demand action now. What choice must we make? What is at risk? And where's the hope? In a story of now, we are the protagonists and it is our choices that will shape the story's outcome. We must draw on our "moral sources" to respond. A most powerful articulation of a story of now was Dr. King's talk, often recalled as the "I have a dream" speech, delivered on August 23, 1963. People often forget that he preceded the dream with a challenge via white America's long overdue debt to African Americans. It was a debt that could no longer be postponed, King argued, a moment possessed of the "fierce urgency of now." If we did not act, the nightmare would grow worse, never to become the dream.

In the story of now, story and strategy overlap because a key element in hope is a strategy—a credible vision of how to get from here to there. The "choice" offered cannot be something like "we must all choose to be better people" or "we must all choose to do any one of this list of 53 things" (which makes each of them trivial). A meaningful choice is more like "do we commit to boycotting the buses until they desegregate or not?" Here, hope is specific, not abstract. When God inspired the Israelites in Exodus, he didn't offer a vague hope of "better days," but described a land "flowing with milk and honey" and what must be done to get there. A vision of hope can unfold a chapter at a time. It can begin by getting a number of people to show up at a meeting that you committed to do. You can win a "small" victory that shows change is possible. A small victory can become a source of hope if it is interpreted as part of a greater vision. In churches, when people have a "new story" to tell about themselves, it is often in the form of "testimony"—a person sharing an account of moving from despair to hope, the significance of the experience strengthened by the telling of it.

Through public narrative, social movement leaders—and participants—can move to action by mobilizing sources of motivation, constructing new shared individual and collective identities, and finding the courage to act.

Who Is A Leader?

Who is a leader? Many of us call to mind historic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jane Addams, Robert Kennedy or President Reagan. In reality, we find leaders everywhere—linking together networks through which we work to achieve common purposes. In every community, church, classroom, and organization, hundreds of people are doing the work of leadership, without which these efforts would not survive.

Although we associate leaders with certain kinds of attributes (like power), a more useful way to look at leadership is as a kind of relationship. Historian James McGregor Burns argues that leadership can be understood as a relationship that emerges from repeated "exchanges" or "transactions" between leaders and followers or constituents. Leaders can provide the resources constituents need to address their interests, while constituents can provide resources leaders need to address theirs.

What do we exchange in this kind of relationship? Constituents may get help solving a problem, a sense of empowerment, access to resources, etc. Leaders may get the same things—and
something else too, something that makes us willing to accept the responsibilities that go with leadership. Dr. King described this as the "drum major instinct"—a desire to be first, to be recognized, even to be praised. As much as we may not want to admit it, this might sound familiar. Rather than condemn it—it is, after all, part of us—Dr. King argued that it could be a good thing, depending on what we do to earn the recognition we seek.

Based on this view of leadership, then, who makes leaders? Can they be self-anointed? Can I decide one day that I am a leader? Or do I earn leadership by entering into relationship with those who can make me a leader by entering into relationship with me—my constituents? There is one simple test. Do they have followers? Fine speeches, a wonderful appearance, lovely awards and excellent work aside—no constituency, no leaders. You may not agree with this, but consider it.

**How Does Leadership Work?**

Many of us may not want to think of ourselves as followers. While leadership is highly praised, no one says anything about being a good constituent...or citizen. I argue that voluntary associations only work when people are willing to accept roles of leadership and followership. Leading and following are not expressions of who we "are" but of what we "do" in a specific meeting, committee, project, organization, or institution. We may play a leadership role with respect to one project, and a followership role with respect to another.

Another important distinction is that between leadership and domination. Effective leaders facilitate the interdependence or collaboration that can create more "power to" based on the interests of all parties. Domination is the exercise of "power over"—a relationship that meets the interests of the "power wielder" at the expense of everyone else. Leadership can turn into domination if we fail to hold it accountable.

We are also wise to distinguish "authority" from "leadership." Authority is a "legitimacy" of command usually attached to specific social positions, offices, or roles—legitimacy supported by cultural beliefs as well as coercive resources. An organization is a way to formalize authority relations among the participants, namely people's rights and their obligations. Bureaucracies structure authority as a set of rules according to which managers direct subordinates. Markets structure authority as a set of rules according to which entrepreneurs can design incentives for persons to make enforceable choices based on their individual economic resources. Civic associations usually structure authority democratically so that leaders are accountable to the constituents whom they serve. Exercising leadership in a civic context can require more skill than in the other settings because it depends more on persuasion than on command. Most of us have been in situations in which those with authority have not earned their leadership, but try to compel cooperation based solely on their legitimacy or "power over." In these circumstances, to what extent do we think our interests are acknowledged and addressed? How does this affect our motivation and performance?

Finally, leaders should be distinguished from "activists." Hard working activists show up every day to staff the phone bank, pass out leaflets, and put up posters, making critical contributions to the work of any volunteer organization. This is not the same, however, as engaging others in doing the work of the organization. Leadership is exercised through relational work.

**What Do Leaders Do?**

We've said a great deal about what leadership is and isn't, but what is it exactly that leaders do to earn their leadership? What is the organizational work they perform? And why is it so important?
Most of us have had lots of experience in “disorganizations.” What are they like?

- They are divided. Factions and divisions fragment the organization and sap it of its resources.
- They are confused. Each person has a different story about what’s going on. There is a lot of gossip, but not very much good information.
- They are passive. Most “members” do very little, so one or two people do most of the work.
- They are reactive. They are always trying to respond to some unanticipated new development.
- They are inactive. No one comes to meetings. No one shows up for activities.
- They drift. Since there is little purposefulness to meetings, actions, or decisions, things “drift” from one meeting to the next.

Being part of a disorganization can be discouraging and demotivating, making us ask ourselves why we’re involved at all.

On the other hand, some of us may have had experience with organizations that really work.

- They are united. They have learned to manage their differences well enough that they can unite to accomplish the purposes for which they were formed. Differences are openly debated, discussed, and resolved.
- They share understanding. There is a widely shared understanding of what’s going on, what the challenges are, what the program is and why what is being done

had to be done.

- People participate. Lots of people in the organization are active—not just going to meetings, but getting the work of the organization done.
- They take initiative. Rather than reacting to whatever happens in their environment, individuals are proactive, and act upon their environment.
- They act. People do the work they must to make things happen.
- They share a sense of purpose. There is purposefulness about meetings, actions, and decisions, and a sense of forward momentum as work gets done.

So what makes the difference? Why are some groups disorganizations and other groups organizations? It is the quality of the work leaders do within them that makes groups work.

- Leaders turn division into solidarity by building, maintaining, and developing relationships among those who form the organization.
- Leaders turn confusion into understanding by facilitating interpretation of what is going on with the work of the organization.
- Leaders turn passivity into participation by motivation by inspiring people to commit to the action required if the group’s goals are to be accomplished.
- Leaders turn reaction into initiative by strategizing—thinking through how the organization can use its resources to achieve its goals.
- Leaders turns inaction into action by mobilizing people
to turn their resources into specific actions by means which they can achieve their goals.

Leaders transforms drift into purpose by accepting responsibility for doing the leadership work which must be done if the group is to succeed, and challenging others to accept their responsibilities as well.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Developing a leadership rich organization not only requires learning to delegate. It also requires a conscious strategy for identifying leaders (opportunities for leaders to emerge), recruiting leaders (opportunities for leadership to be earned), and developing leaders (opportunities for leaders to grow).

Identifying leaders requires looking for them. Who are people with followers? Who brings others to the meetings? Who encourages others to participate? Who attracts others to working with them? Who do other people tell you to “look for?” Saul Alinsky writes about community networks kni: together by “native” leaders—people who take the responsibility for helping a community do its work out of their homes, small businesses, neighborhood hangouts, etc. These people can be found coaching athletic teams, organizing little leagues, serving in their churches, and surfacing in other informal “schools” of leadership.

Although leading is a matter of “doing” and not “being,” there are some ways of being that can help you lead. It is hard for a person who has not learned to be a good listener to become an effective leader—you have to understand the interests of your constituency if you are to help them act on their interests. Listening means learning to attend to feelings—empathy—as well as to ideas, because the way we feel about things affects our actions more than what we think about them.

Curiosity helps us see the novel as interesting rather than threatening, enabling us to learn how to face the new challenges that are always a part of organizational life. A good imagination helps because strategizing is a matter of imagining different futures and possible ways to get to them. A sense of humor helps you from taking yourself and your troubles too seriously, and helps keep things in perspective. A healthy ego is very important—arrogance and a wish to dominate others are usually the sign of a weak ego constantly in need of reassurance. Leadership also requires courage—the willingness to take risks, make choices, and accept the consequences.

Recruiting leaders requires giving people an opportunity to earn leadership. Since followers create leaders, they can’t appoint themselves and you can’t appoint them. What you can do is create opportunities for people to accept the responsibilities of leadership and support them in learning how to fulfill these responsibilities. If you have to get the word out for a meeting, you can get three of your friends to help you pass out leaflets in the one day, or you can find one or two people who will take responsibility for recruiting five other people to attend. They earn their leadership by bringing the people to the meeting.

Developing leaders requires structuring the work of the organization so it affords as many people as possible the opportunity to learn to lead—delegation. Distributing the leaflets through committees, for example, shares the responsibility for engaging others with many people. It is true that organizing the work in this way can be risky. You may delegate to the wrong people; they may let you down, etc. But as Moses learned from Jethro, if you fear delegating, the strength of the community is stifled and can never grow. But you can do things to increase the chances of success. Leadership training sessions help clarify what is expected of leaders in your organization, gives people the confidence to accept leadership responsibilities, and expresses the value your organization places on leadership development.
LEADERSHIP TEAM OR “LONE RANGER”

The most successful organizers are those who form a leadership team with whom to work early on in their campaign. It can be a mistake, however, to recruit people to act as an “organizing committee” too early, especially if you are not careful to recruit people drawn from the constituency whom that community views as leaders or, at least, potential leaders. Nevertheless, the sooner you have a team of people with whom to work, however, the sooner the “I” of the organizer becomes the “we” of the new organization. One you have formed a leadership team you can more easily establish a rhythm of regular meetings, clear decisions, and visible accountability that will help make things actually happen. You don’t build an organization of 500 people by recruiting them all yourself. You build it by finding people willing and able to commit to help building it with you.

CONCLUSION

Although identifying, recruiting and developing leaders is critical to the capacity—or power—of most organizations, it is the particular focus of organizers whose work is to be leaders of leaders. The primary responsibility of an organizer is to develop the leadership capacities of others and, in this way, of the organizations through which their constituents act on their common interests.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY IN MASSACHUSETTS:
A PROGRESSIVE VICTORY

LEO MALEY

On November 18, 2003, by a vote of 4 to 3, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in Goodridge v. Department of Public Health that the state constitution did not permit “the creation of second-class citizens,” and that therefore, Massachusetts could no longer ban same-sex civil marriages. The first same-sex marriage licenses were issued 180 days after the ruling, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision ending legal segregation of the public schools. Celebratory crowds gathered at city and town halls across the state as over 1,000 same-sex couples wed for the occasion. Over 10,000 gay and lesbian couples have been married to date—and marriage equality is now an established fact of life in Massachusetts.

The back-story of this historic civil and human rights victory is the role of over 1,000 clergy—and numerous laypersons—who, in publicly supporting marriage equality, powerfully reframed the same-sex marriage debate in a way that helped lead to this major progressive achievement. However, the historic Goodridge decision is not the achievement I am talking about. Instead, the victory to which religious progressives contributed so significantly was the dramatic showdown vote in the state legislature in 2006 that head-