

Organizing Stories
making public the power of story

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Introduction

The net effect of many changes in the US includes a “moving away from strong social ties and energized voluntary associations toward civic disengagement, declining social trust, and individual opportunism” (Shirley, 1997, 17). Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein state that involvement in civic associations, participation in public affairs, membership in churches and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and friends and neighbors, philanthropic giving, even simple trust in other people, have all fallen by 25 to 50 percent (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, 4). This change has taken place over the last 40 years and according to the authors, hardly anyone has noticed.

However, of those who have noticed, some frame the changing character of American society in terms of the concept ‘social capital’. But what is ‘social capital?’ Putnam describes it as referring to the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. The core idea of social capital is that these social networks have value (Putnam 2000, 19).

The diminishment of social capital has led to a weakening of civil society. This is not a minor matter and goes to the heart of society. Participation in civil society is essential for a healthy civic life, promoting social cohesion, and counterbalancing the power of the state and the market. This participation must enhance and create ‘robust norms of reciprocity.’ These are learned in so-called mediating institutions such as families, congregations, schools, social clubs, citizen’s organizations, athletic groups, parent-teacher associations, unions, fraternal and social organizations. These institutions are the glue that hold societies together. It is through them that we become persons, rather than mere voters or consumers. They are the source to the meaning of our lives. Without them, we could not hold the state accountable nor critique the market.

Given this diminishment of social capital and public life, and the loss of confidence in traditional forms of democratic politics, it is essential to learn about countervailing efforts that seek to cultivate habits of participation and promote civic engagement. Faith-based organizing is one such endeavor, and the telling of stories is its foundation.

Faith-based organizing

In many churches there are great intentions for a better world along with networks of social capital but many are remarkably ineffective in making those intentions or social networks relevant in the political realm. Faith-based organizations seek to improve on this. They work through religious institutions to reshape government policy. They offer faith based institutions a way to bring the social implications of their traditions into the public realm in an effective manner, “while drawing on the ethical insight, social networks, and cultural resources of religious congregations” (Wood, 2002, 73). They bridge the divide between the faith lives of congregations and the social and political world around them. They do not do this on behalf of the congregations. Rather, they develop the leadership and capacity of their members to identify their own interests, help them build power, and then act strategically on what they care about in the public realm. This strengthens the congregations themselves, gives power to the faith-based organizations, and contributes to the well being of civil society.

In the United States there are 133 local metropolitan-area faith-based federations linking some 3,500 congregations, plus some 500 public schools, labor union locals, and

other institutions. Faith-based organizing touches some two million members of these institutions throughout the United States (Wood, 2002, 6). Through building webs of relationships among people—their stories, their passions, values, and collective actions—power is generated that can be applied strategically to issues of interest among their membership. This work generates social capital, cultivates norms of reciprocity and is beneficial to society at many levels.

At the heart of this organizing effort are relational meetings. These are the base and foundation for all faith-based organizing and are a defining characteristic of this sort of enterprise. Relational meetings involve meeting face to face with others, on a one-to-one basis and finding out what is of interest to one another. According to Ed Chambers, a life long organizer, “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” (Chambers & Cowen, 2003, 45). These sorts of meetings are the life blood of faith-based organizing. Consequently, they need to be ongoing, inclusive, and widespread among all the members of the organization.

This is a particular way of acting and will not suit everyone. There will be others who are far more issue based and want to put their energy into the problem without giving much time to the relationships that are involved with this concern. There is much to recommend such a method. However, faith-based organizations take a different approach. They identify issues for action arising from the grassroots, out of the thousands of stories shared among and between people. The telling, hearing, and interpreting of stories, the firing of imaginations, the reshaping of ones outlook, the analysis, reflection and planning all contribute to the identification of issues of concern to families and communities. In this sort of organizing, through relational meetings, provide the energy to act on the issues in a strategic and organized fashion.

In order to make up for a deficit in power to organized money, faith-based organizations seek power through relationships. They weave together a multiplicity of relationships that are both deep and wide. Woods points out that these organizations provide links among communities that often exist in relative isolation from one another. They foster national links and significant “cross racial and interreligious ties, bringing racial/ethnic groups and religious traditions into greater contact and collaborative work than they would be likely to otherwise have” (Wood, 2002, 147). In so doing, faith-based organizations make serious contributions to the well being of civil society, the common good, and democratic possibilities. They provide processes where people learn about each other’s values, come to appreciate difference, and foster understanding of their traditions. Laurent Parks et al., in their book, *Common Fire, Lives of Commitment to the Common Good* found that “constructive engagements with otherness was the single most critical element undergirding commitment to the common good in the lives we studied” (Parks et al, 1996, 215). Faith-based organizing provides these sorts of opportunities.

The following is an example of recent successes of a faith-based organization called the Communities Organized for Public Service (now Metro COPS). They include:

- formulating a plan for a \$10 million housing trust fund to finance affordable housing in inner-city neighborhoods

- organizing the San Antonio Education Partnership to guarantee job and scholarship opportunities to high school seniors from poor neighborhoods
- negotiating and supporting a \$140 million bond issue to provide continued street and drainage improvements
- blocking a proposal to sell the municipally owned electric utility to private interests, which would have resulted in significant increases in utility rates (Wood, 2002, 67).

These issues were identified and acted upon because people told their stories to one another about the need for affordable housing, jobs, education, drainage, and reasonably priced electricity. These were not just chats and by the way stories, randomly told and barely heard. They were organized, told within a particular framework. They were told and heard in a way that taps into what people really care out, value, and desire. The stories generate the energy, create the motivation, deepen and widen all sorts of relationships among many groups of people, shaping a collective identity.

Faith-based organizations draw heavily on the faith traditions of their members, their symbols, imagery, language, and history. Moses is seen as one of the first great organizers, the Exodus inspires the work towards freedom, Ezekiel's prophesy of the valley of dry bones offers an image where a fractured people came together to rebuild a broken community. The reign of God, following Jesus, Jewish concepts of mitzvah and tzedakah, Pentecost, liberation theology and Catholic social teaching are all drawn upon in the organizing process in one form or another, depending on the religious identity of the participants.

Although there is much about religious identity in the culture of these faith-based organizations, it is not altogether clear as to how well the participants 'come to see for themselves' the place of the tradition lifted up in connection to their own lives, community or country. There are public prayers, workshops where organizers use religious imagery to make points, resonating with the belief systems of the listeners, but that is not the same as helping participants come to see for themselves the significance and relevance of these texts in their own lives. There is little evidence of a 'shared praxis' approach,¹ or any other sort of approach that puts one's own experience into conversation with a religious tradition in such a way that transformation can happen. This offers a great opportunity for religious educators interested in bringing 'faith to life', in the public forum. Religious educators who care about the public significance of religious traditions would do well to connect with a faith-based organization and enhance the capacity of the participants to really appreciate and come to see for themselves the meaning of religious symbols and texts for public life.

Some are concerned about the danger of an instrumental relationship with a religious tradition on the part of organizers or participants. There must not be an over simplistic instrumentalizing of key authoritative texts or symbols to legitimize particular points of view or courses of action. Once again, there are great opportunities for religious educators within faith-based organizations or the congregations which are members of a faith based-organization. They must find ways for the stories of the participants—the very glue of the organization—to be in transformative, sustained, and in critical conversation with wider religious traditions. The work of faith-based

¹ Here I reference the work of Thomas Groome, as one of the most popular contemporary approaches to religious education. .

organizations is not simply the generation of social capital—which is something they do very well through the constant telling of stories among the membership, and the building of wide and deep relationships—but the critical reengagement with “cultural traditions that can provide ethical, democratic guidance during the long struggle to reform our institutions” (Wood, 2002, 267).

Finally, there is a dilemma as to how religious organizations ought to attempt to use religious language in the public realm. This must be done carefully in a time when some on the Christian Right are “pursuing a similar course in ways that smack of Christian hegemony” (Wood, 2002, 149). This will require an appropriate tone and content in their political interventions and they will need to decide how best to incorporate diverse religious voices into its organizing work.

Up to this point, I have highlighted the importance of faith-based organizing as a countervailing force to the diminishment of social capital and the shrinking of civil society, along with some of the opportunities for religious educators. In the next section, I look at how organizers understand ‘stories’ and how they organize them.

Organizing stories

We are surrounded by stories. We carry the older ones in our memories and in our bones. Today we are shaped by the ones told by our families, friends, churches and faith traditions, communities, popular culture, country and so on. These influence us in all sorts of ways. Faith-based organizers are interested in the ones that *move* us to act, shape *how* we act, and *sustain* our participation in the effort. Part of the role of an organizer is to find ways for people to tell their story, to communicate to others what matters to them, what fires them up, and what is of value to them. In this process, the participants in their turn will hear from others, what they care about and what is important to them. This conversation—this exchange of stories—is potentially transforming for all concerned. The stories we hear can give us guidance in the face of uncertainty. It can be very reassuring to hear the story of someone who has faced a similar situation that is worrying for oneself. Stories can inspire us to action in the face of fear, they can motivate us out of apathy, they can change our perspectives and help us to see ‘the real’ more clearly.

But we do not just hear the stories of another individual, we hear fragments of other stories that have shaped her/him, we hear their communities’ stories through and in them. These are the sorts of stories about how communities have stood up to challenges and overcome them. These are told over and over again as songs, religious rituals, and community celebrations (e.g., Passover, Easter, 4th of July). And just like the stories of individuals, these can also inspire and motivate toward action. Organizers are interested in getting people and communities in touch with their own stories, and the stories of their communities in a mindful and intentional way, appreciating the interconnectedness of their lives. In order to help people tell good stories, good questions are essential.

One set of questions that faith-based organizers use to great effect in building relationships in the one-to-one meetings are ‘what do you care about, why do you care (tell some stories) and what are you doing about it?’ We rarely have a chance to think about what we care about, and when we are asked that question on a number of occasions by a number of different people, we become more aware of what it is that we actually

care about. The telling of stories in answer to this question reveals our values, and the second part, what are we doing about it, helps keep our answers honest and real.

To help communities face challenges and engage with issues of concern, organizers create opportunities for people to tell their stories. These are not just any stories. They need to be told in response to questions such as these: ‘what’s the challenge; why we care; why you should care; where’s the hope; what’s the action?’² In responding to what is the challenge, a community will need to look at it from many points of view (appreciating their own social location and inherent point of view), taking into account the historical perspective, along with the economic, political, cultural and social dimensions. In answering ‘why us?’, a community will have to draw on stories that concern their identity, why they should care in the first place, why is it that they are called upon to face this challenge? what is it in who they are that demands it of them? ‘Why we care?’ requires an account of why a group is called to face this challenge in terms of who they are, where they came from, and where they hope to go. It may include an origin myth, stories of great historical figures, past achievements and struggles overcome. ‘Why you should care’ seeks to find stories in the traditions of those whom you hope to mobilize on a particular issue, what is an account of why others must act and what will shape how they will act. ‘Where’s the hope’ requires the articulation of a vision, a vision that can inspire others to act in the face of fear and uncertainty, and so gain hope. Organizers help people have hope in a better future. Finally, ‘what’s the action’ requires the organizers to plan an action that is realistic and credible. The telling of this story, if done well, can help people have confidence in the fact that they can make a difference.

These sorts of questions are essential if people and communities are to tell and hear stories that can inspire, motivate, and shape action. And within the context of faith-based organizing, they will require good religious education.

The following is a brief sketch of how this sort of story telling might be organized in a particular community. The leadership will gather a group of people who are interested in improving the quality of life in their community. Through as many relational meetings as possible (places where stories are shared), the organizer widens and deepens relationships, builds power, generates energy and creativity, identifies interests and provides a way to act in a strategic manner on the issues identified. This may happen in any of the following places: different Christian parishes, Jewish temples, Muslim community groups, community groups, schools and unions. When many relational meetings have taken place within a few of the above and issues identified, the organizer will bring the different groups together, to identify common interests, to share common stories. These might be about the quality of schooling in the neighborhood, the need for housing, childcare, safety etc. When the relationships are woven together again at this new level, power generated, issues identified, strategy developed, action will follow.

Conclusion

Faith-based organizing provides a way for participants in religious congregations to take the social implications of their faith into the public forum in an effective manner, thus counteracting the demise of social capital. The organized telling and hearing of

² I am indebted to Marshal Ganz at the Kennedy School of Government for these questions.

personal and communal stories provide great opportunities for religious educators to assist in bringing the stories of faith traditions into conversation with these people and congregations in imaginative, participative, and transformative ways.

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