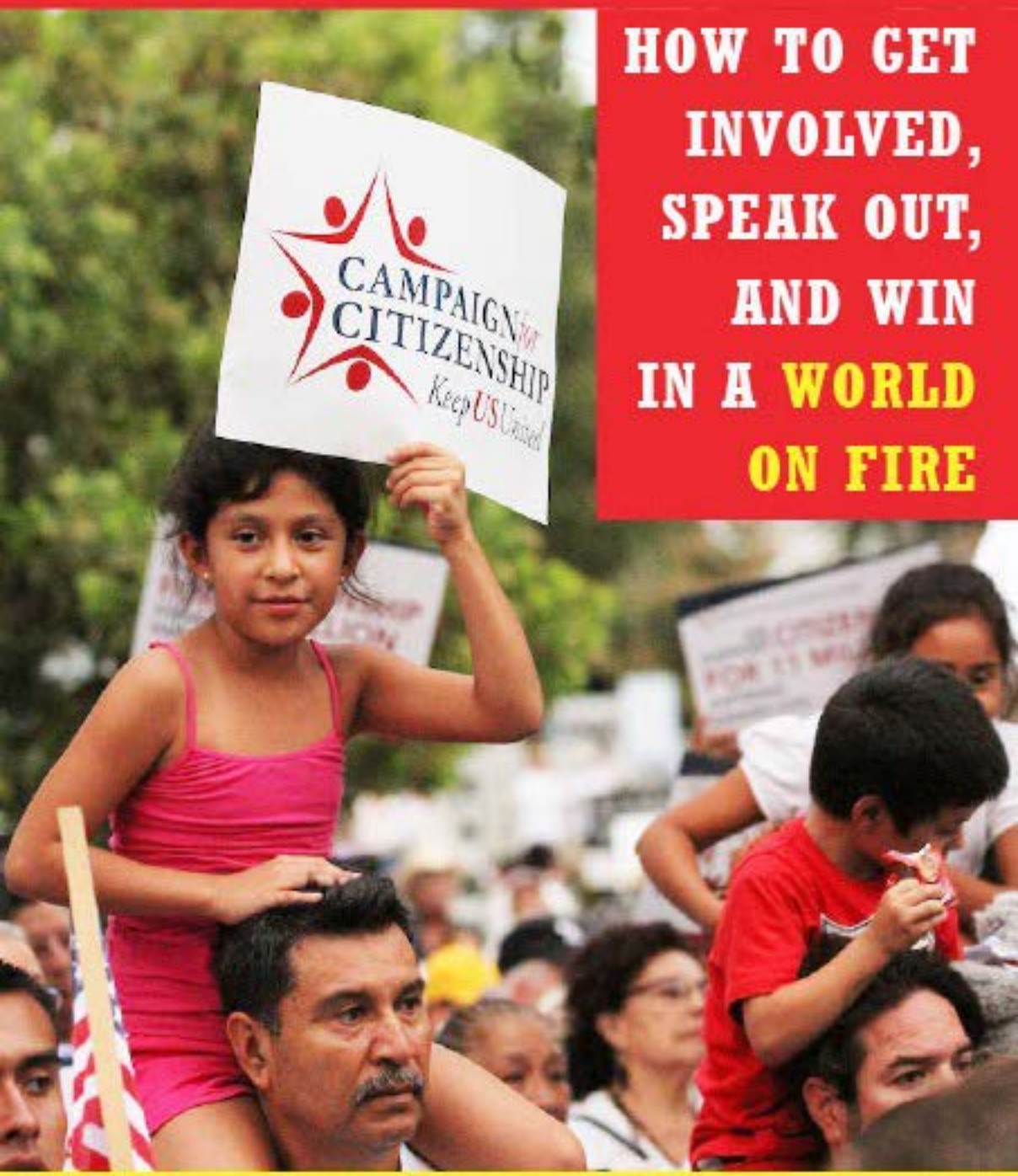
STAND UP!

HOW TO GET INVOLVED, SPEAK OUT, AND WIN IN A WORLD ON FIRE



GORDON WHITMAN

"Grassroots organizing is our best hope. If you're serious about making change from the bottom up, read *Stand Up!* and pass it on."

—Representative Keith Ellison

Each of us faces a moment of truth—at a time of crisis, do we stand up and speak out or retreat into our private lives? This book is for those frustrated by what they see happening in the world but not sure what they can do about it.

Veteran organizer Gordon Whitman shows that we have the power we need to create a racially and economically just society. But it won't happen if we stay on the sidelines sharing social media posts and signing online petitions. We win only if we're willing to join other people in the kind of face-to-face organizing that has powered every successful social movement in history. Whitman describes five types of conversations that enable people to build organizations that can solve local problems and confront the greatest challenges facing our country—from gun violence to climate change. The book is a road map for standing up to the bullies who've hijacked our democracy and divided us against each other.

Find your voice, make it heard, create lasting change, and live your purpose in the world!

"A manual for a multiracial movement that combats racism and economic inequality as two sides of the same coin, *Stand Up!* is a road map for moving from resisting to governing."

—Heather McGhee, President, Demos

"*Stand Up!* is just the kind of book we need right now. This is a guide for working people who want to make a difference."

—Mary Kay Henry, International President, Service Employees International Union

Gordon Whitman's book is a summation of years of great organizing and an invaluable resource for anyone who is ready for action."

—Ai-jen Poo, Executive Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance, and author of *The Age of Dignity*

GORDON WHITMAN is deputy director of Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network), with a membership of 3,000 faith institutions and 2.5 million people. As a community organizer, legal services lawyer, and strategist, he helps working families build strong and effective multiracial community organizations.

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Praise for *Stand Up!*

"*Stand Up!* is full of good sense about how people with the most on the line can use their leverage to create change."

—Carlos Saavedra Diaz, cofounder of Movimiento Cosecha and Lead Trainer, Ayni Institute

"Gordon Whitman has done what organizers almost never do: turned his years of practice into a valuable resource for engagement, learning, and action."

—Marshall Ganz, Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government

"'Who belongs?' is the most important question of our time. Adopting this as a challenge, *Stand Up!* charts a way toward a more inclusive society through five necessary conversations. Part organizing strategy, part research, part biography, and part history lesson, *Stand Up!* is an important guide for our troubled times."

—Professor john a. powell, University of California, Berkeley, Director, Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society

"*Stand Up!* presents a framework for change that is both practical and inspiring. Group-based, grassroots organizing is the most powerful way you can effect change, and Whitman provides a clear description and explanation of the organizing tools you need to stand up with others in your community."

—Ezra Levin, Co-Executive Director, Indivisible

"*Stand Up!* is a terrific guide for those who want to make this a more just world."

—Heather Booth, organizer and founder of Midwest Academy

"Upset about the state of the world? Unsure what you can do about it? Read this book! You will be a changed person and more prepared than ever to help change the world."

—George Goehl, Codirector, People's Action

"Whitman's book is a must-read antidote for anyone who is struggling to understand how to live a life of purpose or anyone who feels the calling but is not sure what to do."

—Professor Hahrie Han, University of California, Santa Barbara

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"We need to bring everything we know about people-led social change to the table—that's why *Stand Up!* is such an important book for this moment. It is a must-read for organizers working to develop leaders, build multiracial teams, and win campaigns."

—Saru Jayaraman, cofounder of Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and Director, Food Labor Research Center, University of California, Berkeley

"If you believe now is the time to resist, then this book about organizing and building lasting power is for you. *Stand Up!* links our work across the issues of racism, economic inequality, and climate change. It gives me hope and the tools to build a society in which everyone belongs and can thrive."

—Lindsey Allen, Executive Director, Rainforest Action Network

"Equal parts how-to and inspiration, *Stand Up!* shows how to build democratic multiracial organizations that are both humane and effective."

—Scott Reed, Executive Director, Faith in Action

"Gordon Whitman has given a gift to all of us who yearn to bring people together across lines of difference to redeem the soul of our nation. *Stand Up!* offers both a sacred call to action and a path forward."

—Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

"For those interested in fighting for the social justice so desperately needed in our world today, *Stand Up!* teaches how to build power to make impactful change, combining examples of successful organizing efforts, specific steps to developing power, and a compassionate reflection on the real challenges to social change work."

—Professor Paul Speer, Vanderbilt University

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STAND UP!

How to Get Involved, Speak Out, and Win in a World on Fire

Gordon Whitman

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PREFACE

I started writing *Stand Up!* before the fateful 2016 election. I wanted to boil down what I've learned about social change from working as a community organizer for over twenty-five years. I wanted to explain *how to* make a difference in a system that seems to be stacked against us and *why to* dedicate your life to social change. This preface explains why I wrote the book and some of the experience on which it's based.

Opening Our Hearts

Chances are, we don't know each other. I don't know how you've decided to live your life, your hopes and dreams, or the suffering you've experienced. But we're in the same boat. I have a stake in whether you decide to get involved and speak out. Whether we're awake to it or not, we're facing off together against the same wealthy families and large corporations that have too much influence over our lives. Too often, their interests are to remove as much oil and gas from the ground, automate as much work to reduce labor costs, and divide us as much as necessary to hold on to their power. We cannot trust good intentions or our democratic institutions to protect us. All we have to fall back on is each other and our capacity to work together to create a better society. That rests not on technology or brainpower but on our ability to see each other as brothers and sisters, even if we've never met: to love others as we love ourselves.

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I felt this sense of human kinship and interdependence on February 6, 2017, as I stood with 150 people gathered in Phoenix to pray for Guadalupe Garcia de Rayos as she said good-bye to her two children and entered a federal immigration building. The next day she was deported to a country she had left twenty-one years before at age fourteen. The photo of Guadalupe's distraught face as she looked through the grated window of a van taking her away was haunting. It reminded me of how I felt watching Tajai Rice being handcuffed and locked in the back of a squad car while her brother bled to death in a Cleveland park where he'd gone to play and hearing Sandra Bland being told by a White Texas State Trooper that he'd "light her up" for asking why she'd been stopped.

Whether we see this pain in person or on social media, it can break our hearts—if we crack them open wide enough. We're programmed to resist oppression—our own and that of those we love. It makes us angry to see another person treated as less than human. We know that our humanity doesn't flow from the lightness or darkness of our skin, the ID in our pocket, or the money in our paycheck. When we feel injustice, it provokes an instinct to fight back, to resist. Still, we wonder whether anything can be done. After we react to a Facebook post or repeat a hashtag, what comes next? How do we convert our anger and frustration into action that makes a difference, especially if the system seems rigged?

We know that our humanity doesn't flow from the lightness or darkness of our skin, the ID in our pocket, or the money in our paycheck.

For the past two decades, I've had a job teaching and agitating people to come together to improve their communities and the country. I've helped build some of the most effective grassroots organizations in the United States. The organization I work for—Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network)—equips tens of thousands of people every year with tools to fight racial and economic injustice. We teach the art and science of

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community organizing—the steps a person can take to become a leader for change. We show people how to put the values they care most about into action. The multiracial, people-led organizations in our network have won hundreds of victories, including raising wages, expanding access to high-quality affordable health care, reforming sentencing laws, and reducing gun violence—creating better lives for millions of people.

Since 2008 (in the shadow of the financial crisis), we've seen more people showing up at meetings wanting to tackle bigger issues and take greater risks. In August 2013, fifteen men and women spent twenty-one days walking through the blazing heat of the Central Valley in California to build support for immigration reform. Their pilgrimage for citizenship began with a Catholic mass in Sacramento. It ended 285 miles later with a three-thousand-person rally in Bakersfield (from which the cover image is taken). It followed (in reverse) the route Cesar Chavez took on the historic 1965 farmworkers' march. More than eighteen thousand people participated in the events along the way. Thousands more walked in pilgrimages in other states. The willingness of people to walk for weeks and the scale of the response surprised some people. But I see it as a sign that people are growing more committed to fighting for social justice.

We're all impacted by the overlapping crises facing our society, but the shock waves hit some people before others. Those who experience injustice most directly are often acting first and taking the greatest risks. They're putting their bodies on the line to show that there is a better path forward. This is what a small group of young people did when they took to the streets of Ferguson to protest Michael Brown's killing, chanting "We're young, we're strong, we're marching all night long." Many met for the first time watching as Michael lay bleeding in the street. They faced down military weapons, tanks, and tear gas and relentlessly told the Ferguson story through social media. Their

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courage created a moral crisis—a moment of truth—that has rippled through every community in the United States.

Since the 2016 election, people from all walks of life have come together to resist Trump administration policies targeting and scapegoating immigrants, Muslims, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and women. Black Lives Matter activists and faith leaders have ramped up efforts to end cash bail and elect responsible prosecutors who will stop trying children as adults and reduce the number of people behind bars. Low-wage workers have continued to press for higher wages and a union through Fight for $15. Dreamers have been organizing to keep their legal status and protect their parents from deportation. These, and hundreds of other grassroots campaigns that have gotten less notice, give us a glimpse of what's possible when people organize.

But even when you combine all the social justice organizing taking place across different networks, issues, and movements in the United States, it doesn't match the forces we're up against. Our opponents are on the wrong side of history and humanity. But they have enormous resources. They have a web of institutions that stretches from think tanks, super PACs, and lobbyists in Washington, DC, to radio and television stations and activist groups in every state. The richest families in America have made government more responsive to money than people. To counterbalance their influence, *we the people* need to create a level of sustained mobilization, disruption, and grassroots political influence not seen on the side of social justice in the country since the 1960s. That's why I wrote *Stand Up!*

My Story

I learned the most important lessons about organizing from women and men who'd spent their lives fighting the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. In 1990, during the transition from the dictatorship to an elected government in Chile,

I lived with my wife, Julia Paley, in a neighborhood with dirt streets and hand-built houses on the outskirts of Santiago, the country's capital. I spent my days working with a grassroots health collective that had been organizing for years to resist and defeat Pinochet. It was sobering to realize that during those years, the decision to go to a meeting meant risking being tortured or killed. You might not know people's real names at these meetings (many used pseudonyms to protect themselves and others), but you'd better know them well enough to trust them with your life. The last thing you wanted was to rely on good intentions or go into battle alongside people without having deep relationships with them. I watched how seasoned leaders brought new people in by valuing their knowledge and experience, and how they worked with people under intense stress to form groups that took concrete action in the community. I learned how clarifying it is to know exactly who your opponent is and understand that you're in a life-and-death struggle. I came back to the United States clear about how important it is for all of us to have organizations that we control and can use both to protect ourselves and our families and to reshape society.

My path into a life of social change had been shaped by two ideas that my parents taught me when I was young. The first was a Holocaust lesson that you needed power to survive. If you were powerless, then people who hated you could kill you and your family and destroy your culture. The second was that each of us is created in God's image, so you treat people with respect whatever their race, religion, gender, or background.

My mother told me stories about growing up in Mattapan, a neighborhood in Boston. I was struck by the idea that you could walk to the grocery store, see neighbors along the way, and if you didn't have enough money, get what you needed on credit. It may have been an idealized view; still, it seemed so different from the anonymous suburban life we had. I could feel my mother's sadness at losing that sense of community.

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She and my father explained what happened to her neighborhood in a way that pointed toward actions taken by powerful institutions. They said that Brahmin (White Protestant elite) bankers held deposits from Irish families who didn't want Black people living in their neighborhoods. So the bankers drew a red line on a map around Mattapan and other neighborhoods where Jews and Blacks lived. They said that these were the only neighborhoods in which Black families could borrow money to buy homes in. This redlining kept White ethnic neighborhoods and suburbs White. Jewish homeowners were not allowed to sell their homes directly to Black families. They had to go through middlemen. Banks and real estate speculators were able to profit off this scheme through blockbusting. They would scare Jewish families into selling at fire-sale prices and then resell the same homes over and over—at inflated prices. The loans were federally insured, so bankers and real estate agents made more money when homes were foreclosed and then resold.

The story my parents told me about Mattapan fed into the larger narrative of what could happen if you didn't have power or were despised. When I moved to Philadelphia in 1982 for college, I didn't fully understand redlining and blockbusting in Mattapan or the fires in Boston and fights over school busing that I'd watched on the news growing up. But I had an orientation toward the world.

In Philadelphia, during the deep Reagan recession, I saw a lot of people living on the streets and thousands of abandoned houses. That contradiction conflicted with what I'd been taught about valuing people and about problems being solvable. As a freshman, I led my first organizing campaign (Students for a Sensible Calendar) to persuade the university to change the school calendar so that the first day of classes wouldn't fall on the Jewish high holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Later, Desmond Tutu visited campus, and a good friend and I started Jewish Students

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Against Apartheid. We joined a twenty-day sleep-in outside the college president's office to press the university to sell stock in companies doing business with South Africa. From the mundane to the global, these experiences helped me overcome shyness, which had made me want to hide in the back of classrooms in high school. Campus organizing gave me a taste of what it felt like to operate with other people in the world. But it also left me wondering how it was that we could fight small wrongs against my own community and great ones a world away but do nothing about the apartheid that defined the city I lived in.

After college, I worked for a network of community organizations that developed housing and employment in Philadelphia neighborhoods. During my job interview, I heard the word *organizer* connected to paid work for the first time. I learned to analyze data showing mortgage lending discrimination and organize community groups into antiredlining coalitions. We won lending agreements with banks worth millions of dollars. At the time, I didn't connect the work I was doing to the stories I'd grown up with. But looking back, I can see that I found purpose in doing something about the redlining and blockbusting that had destroyed my mother's neighborhood. It was the first time I had a glimpse of what being powerful felt like.

When I was first learning to be an organizer, one of the people I worked for, who was African American, helped me see how much privilege I had walking into a room as a White man, how my race and gender shaped people's willingness to respect what I had to say. But I was also told by others that if you were bringing people together across racial lines to make changes on issues that affected their families and communities—like affordable housing, better schools, and safer streets—you didn't need to spend a lot of time talking explicitly about race. Other organizations could focus on intergroup dialogue. We were uniting people from different races to make changes that they could see in their lives.

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The underlying anxiety about focusing on race and racism was that it would make it harder to hold multiracial groups together. Then, as now, many White-led organizations that see themselves as progressive emphasize class over race. They believe that this will keep working-class Whites in the fold. But, something else is going on in this thinking. Looking back, I'm sure that I felt emotional satisfaction in being a White person who was able to bring people together across race to make changes in the community, without having to talk about race or my own privilege. And that made me miss something larger and more important that was happening in my own identity and in the groups and communities I was working with.

For several years, I worked as an organizer with a trilingual Catholic parish in a working-class Philadelphia neighborhood that had been devastated by the collapse of the textile industry. When we started organizing, White, Latino, and Vietnamese leaders in the church met separately to talk about community issues. The Spanish-language meetings attracted the most people, and while the neighborhood problems that people raised in them were similar to those raised by White and Vietnamese parishioners, we also heard many stories of people having felt like second-class citizens when they first began attending church. In the White meetings, people expressed thinly veiled racial anxiety and anger about losing control of their neighborhood. In the Vietnamese meetings, parents worried about losing their children to what they saw as an American urban culture of drugs and gangs. The separate meetings created space for people to talk honestly and find their voice. But when we brought people together, we skipped over the racial subtext in each set of meetings and went straight to the neighborhood issues that people shared in common.

At the first big public meeting we held with city officials—focused on abandoned homes on one of the streets facing the

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church and car break-ins during services—we translated what was being said in English into Vietnamese and Spanish. Near the beginning of the meeting, a man sitting in the pew in front of me shouted, "My brother died in Vietnam; I'm not going to put up with this crap" and then walked out. Ideas about race were on everyone's minds. But I wasn't equipped to go beyond the edges of a real discussion about how race was playing out in the parish and neighborhood—and in people's hearts. And I wasn't sure that was my job.

In hindsight, I can see that our inability to create space for a direct conversation about racism and racial anxiety—felt but not always spoken—made it harder to unify the parish. It limited what we were able to accomplish. We had a tactical alliance among Anglo, Latino, and some Vietnamese members focused on vacant houses and drug corners. But we weren't able to directly confront how city officials were pitting neighborhoods and racial groups against one another for scarce resources. We focused on symptoms, not causes. Not having the language and space to talk frankly about race and racism held us back from confronting how the neighborhood was being abandoned—so that it could eventually be redeveloped for the benefit of an entirely different set of White people, who had money and time to burn.

My ability to choose whether or not to talk about race and racism was part of the privilege attached to being White in American society. This privilege is toxic to making progress on social justice. Talking explicitly about people's experience with racism and privilege may mean harder conversations. But it increases the chances that people will show up fully. It makes racism the responsibility of everyone, not just people of color. If we see how racism is being used to divide us and set us against each other, if we talk honestly about how it lives in our hearts, then we have a chance to build the trust needed for people to work together to create a more just and humane society.

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In *Stand Up!* I discuss many of the most pressing issues facing American society and the world. Underlying all of them is a question of who belongs and whose voice counts. As Pope Francis has said, "The only future worth building includes everyone."[1] Yet every day we see more attempts to pin social problems caused by the concentration of wealth and power onto ordinary people who are trying to make their way in the world—targeting our brothers and sisters for blame simply because of their race, religion, and gender. To build a better world we need to construct a movement that makes space for everyone's suffering and hopes, regardless of background, while also acknowledging the specific trauma and pain caused by racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination and exclusion that plague our society.

The underlying message of this book is that each of us matters. Our opinions need to be heard—and can be heard, but only if we stop watching from the sidelines, open our hearts wider, stand up, come together, and get organized. I hope that *Stand Up!* can serve as a useful tool for people (and ideally, groups of people) to reflect on their place in the process of social change. As chapter 5 argues, reading and reflecting on books, articles, and other writings can be a useful part of a process of collective action. At the same time, it is important to underline that the ideas and advice in this book are a shadow of the actual experience of fighting for justice in the world. We learn organizing by doing it, and everything we know about organizing is the fruit of those who've had the courage to stand up and wrestle a better world into existence.

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INTRODUCTION

A Survival Guide

Each of us faces a moment of truth when we have a chance to take a risk for something larger than ourselves. Sometimes the knock at our door asking us to stand up, get involved, speak out, take leadership, do *something* is so faint we miss it. Other times we hear the knock but aren't sure how to respond. Is it really for me? Am I the right person? Won't someone else step forward?

Stand Up! is a guide to answering the knock at your door asking you to join other people to change the world. It's about finding your life's purpose in social change. The principles and practices in the book will help you solve local problems in your community and participate in confronting the greatest challenges facing our society. *Stand Up!* explains what each of us needs to know—and be able to do—to survive and thrive in a world that feels like it's spinning out of control. This introduction condenses the main points of the book, beginning with a story that illustrates the connection between standing up and survival.

The knock at Mario Sepulveda's door was unmistakable. It came as a deafening explosion of falling rocks. On August 5, 2010, Mario was operating a front-end loader, deep in a

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one-hundred-year-old copper mine in Northern Chile. After years of neglect—which had led to scores of workers losing limbs and lives—the mine finally collapsed, trapping Mario and thirty-two other miners two thousand feet underground.

In the minutes that followed the collapse, some men ran to a small reinforced shelter near the bottom of the mine. Without thinking ahead, they broke into an emergency food supply cabinet and began eating the meager supply of food meant to keep two dozen miners fed for just two days. Other miners went searching for their comrades. Once the mine settled, a small group, including Mario, explored narrow passageways looking fruitlessly for a way out. The shift supervisor took off his white hard hat and told the others that he was no longer their boss. Now they were all in charge.

Amid the fear and confusion, Mario began organizing the other miners. He'd seen the massive slab of rock blocking their escape. Later, he told Héctor Tobar, author of *Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free*, "At that moment I put death in my head and decided I would live with it."[1] Mario told the men (women weren't allowed to work in the mine) that they might be underground for weeks. They needed to ration their cookies and condensed milk. Once they accounted for all thirty-three miners, he reminded them that that number was the age at which Jesus was crucified, a sign that they were meant to live. He encouraged them to organize daily prayer meetings, which brought the men closer and helped them overcome the frictions of being buried alive with little hope of rescue.

Mario was not alone in taking leadership. One of the most important actions that he and the shift supervisor took was to give every man a role—from setting up lighting to mimic day and night, to carting water and caring for the sick. The men organized daily meetings where they debated and voted on life-and-death decisions about rationing their food and organizing

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their living space. Above ground, their mothers, sisters and wives organized to put pressure on the Chilean government, which dragged its feet before mounting a full-scale rescue. The miners' survival was a team effort.

Yet Mario's decision to stand up on the first day likely saved his own and the other men's lives. By carefully rationing their meager supply of food, they were able to survive for weeks on daily crumbs. As important, by organizing themselves, they preserved their humanity. They sustained the belief that they would ultimately escape their underground tomb. When some men gave up hope, others pushed them to keep fighting to stay alive.

Few of us will experience the extreme deprivation faced by the Chilean miners during their sixty-nine days underground. Yet the challenges they overcame—finding a way to share scarce resources, keeping hope alive despite repeated setbacks, not lashing out at the people around them—are similar to those we grapple with in our own lives. And, like the miners, we all ultimately depend on one another for our survival.

Humans can be shortsighted and cruel. Like the men who ripped open packets of cookies they'd need for weeks, we act without thinking through the consequences. We put the mighty dollar above the value of human life—allowing people to work in a death trap to keep profits flowing. We allow problems to fester, prejudice to divide us from people whose fate we share. Yet at our best we're social beings wired to work together to solve problems. We feel in our bones the need to look out for one another. As Pope Francis has said, "For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love."[2]

Martin Luther King, Jr. captured this tension in our humanity in his sermon on Luke 11:5–13. A man knocks at his neighbor's door at midnight asking for three loaves of bread. The man wants the bread to feed a hungry traveler who's arrived at his home. The neighbor with the bread says, "The door is already

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locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything (Luke 11:7)." When it's clear that the man seeking the bread won't stop knocking, the neighbor relents. King says that midnight is a time of despair. The traveler is seeking not just the sustenance of bread but the hope that dawn will come.[3] Like us, the characters in the parable are interdependent. But they must still choose whether to respond or to retreat. The hungry traveler brings to the surface a battle between selfishness and solidarity, which simmers inside all our hearts and comes to a boil at moments of crisis.

A Guide to Surviving a World on Fire

Today, in one way or another, our lives are being made less secure by three interconnected crises—growing economic inequality, hardening racism, and accelerating climate change. These are the equivalent of the falling rocks and darkness that put the Chilean miners to the test. Like the mine collapse, the changes that are pulling our society and planet apart are not simply the result of unfortunate accidents. They flow from decades of disinvestment from people and communities. They are the result of intentional political decisions that have pitted us against each other and concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a small number of people at the expense of our safety and well-being.

Just as the miners had to face the reality that there was no simple way out of the mine (one of the many safety violations found was the lack of ladders for miners to climb up ventilation shafts), we need to recognize that conditions are not going to get better by themselves. No one is coming to save us. There'll be no hero on a white horse. There is no app, no high-tech solution. All we have to fall back on is one another, our human capacity to organize

All we have to fall back on is one another, our human capacity to organize ourselves to create a better society.

ourselves to create a better society. As with Mario Sepulveda and the three men in the parable, the first choice that each of us must make at this moment of truth is whether to engage in the world or retreat into our private lives. On this question hinges the quality of our lives and the future of humanity.

In their book *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times*, Amy Sonnie and James Tracy tell a story about Jean Tepperman, who at eighteen years old attended the famous 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Years later—after a lifetime spent organizing—Jean remembered that she hesitated for a moment when a speaker asked people to take a step forward if they were willing to commit their lives to the struggle for racial justice. "Could she really make that promise? She recall[ed] the color and texture of the pavement under her feet as she paused, then stepped forward."[4]

Stepping into social change—for a moment or a lifetime—is never simple. It's hard to give up on the idea that we can take care of things by ourselves, without making waves or being vulnerable to other people. Many of us, especially men, have been taught that living a good life means being self-sufficient, that we should aim for control and accept our fate. But if we're smart, we learn to depend on other people—not just family and friends but strangers. We grow as humans by trusting others and feeling the love that follows. We're like a driver stuck on the median as cars whiz by. We must put our life in other people's hands to make our way forward in the world. That's why Mario had to face his own mortality and dependence on his brother miners before he could lead.

Once we decide to stand up and speak out, we're entering a world of wolves, of powerful forces that want us to keep quiet or disappear. They will not give up their privilege without a fight. We need to bring all the wisdom we have about how to make change. We cannot rely on good intentions or use Band-Aids to

We cannot rely on good intentions or use Band-Aids to treat the symptoms but not the sickness.

treat the symptoms but not the sickness. We need to bring people who are on the sidelines into public life so we have enough people power to win. We need organizations and movements with leverage to negotiate changes in the laws and policies that shape our lives. We need to be able to govern the communities, states, and countries in which we live. That political work can be aided by technology. But it succeeds only if it's rooted in the kind of face-to-face relationships that have sustained every social movement in history.

The primary point of this book is that we have all the power we need to create a just and fair society. People who profit off misery tell us to suck it up: *"This is just the way it is. You can't fight city hall. Your voice is irrelevant."* What those in power are telling us is a lie, no truer than the idea that some people are worth more than others. There is almost nothing we cannot change—*if* we choose to get involved, if we open our hearts to others, if we see that this isn't about helping another person but about our own liberation, if we don't try to do it alone, if we learn from those who've risked their lives to fight oppression, if we have the courage to confront people in power even when we're uncertain or scared.

Beyond Cynicism

To shift the balance of power in our society, many more people need to let go of the idea that nothing can be done or that they have nothing to offer. When we hesitate to engage in politics as more than dissatisfied voters, we end up handing our power to those who are already powerful. We live in a society that tells us that we're on our own, even as a small number of corporate executives exercise outsized control over our lives. Over the past forty years, the people who run the largest companies in

the world have succeeded in depressing wages for most workers, increasing profits, and shrinking government as a safety net in hard times. These changes have caused great suffering and shorter life spans.[5] They've also cut us adrift from each other. We distrust not only big institutions but also one another and ourselves. We seek community but doubt it exists. We want our voices to be heard but question if anything can change. We hear how money has corrupted politics, but that just reinforces our disgust with the system.

I wrote this book as a tool to help interrupt this cycle of cynicism. I want to demystify social change so that we see it as something that we're all meant to do as humans. We have to view our engagement with the world—with all its problems—as how we live out our purpose in life. When we organize, we act as our best selves. We experience being an agent of change rather than an object of someone else's imagination. We overcome division and despair. We solve problems that need not exist. This is about more than just being good people. It's about our survival. In a society where wealth is ever more concentrated and the planet is at risk, opting out is not an option. If we don't act now, our lives and those of our children and their children will be immeasurably diminished. It will become increasingly hard to afford higher education, find stable work, and walk the streets without fear of violence.

Ella Baker—the organizing conscience of the civil rights movement—said about her work. "My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence and injustice." That means nurturing people's capacity to lead their own organizations. As she said, "Strong people do not need strong leaders."[6]

Stand Up! offers a tested step-by-step framework for becoming an effective social-change leader and building better

organizations. It's designed to motivate more people to dive in and take greater risks. It's a call to experience the power and purpose that comes from joining other people to create a world in which we can all belong and thrive. If you are already involved in social change, the book is meant to help deepen your commitment—to answer the question, How do I make a life out of this justice work and bring others with me?

Five Conversations That Can Change the World—and Our Lives

Stand Up! is structured around five conversations that can help people build and lead powerful organizations. Our capacity to talk with one another is the most reliable tool we have for changing the world. We all know the difference between a lecture and a conversation. When we talk *at* people rather than *with* them, most people will take a pass. Some may show up again or respond to the action we asked them to take, but their commitment is unlikely to grow. Any results will probably be short-lived. We need to engage in dialogue with people if we want to see them develop into leaders or to build organizations that can persist against powerful foes.

Our capacity to talk with one another is the most reliable tool we have for changing the world.

Conversations take time and can be difficult. They're powerful because they create a "pool of shared meaning" that makes it possible for people to think together.[7] The choices we make about strategy and tactics are better when they stem from dialogue. People feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for them. Social change boils down to building durable human relationships that make it possible for large numbers of people to act with power and purpose—which is why *Stand Up!* is structured around conversations.

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First Conversation: Purpose—Preparing Emotionally for the Fight of Your Life

The first conversation is with our own hearts to reflect on our *purpose* in the world. Why am I here on this earth? And what will I leave behind? For many of us, this is a conversation we have with God: What do you ask of me? What lessons should I take from the suffering and grace that I've experienced in my life? For others, this conversation is about wrestling with the meaning of our lives and the difference we want to make in the world.

The starting place for all social change is internal transformation. The process of opening our life up to the world—of finding our place in a larger movement for change—is mysterious. It requires shedding layers of stories we were told growing up about how we're supposed to behave and what our proper place is in society based on our gender, skin color, religion, sexual orientation, or nationality. We realize the truth of what is happening in the world and what is expected of us in fits and starts. We have an experience that causes us pain or embarrassment. We feel a sense of personal power that we don't want to go away. We hear something from someone we love or respect that captures our imagination. Someone pushes us to stand up for something. We react emotionally to a situation and find ourselves involved in a fight that we thought had nothing to do with us.

Oppression persists because people who benefit from it are willing to fight so hard to keep their privileged position in an unjust order. Organizing against injustice requires emotional strength to steel us for a long road filled with disappointment and delay. We need to be clear about what we value enough to struggle for. Commitment that comes from clarity of purpose is the most powerful resource we have against determined enemies. Nelson Mandela brought tears to our eyes when he walked out of prison in 1990 after twenty-seven years, on his

own two feet. We witnessed a man who had the fortitude to never give in and never give up. When we're clear about our purpose, and who stands behind us, there is almost nothing we cannot accomplish. We're ready to build a movement.

Second Conversation: Story—Building Relationships That Move People to Action

The next step, the second conversation, is sharing our *story* with another person and hearing his or hers. Stories are the basic building block of social change. Our stories capture the unique set of experiences, people, and beliefs that have shaped our lives. They're how we explain our values and emotional commitments to other people—and how we connect our lives to theirs and to history. When I hear your story, I see you. When we find something in common in our stories—which we always do, no matter how different we may seem—it creates the emotional connection we need to begin walking together on a path to justice.

Because stories are how we make sense of the world, they're the best way to persuade people to look at things differently. We read a book or hear a speech, and years later the one thing we remember is the nugget of a story. People who take time to reflect on the experiences that have shaped their lives and crystalize those experiences into emotionally powerful stories are able to persuade and motivate people to do almost anything. Fr. Jesus Nieto, a Catholic priest in Oakland and a clergy leader in Faith in Action, tells of coming from Mexico to the United States packed tightly with two other people in the trunk of a car. He emigrated in order to reunite with his father. That image of a boy, who would grow up to be a parish priest, struggling to breathe in a car trunk is powerful. It puts us in an emotional space, and tells us what we need to know, to engage in a serious conversation about making US immigration policy more humane.

Third Conversation: Team—Finding a Home Base in a Movement for Change

The third conversation is with a *team* of sisters and brothers we can work with to change the world. Social change is a team sport, carried out alongside people whom we trust with our lives. The best way to stay on the wagon of justice is to be part of a group that meets regularly. What we can get done in the world, and the personal transformation we experience along the way, hinges on the quality of the conversations we have with people we're working with daily to create change. Small groups that build trust and a shared focus have driven social change through history. They make it possible for people to sit down at segregated lunch counters and occupy policed streets with impunity and refuse to be moved. In contrast, large organizations without smaller spaces tend to treat people as cogs working in a larger wheel rather than agents of social change.

It takes hard work and honesty to make social justice teams work. Small groups succeed when they create shared norms, build trust through frank conversations, adopt ambitious goals, create clear roles for people, and make important decisions together. With these ingredients, it's possible to organize large numbers of teams that can function effectively without depending on lots of paid staff. Within groups, people can follow a process of sharing stories, reflecting on text, and acting together that helps teams both get things done and be transformative for their members.

Fourth Conversation: Base—Recruiting a Following You Need to Lead

The fourth conversation is with a *base* of people—in schools, neighborhoods, congregations, workplaces, and social networks—who make us leaders and hold us accountable.

Millions of people are waiting to be invited to create a better world. I began this book by saying that each of us has to make a deeply personal decision about whether, and how, to engage in the world. I used the image of a knock at our door as a metaphor for that choice of whether to stand up or pull back in a crisis. If you're this far into *Stand Up!* I want to be clear that it's not enough to answer the door; you need to go out and knock on another person's door. When we decide to engage in social change, we're saying yes to the messy work of organizing other people. To go back to King's sermon, the protagonist in Luke 11:5–13 is neither the midnight traveler nor the reluctant neighbor. It's the person courageous enough to knock on another person's door at midnight and ask for social sustenance. It doesn't matter if no one answers or if the door gets slammed in our face. The question is whether we have the fortitude—like Nelson Mandela—to keep going until we find someone willing to join in.

The key variable in the mathematics of social change is the number of people we invite to participate. When people are asked to volunteer or contribute to a cause by a friend or neighbor, they tend to respond at surprisingly high rates. When I hear people explain how they first got involved in an organization, they almost always begin their story with someone they knew, or a person sent by someone they knew, coming to talk to them. It seems too simple, but the surest way to get people off the sidelines and into the fray is to ask them directly, especially if the person doing the asking is known to them. Flyers and Facebook posts don't cut it. People need to hear that someone they trust wants them at the table.

Fifth Conversation: Power—Winning Social Change

The fifth conversation is with the *powers that be* to unmask who is benefiting from the pain we see in the community and

in society and who has the ability to relieve it and then to begin negotiating change. This conversation helps us begin to figure out how much power we need to overcome the interests that are holding injustice in place. We're talking about direct, face-to-face contact that engages our senses—allowing us to see, hear, touch, and smell the people who are making the decisions that shape our lives.

This visceral contact is not always easy to make happen (although it is often less difficult than we think), but it's essential. It gives us a taste of power. People realize their influence in the world by experiencing their ability to make change, not by being told they are powerful. Engaging with people who lead institutions and systems helps strip away the layers of deference that lead us to hand over our lives, and those of our loved ones, to people with aims other than our well-being. It also forces us to be brutally honest about how politics works.

Most people—especially those who have long experienced being told by others what to do at work and in their lives—have doubts about their power. Organizing changes that. Faith in Action has years of research showing that the more people participate in face-to-face meetings with mayors, city council members, bank executives, and other decision makers, the more they find their own voices as leaders. They are more likely to attend future meetings, accept bigger roles in organizations, and feel more of a sense of agency.[8] In contrast, when people attend a rally or big meeting, it can help an organization show its strength and get results, but it doesn't necessarily translate into their continuing to participate, chairing a meeting, or feeling like they have the ability to make changes in their community or society.

Local organizing that directly engages powerful institutions in our communities is valuable not only because it addresses some of the most important decisions that shape our lives and gives us experience with politics but also because it creates

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precedent and momentum for larger-scale victories. We need to build campaigns and movements from the ground up. At the base of the pyramid are local efforts through which people work together for changes that they can see and feel in their lives. At the next level are bigger campaigns to change public policies in cities or states. At the top are large-scale movements that seek to fundamentally reshape the rules and culture of the society, like abolishing slavery, ending child labor, and providing health care for all. These changes reshape the flow of the river. They can take decades and generations to make happen—but they begin with people wading into the water in their own communities.[9]

These five conversations—with yourself, other people, your team, your base, and the powers that be—will help you figure out what a larger movement for change needs from you personally. They show you how to be a leader with a following, engage other people, build and sustain organizations and movements, and take action that turns the impossible into the possible and the possible into the inevitable.

Each conversation has a different purpose. Each takes place with different people at distinct moments in a cycle of building an organization. Each involves a different emotional orientation. Together, they make it possible to spin a web of relationships strong enough to confront the people who are feeding off injustice. The five conversations—and the principles and practices embedded in them—can serve as cornerstones of a lifelong commitment to social justice.

The primary audience for *Stand Up!* is people who are frustrated by what they see happening in the world and want to get more involved in change. The book also has a message for people who lead community, labor, and other social justice organizations. It's an argument that we need to redesign the architecture of social change in the United States. The organizations that should be our tools for building better lives expect

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too little of us. Too often they act as if we live in a postracial society. They skate on the surface rather than engage in real talk about race, gender, class, and identity that is necessary to build trust so people can work together across differences. They ignore our spirituality and our search for purpose and belonging, mistakenly imagining that wanting more money or the stuff it buys is the only thing that motivates us. Too many organizations assume that taking "action" online or making a small donation is the most that can be asked of people facing disaster. That leaves too many of us clapping or booing from the sidelines. We need organizations that ask us to bring our whole selves to the table; that see us as ends, not means; that are organized around members searching for meaning rather than issues searching for support. With that in mind, here's how the book is organized.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 tells a short story that summarizes how the five-conversation framework in *Stand Up!* can be used to protect the people and things we care most about. Chapter 2 explains how inequality works; who's profiting from it; why the crises of hyperinequality, racial exclusion, and climate change matter to all our lives; and what we can do about them. This is the context of a world on fire, which makes answering the knock at the door for social change and organizing so important at this moment. Chapter 3 shows why wrestling with our purpose is a first step to becoming effective leaders for change. This chapter is designed both to help us deepen our personal commitment to social change and to build organizations around which people can build their lives. Chapter 4 is about story, how we get clear about our unique story, use storytelling to build organizations rooted in strong relationships, and organize to tell new stories that pave the way for greater racial and economic justice.

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Chapter 5 focuses on finding and sustaining a team that we can work with to change the world. Chapter 6 explains the conversations we can use to build a base of people to whom we're accountable, which is the fundamental work of bringing more and more people into social change. Chapter 7 is about engaging the powers that be. It's a guide to winning fights, big and small, and building a movement to reverse the inequality and racism in American society. It includes a discussion of organizing strategy and tactics and examples of (mostly successful) campaigns. The conclusion discusses ways to apply the ideas and practices in the book to your life and work.

1

Pulling It All Together

This short chapter offers an example of how the five conversations can fit together in a tangible way to help us win change that matters for our lives.

My son has special needs. Parenting him has felt like a full-time organizing job for me and my wife, Julia. It's been a driving purpose in our lives. When Isaiah was young, we struggled to have the kind of back-and-forth conversations with him that came naturally with his twin sister. When he was eighteen months old—after being told by one of the best children's hospitals that his hearing was fine—we finally got him the right test, which showed that he was hearing impaired. Then, at age three, he was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified. That means being on the autism spectrum. To get him the help he needed to learn to communicate and connect, we had an endless set of fights with insurance companies, schools, and hospitals. At one point, we held a family sit-in outside of the office of the director of special education in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It's taken everything I've learned as a legal service lawyer and community organizer to raise my son.

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We got a lot of help along the way. The Pennsylvania Medicaid program helped him get his first hearing aids. The Philadelphia Early Intervention system made it possible for him to attend a school for the deaf to learn to understand language and speak. Doctors and therapists taught us how to raise a child with autism. By the time Isaiah had finished elementary school and gone through many hours of therapy, he'd become a social being. He was still awkward, but he'd learned to engage with other people and show his brilliant mind and caring heart to the world. Still, we'd dreaded middle school.

What made the difference and helped him have his best school years was a special program at his neighborhood middle school. The program gave intensive support to students with autism, while making it possible for them to participate fully in regular classes. But when Isaiah was in seventh grade, he came home from school one day and told me that he'd overheard his teacher and teaching assistant talking about budget cuts to the autism program. (Despite being hearing impaired, my son has a knack for eavesdropping on other people's conversations.) He told his teacher to talk with me, saying that I was a good organizer and could help. I thanked him for the compliment but did nothing.

Although I earn a living agitating people to stand up and fight for their families and communities, I almost missed this knock at my own door. I had taken for granted that my son would get what he needed. I had tossed the invitations to special education parent meetings. I couldn't tell you who was on the school board.

A week later, another parent sent out an e-mail asking us to attend the next day's school board meeting to speak out against the budget proposal. Taking a distracted break from responding to e-mail at work, I clicked the link to the budget document, which showed the proposal to cut seven of the twelve aides in the program. That triggered the anger I feel when it seems that people

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who are weak or different are being picked on. But I wouldn't have given the e-mail a second look or signed up to speak if Isaiah hadn't primed me the week before—if he hadn't essentially reminded me to reflect on my purpose in life (first conversation).

The next day, I joined six other parents of children with autism at my first school board meeting in my county. Most of us met for the first time as we waited to testify. I wrote notes about what I would say and put the folded paper in my pocket. It stayed there. We listened to parents from a preschool program that was facing an increase in tuition. They had on matching T-shirts with their message and told stories about what higher costs would mean for their kids. Then the clerk said that the time for public testimony was over. Not a single one of us autism program parents had a chance to say a word.

In my first job as a community organizer, I'd spent my days talking to parents about what they hoped for their children and thought about the public schools in their neighborhood. I was in my late twenties and knew little about being a parent. Mamie Nichols, a renowned neighborhood leader in Philadelphia, told me that there were two systems you never trust your children to: the school system and the health system. You have to be vigilant with both. I didn't fully understand what she meant until I had my own children, especially one with special needs. And then I knew.

I'd learned as an organizer that it was a recipe for frustration for individual parents to speak at school board meetings. One parent after another would go up to the microphone, tell a heartbreaking story, and then be met with stone silence from the board members. Next. Next. Next. Still, years later, sitting at the school board meeting in my own town, I felt disappointed to not be able to speak about the cuts to my son's program. It felt like we'd let our kids down.

Then I heard the voice in my head that says every problem has a solution. I remembered that I was an organizer. I asked

the other parents to join me in the hallway. We circled up and began a round of introductions, which included telling our stories. That story sharing (second conversation) made all the difference. One mother told about how her son had threatened to commit suicide at his old school, where he was essentially being punished for his autism. But now that he was in the autism program, he was finally doing well because of the help of aides and a teacher who understood what it meant to be on the autism spectrum. By the time we'd made it around the circle, we'd experienced emotions that began to bond us. It was clear that we had a lot in common and had a lot at stake in stopping the budget cuts.

By the time we'd made it around the circle, we'd experienced emotions that began to bond us.

I asked people to do two things: one, come to my house the next week for a parent meeting, and two, go back into the board meeting, wait until it ended, and then ask the school board president for a meeting. During the next six weeks, eight to ten parents met weekly at our house. We became a team (third conversation). We drank together and shared stories about our children that made us cry. We put out a short report on the history of the autism program. We learned that the program existed because parents had demanded it. They'd been upset that their children were being isolated in special education classrooms, a problem that is still all too common.

Before Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, most children with disabilities were excluded from public education. They were placed in institutions or special schools, where they received little or no instruction. With the IDEA, Congress created a right to a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities. But it provided only part of the funding. This makes special education programs a constant target of budget cuts by local school districts. Without setting out to, we joined a long history of organizing against the segregation of people with disabilities.

And we were coming up against the structural challenge of how special education is funded in the United States.

The next thing we did was to build a base (fourth conversation). We reached out to other parents, beginning with those who would be directly affected by the proposed budget cuts. Our first public action was to send a letter to the school board signed by more than half of the sixty families with children in the autism program. But we knew we needed a bigger base to win. So we started having conversations with parents of children in other special education programs. We shifted how we talked about what we wanted to make it clear that we were in solidarity with parents whose children needed different kinds of services. Later, when the fight got hotter, we organized a Change.org petition that more than a thousand people signed. Not only did the petition site send e-mails to each of the school board members every time someone signed, but the comments signers left helped us identify people who could testify at hearings. The support from neighbors—many of whom hadn't known that we had a son in special education—was moving.

We began to engage the powers that be (fifth conversation). We met multiple times with each board member and with key school district staff. After the school board president told us that she wouldn't reverse the proposed cuts, we went public. We shifted our message. We'd been making policy arguments about the program being a success that saved the district money it would otherwise have spent sending children with autism to private schools. Now we delivered a blunt message that the board was picking on children with autism. We held a rally on the school district steps. We essentially took over a school board meeting to tell our stories. And we made cuts to the autism program an issue in the school board election that was taking place at the time. We generated a lot of local media coverage, including a story on the evening news on which my son publicly "came out" as having autism.

At one point, a school board member who was on the fence called us to see if we would be open to a compromise. The group was initially split on how to respond to the offer. But the work we'd done to build trust helped us reach a group decision to keep fighting to remove all the cuts from the budget.

Later in the spring, after watching the school board vote four to one to restore the full funding, we stood together outside the school district building for nearly an hour, celebrating and telling stories. It was late, and we all had to get home to put our kids to bed, yet the pull of the community that we'd created together was strong. Six weeks before we'd been strangers; now we cared about one another. For the first time, I felt like I belonged in the place I lived. And I was glad that I was able to answer my own son's knock at the door.

Our fight to save the autism program was a small example of what people can achieve when they organize. I took for granted the education my son was receiving because I didn't understand the history of parents fighting for the program in the first place. Nor did I know about the political dynamics in the school district that put my child's education at risk. We all have fights like this that need to be waged in the communities in which we live. Our capacity to fix problems close to home is a foundation for a functioning democracy. At the same time, we're in, or need to be in, bigger battles with more entrenched and powerful interests. Whether we're trying to stop budget cuts in our communities, save the planet from ruin, or end policies that create financial incentives to put more and more people of color behind bars, we need to be clear-eyed about what we're up against and what it will take to prevail. That is what the next chapter is about.

Our fight to save the autism program was a small example of what people can achieve when they organize.

2

A World on Fire

Understanding Who's Profiting from Injustice and What Can Be Done about It

To stop an injustice, we have to first understand who is profiting from it. Human suffering, misery, and oppression that fall systematically on people based on their class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or disability are no accidents. Despite what we're often told, and perhaps want to believe, extreme social inequality happens by design. It results from conscious decisions that promote the profits, status, and power of some people over what is good and necessary for the vast majority of us.

When something is by design, it can be changed. The most important question facing any community or society is how much inequality it will tolerate. The answer is in our hands. It results from political struggle. But that struggle is never just about who gets what or who can profit from the labor of others. It comes back to whose humanity is taken for granted and who has to fight to live a dignified life. This is why coming out—asserting your humanity and forcing society to recognize it—has been part of every social struggle in history and why engaging in social change is so important to living out your purpose rather than being a pawn in someone else's imagination.

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This chapter explains why racial and economic inequality is increasing, who is benefiting, and what it will take to change course. The first section of the chapter provides a simple framework for how inequality works and how it can be dismantled. The second section provides a brief overview of the historical struggle for racial and economic justice in the United States and the backlash we've experienced over the past four decades. The third section reviews the difficult moment we're in today, with inequality, racism, and climate change fueling one another. The final section discusses how we can break vicious cycles like the one we're in. The chapter provides context for the principles and practices in the rest of the book and a way of thinking that can be used to get to the root causes of injustices in our communities. A main point is that we need to be brutally honest about what we're up against but also clear about our power to create a world in which everyone is included and able to thrive.

How Inequality Works

I've found Doug Massey's book *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* helpful in clarifying how inequality works and why it's so hard to fight against. Massey says that the amount and character of inequality varies across societies and human history but that it always "boils down" to two basic steps. First, societies place people into social groups based on characteristics they're either born with (e.g., skin color or sex assigned at birth) or acquire during their lives (e.g., where they live or what work they do) and rank these groups on a scale of value. These social groups and their ranking are always fundamentally arbitrary. Second, societies distribute resources, opportunities, and authority based on social categories. This process of dividing and distributing works only if enough people believe that the social groups into which they

and others have been placed and ranked are natural and that inequality is a logical result of human differences.[1]

When we stop and think, we know this is not true. We know that each human is unique. We understand ethically and emotionally that people have intrinsic dignity. But seeing people as precious individuals requires energy, especially when we feel insecure or scared. Our brains are wired to cut corners. We use simple categories and stories to make sense of complex situations. Against all evidence of human variation, we take the mental shortcut of categorizing people into groups. Once we know a person's group marker—race, gender, religion, neighborhood, job—we think we have that person's story.

Our human tendency to categorize makes us easy targets for the false idea that not only are social categories real, but some groups are more worthy than others. They can be ranked. This "hierarchy of human value" is a source of much of the pain and suffering in human societies. Once a group of people's humanity is diminished or obliterated, it's possible to exploit them and deny them what they need to thrive. Genocide and slavery are the most extreme examples. The wealth of the United States was amassed from lands stolen from Native Americans and labor stolen from African slaves and their descendants. To justify this theft, the most distinguished scholars and theologians of their time spread absurd ideas about the inferiority of people based on their skin color. After slavery was abolished, White elites still needed low-wage agricultural workers to sustain their fortunes. They still wanted to keep Black and White workers from allying. They relied on the same false ideas about race to dictate where and under what circumstances African Americans could work, live, travel, and study. They even replicated a new version of slavery through convict leasing programs.

Once a group of people's humanity is diminished or obliterated, it's possible to exploit them and deny them what they need to thrive.

A small elite gains most of the benefits from racial discrimination. As Ibram X. Kendi explains in *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, racism is not the unfortunate result of backward ideas. The reverse is true. Elites produce racist ideas about human superiority and inferiority to justify racial oppression. Racism is so pernicious because it fuels a vicious cycle. When people are excluded from resources and denied a say, it reinforces the belief that they matter less. As inequality becomes more extreme or people with privilege feel more threatened, the blame on individuals for unequal social outcomes intensifies. That is why White supremacy is spreading today rather than fading away. We cannot make society more fair and equitable without defeating the idea that some people are worth more than others nor eradicate racism without changing the economic and political rules that fuel its existence.

This double work is what we mean by social change. Whether it's climate change, mass incarceration, gun violence, or the dizzying number of other issues competing for our attention, the work is the same. Organizing is always done with two hands: one focused on crushing the lie that some people are more equal than others and the other on changing the rules of society (government and corporate policies, collective bargaining agreements, legislation, and constitutions) to more equitably distribute resources and opportunities. One of the best examples we have of this kind of struggle that fused demands for dignity and economic equity was the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike.

I Am a Man—The Memphis Sanitation Strike

On February 1, 1968, Echol Cole and Robert Walker had finished hauling trash out of the yards of White families in East Memphis. It was raining hard, and they were riding in the back

of a decrepit garbage truck when its compactor malfunctioned, crushing them to death. Ten days later, their coworkers—thirteen hundred Black sanitation workers—walked off the job to demand safe working conditions, living wages, and union recognition. While they had many grievances, their underlying demand was to be treated as human beings.[2]

The city's power structure rejected the idea that Black men, who did the dirtiest, worst-paid work, could have a union. Memphis mayor Henry Loeb refused to negotiate. The city's main newspaper stood with Mayor Loeb. It published a torrent of hateful, racist cartoons and articles against the strike. The police attacked the sanitation workers and their supporters as they marched through downtown Memphis. The police went on to lash out at the entire Black community, rampaging through Black neighborhoods, breaking into homes, and beating up anyone they caught on the streets.

The police violence turned a labor dispute into a mass movement to end White supremacy in Memphis. The sanitation workers began carrying large "I *AM* A MAN" signs. Like the message of Black Lives Matter, the signs crystalized a rebellion of the heart and feet against a lifetime of dehumanization. Clergy stepped forward to support the workers. Black women organized a boycott of downtown businesses that brought Memphis to its knees. Martin Luther King, Jr., came. The strike became a symbol of his quest to eradicate America's sin of poverty in a land of plenty.

Dr. King was murdered on day fifty-four of the strike, on his second trip to Memphis to support the strikers. The night before, he'd told the sanitation workers and their supporters, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a

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people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."[3] Yet, even with King's blood on the hands of the city, Mayor Loeb refused to relent. It took another two weeks—and the pressure from a grief-stricken Coretta Scott King—before Memphis finally recognized the right of Black workers to have a union.

It was no accident that the sanitation workers began their strike to renegotiate their employment contract with the City of Memphis and ended up marching with I *AM* A MAN signs. Whites in Memphis referred to Black sanitation workers as buzzards. The experience of being treated as less than human was inseparable from poverty wages and life-threatening working conditions. The Memphis workers rebelled against a caste system—a false hierarchy of human value—expressly designed to maintain a large pool of low-wage Black and White workers in the South.

White Southern landowners had put in place the harshest elements of Jim Crow to keep wages low by crushing interracial organizing between White and Black farmers. As Martin Luther King, Jr., explained in his "How Long, Not Long" speech at the conclusion at the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, "To meet this threat, the southern aristocracy began immediately to engineer this development of a segregated society . . . direct[ing] the placement on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century."[4]

Ideas about the inferiority and superiority of people don't need to be written into the law to facilitate oppression. Before the sanitation strike, the City of Memphis categorized workers who hauled trash "unclassified" hourly employees without civil service protections. Unlike "classified" employees—drivers and supervisors—unclassified workers could be fired at will

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and weren't paid if rain prevented trash collection. Nothing in Memphis law said that Black workers had no rights, but the system was designed that way.

Today, undocumented immigrants face similar exploitation. Supposedly racially neutral laws deny immigrants—who are primarily dark-skinned men and women from Mexico and Central America, as well as Africa and Asia—legal status and employment rights. Businesses are able to extract extra profit from these workers' labor by paying them less and providing no benefits. We can see another version of exploitation in the increasing practice of police departments overarresting Blacks and Latinos for petty infractions and then sucking money out of their pockets to fund local government. This was a key grievance that fueled the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri. And it flowed directly from the successful efforts of Rex Sinquefield, a Saint Louis billionaire, to limit the ability of local governments in the state to raise funds through property taxes. We need to look beyond the official rules to the actual results. If opportunity and oppression are distributed along a color line, then we're living in a caste society—in which everyone is somewhere in a hierarchy.

White Privilege

One privilege of being White in American society is the ability to imagine that you live outside a racial hierarchy. People who are White can fall into the trap of acting as if race is just about people who are marginalized. Yet all of us are located somewhere on the scale of human value that structures society. It applies to everyone, whether you're at the bottom, middle, or top. It's important to acknowledge where you fit, especially if you're on the winning end of an uneven field. People who are able to walk into a room and be seen and respected because of what they look like carry a valuable unstated and unearned

privilege with them. It takes hard, persistent work to reveal and eliminate this privilege in our organizations and society. Erroneous ideas about human value, about makers and takers, about who is lazy and who works hard, are deeply embedded not just in our culture but in our minds and relationships with one another. They create invisible walls that some people crash into while others walk through.

None of this takes away from the importance of cultural identity to our lives. The problem comes when we rank groups or imagine that social categories are immutable. Ideas about human value are fluid and shifting and can be countered. But this is some of the hardest social change work. People will fight to the death to hold on to their place within a social order, even if it is near the very bottom. Elites have long used race to divide and control working people. They've gifted poor Whites small privileges and the idea that whatever troubles they face, they can know that at least they sit higher in the pecking order than people of color. This is also why people who challenge the hierarchy, by complaining about their assigned place or by living their lives as they see fit, are so often met by violence.

How We Got Here

Opportunity Structures

When we say that people have the power to reshape society, we have plenty of historical evidence. One of the best examples is the fifty-year period that followed World War I. During these decades, labor organizing, a revolution in federal policy, economic growth, and the civil rights movement reinforced one another to drive down inequality in the United States to historic lows. This social progress flowed directly from organizing led by women and men who were fighting for their own freedom.

In *Capital in the 21st Century*, Thomas Piketty explains that the decline in economic inequality in the United States and Western Europe during this time was unprecedented. Inequality had increased steadily throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it shrank dramatically after World War I. Piketty says that this reversal resulted from a combination of (1) shocks caused by the two world wars and the Great Depression, which wiped out the inheritances of many wealthy families, and (2) policies that the United States and other developed countries adopted to reduce inequality. These policies were the fruit of relentless labor and civil rights organizing. They included progressive taxation, social welfare programs, collective bargaining, and massive investments in education.[5]

Yet many federal programs that helped working people raise their living standards and build wealth shortchanged African Americans. Southern states won provisions in Social Security and wage and hour laws that excluded domestic and agricultural workers, who were predominantly people of color. Federal housing programs subsidized homeownership but allowed real estate agents to keep Black families out of growing suburbs, locking them into overpriced rental housing in segregated cities. As Ta-Nehisi Coates shows in his article "The Case for Reparations," these policies haven't just disadvantaged African Americans. They've enabled White elites to generate enormous economic benefit from redlining, blockbusting, and access to low-wage labor.[6]

My family benefited from the two-tier opportunity structures created during the years before and after World War II. My grandparents came to the United States in the 1910s fleeing religious oppression in Eastern Europe. Like many Jews who immigrated during these years, they had little education and few resources. They settled near the East Coast ports through which they'd entered, happy to be safe. They had the good

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fortune of arriving just before anti-immigrant forces succeeded in closing the doors to America in an effort to keep the country Anglo Saxon. In the years after WWII, white-skinned Jews, Italians, and Irish were allowed to "become" White. Federal housing, highway, and education policies made it possible for them to buy homes in the suburbs, attend college, and enjoy the economic and social privileges of White identity in American society and pass into the middle class.

I first experienced the intersection of history, social class, and race while trying to make sense of the differences in how people acted in my father's family. My father was one of six children, five boys and one girl. His family ran a hat store and lost their home to foreclosure during the depression. His three oldest brothers fought in WWII and came back to working-class jobs. His sister, who was disabled, worked at the checkout counter at a bargain store late into her life. My father and his younger brother were too young to fight in WWII but the perfect age to benefit from the postwar opportunity structure. They went to college and graduate school. My father became a judge, and his brother a banker.

My parents' path into a secure middle-class life, and the doors it opened for me and my brothers, were aided by their white skin and policies that made it possible for people who came of age during this period in US history to achieve a measure of prosperity. My parents saw themselves as living in the shadow of the Holocaust. They taught my brothers and me the catastrophic consequences of not having power. They were proud when their rabbi went south to march with Dr. King. Their lived experience and the hope that they had seen in the civil rights movement gave them a belief that things would continue to get better. Racial and gender barriers would continue to fall.

But that belief in progress turned out to be wrong. For very specific historical reasons, social mobility and racial progress ground to a halt in the early 1970s. The civil rights movement

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dismantled the legal architecture of segregation. It seared a commitment to racial justice into the hearts of millions of people of all races. It gave us models of collective action that we still rely on today. But it left in place the economic and human consequences of centuries of exploitation and discrimination—not just the great gap in family wealth but also a series of racial fault lines running through the nation's imagination and institutions: political parties, labor unions, government agencies, advocacy organizations, and media. Those divisions opened the door for a sustained effort to roll back the social welfare, labor, and civil rights victories that had made it possible for so many Americans to achieve economic security.

Reconcentrating Wealth and Power

Seven months after the Memphis strike ended, Richard Nixon was elected president and the backlash against the civil rights movement began in earnest. Nixon, followed by Reagan and a generation of political operatives, used coded "dog-whistle" language, such as "forced busing," "tough on crime," "war on drugs," and "welfare queens" to speak to the racial anxieties of White voters.[7] They didn't just mobilize Whites to oppose racial equity. They associated most government action, from welfare to spending on education to taxes, as benefiting Blacks and Latinos over Whites. Rather than pushing back on these efforts to divide people by race, many Democratic politicians followed suit. For example, Bill Clinton used coded appeals around welfare and crime to try to hold on to White working-class voters.

The rightward shift in American politics wasn't the result of only manipulation by presidential candidates and political operatives. As Lisa McGirr shows in her book *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, it was also powered by a conservative grassroots movement. This movement gained strength in booming suburbs and exurbs in the

South and West in places like Orange County, California (where McGirr's book is based). These areas had ironically grown prosperous from federal spending on highways, housing, and the Cold War defense industry. White middle-class residents found community and purpose in right-wing organizations and evangelical churches. Some people who became politically active were motivated by resentment of the growing influence of the federal government in local affairs, others by their concerns over abortion and homosexuality, and many by racial anxiety about law and order. What they coalesced around was a shared disgust toward liberalism as a threat to their way of life—a reminder that for good and bad, the most powerful movements provide not only an outlet for anger but a way of making sense of the world that gives shape to our lives.[8]

The impact that McGirr's suburban warriors had on American society was magnified by a handful of the wealthiest families and largest corporations in the United States. In 1971, Lewis Powell (whom Nixon later appointed to the Supreme Court) wrote a memo to the US Chamber of Commerce. He urged CEOs to get off the sidelines and invest their money and time in building institutions to defend the free enterprise system—which is what they did. In the years following the Powell memo, a small group of billionaires—including David and Charles Koch (oil, gas, and chemicals), Richard Mellon Scaife (banking and oil), and Joseph Coors (beer)—built a network of think tanks, policy organizations, and lobbyists, along with radio and television stations. These institutions linked grassroots activists together and connected them to ideas that would shape how millions of Americans saw the world.

The institutions created in the wake of the Powell memo advanced a generation of public policies that concentrated wealth and influence in the hands of a small number of rich people and large corporations. They cut federal tax rates for the wealthiest Americans and shrank the revenue available to

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government at all levels. They removed usury caps on interest rates, paving the way for an explosion in payday and other predatory lending. This sucked investments out of manufacturing and other productive activities. Trade laws, supported by both parties, allowed multinational corporations to ship investment and jobs overseas. This left a legacy of vacant factories and hollowed-out main streets across the Midwest and South.

The corporate leaders who dreamed of unlimited wealth and power played a long game. They understood that holding labor and regulatory costs down and spreading their production across the globe was sustainable only if they tilted the democratic playing field in the United States. They used the courts to eliminate almost all restrictions on spending money to influence elections. They used racial gerrymandering to pack African Americans into the smallest possible number of voting districts and voter ID laws to create a modern-day poll tax to decrease voting among people with the least resources. They gutted laws that made it possible for workers to organize, driving private-sector labor unions to the brink of extinction, and then mounted a sustained campaign to destroy public-sector unions. By 2015, the percentage of US workers able to bargain collectively—a right that Dr. King died trying to advance—had fallen from 28 percent in 1968 to just 11 percent.[9]

In 2016, the Koch brothers alone had 1,200 staff in 107 offices nationwide. They spent nearly a billion dollars yearly to advocate for low-tax, low-regulatory, antidemocracy policies that support their oil and gas investments and financial speculation.[10] Art Pope, one of the wealthiest men in North Carolina, spent tens of millions of dollars on a decade-long effort to take control of the state's legislature and governor's mansion.[11] Wealthy families and national corporate-funded political organizations have followed the same playbook in state after state. They've spent massive amounts of money on politics and created new organizations designed to shape public opinion and win elections.

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They've won policy changes that limit voting, shrink taxes, and cut spending on social services and education.

Much of what we experience as unsettling in our lives—job insecurity, deeper recessions, more debt, racial tension, extreme disinvestment in some areas and rapid gentrification in others, and polarized entertainment-style politics—flows from changes won by the conservative movement over the past forty years. These changes were made to benefit a small number of extremely wealthy people. They were accomplished by making our political institutions less democratic and by changing our culture and how we see and relate to one another. As a result, today we find ourselves in a vicious cycle of rising inequality, racism, and climate change that will take extraordinary effort to reverse.

A Vicious Cycle

Economic Inequality

The United States is now the most unequal developed country in the world. Inequality is back to levels not seen in a hundred years. The top 10 percent of earners now capture more than half the income produced each year. Senior executives in US companies consume an increasingly big piece of the total salaries and wages paid by their firms. CEOs at the country's largest corporations now earn three hundred times more than their average-paid workers ($16 million compared to $53,000). The gap was just twenty to one in 1965.[12] It takes a typical CEO less than two hours to earn what his or her minimum-wage employees earn working full time for a year, less than two weeks to exceed a lifetime of work at low wages. Thomas Piketty says that as CEOs continue to amass huge fortunes, we'll soon return to a time when most of the wealthy owe their privileged place in society to having inherited fortunes.[13]

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But staggering inequality has not changed things just for the rich. We now have the lowest level of social mobility of any developed country. "Parents' income has become an almost perfect predictor of university access" in the United States, according to Piketty.[14] And social mobility is likely to decline even further as higher education costs are increasingly shifted from the government onto students and families. Today, young people in the United States have less of a chance of doing better economically than their parents than any previous generation or their peers in any other developed country. The implications of Piketty's analysis for our future are sobering. He says that unless we're willing to tax capital and make massive investments in education and training, inequality will continue to escalate—and our society will become increasingly unstable.[15]

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Hardening of Racial Hierarchy

America is being pulled apart not just from the hollowing out of the middle class and the growing gulf between the increasingly idle rich and multiple-job-working poor. Yes, working people of all races—including older White people living at or near poverty—are experiencing deteriorating health and declining life expectancy. But at the same time, the racial divide is growing. This dynamic is creating confusion and anxiety that are easily exploited by demagogues. The tendency to pit people of different races against one another cannot be overcome without acknowledging both falling living standards for most people and growing racial disparities. African Americans and Latinos started with less and have been subjected to more exploitation. The financial crisis destroyed trillions of dollars of wealth held by American families. But the greatest damage was done to

communities of color. In 2010, the *New York Times* published an article with the headline "Blacks in Memphis Lose Decades of Economic Gains." Black families in the city were disproportionately losing their homes and life savings and being driven into poverty by the Great Recession.[16] Foreclosure rates in Memphis were seven times higher in Black than White neighborhoods. In 2014, the poverty rate in Shelby County, where Memphis is located, exceeded the level at the time of the sanitation strike in 1968. Nationally, in 2013, more than half of all Black households in the United States had less than $11,000 in net assets; for Latinos, it was $13,700; for Whites, it was $141,900—with the racial gap in wealth at record highs.[17]

Underneath disparities in wealth are disparities in the value placed on lives. In 2015, the *Guardian,* a British newspaper, created the Counted, a website that tracks all police killings in the United States. The number of killings in 2016 hit 1,093. The site points out that "U.S. police kill more people in days than other countries do in years."[18] Reading through the stories attached to each person killed is sad. There are stories of hundreds of young African American and Latino men shot by the police but also many Whites, a reminder of our shared fate when we tolerate injustice. No US government agency has ever made the effort to collect this data—a sign of the impunity attached to police violence. So we don't know whether racially motivated police killings have increased or decreased. We do know that the pattern of racial disparities in police killings is as old as the country. If the number is increasing, we should not be surprised. As our country pulls apart economically and socially, people of all races feel greater insecurity. We can anticipate a rise in racism and violence associated with policing where, when, and how people of color can move in the world.

What we do have precise and chilling data about is the massive criminalization of African Americans and Latinos in the United States over the past forty years. Law-and-order messaging used

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to mobilize White voters was not just symbolic. It helped shift the role of government from one of providing economic security to working people to one of supposedly keeping us safe from crime and terrorism.[19] With a decline in spending on education came prison building. After holding steady for many decades, the rate of Americans behind bars began skyrocketing in the mid-1970s. In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* Michelle Alexander shows how mass incarceration replaced Jim Crow as a way to control and exploit African Americans. Between 1980 and 2015, the number of people under the control of the criminal justice system (jail, prison, parole, and probation) increased from 1.8 million to more than 7 million.[20] That's a fourfold increase, with African Americans and Latinos arrested and jailed at far greater rates than Whites for similar crimes. This unprecedented criminalization entangled a generation of youth of color in the criminal justice system. One in three Americans now have criminal records.[21] Even after people complete their sentences, they are likely to face a host of barriers that make it difficult to obtain work and reintegrate into the community.

One of the tragedies in America today is the mistaken belief that racial inequality is a sad but inevitable condition of our society. This myth manifests itself in the tone of pity that runs through media coverage of racial issues. Despite what the media news may suggest, we have the power to create a society in which race doesn't determine destiny. Ending racial exploitation means overcoming powerful interests that benefit from the hypersegregation of our metropolitan areas and our low-wage, low-tax economy. Change will come from the leadership of people who most directly experience injustice, as it did in Memphis and through the civil rights years. Then and now, the choice for White Americans is whether to look away

One of the tragedies in America today is the mistaken belief that racial inequality is a sad but inevitable condition of our society.

with indifference or pity or to be part of a shared movement to build a society that is not based on racial oppression.

It is important to recognize that what we're experiencing as a society is not only a matter of excluding some people from the American Dream. Dehumanization begins with those most marginalized but inevitably extends to almost all of us. We walk into stores and see rows of machines that have replaced people. We find ourselves on the phone in autobot mazes trying desperately to press the right button to get to a human being. Our lives and agency in the world get devalued. And we become more distrustful, not just of institutions, but of one another. It's not just our public institutions that have been privatized but also our pain.

If we avoid challenging the implicit idea that some people are worth more than others—and the exploitation that feeds it—we have little chance of addressing the other challenges facing our society and planet. It's too easy for those who grip tightly to the status quo to use ideas about race to divide and conquer. And if we allow inequality to grow on the trajectory it is on, we can expect that the rationalizations that blame people for their situations will only become more virulent. That is what makes this a vicious cycle that we all have a stake in interrupting. And it's all the more difficult because of how economic inequality and racism are fueling and being fueled by climate change.

Climate Change

Bill McKibben has inspired a generation of people to organize against climate change. People often ask him, "How can I prepare myself for climate change?" His answer: "Live anyplace with a strong community." The follow-on question is often "Where do we find those communities?" McKibben's response: "You make them."[22] There are many technical strategies for responding to climate change, but they all hinge on

our capacity to organize. Many grassroots organizations today are creating models and momentum for a broader response. People are coming together to press their local and state governments to be honest about the current impact and future threat of climate change and take steps to mitigate the potential damage. They're demanding that cities require buildings to be retrofitted for greater energy efficiency, set deadlines for ending their reliance on dirty energy, and switch to clean municipal-run power companies. And they're running corporate campaigns to force utility companies to transition faster to solar and wind energy.

Climate change is not rocket science. The main reason the US and global response has fallen so short is that many investors and CEOs are amassing huge fortunes by extracting carbon. If the companies that are burning gas, oil, and coal had to pay for the damage they do to the atmosphere, much of these substances would stay in the ground. Instead, energy companies receive nearly a trillion dollars a year in subsidies.[23] We have options—including a tax on carbon—that would interrupt the vicious cycle of climate change. But any solution requires fundamentally restructuring our economy. As Naomi Klein argues in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, a people-driven response to climate change is the best opportunity we have to shift power away from the billionaires and create a new economy based on good, well-paying jobs.[24]

The hitch is that the people, corporations, and nations that currently believe they possess the right to extract fossil fuels regardless of the consequences would lose trillions of dollars in wealth. They are not going to give that up without a massive fight. So what we have is a question of power. Do we have the courage and political power to restructure our economy in a way that saves lives and communities and perhaps the planet, even if it causes some people to lose their dreams of infinite wealth? These are similar foes and the same challenge we face

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in confronting racism and creating a more economically equal society. Which brings us back to organizing and what we know about how to replace vicious cycles with virtuous ones.

Coming Out

We can interrupt vicious cycles of inequality. Humans may tend toward snap judgments, but we're also programmed to resist our own and other people's oppression. When we see one another's humanity and recognize that we're part of the same human family, we bend toward justice. This is why "coming out"—making yourself seen as "fully human"—is so important to social justice struggles. This is what the LGBTQ community did to win marriage equality and reshape American attitudes about sexual orientation and what Memphis workers did when they went from being "buzzards" to Black men on strike.

We see this demand for dignity among immigrant youth, who've come out as "undocumented and unafraid." They've created an identity as Dreamers. They've risked deportation to make people see immigrants as human. They've put their future on the line to protest the hypocrisy of relying on other people's labor yet denying their existence. Carlos Saavedra, who founded United We Dream and now leads Cosecha, tells the story of immigrant youth donating blood together during a blood shortage in Boston. They created a moral crisis over whether the Red Cross would reject their blood simply because they didn't have legal status. They forced people to see the humanity of immigrants and showed the absurdity of a system that turns its back on people who want to contribute to society.

Formerly incarcerated men and women are walking a similar path. They're establishing a public identity as returning citizens. They're stepping forward to challenge policies that lock people with criminal records out of jobs, homes, and voting booths. Like Dreamers, LGBTQ activists, and the sanitation workers,

they're embracing an identity used to justify discrimination against them to undermine the stigma and build a movement to change unjust rules.

People need to be courageous to stand up to institutions and ways of thinking that have pushed them down. In one of the best turnabouts in the Bible, Joseph—who's been thrown into a pit to die by his brothers and then twice imprisoned—is hauled out of jail to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Figuring out what dreams about seven fat cows followed by seven emaciated cows and seven plump stalks of grain followed by seven that are blighted mean in an agricultural society seems easy. Joseph's real challenge is emotional. He is a person whose life has been destroyed by others, who has seen firsthand how people can be crushed for speaking their minds. He sits, to quote Pope Francis, at the "bottom of the pile"[25]—an incarcerated criminal alien. How could he summon the courage to instruct Pharaoh to take the steps to save society from ruin? And yet, that is what Joseph does. He doesn't stop at analysis. He tells Pharaoh that the only path to survival is to completely restructure Egyptian society. He lays out the blueprint—including a massive new tax system. And for good measure, Joseph takes responsibility to lead the whole operation.

Faced with our own crises, we could use a dose of Joseph's courage. In *Laudato Sí*, Pope Francis says, "As often occurs in periods of deep crisis, which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear."[26] Joseph does none of that. At least on the outside, he has pure confidence that it's possible to change everything. Like Joseph, we need to resist the caution that serves as a green light for the powerful to plunder. We need to have the courage to see a different world and bring it into existence.

Joseph is a reminder that those who—like the Memphis sanitation workers—society most tries to toss aside hold the keys to our collective survival. Joseph tells Pharaoh that he is acting

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as an instrument of God, who has given him the ability to interpret dreams. And because Pharaoh sees God acting through Joseph, he entrusts this man of low social status with the kingdom. This is an example of how faith can mediate change not only by making it possible for people to speak truth to power but by providing the confidence to believe that change is possible. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the clergy in Memphis played this indispensable role in the sanitation strike, and Pope Francis is doing this in our time.

The silver lining in this moment is that everywhere people are searching for meaning and connection. People are waking up. They're willing to act with courage. Joseph did not just save Egypt from famine and lift himself from prison to riches. He used his power to heal, to protect his family from starvation and bring them to live in his new country. His greatest courage was not in standing before Pharaoh but in choosing to forgive his brothers for trying to kill him.[27] Just as inequality is never only about who gets what but always about who counts, we amass the political power to change the course of history only if we change how we see and relate to one another. We must act as our brothers' and sisters' keepers. That is the only path to freedom. But, like Moses and the Memphis workers, we have to be willing to keep the pressure on against all opposition. This takes commitment and clarity of purpose (the focus of chapter 3).

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3

Purpose

Preparing Emotionally for the Fight of Your Life

Why dedicate our lives to social change? Surely there's an easier path to a good life?

People get involved in social change for many reasons. We see problems in our community that need to be addressed. We care about an issue that affects our life. We want to help others. We want to feel a connection to people. But deciding to get more deeply involved, take on leadership, or make a lifetime commitment to fighting for justice takes a different level of motivation. This choice is more about emotion than logic. The payoff for deepening our commitment is less about a specific issue than the opportunity to feel included and respected, to know that we matter and that our lives have meaning. It's less about helping other people than about our own freedom.

The *first conversation* that helps us clarify our purpose is important because it makes it possible for us to join others to take on the most entrenched forces of injustice. If we know that this is how we're meant to be living our lives, then we can persist against opposition. We can motivate those around us. We can build the deep, trusting relationships people need to go into a fight together. That's why the first conversation in social change

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needs to be with ourselves about the purpose of our lives. One of the biggest mistakes people make when working for justice is to skip over their own internal revolution. Personal commitment is what helps us work through the obstacles that beset even the best organizing strategies, campaigns, and tactics.

This chapter on purpose has three sections. The first looks at the emotional and spiritual work that can help clarify our purpose in life and deepen our commitment. The second section provides practical advice for applying what we've learned about managing our emotions to lead meetings, trainings, and events that deepen other people's commitment and bring the most out of them. The third section lays out a framework for using these facilitation tools and ideas about emotional commitment to build purpose-driven organizations and movements around which people can make sense of the world and create meaningful lives.

Clarifying What's on the Line

When I was learning to be a community organizer in Philadelphia, I met a woman named Rosie Mateo. She worked as a crossing guard in a neighborhood where people drove to buy drugs, day and night. The dealers owned every corner—but not hers. It was across from an elementary school, where I was working with parents to fight for better education for their children. Rosie knew everyone. She didn't just stop traffic—she hugged children and their parents as they crossed from one side of the street to the other. She was a human connector—the kind of person I was taught as an organizer to get close to. In a neighborhood where drug dealing made people afraid to leave their homes—let alone go to meetings—parents whose trust I needed trusted her.

But as much as I tried to get her to participate, and as often as she told me that all the boys and girls at the school were her

children, she hung back. Dressed in her crossing guard uniform, she'd stop by meetings and sit at the edge of the room. Most parents saw the school as a haven in a neighborhood that had spun out of control. They wanted to work together to make the streets safer for their children. Rosie had young grandchildren living in the neighborhood, which seemed like plenty of self-interest to me. It frustrated me that she wouldn't join the circle. When I asked her why, she'd say that she would do anything for her (450) children who attended the school, but these meetings were for the parents, not for her.

At one point, without planning to, I asked Rosie whether she was afraid out there on the corner. Her first response was "No, no." But as we continued to talk, she told me how it scared her to spend hours out on the street, watching all the drug dealing and the shootings. She explained how no other crossing guards would agree to take the other corners. She cried, and her fear shook me.

Rosie's willingness to be honest about her own fear broke the wall she'd put up between herself and the parents at the school. Once she could participate for her own sake, Rosie pulled her chair up at the next meeting and she never looked back. She kept talking about all her children—but now began acting like her own life was on the line. Her fierceness and devotion helped set the parent group in motion. It was amazing to see the energy released when Rosie realized she was in the room for her own well-being and not just to help others.

I didn't have the clarity then to share how I was feeling. I felt out of place—shunned by the teachers at the school and confused in the neighborhood. I walked past mothers pushing strollers, young men selling drugs, cops, and burnt-out houses. I'd constantly look down at the index cards I carried to make sure I was knocking on the right door. I was ignorant about the social codes, unsure how to dress, overwhelmed by the stimuli, and barely aware of the privilege that allowed me

to float in and out of the neighborhood. But something drove me to be there, to hit my goal of twenty face-to-face one-on-one meetings every week. I wanted this organization to succeed more than anything. The conversation I had with Rosie, and what it unlocked for her and did for the group, helped me begin to see that organizing required something different and more difficult from me. I wasn't there to help other people. My work wasn't just, or even primarily, about finding and connecting people or using my brain to teach them how to change policies. I started to understand that this work of repairing the world began in confronting the emotional stuff in our hearts. And at the time, my heart was the part of me that I least knew how to use.

Rosie's breakthrough illustrates the role that emotion plays in clarifying our purpose and preparing us to act. Rosie had to feel and express her fear before she could lead. Our path into social change doesn't always start with facts. It begins with regret, rage, anger, fear, despair, sadness, love, compassion, and all the other emotions that make us human. As Mario Sepulveda said about his decision to stand up and lead in the collapsed Chilean mine, "At that moment I put death in my head and decided I would live with it."[1]

One of the classic stories of social change in the Bible is Nehemiah's effort to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah learns that the people who remain in the city are "in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire" (Neh. 1:3). Before he approaches the king for materials to restore the city, Nehemiah says, "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). Feeling the pain of a city in ruins gives Nehemiah, and ultimately the whole community, the courage to face what will end up being violent opposition. Like Rosie, rather than bottling up

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pain and shame, Nehemiah turns these emotions into the primary resources out of which he rebuilds the city.

The experience of acknowledging our fear, sadness, and other emotions clarifies what we have at stake. Even when the knock at midnight seems like a plea to help another person, it's always about our own freedom. We clarify our purpose in life, and the commitment that flows from that clarity, by reflecting on what we personally have at stake in changing unjust systems. Michael Walzer writes in *Exodus and Revolution* that the biblical story of Exodus teaches us three lessons about freedom: "[F]irst, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt [i.e., a place where you are not free]; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that 'the way to the land is through the wilderness.' There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."[2] We don't get to a better world by trying to help other people. We do it by walking together.

Even when the knock at midnight seems like a plea to help another person, it's always about our own freedom.

Yet many of us first come into social change through doors labeled "service" or "advocacy." We see people in pain, children who need tutoring, vacant lots to be cleaned. We say, "Yes, here I am." I had first visited Rosie's neighborhood ten years before I met her. As a freshman in college, I went to work at a soup kitchen run by lay Catholic volunteers. I returned as a legal service lawyer to represent people who were being drained of what little they had by debt collectors, who turned $30 debts into $300 legal demands. One day, I went to a client's home to have her sign a legal document. After she signed, she took me to her backyard to show me the garbage from the abandoned house next door. It had piled up to her fence and brought rats into her home. She told me that she'd been trying for months to get the city to do something. The smell was overwhelming. At

that moment I knew that I needed to leave my legal aid job to stand alongside people at fences like this, not sit across a desk trying to solve people's problems. What mattered most wouldn't walk into my cramped legal office. I wanted to build organizations with people, to do what I'd been taught during the year I spent living and working in Chile at the end of the Pinochet dictatorship. That's when I decided to figure out how to become a community organizer.

My client's house was a block from Rosie's corner. When I came back the next time, it was as an organizer. Yet, as my experience with Rosie showed, I still had a long way to go. I had been brought up to believe that it was important to be active in the community and to be helpful to those in need. Too often, though, I've seen people make the mistake of expecting that service alone can cure the underlying illness. And sometimes when we're engaged in trying to tear out the roots of injustice, the urge to help solve another person's problem (rather than walking alongside the person as a coconspirator) trips us up. It keeps us from bringing our full selves—and our own liberation—into the fight.

Henry David Thoreau—who cherished solitude but was nonetheless socially active in the Underground Railroad—said, "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life."[3] Those are strong words for those of us who knock on people's doors. There is a difference between trying to save another person from oppression versus challenging a person to stand up and walk toward freedom. But the line is not always easy to grasp. As is often the case when things get murky, the answer usually lies in connecting honestly with people. We can follow Michael Walzer's point about the relevance of Exodus for our own lives by asking ourselves, How am I experiencing Egypt in my own life? What would the promised land really look like for me? W*hom can I walk with to get there?*

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Practical Exercise

There is no magic recipe for clarifying your purpose and what you have at stake in a fight, but there are ways of getting closer. Try this: Put aside for a moment your opinions, however strongly you feel them, about what is wrong in the world and what needs to change. Put aside the people whom you want to help, however noble that urge may be. Write down what you personally need from the change you want to bring about. What would it mean for your life? Without judging your own response, ask and answer this question three times in a row. Be as honest as possible, even if you think the answer isn't something you're supposed to say. You're aiming at the kind of shift that Rosie experienced. You should get clearer each time.

Our values are shaped by our experiences and the stories we tell about them. Often what we most need is to be included, to find a sense of connection with other people, to know that our lives matter. When we find our purpose in life, we have the commitment to act in the face of uncertainty and explain to others why they should trust us with their lives. Rosie's resolve to stay on the corner despite the danger was tied to a deep religious belief. Her willingness to take the next step—to join others to attack the underlying problems facing her community—depended on seeing organizing as part of her purpose. For Rosie, that flowed from her understanding of what God wanted for her. That's true for many people. For others, our purpose flows from the difference we want to make in the world, what we want to leave behind when we're gone. Our commitment hinges on how aligned the work we're doing is with our understanding of our purpose. If we know this is what we're meant to be and do, it's hard to knock us off course.

When we find our purpose in life, we have the commitment to act in the face of uncertainty and explain to others why they should trust us with their lives.

That's why creating space in our organizations for conversation about purpose is so important. For some people, the moment when we know we're called to a lifetime commitment to social justice falls like a ton of stone on our heads. For most of us, the breakthrough moments aren't that clear. Figuring out our purpose can be like looking for a lost object that can be found only by searching in our minds. I once filled up my gas tank and drove ten or fifteen blocks before someone leaned out his window and shouted that my gas cap was missing. In the dark, I drove back to the exact spot where it had fallen off the roof of my car. My mind knew just where it was, but I needed someone to tell me to go back and look for it. People who ask us to reflect on our purpose and agitate us to wake up are invaluable because they help us fit all the pieces of our experience together to find the larger pattern. The knock at our door may be so soft that we risk missing it. We may need someone to help us hear that we're being called. Then we have everything we need to make a difference.

Emotional clarity is important because it makes us magnetic to other people. When we're aware of our emotions and clear about our purpose, we're able to forge virtually unbreakable relationships with one another. This trust built from honesty is the collective "endurance" that the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass described as the one thing that can set "the limits of tyrants."[4] Organizers like to quote Margaret Mead, who famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."[5] But the trusting relationships that make change possible don't just happen. They take work. And they flourish best when we build organizations and movements around human purpose and transformation.

During the six weeks after Rosie had her breakthrough, the parent group talked to hundreds of people in the community to hear their concerns. The group met with public officials to

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figure out what could be done to make the neighborhood safer and improve the school. The parents leading the effort were still afraid of getting on the wrong side of the drug dealers who ran the corners, but the work they'd done to clarify what they had at stake and build trust together kept them moving forward. They decided to go ahead with a big public meeting—the first one in many years in the neighborhood. The night of the meeting, more than five hundred people showed up. Parents, children, and neighbors crammed into the school's small auditorium, filled the main hallway, and stood in the schoolyard. People testified about the shootings that had taken place around the school. The main demand was for the local police captain to assign an officer to be at the school at the start and end of the school day. The goal was to create a truce that stopped sellers from dealing drugs during the times when children were walking to and from school.

I remember watching the captain respond to the demand and my not being sure whether we had won or lost. Had he said yes or no? But then I looked at Rosie and the other parents leading the meeting, and I knew from their faces that we'd won. The feeling after the meeting was electric. The next day, a sad-looking cop walked around the school in the morning and afternoon with his head down. His presence was cold comfort, given everything happening in the neighborhood, and did nothing to get at the root causes of the problems. Still, it was a start: a tiny down payment on the idea that collective action could create a reaction in the world.

In the years that followed, the parent group went on to win a new roof for the school, full-day kindergarten, and the first Spanish-speaking teachers (one per grade). When parents began organizing around reading levels and the fact that even children who were receiving good grades weren't adequately prepared for middle school, the principal kicked the parent group out of the school. For six months, we held meetings on

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Rosie's corner. Eventually, the parent group pushed the school district to hire a new principal. He was a Latino man who did a lot to reconnect the school to the community, including having ten years' worth of graffiti removed from the building's exterior. Along with an umbrella organization of schools and churches, the parents helped anchor a major campaign to get the city to renovate, and in other cases tear down, hundreds of vacant homes.

None of these changes altered the underlying inequality that still makes Philadelphia one of the poorest big cities in the United States. But they created virtuous cycles in the community and in people's lives. In 2012, eighteen years after Rosie and the other parents first stood up, parents and teachers at the school defeated a plan to close their school. They won that fight by showing that even though the building was old, the school was doing a better job of preparing its students for middle school than other nearby schools. In the news coverage, I noticed that the building (which I hadn't seen in years) was still completely clean of graffiti. Over time, the parents who had had the courage to step forward into uncertainty and danger helped transform their community into a better place to raise children. Along the way, they changed their own lives.

This personal transformation is inseparable from the struggle for social justice. Our growth is both the greatest resource we have and the purpose for the changes we seek in the world. After the first big meeting organized by the parent association, someone made a video about their work. What struck me was how much people lit up when they talked about what had happened to their own lives. People would mention the issues in the neighborhood and the changes they were making. But what they wanted to talk about was how they'd changed. They shared how amazing it was to stand up and speak their minds, to tell officials what to do—and how they'd never imagined doing such a thing.

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Angelina Rivera, a parent of five young children, often expressed the white-hot anger of the group. She would bring people to tears at public meetings about improving the quality of education at the school. ("Just because we're poor doesn't mean our children don't deserve a good education.") One day she said to me, "I'm going back to school." I said that was great and asked where she was going to get her GED. She said, "No, I'm going back to finish high school in the same school and the same grade where I left off ten years ago." And she did. Angelina, like Rosie, taught me that what leads people to stand up is almost always deeper and more personal than the problem that they said needed to be solved.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates tells his son, "History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life."[6] Jerry Wurf marched with the Memphis sanitation workers as the head of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. He said that union organizers "think they're peddling better wages and working conditions, but essentially they're offering dignity. And sometimes the worker who doesn't articulate this very easily has more awareness than the professional organizer. The civil rights struggle, the equality struggle or whatever you want to call it, is just one part of this continuing struggle for dignity."[7] Ultimately, the work that seems to be about fixing the world ends up being about finding our purpose and place within it.

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That's why it's important to come into social change work with some idea about how you want to grow personally. The problems facing our society and planet are enormous. But, like Angelina, each of us has permission to make our own development a priority. In Faith in Action, community organizers work with volunteer grassroots leaders to write leadership

development plans that spell out what the leaders want to learn and get better at doing. Given that fear of speaking in public is so common, it's not surprising that people often say that they want to learn how to talk in front of a room. But plans can include anything from running successful meetings or advocating for your child at school to trusting people more or deepening your faith. Some people gain the skills and relationships to run for office. A good leadership development plan sets goals that are ambitious but achievable and can be measured. It identifies specific activities that will help you achieve these personal goals, such as speaking at the next meeting or attending a weeklong leadership seminar. We all need coaches to keep us on track. And we need to be in environments that take our growth seriously, which is the focus of the next section.

Using Our Emotions to Bring the Most Out in People

One social-change superpower that we all need to nurture is the ability to channel our emotions. We can use this power not only to shape how we're feeling ourselves but also to shift the emotional state in a room or in a relationship. We can create human environments that make people more open to reflect on their purpose, learn, grow, and develop strong and trusting relationships with one another. This makes it possible for people to take risks together. Our emotional power is the main tool we have to lead people, organize events that engage and energize people, and construct effective organizations.

Two facts about how we're wired as human beings make this possible. One has to do with the inherent way our brains default to mimicking one another. If you and I are talking across the table, we are exchanging thousands of tiny bits of information (which makes being face-to-face so powerful, compared to communicating by phone or e-mail). If I rub my forehead for a

moment, chances are that you'll do the same. If I lean forward slightly, you will too. Within a few minutes, without either of us noticing it consciously, we may synchronize our breathing. Indeed, the word *conspire* comes from the root words meaning "breathing together." We're subconsciously influenced by and adopt each other's emotions. If people are dejected from losing a fight, and I walk into a room with a sense of resolve, my emotional state can shift the feeling in the room.

You cannot make someone stop or start feeling a certain way. Nor can you argue with an emotion. Telling people that they don't feel sad—or worse, that they shouldn't feel sad—is never a good idea. It always backfires. And we cannot override the pain or anger that people experience by telling them to be happy or think positively. But we can use our emotional state to shift and channel how people around us are feeling—if we're intentional about it.

Psychologists call this "priming." This is the second brain-related concept that facilitates leadership and collective action. Given how our brains work, we can be primed to feel certain ways. This happens when we are exposed to images, words, and thoughts that our memory associates with a feeling we've had in the past. Simple experiments involving colors and words demonstrate this. For example, people who are shown a yellow card and then asked what they'd like to eat are more likely to choose a banana from among other options.[8] This is how advertising works: it can get us to buy a product by associating it with a memory that made us happy in the past. You can use language as a priming tool to encourage a mind-set in others that disposes them to work cooperatively to build power. A simple example is asking someone to share what she or he feels grateful about. Just saying the word *grateful* and having to articulate that emotion can help take the edge off stress or a feeling of being overwhelmed in the face of so much injustice.

The same basic idea applies to reading the emotional state of a room. If you're facilitating a meeting and running into a lot of conflict and confusion, you can stop and ask people how they're feeling. What people say will shape how others are feeling and influence what the group can get done. But if there is underlying tension, it's almost always best to get it out on the table, so people can figure out together how to move forward. This may take a lot of effort, since part of the reason for the tension is that people are uncomfortable giving voice to challenging subjects (as Rosie's example illustrated). Similarly, at times of stress or crisis, having an agenda with more structure is better. It gives people a sense of where things are going, increasing trust levels.

My friend Carlos Saavedra, who told the story recounted in chapter 2 about undocumented immigrants donating blood, is a great teacher of organizing. He says, "state before story," which means that you have to start by establishing the right emotional state in the room. Then you can go forward with sharing your story, taking the other steps to get organized, and creating change in the world. Part of what makes Carlos an effective organizer is his ability, like an actor, to bring strong emotions to the surface by tapping into a reservoir of powerful memories.

These ideas have practical applications for the choices we make in facilitating meetings and organizing events. What we do to shift the state of a room can be as simple as moving the chairs around. An iron rule of organizing is that if it is physically possible to arrange a room so that everyone can see one another's eyes, you ought to take the time to do this. Even if the chairs are arranged in rows when you arrive, rearrange them into a circle. That way, we don't just *say* everyone needs to be seen and heard, we make it possible.

If you have hundreds of people in the room, put them at round tables so they can spend some time working together in small groups. People need to not only consume what's being said upfront but also process what they're learning and share

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what they know with others. And try this: ask people to stand up and put their hands underneath the edge of the table. Count to three, and then ask everyone to lift at the same time. Boom! We just had a physical experience of acting together. And we felt how light the tables were when we acted in unison.

The tactile experiences are often the most powerful. When I was in Chile, almost every meeting or training would begin with a *dinámica* (a game of one sort or another) that got people moving and working together in a playful way. Activities included seeing how long a group of people keep a few beach balls up in the air and seeing if people could pass an orange or small ball from one to another without using their hands. These kinds of games shift the state of the room by triggering all sorts of feelings and memories—mostly positive. They're not just activities—they give an experiential taste of a different way of being in the world.

Sometimes what makes all the difference for a group is to go for a walk. I was once in Flint, Michigan, in a church hall, where people were debating what to do with an abandoned apartment complex nearby. Should the church buy it to redevelop into affordable housing (the pastor's idea)? Or push the city to tear it down? Or demand that the owners renovate it? We decided what to do only when we left the church, and walked over broken glass, to see, feel, and smell the state of the buildings.

Sharing a powerful story works as well (something we'll talk more about in the next chapter). But sometimes the simplest step that you can take is to ask a question: What are you feeling grateful for this morning? What was a moment in your life when you felt included? Or excluded? One breakthrough for the marriage-equality movement was shifting from telling people about the right to marry to asking people when they first fell in love. Another simple but powerful state-shifting tool is to ask people to share what they appreciate most about the other people in the room. These "appreciation circles" can be especially helpful

when groups have experienced tension. The questions can feel a bit corny when you ask them, but they almost always work.

My colleague Alvin Herring uses a Wall of Truth to prime people for honesty and compassion in trainings about race and racism. He gives people sticky notes and asks them to write down things about race that they think but don't say out loud and then put them up on a wall. What people write is often mind-blowingly honest. Afterward, people walk up and read the notes, and then the group can discuss some of the most challenging or perceptive truths. Effective multiracial racial-justice organizations develop out of hard and honest conversations. These can happen only when we intentionally create spaces where people can say not just what they think but what they feel.

Activities like the Wall of Truth and appreciation circles make us better teachers, trainers, facilitators, chairpeople, and all-around good people to have on teams. When we repeat them, they become rituals. Those rituals shape the culture of our organizations. People come to expect that participation will involve being challenged to think differently—even if it is uncomfortable. At Faith in Action, we begin most meetings with prayers or reflections and sometimes song. I've worked with other organizations that use readings, music, spoken word, and chants to center people and connect them to a larger purpose. We know how central music was to the civil rights movement and to so many other struggles. All these approaches and activities come back to inviting people to bring their whole selves to the table, which is what organizations that follow the framework in the next section do.

Building Organizations That Treat People as Ends, Not Means

We want the small group, larger organization, or mass movement to which we're dedicating our time and energy to treat us

as ends, not means. We want it to be a small version of the kind of society we are trying to bring into existence. The work may be difficult and uncomfortable at times. But it always needs to come back to our well-being, learning, and growth. Building this orientation toward people into organizational culture can be done in many ways. One approach is to think about purposeful organizations as four-dimensional: they *teach*, *trust*, *reflect*, and *face outward*.

Teach

Organizations develop their members into leaders when they dedicate time and resources to *teach* people the knowledge and skills necessary for leadership. A lot of research has been done on education reform that highlights the importance of designing schools as places where teachers are constantly learning.[9] If the teachers aren't learning, then students aren't either. The same applies to our organizations. If organizations aren't places where people are learning and growing, they're less likely to be able to make change in the world. Yet people in our organizations often tell us that we rush them into action. We don't adequately explain the context or teach them the skills they need to succeed.

Here are three practices that nurture learning in organizations: (1) explicitly describe what skills and knowledge are being taught and why (don't make people guess why they're attending a training); (2) before teaching adults something, ask them what they already know about the subject; and (3) regularly ask people what they are learning and what difference it's made in their lives. If we don't *tell* people why, they won't know where we're going. If we don't *validate* what they know, they won't feel that we respect them. If we don't *ask* whether it's working, they won't know we care about their growth.

Trust

Investing in people goes hand in hand with *trusting* them with big responsibilities. This is the difference between telling someone to come to the next activity or do a small task versus laying out a big goal and sitting down together to figure out what that person's role is in achieving it. If we don't invest relentlessly in people's development and trust them to lead, we end up replicating racial and class inequality inside our organizations and movements. Some people—often White men—get to be heads, making decisions and developing strategy. While others—people of color, women, those with less formal education, volunteers—are hands, receiving instructions, showing up, and doing the work. We ask too little of people who are prepared to give so much.

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Reflect

The third dimension of a purposeful organization is a commitment to *reflect* on all significant action. Every meeting, training, and event should include some reflection and evaluation. We need to set aside time to figure out what we've learned from taking action together. Too often, people spend time gearing up for a big showdown, and then, win or lose, they go silent or move on to the next task. This is especially true when different organizations come together to work on a larger campaign. They may have been able to coordinate their work, but they don't necessarily have a structure to process it together and figure out what comes next. I once talked to a friend who'd been involved in a successful effort to raise the minimum wage in his city. Months later, he told me that the groups that had led the effort still hadn't set up a meeting to reflect on the campaign. They hadn't made an effort to look honestly at how they'd worked

together, what they might do differently, and how they could build on their success. If we're creating people-based organizations, we can't afford to miss a chance to learn and get more real with one another about what we're doing together.

Face Outward

The fourth dimension is *facing outward*—actively reaching out and engaging people through direct contact. People want to belong. But all groups, large and small, have tendencies to become cliques, to slouch into oligarchy. Organizations say that they want more people to be involved but send out the opposite message or allow long periods of radio silence. In college, I wanted to become involved in the movement on campus to end South African apartheid. But I couldn't figure out how. It seemed like the cool kids all knew one another and that there wasn't a clear way in. Later, once I'd figured out how to be part of the group, I was at a meeting where people were complaining about how hard it was to get people involved. Now, whenever I'm in a conversation about how to increase participation or about why more people don't show up, I remember that moment. I remind myself that what's important is not our stated desire for people to join our group but the messages people are actually hearing about whether we want them. People remember how you made them feel. Are we faced inward, talking to one another, feeling special and chosen? Or are we turned outward, communicating the feeling of inclusion, measuring our days by the purposeful conversations we've had with people who've waited so patiently for us to knock at their doors?

When I saw people pouring into the school auditorium on that night of the first public meeting organized by the parent group, it felt like an epiphany. Organizing wasn't so hard. If you could get enough people to show up and ask for something,

you'd get it. That was an experience of the Utopian Flaw, an idea I learned from the Jesuits. When we're building something new, we put an almost idealistic hope in it. We convince ourselves that reaching the top will solve all our problems. The truth is that bigger mountains lie beyond the one we've just climbed; the hardest part isn't scaling the first one. It's making it through the valley that follows. That capacity to keep going rests on the strength of the relationships we're able to build with other people. And that starts with sharing our story.

4

Story

Building Relationships That Move People to Action

Getting started on change isn't hard. If you're frustrated about what you see happening in the world or your community or workplace, go out and talk to another person. Share your story. Hear that person's. Talk about what both of you care about. Explain the source of your anger. Build a relationship. Storytelling may seem like a distraction from the real work of politics, but it grounds all social change because stories are how humans make sense of the world. We use them to communicate our values, what we care enough about to act on and even risk our lives to achieve. Four important results happen in organizing when we start with story.

First, we experience a small taste of the world that we're struggling to bring into existence. When I listen to your story with focus, I communicate that I see you. You matter. You belong. When I tell my own story to another person, or to a thousand people, I assert my humanity. Indeed, this may be the action that is most in my control that gives me dignity.

Second, when we exchange our stories, the empathy we give and receive becomes social trust. This is what makes it possible for people to work together. It can take many conversations,

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but we cannot expect people to take risks together without trust. Sharing the experiences and emotions that have shaped our commitments builds the bonds we need to go into battle together. It also builds bridges between people from different backgrounds, helping us overcome efforts by elites to divide us from one another.

Third, we draw connections between our experiences that expose the social structures that shape our lives. We tend to overestimate other people's personal responsibility for their successes and failures (while minimizing our own). This makes it easy to blame people for the situations in which they find themselves and miss how political decisions help or hinder people's progress in the world. When we share our stories, we often find historical convergence (say, two people discovering that they were the first ones in their respective families to go to college) or divergence (say my having gone to college at a time when costs were low and lots of grants were available and your having taken on tens of thousands of dollars in debt to finance your education). These similarities and differences help us step outside our own sweat and tears. They give us some shared ingredients, or at least shared points of discussion, for teasing out how social structures beyond our direct control have contributed to who we are and our place in the world.

Finally, storytelling is how we rewrite the underlying story of our society to support more equitable policies. The ability to tell stories makes human beings unique among all animals. Scientists say that around seventy thousand years ago—a blink in the history of the human species—we experienced a "cognitive revolution" in the structure of our brains that made it possible for us to think and communicate about abstract ideas. In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari writes that if we could go back in time before this revolution in human thinking, we'd struggle to understand the people we met. But after that point, "We'd be able to explain to them

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everything we know—from the adventures of Alice in Wonderland to the paradoxes of quantum physics—and they could teach us how their people view the world."[1] For a species that depends on social interaction for survival, our newfound ability to tell stories about things that we couldn't see or touch allowed us to create social trust and cooperation across vast numbers of people. Once things could be imagined, they could be brought into existence. Storytelling was the supertool humans used to build complex societies. Similarly, today, we cannot make the social changes needed to save lives and live better without telling new, more inclusive and equitable stories. Just as stories rationalize the worst actions of human beings, they also fuel the movements that make us live up to our potential.

This chapter is organized into four parts. The first section discusses research on what keeps people engaged in social change and increases their participation. (Hint: the opportunity to share your story with another person is key.) The second shows how we can get better at telling our personal stories to give them greater emotional punch. The third section is about using one-to-one story sharing as a tool to build stronger organizations. The fourth focuses on the role of narrative in the communications work we need to do to win on the issues we're working on and transform our communities and country.

What Keeps People Involved in Social Change?

Too often, activists and social justice organizations lecture people rather than listen to them. We mistakenly think that people need to be persuaded to think a certain way before they take action. Or that you move people by telling them what is wrong. We end up spending too much time communicating *to* people, too little talking *with* them. That's why we teach community organizers that they have two ears and one mouth so they can spend twice as much time listening as talking.

Faith in Action has collaborated with Vanderbilt University professor Paul Speer on research to understand what motivates people to get involved in social change and what keeps them coming back. For five years, Paul and his team studied grassroots organizations affiliated with Faith in Action in different parts of the country. The organizations varied in size, but they shared a basic approach to organizing people of faith (from many different traditions) through their religious institutions. Paul's team collected sign-in sheets from meetings and lists of people who'd met with each other face-to-face as part of the organizations. The researchers also surveyed people who had participated and those who hadn't.

They found that two things keep people engaged: "(1) relationships with other participants and, (2) the opportunity to play a role that is meaningful and challenging."[2] Two specific activities were especially "sticky" (in the sense that they held people and deepened their involvement). The first was a short one-on-one meeting with another person where you shared your story and heard the other person's. The second was a "research action," a small meeting with public officials or someone else with power over what is happening in the community. (Research actions are discussed in more detail in chapter 7 on power.) People who participated in these two (fairly intimate) activities were more likely to keep coming back and take on greater leadership than people who didn't. They also came to see themselves as having more power and agency in their lives. Attending a large meeting or protest may help an organizing campaign achieve its goals, but it had little effect on an individual's likelihood to get more involved in the organization. And interestingly, nothing about people's demographics or the attitudes they had before they arrived predicted whether they would show up once and then walk away or end up chairing meetings. What mattered was whether they had an opportunity to share their story and engage decision makers alongside other people.

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This finding has important implications for how we think about building organizations and social movements. It suggests that millions of people could be involved in fighting for social justice if they were asked directly and were invited into activities that gave them a chance to take leadership alongside other people. The one-on-one isn't only a good way for people to get to know each other at the start of a meeting. It's a perpetual-motion machine that we have at our fingertips to pull more and more people onto the playing field of justice.

The Vanderbilt research is consistent with other studies showing that people often come into organizations seeking social connection. For example, one study surprisingly found that half the people active in the pro-life movement first showed up either being supportive of abortion rights or without having strong opinions.[3] They joined because other people in their communities and congregations were involved, and their involvement shaped their views. The power of organizations to influence how people see the world runs counter to the tendency of activists to spend lots of energy trying to find likely supporters to engage. When we're fighting for causes that already have a lot of support, like raising wages or providing a path to legal status and citizenship for immigrants, we don't need to search for true believers. We're often better off inviting a lot of people in and exposing them to meaningful activities that put them into relationship and leadership—beginning with sharing their story with other people.

Getting Clear about Your Story

The story of your life is as unique as you are. But compelling stories have a common structure. And our personal stories follow patterns shaped by history. We know from experience that people can get better at telling their stories through practice and by understanding the elements of a good story and reflecting

on how their own lives have been shaped by history. Our brains are wired to make sense of the world more easily through stories than through facts and figures. So when we build up our storytelling muscles—individually and as organizations—we become more persuasive to the people we're trying to motivate and to people in positions of power whose decisions we're trying to influence.

Marshall Ganz, who worked with Cesar Chavez as the organizing director of the United Farm Workers, has taught thousands of people to tell their stories more powerfully. He says that "a good public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the 'plot' of your life—the challenges you faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced." Your story needs to answer the question of what motivates you. As Marshall says, people need to "understand the values that move you to act, because it might move them to act as well."[4]

Often, the stories that grip us emotionally revolve around a time of great pain or loss. My friend Desmond Meade, a leader in the movement of formerly incarcerated returning citizens in Florida, describes how, after he had left prison and was homeless, he was about to lie down on a train track and kill himself. At that moment, he had a vision of a different future. That led him to put his life back together and become a lawyer. His choice was similar to the one made by the Chilean miners who looked death in the face and vowed to survive. These stories of rebirth are fundamental to our shared history and religious traditions. Whether or not we've personally faced down death, they remind us of low points in our own lives and how we rebounded, of the trauma we've experienced, the support we've received from those who love us, and our strength and resilience as humans.

The key to powerful stories is not always the dramatic moments of external conflict, although these experiences can help focus people's attention, but rather the emotional drama playing

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out inside our hearts. We know this from the movies we've seen and books we've read. What first appears to be a physical conflict with an obstacle (usually a villain) is really about the hero struggling with a choice that brings to the surface an internal contradiction in his or her character. The challenge can be self-doubt, overconfidence, wrestling with meeting expectations set by others, and so many other difficulties that bedevil us as we try to make our way in a complicated world. That is why the moral of the story usually comes back to what the main character learns about himself or herself and what we learn about ourselves. Often it's the helper (the "impact character") who forces the protagonist to make a different choice. The "help" doesn't solve our problem but rather helps us see our choices more clearly. This is why coaching is so important to social change and why compelling public stories often include someone who helped us look at the world differently.

We don't need to have had a near-death experience or lived on the streets to explain the source of our motivation. But a compelling story needs to be more than simply recounting our life story. We need to dig into not only what happened to us but also the conflict we faced and the choices we made. In the end, our story is an argument for what we think needs to happen in the world based on our experience. Getting there requires reflecting honestly on the turning points that shaped our lives (there can be many, and we can share different pieces of our story at different times, depending on the impact we're looking to have and what group we're with). Since our motivation is shaped by what has happened to us in our lives, as Marshall Ganz says, we all have "within [our] experience what [we] need to be able to make an impact in the world."[5] We just have to take the time to explain that experience clearly.

Sometimes we have the luxury of sitting down with someone to share our story. Often, we have less time and a less explicit invitation to tell our story. Practice helps us tell a condensed

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version of our story in a short conversation that might take place when you bump into someone on the street ("I watched my parents lose their home when I was fifteen and decided I'd never let myself be pushed around"). We need to be able to share a snippet of our story that explains our motivation when we introduce ourselves at a meeting, make a phone call, or knock on a door ("I've lived in this neighborhood my entire life, and I'm not going to be forced out now"). Like a precious metal that goes through a refining process, we have to boil our story down to its essence through repetition.

Using Stories to Build Organization

The real power in storytelling comes not from telling our story but from eliciting the stories of other people. When you're working to create social change, you want to think of yourself as an architect of human relationships. The best way to get people into relationships is to ask them to share their stories. One of the lessons we teach in organizing is that while meetings are important to make decisions and to get people marching together, most of the work happens through one-on-one relationships. The best way to make a meeting successful, especially when the stakes are high, is to talk individually with key people beforehand.

Use your power to create community wherever you are and whatever your role is in the organization.

But even if you're in a big meeting, before getting to the tasks, ask people to break up into pairs and share their stories. Use your power to create community wherever you are and whatever your role is in the organization. The deeper the relationships, the easier the work will be. One practice that creates a culture of respect is to ask people to sit across from each other and take turns telling their story for a few minutes while the other person

listens without comment. When each person is done speaking, she or he concludes by saying "I've spoken." The other person responds, "I hear you" or "I see you." The same ritual can be done when people tell their story in front of a group. It connects the act of speaking your truth with the experience of being seen as fully human.

With an orientation to relationship building through story, organizations can build stronger bonds between people who already share a lot in common and also bridge people who come from different backgrounds. Caucuses organized by race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities create space for people to support one another, connect their stories to a larger historical struggle, and build collective power.

When people come together from different backgrounds, starting with story can break down social barriers. You don't need to know whether you agree with someone to hear his or her story. And that experience of being seen and heard by another person is the best tool we have for combatting the false hierarchies that diminish people and separate them from each other.

If you want people to look at the world differently, share a story that opens their heart. Even better, give them the space to explain their experience and thinking. We so badly want people to think the way we do. But without listening to their stories, our wish to convince or influence can end up pushing people into their corners—all the more so now that social media has fractured our communities, making it possible for us to be exposed only to those stories that reinforce our outlook on the world.

Stories are especially important when we are trying to get people to see the underlying structures that shape our lives, the intentional political decisions that we get socialized into thinking are normal and natural. A good way to begin to reveal these decisions is to ask people to explicitly reflect on the structures

of opportunity and oppression that have shaped their lives and their families. As I explained in chapter 2, getting involved in organizing helped me see how my family's history was shaped by very specific structural decisions (my grandparents' coming to the United States during a brief window when the doors were open to Eastern European Jews and my parents' coming of age during the post-WWII period at a time when Jews were able to take advantage of the privileges of being White and when education, housing, and labor policies were lifting millions of White working-class families into the middle class). Reflecting on my family history has helped me be more conscious of my privilege, more connected to my heritage of social justice, and clearer about how inequality works.

Focusing on both structures that create barriers and those that provide advantages helps avoid the tendency to look only at the deficit. We have plenty of examples in our family stories of public policies that facilitate social advancement for some people but not others. From federal housing policies that enabled some families to build up wealth in their homes to university admissions policies that privilege the children of alumni and donors, we know that structures shape opportunities. The story that inequality is unfortunate but unavoidable is a myth. When government is accountable to working people, it can create opportunity and make society more racially and economically equitable. We have the capacity to drive that change. Indeed, what makes organizing powerful is that it not only gives us the ability to improve our lives and communities but makes it possible to tell a new collective story about what is right and how change happens. Organizations that run successful campaigns build a reservoir of stories that give people the lived experience that change is possible. This helps us dispute the stories we get told by elites about staying in our place and accepting what is.

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Winning the Battle over Narrative

Challenging the Dominant Story

Paul Medellin, an organizer with PICO in the 1980s and '90s, used to lead a workshop on power, in which he drew a sketch of a city with a bubble over it. The media on one side and corporate interests on the other held the bubble in place. Some ideas were allowed in, while others bounced off. At the time that I saw this training, I was working as a community organizer in Philadelphia, and Ed Rendell was mayor. Rendell was a deal maker. He invested hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds in big development projects, including fifteen new hotels, a Disney-Quest entertainment center, the National Constitution Center, and a new home for the city's symphony orchestra. All these projects were located in Center City Philadelphia. His push to revitalize the central business district defined his administration. It established his reputation, outside Philadelphia, as a savior of the city.

Many of us in the city saw Rendell's wheeling and dealing as sucking up the city's resources and political will, making it difficult to get the powers that be to focus on the neighborhoods where most people lived. The investment in Center City was gentrifying nearby residential areas while pushing blight deeper into many communities that were experiencing a vicious cycle of disinvestment. The number of abandoned homes and buildings was skyrocketing. Half of the young people at many neighborhood high schools were leaving school without graduating. Jobs had disappeared. People were seeing their neighborhoods turned into open-air drug markets, and the police department was rocked by corruption investigations. Very little of this "data" about what was happening in the city's neighborhoods was included in the dominant narrative of Philadelphia as a city

on the rise, led by a tough, charismatic mayor. And proposals for renovating blighted housing and linking Center City development to neighborhood revitalization through development fees bounced off the magic bubble hovering over the city.

As Rendell was touting a narrative about Philadelphia and what it needed, he was operating in concert with real estate development interests in the region. These men donated millions of dollars to Rendell's election and re-election campaigns, often in checks that exceeded $100,000. Throughout his term as mayor, Rendell worked hand-in-glove with the city's dominant power broker, State Senator Vince Fumo. Fumo controlled so many city institutions, from the port authority to the school board, that he was once depicted in the *Philadelphia Daily News* as an octopus with twenty arms. Together, Rendell, Fumo, and City Council President John Street channeled money into development projects and contracts controlled by well-connected law firms and developers. The building trade unions, which used a combination of political influence and violence to keep Black and Latino workers out of the best paying trades, were key allies—as were some of the city's leading politicians (White and Black), who were tied to law firms that had a slice of the bond work connected to development projects.

Rendell's strategy was to turn Philadelphia into the sixth borough of New York, a mini-Manhattan. The story of Rendell's leadership and Philadelphia's bright future was told in the city's two newspapers, one a tabloid for the people and the other for wealthier and more suburban readers, both owned by the same company. Scandals occasionally broke through. But the intricate system of influence and racial and ethnic politics that determined who got what contracts to do what work was largely left out of the narrative. The main story line was grit and renewal, illustrated by *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Buzz Bissinger in his best-selling ode to Rendell, *A Prayer for the City*.

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Bissinger's book came out in 1997. By the end of Rendell's term in 2000, the US Census showed that Philadelphia had lost 68,000 people, a higher percentage loss of population than any other large US city besides Detroit.[6] Median family income had fallen by 7 percent. Poverty was up 2.6 percent. Latino poverty was the highest in the nation, and Black poverty among the highest.[7] A time-lapse map of housing abandonment showed blight spreading out from Center City into a host of once-stable neighborhoods.[8] During Rendell's tenure, the US economy gained 22 million jobs, one of the most sustained periods of economic growth in a generation, yet by most measures, Philadelphia lost ground compared to other cities while he was mayor.[9] Unfortunately, these facts didn't get in the way of the inspiring story of a White mayor saving an increasingly Black and Brown city.

By the time Rendell left office, real estate developers had locked in hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks that would go on for decades. They were making fortunes from gentrifying the neighborhoods that bordered Center City. Rendell was on his way to becoming governor of Pennsylvania based on the reputation he had built as mayor. Large sections of the city had lived through another decade-long vicious cycle of joblessness, violence, and disinvestment. Eventually, both Johnny Dougherty (the head of the racist building trades) and Vince Fumo (Philadelphia's ultimate power broker) went to federal prison on corruption charges. But that was after the damage was done.

After eight years of urban decay under Rendell and lots of organizing by Philadelphia residents, the gaze of city leaders began to shift to the crisis playing out in the neighborhoods. In 2000, during the mayoral election to replace Rendell, the organization I worked for ran a campaign called Neighborhoods First. At the time of the election, more than two hundred thousand

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abandoned cars were on the streets of Philadelphia, many burnt out and upside down. None were in Center City. We succeeded in making these junked cars a symbol of the neglect of neighborhoods. At one point, we put stickers on thousands of cars saying "The next mayor will decide how long this car sits on your street, but you'll decide who the next mayor is."

The candidates competed to announce their plans to deal with abandoned autos and community revitalization. The city's newspapers—decimated by falling population and declining circulation—shifted from boosting Center City development to urging the candidates to focus on neighborhoods. John Street won the election and made getting abandoned autos off the street his first major policy initiative. He went on to make neighborhood revitalization a focus of his administration.

Organizing in Philadelphia during those years taught me that we cannot advance social change without taking on the dominant stories that are used to hold structures of inequality in place. The difficultly is that these stories are not just out there in the news waiting to be disputed; they are embedded in people's minds as common sense. Even people who stand to lose as a result of a story may still believe it to be true. And this is not just a matter of people being duped. People embrace dominant stories because they help make sense of a confusing and chaotic world. Simple stories create a sense of security.

Of course, most people living in North or West Philadelphia didn't buy into Ed Rendell's vision of shiny buildings or give a damn about being the sixth borough of New York City. The main audience for Rendell's dominant narrative was the suburban voters and elites who controlled the institutions in the region. These voters helped him become governor and later emerge as a key Democratic Party power broker. Rendell and the developers and corporate executives who supported him raised and spent tens of millions of dollars. They used that money to hold together a coalition on the city council and in

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the city's Democratic Party. They kept dollars flowing into the right projects and pockets. The light playing on the water of a dominant narrative is always a mix of well-resourced arguments that reinforce common sense and money spread around strategically to hold everything together.

Telling a New Story

Exposing the big lies that sustain inequality is an important part of social change and can be energizing. But the harder work often is creating a new narrative. We can be crystal clear about our opponent's story but mushy about our own. Narrative warfare is almost always uneven. Rarely do we have the resources to create a new story line from whole cloth. We don't always have a platform as big as Ed Rendell had in Philadelphia. More often, we're left with finding an existing story line that isn't getting enough attention and trying to fuel it. Other times, we're fighting to co-opt an existing narrative and make it our own.

One key is to find simple metaphors that make sense in people's guts. Frameworks, an organization that researches public opinion, conducted a study on attitudes about criminal justice. This issue tends to bring out people's least generous views about individual responsibility and punishment for bad behavior. Getting people to focus on how structures and policies entangle people in the justice system and how racism can fuel this process can be hard. Frameworks filmed some troubling videos of White people puzzling over racial disparities in drug sentencing. Studies show that Black people use drugs at lower levels than White people but are arrested and jailed for drug possession at much higher rates. In the videos, you can see focus group participants resist undisputable facts about these disparities. Participants come up with many arguments for why their prejudices are right and the data wrong. That's because the stories people have in their minds almost always trump data.

However, Frameworks did find a metaphor (which, in a sense, is a mini story) that was effective in getting people to think about criminal justice in terms of structures: a maze. If you introduce the idea of a maze into a conversation about criminal justice, people begin to talk about what it feels like to be dropped into a system you don't understand. People with money or influence can see the exits, but others can't. You end up circling back to the same place over and over if you don't get help. Getting people to tell their own stories that explain how mazelike structures shape behavior doesn't take much prompting. The power of a collective story rests on whether people can own the narrative and repeat it in their own words.

The power of a collective story rests on whether people can own the narrative and repeat it in their own words.

In 2000, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) was working with parents in working-class neighborhoods in Oakland, California, where schools were so overcrowded that they ran on two shifts. Student test scores were abysmal. Liz Sullivan, an organizer with OCO, worked with a group of parents to make a simple map of Oakland that noted the sizes, test results, and locations of all schools, showing visually the link between the number of students attending a school and its educational outcomes. The map helped spark what came to be called the Small Autonomous Schools Movement, which went on to transform public education in the city. OCO was clear that "small" meant schools that were developed by parents and teachers around student needs and accountable to the community. Parents persuaded the school district to create a "small school incubator" out of which more than fifty new small autonomous public schools were created, most of which are still outperforming traditional public schools. Almost all are more closely integrated into their communities.

Skeptics and opponents challenged these small schools, saying that small doesn't mean good. But this pushback helped

advance, rather than end, the conversation. A good metaphor gives us something to work with. Parents were able to use the simple and clear idea of small schools to talk about schools in which their children would not fall through the cracks. In doing so, they told a new story about education in their city, a story that was built around the needs of their children, and the controversy it generated only helped.

Of all the social justice stories coursing through our country in recent years, Black Lives Matter has been the most compelling and influential. Alicia Garza, cofounder, describes its origin this way: "I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements."[10] Black Lives Matter went viral because it came out of a common struggle, and so many people saw their own stories in it at a moment of great pain. As Alicia makes clear, the point of these words put together and pushed out into the world by three African American queer women was to radically disrupt the larger society and the social justice movement. The feeble racist response that "all lives matter" can be painful to hear. But it's a sign that Black Lives Matter is powerful and cannot be denied. It's a reminder that good social justice stories don't resolve tension. They force us to go deeper into the truths that dominant narratives try to drown out.

Everyone should read what Alicia wrote directly, but part of what struck me, particularly as a White man, was this: "#Black LivesMatter doesn't mean your life isn't important—it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation." The story of Black Lives Matter not only forces a moral choice for every person

who hears it to either accept or deny four hundred years of racial oppression, but like the small schools demand, it creates a platform for people whose fates are intertwined to unite around a common struggle—which leads to the next chapter on justice teams in larger movements.

5

Team

Finding a Home Base in a Movement for Change

After college, I lived in a shared house with three other people. One of them was a slug. He didn't clean up, shop, or do any of the other work necessary for four people to live together. For a while, the rest of us tried to compensate. But eventually, we fell into a small-group death spiral. We retreated to our rooms and waited for the lease to end. I know people who've had the opposite experience, who are still best friends with their old housemates. Why do some teams soar, while others crash and burn? And what makes it possible to consistently build social justice teams that bring out the best in their members and are able to drive change in the world?

Having people whom you trust to walk with is indispensable to a life of social justice. All the important changes we make in the world are made alongside other people. Yet finding (or building) a good team of people to conspire with is never easy. The challenge of forming teams—and holding them together—is what organizers spend the most time wrestling with. And it's the Achilles' heel of an American social justice movement in which most so-called members have never met

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one another—let alone participated in the kind of face-to-face organizing that's been the lifeblood of every social movement in history.

This chapter on building and sustaining social justice teams is organized into three sections. The first looks at the value of small groups—for us as individuals, as well as for organizations and larger movements. The second shares four practices that set teams up for success: trust, shared purpose, clear roles, and a learning culture. The final section offers an example of how large numbers of interconnected small groups that combine personal growth and social action can change history.

Why Small Face-to-Face Groups Are Indispensable for Social Change

Saddleback Church, in Orange County, California, is a large institution built on a foundation of small groups. Led by Rev. Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, the church has regular Sunday attendance of over twenty thousand people, making it one of the largest religious congregations in the United States. One key to its growth has been the creation of thousands of small groups that provide a home base for its members. Steve Gladen, the leader of Saddleback's Small Group Ministries, writes that the church has "more people in small groups than attend our weekend services."[1] Through the groups, people pray together, share problems, study, and engage in service and outreach. The church has a structure that provides training and support to group leaders and connects groups to the larger mission and activities of the institution. Gladen says, "We look at the people who are serving as hosts and identify the ones who are natural shepherds. Then we begin to raise these people up through a 'Small Group Leadership Pathway' that helps them understand the ministry, recognize God's call in their lives, and then trains them in head

and heart fundamentals so they can be effective in the ministry. We take hosts and turn them into leaders!"[2]

Many of the organizing and leadership-development practices that make Saddleback successful also apply to purpose-driven social change. Small groups give people space to breathe, think, find support, and grow. The larger the institution or movement, the greater the need for small spaces in which people can connect. None of us comes to social justice work fully formed. Becoming a public person who can act with confidence against injustice is hard. We need to be around people who can keep us from retreating back into our comfort zones. We need places where we can test our voices, connect with partners who complement our talents, and find a sense of belonging.

A burning issue might bring us to a first meeting, but what keeps us coming back are the relationships we build. There's a point that successful groups pass—similar to a runner's high—after which people don't need to be persuaded to come to meetings. At that point, the relationships, not the agenda, hold people together and make the work seem easier.

A burning issue might bring us to a first meeting, but what keeps us coming back are the relationships we build.

Being on a team also gives people the ability to negotiate their interests within a larger institution or movement. Even in organizations working in a single city, people without teams can end up becoming cogs in a larger system. If we're not actively engaged with others in making decisions about the social change work we're doing, we can end up being hands, not heads—being given small discrete tasks, such as signing petitions or attending rallies. To be agents of our own destiny rather than objects of other people's plans, we need teammates.

That's why face-to-face chapters, small groups, and teams are the building blocks of mass social movements. An early example in US history is the antislavery movement. Until the 1820s, the primary organizations working to end slavery in the United

States were a small number of societies, led mostly by prominent Quakers. These associations "advocated [for the] gradual abolition of slavery" using "tactics of voluntary manumissions, legal aid for blacks, and petitions to state governments."[3] Their tactics and membership were limited. Many other people—including many free Blacks—had energy for more direct and rebellious opposition to slavery, but these potential participants lacked the organizational structures to express that resistance.

Then something changed. Abolitionists decided to adopt a different organizing strategy and structure in the early 1830s. They were inspired by slave rebellions, such as the 1831 uprising in Virginia led by Nat Turner, and by the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that spread a spirit of moral reform in the country. In 1832, leading abolitionists launched the American Antislavery Society—a new organization with a nationwide membership that included Blacks as well as Whites. They chose a "federated structure comprising nested local, state, and national chapters [which] enabled a franchise like expansion . . . providing a template for organizing and a way to link local groups to a nationwide effort."[4]

In their article, "Antislavery in America: The Press, the Pulpit, and the Rise of Antislavery Societies," Marissa King and Heather Haveman show how this change in organizational structure and philosophy made abolition the first large-scale American social movement. "The American Antislavery Society initiated a popular grass-roots campaign to promote immediate abolition. Rather than having prominent citizens sign petitions or bring lawsuits, the [society] sought to build widespread support among the citizenry to end slavery through a moral transformation that would turn the entire populace into abolitionists."[5]

The fervor of the new structure is captured in the organization's 1838 constitution:

> We shall organize Antislavery Societies, if possible, in every city, town, and village in our land. We shall send forth agents to lift up the voice of remonstrance, of warning, of entreaty, and rebuke. We shall circulate unsparingly and extensively antislavery tracts. . . . We shall enlist the pulpit and the press in the cause. . . . We shall aim at the purification of the churches from all participation in the guilt of slavery.[6]

Membership exploded. At its height, the American Antislavery Society had more than sixteen hundred local chapters. It engaged tens of thousands of people in face-to-face organizing against slavery. The greatest participation was in states with the largest free Black populations. In 1835 alone, the society distributed more than one million pamphlets and slave narratives. Many participants in local antislavery societies went on to become conductors on the Underground Railroad. The core components of the abolition movement—mass multiracial membership, local societies or chapters, traveling agents, direct action, and an ethic of moral resistance to injustice—shaped every subsequent social movement in US history, from women's suffrage to ending child labor to the civil rights movement.

In her book *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Theda Skocpol explains that, like the abolition movement, the largest and most successful social organizations in the United States have been organized along federated lines, with national, state, and local structures.[7] This approach to building organizations and movements has been powerful precisely because it creates spaces for large numbers of people to be directly involved in face-to-face teams, while connecting them together and coordinating their work across great distances.

Organizations that reach deep into local communities and can bring large-scale pressure on the federal government are

especially important in the United States because of the size of the country and how our government was designed to block change. The thirty-nine men who wrote the US Constitution (eleven of whom owned or managed slave plantations) made it extraordinarily difficult to pass policies to rein in elites, eradicate slavery, or benefit working people. From the design of the Senate—where one senator can stop an entire piece of legislation from moving forward—to the separation of powers between the president, Congress, and Supreme Court, they structured the rules of government to protect the status quo and to slow change. We play politics on a tilted field. The deep frustration that Americans feel about the inability of Congress to address the issues that matter most in our lives is extreme today. But the cry against do-nothing politicians is not new nor an accident. It's the product of how a small number of wealthy White men designed the federal government, as well as many of our state governments.

Unfortunately, since the 1970s, social justice organizations that reach deep into communities have been eclipsed by what Skocpol refers to as "staff-led, mailing-list associations, without local or state group affiliates."[8] "If a new cause arises, people think of opening a national office, raising funds through direct mail, and hiring a media consultant."[9] In contrast, the Christian Coalition and other conservative organizations have continued to rely on structures that create space for people to take meaningful local action in their communities, connected to larger moral and political issues. But progressive and especially environmental organizations largely relate to members as individual donors or online activists. In 2000, Robert Putnam wrote, "Virtually all the major American environmental groups (as well as thousands of smaller organizations) are addicted to direct mail as a tool of mobilization and membership retention."[10] Today, national organizations fill our in-boxes with e-mail and claim

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us as members solely on the basis of our donating a few dollars or signing an online petition.

The inherent weakness of mailing-list organizations can be seen in the spectacular failure of the nation's environmental organizations to secure climate change legislation during the first Obama term. Skocpol shows how "Big Green" organizations went into the fight with hundreds of millions of dollars—from direct-mail donations—to spend on lobbying and large lists of "members." But they lacked a deep, mobilized base of people necessary to create moral and political pressure for action on climate change. This made it possible for the fossil fuel industry to use influential lobbyists, hundreds of millions in campaign contributions, and Senate rules to block action on cap and trade legislation.

Lawrence Goodwyn captures the bind we face today in his book *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. Populism, which began in the 1870s, was the largest democratic movement in American history and a precursor to our current struggle to restrain corporate power. Goodwyn writes, "[H]istory does not support the notion that mass protest movements develop because of hard times. Depressed economies or exploitive arrangements of power and privilege may produce lean years and even lean lifetimes for millions of people, but . . . they do not produce mass political insurgency."[11] The crises we face in our own time are hollowing out the middle class and making more people poor. But neither this hardship nor widespread awareness of the corrupt influence of moneyed interests is enough to create a social revolution. Rather, as Goodwyn writes, "Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. . . . Their sense of autonomy permits them to dare to try to change things by seeking to influence others."[12]

Like the abolitionists after 1832, the populists sought to fundamentally change the way Americans saw their society. They fielded forty thousand lecturers who, like the antislavery agents, traveled the country speaking to groups of farmers and urban workers. Participants weren't just showing up for speeches; they were directly engaged in day-to-day organizing against the economic structures that were impoverishing their families. They had spent many years "talk[ing] to each other about their troubles. They had read books on economics in an effort to discover what had gone wrong" and had formed local cooperative organizations that they controlled. Goodwyn says that this "cooperative struggle . . . engendered within millions of people what Martin Luther King would later call a 'sense of somebodiness.'" This is what gave people the ability to stand up to the proverbial pharaohs of their times. "Thus armed, the Populists attempted to insulate themselves against being intimidated by the enormous political, economic, and social pressures that accompanied the emergence of corporate America."[13]

Much has changed in our times, from the Internet to globalization. But the forces we're up against are only more entrenched. And people's sense of resignation and intimidation is pervasive. Like the populists and the abolitionists, we need a movement that can wake Americans up, that can reach into every town and city. To get there, we need face-to-face structures that connect us to one another and to a larger movement. The spaces where we can become somebody and test the limits set by conventional wisdom are just as indispensable today. That is what makes building powerful, purposeful, interconnected teams so vital. And we know a lot about how to do this well.

Creating Teams and Setting Them Up for Success

Teams are more than just a structure or technique. Like all the conversations in *Stand Up!*, they are a way of thinking about

how people create meaning and solve problems together. Seeing social change through the lens of purposeful teams changes how we design our organizations and movements. It shifts the choices we make in facilitating groups and crafting strategy. It's not enough to schedule a meeting and hope people will show up or be happy that the room is full. As a facilitator, I may try to focus people on their purpose, expose the forces we're up against, or ask people to share their stories. But the main question going through my mind is whether people are already organized into small groups. If not, I'm thinking about how I can make that happen as soon as possible. I want to get people into groups, energize those groups, and set them up for success so they can bring more people to the table.

This section focuses on four elements—trust, shared purpose, clear roles, and a learning culture—that help social change teams thrive and make it possible for large numbers of people to work together to advance justice in an uncertain world. When the stakes are high, these four elements can make or break teams and ultimately social movements.

Trust

Social trust is the starting place for successful teams—all the more so for groups that have the audacity to take on the status quo in a society polarized by race, class, gender, and religion. People need to know that they have each other's backs. This doesn't just mean being confident that if you fall backward your friends will catch you or that if you lose your job trying to organize a union your coworkers will look out for you. It means being willing to be vulnerable. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, Patrick Lencioni defines this kind of trust as "the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group."[14] To make

teams work, we need to open our hearts and expect the same of others. When teams aren't emotionally truthful places, people skate on the surface. They don't hold one another accountable. One or two people can take the group off the rails. The whole isn't greater than the sum of the parts, defeating the purpose of being a team.

People must learn to be honest about how they experience race and gender differently. We need to fight the tendency to replicate society's oppressive and hierarchical patterns in our own groups and organizations. Everyone needs to be conscious about whose voices dominate discussions in meetings and how someone's race and gender influence how his or her ideas are received. To function effectively in a multiracial movement, we need to master a knowledge base—discussed in chapter 2—about White privilege, racial anxiety and the way societies are structured around false hierarchies of human value. We need to be able to talk about racism and patriarchy explicitly and recognize how they shape our individual behavior, interpersonal relationships, and group dynamics. The capacity to both tell the truth as we experience it and hear things about ourselves that we may not know—without flinching—makes us emotionally intelligent and racially conscious. And if taken as a primary responsibility, not an add-on, these skills can help a team forge itself into a tool for dismantling racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

Of course, it's easier to *aspire* to emotional intelligence and self-awareness than *practice* them, especially when you believe your personal efforts can change the world. One truism about politics is that you can get almost anything done if you're willing not to take credit for it. When I was working on a campaign to get abandoned cars off Philadelphia's streets, our organization got all the local and state officials involved to agree on a solution. But it took another six months to iron out who would

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get to announce that they'd solved the problem. Most of us want desperately to make a difference. And we also want to get some credit. A necessary conceit of social change is that each of us feels that we added the straw that broke the camel's back. The belief that our contribution matters is part of what keeps us from sitting back and letting others do the work. But there is always tension between what my ego needs to be happy and what I must do as one of many to support a healthy group that can get things done.

Organizers like to quote Rabbi Hillel, who asked, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?"[15] In real life, it isn't easy to figure out how to be for yourself and also be for others. Strong teams live at the point where these three questions meet. Strong teams are places where people can be emotionally honest about what they need from the group and the group can be crystal clear about what it needs from each person.

To help groups that we're part of or we coach go deeper, we need to return to the discussion in chapter 3 about using our emotional state to signal gratitude and abundance and to build purpose-driven organizations. People need to know one another's stories and motivations. They need to feel that they belong and matter. They need to hear the group tell them why they're valued. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Lencioni pushes further. He outlines a team effectiveness exercise that "requires team members to identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team, as well as the one area that they must either improve upon or eliminate for the good of the team."[16] Lencioni is speaking to workplace teams, but the underlying idea that honesty creates trust, and trust generates the capacity to think and act together, applies even more so to social justice teams facing off against powerful opponents.

Shared Purpose

Team members need to work together to achieve an important shared goal that they all understand and own. This seems obvious, but this understanding is often missing from both small groups and large organizations. In a small group, it's good to ask the following questions: If you took each member of the team into a room separately and asked what the team was trying to accomplish, would you get the same clear response from everyone? When you look at how the members of the team spend their time outside meetings, can you see evidence that they are actively working together to achieve the same goal?

When a team has a shared purpose, its members are consumed with trying to accomplish a single important result. They're not just connected by a set of values, an outlook on the world, work that is closely related, or a regular meeting time. They're able to describe clearly what would be different if and when the team is successful. They know what success would mean for their lives, rather than being able to simply give a laundry list of activities that the group is engaged in. All team members can explain not only what they are doing to make the outcome a reality but also the roles that other team members are playing and why each is important to the result.

For electoral campaigns, union organizing drives, or efforts to pass ballot measures, where there are hard deadlines and win/lose outcomes, the shared purpose can often seem clear. But even in these situations, teams must be organized around goals, not tasks. People need to understand clearly how their team's goals are related to the larger campaign's success.

This focus on team goals was a key principle used by the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. The campaign relied on volunteer teams to drive their field program and meet voter registration, persuasion, and turnout goals that most campaigns leave to paid staff. Each volunteer team had meaningful goals that

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helped people feel ownership over their team's piece of the puzzle and understand what they needed to do and why. As Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie Han explain in *Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*, the goals shifted as the campaign progressed. Metrics changed from recruiting volunteers and creating new teams in the early stages to contacting voters closer to Election Day. But the underlying idea that teams needed to have autonomy and agency remained constant—reflected in the campaign's mantra, "Respect, empower, include."[17]

When there isn't a hard Election Day deadline or when teams have a broader mission, focusing everyone on a single measure of success takes more work. The group needs to both define the goal and figure out how to achieve it. When a team is part of a larger movement, it needs to negotiate its own goals with other teams. As with the Obama campaign teams, it's important to define the job in as big a chunk as possible and then shift the responsibility for figuring out how to be successful to each team.

For example, a team working to put a proposition on the state ballot to raise the minimum wage might be responsible for collecting the specific number of valid signatures needed from their county to qualify the measure as part of a larger statewide signature-collection goal. This is different from saying to the group, "Here are the days on which we want you to gather signatures at these locations." The former instills purpose. The latter is about how to execute. The team should figure out the best way to achieve the goal, adjust its strategy, and see the goal to the finish. They need to take into account that some signatures will be tossed out. So the mission is to reach the goal of valid signatures and to go back out onto the streets if the goal isn't met.

Or let's say we're trying to pass an ordinance to require employers in our city to provide paid sick time to their employees. Ideally, we have teams that take responsibility for delivering

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the vote of the councilperson who represents their district. One way to approach the campaign would be to say, "Let's hold a public meeting in each council district to build support for the ordinance." Then the job of each team would be to organize that event. Nothing is wrong with that approach. But what if we had all the teams meet together and say, "Okay, we're each committing to deliver a specific outcome from our councilperson." (Depending on where the councilperson starts out in his or her support, the options might be to cosponsor the bill, vote yes, abstain, or in the worst case, be less vocally opposed.) Each team is responsible for achieving a concrete measurable outcome. How groups meet their commitments will vary. Some might decide to hold a big public meeting with their councilperson. Others might organize a prayer vigil outside the councilperson's office or a meeting with small-business people who support the campaign. Now the discussion in the team has gone from figuring out how to plan a good meeting to how to deliver a yes vote (or neutralize an opponent). This shift might seem subtle, but for a team to have agency, it has to own the strategy. A plan informed by people closest to the problem is likely to be better. And collectively wrestling with how to win is how teams grow and gain confidence. By inspiring teams and then trusting them to figure things out, we help people find their purpose together.

Of course, group purpose can change. People bring different perspectives and interests to the table, and what matters most to them shifts over time. When our parent organization was fighting to protect the autism program in our school district, we started with a very clear goal to stop $171,000 in cuts in the final school district budget. However, once we began to negotiate with the school board, parents on our team reacted differently to offers of a compromise. We hadn't done enough work to talk through together what success would look like. This became even clearer when a parent whose school did not have

an autism program, but needed it, began to take leadership in the group. Were we fighting to protect one program or to make this effective approach available to all students in the school district? We had to take a step back to hammer out exactly what Concerned Parents of Arlington Students with Autism was trying to achieve—and how we would know if we were successful. That conversation ended up inspiring us because we realized that we had a larger purpose.

Clear goals owned by the whole team need to come with a sense of urgency. The best teams meet weekly, talk daily, and text and e-mail constantly. There is no magic recipe, and many successful teams meet less often. But as money floods our political system, we have to raise the bar on what we expect from one another. When I was organizing with parents in Philadelphia, we worked with a sister organization called Youth United for Change (still one of the most successful youth organizing groups in the United States) that organized students in the same high schools where we were organizing parents. The students met weekly, and that rhythm—combined with being inside the school—gave them energy and enabled them to organize circles around the parents, who met only every few weeks. Of course, many of us have complicated lives, between work and family commitments. But sometimes the events that happen every week, like clockwork, are easier to build into our lives. Even if meetings are short, the more regularly we meet, the more intense heat we can generate.

During the financial crisis, a group of people from Contra Costa County, California (one of the areas of the United States hardest hit by mass foreclosures), cornered Adam Kruggel, a talented organizer with whom they were working. They pressed him to help them charter a bus to drive across the country, to Washington, DC, to raise awareness about the need to keep families in their homes. The result was the *Recovery Express*, which carried families facing foreclosure from California to Capitol

Hill. They stopped for rallies in eight cities, spending two weeks on the road telling their stories and learning together. Their message reached millions of Americans through national media coverage. Their commitment—like the dedication shown by those who fasted for weeks to support immigration reform in 2013 or the Ferguson activists, who marched all night long for Michael Brown—show the kind of change that small groups of people can bring about if they share a consuming purpose. We need to try to match this intensity in all the teams we're building if we expect to keep pace with the forces we're up against.

Clear Roles

Having a shared purpose and a sense of urgency doesn't mean that we all have to do the same work. The third key to successful groups is that they differentiate roles, based on talents and interests. And they're rigorous about making sure that people are in the *right* roles. This is also an area where we can learn from the 2008 Obama campaign. The core unit of the campaign's field program was the Neighborhood Team. Each team (sometimes referred to as a Snowflake) had a Neighborhood Team leader—a volunteer who was responsible for coordinating the activities of the group. Paid field organizers would typically be responsible for coaching the volunteer team leaders from three to five Neighborhood Teams. Each member of the Neighborhood Team had a specific role (e.g., phone bank captain or canvas captain) with defined goals (e.g., talking to *X* number of voters). The key was that everyone had both a role and clear goals and there were straightforward measures to figure out if the role was right for that person. This commitment to roles and goals led volunteers to take their responsibilities seriously and allowed people to rely on one another. Ultimately, it made it possible to coordinate the work of 2.2 million volunteers, through ten thousand teams, led by thirty thousand leaders.[18]

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When I was first taught organizing, I was warned to beware that some people would take positions of authority because they spoke well or had dominant personalities—but end up not doing the work. To avoid this pitfall, I was told to build organizations based on "relational" rather than "positional" power. Under this thinking, the people who lead should be the ones who've demonstrated the willingness to do the work. This often meant putting off the question of who would fill which roles, such as chairperson or team captain. Instead, people would take on specific tasks. Besides being crucial for each person's own development, this gave everyone a sense of who was really willing to work. But people's roles on the team were undifferentiated—each person's role was to show up for meetings when possible.

One downside of this approach was that the organizer (the paid staff person who initially built relationships with people and brought them together) would often remain at the center of the team rather than fading back. In the absence of elected leaders, and without people having clear roles, the organizer became the de facto chairperson. The organizer might be doing important work in helping create trust on the team and keeping work moving ahead. But this came at the expense of leaders owning their team and driving its work forward. At worst, people would wait for the organizer to give them their assignments or tell them the date of the next meeting. When organizers were honest, they'd admit that they continued to attend the meetings of their strongest teams because that was where the action was, not because they needed to be there. And when organizers spent time with existing teams, they had less time to build new ones.

The team-role-goal approach is an important corrective that brings organizers and grassroots volunteer leaders back to their original mission of developing people's leadership skills. The job of the person setting up a team, whether a paid organizer or

volunteer leader, is not to chair the team or even to attend most meetings. It's to have a coaching relationship with the team's coordinator or chairperson. The role of the person leading the team is to make sure that all members have the right role and are clear about what goals they're trying to achieve and how they fit into the team's larger purpose. This isn't always easy. It takes figuring out what people are good at, making big asks of people, and regularly assessing whether people are delivering in the role they've taken on.

Trusting teams to get the work done requires investing in more systematic training and development for people who take on roles. Organizations that have shifted to this approach have been able to build more teams and organize more people. But to do this, they've had to change how their organizers spend their time (more coaching, challenging, and training of team leads; less hands-on facilitating of meetings). They've blurred the line between paid organizers and volunteer leaders—making it everyone's business to wake people up and organize them into teams. And they've created more structured and predictable training programs so people don't have to wait for a paid organizer to tell them what comes next. Faith in New York—a grassroots organizing group in New York City—has held ten-week leadership schools in each borough in the city. During the two and a half months that people are "in school," they're expected to build teams at their congregations. Some teams may crash and burn. Some people may take on roles that aren't a good fit and then not let go. Other teams won't have enough internal trust for people to hold each other accountable. But not all teams need to succeed if we have enough of them to build a movement.

A Learning Culture

Teams bond through action. But to grow and thrive, they also need to set aside time to learn together and reflect on what

they're doing. Teams need to be places where people feel that their development matters as much as any other task. Creating a learning culture is the fourth key to setting up teams for success. What made the anti-slavery movement societies and populist cooperatives powerful was that they created conditions for people to develop an independent analysis of what was happening in the world and what it would take to bring about change. Engaging successfully in social change requires stripping away myths we're taught about how society and politics work. Small groups are an ideal place for this kind of learning because they give people a chance to test out new ideas and try on new roles.

Teams need to be places where people feel that their development matters as much as any other task.

You can foster a learning culture on a team by getting people to regularly reflect on powerful experiences, including what's happened to them in the past and what they've done together as a team. People learn best from experiences that bring forth strong emotions. We remember what we feel. Through our hearts, we rethink our values, connect the dots between stories that seem unrelated, see our lives in a new light, and reimagine what's possible. This is especially true for adults, whose minds are already wired by everything they've gone through. Without setting aside time for intentional reflection, people can engage in a lot of activity without learning much or keep powerful experiences buried. As with building trust, promoting an orientation to learning and personal development on teams can be done by engaging in regular practices of reflection—for example, by asking each person to share how he or she felt after significant activities undertaken by the group. These practices set an expectation that participation will lead people to greater wisdom.

If your team is anchored in an institution—like a school or religious congregation—dedicated to people's spiritual and emotional development, you may have a head start in creating

a learning culture. People may arrive primed to expect that their personal growth is valued. If you don't have an organizational culture to draw on, the risk is higher that a small group will fall into a string of unprocessed tasks and activities. You can correct for this by being more rigorous about setting group norms upfront and by incorporating reflection into the life of the team. You have to take the time to intentionally create the team's culture—for example, by starting every meeting with a discussion of a reading and how it relates to people's lives or by asking people to share the norms they want the group to abide by. The less well people know one another, the more untethered a group is from a larger structure, or the greater the crisis, the more structured activity you should build into the agenda. Practices that ask people to go around a circle responding to a question may seem awkward at first, but they signal that everyone's voice matters and that the work is both about making changes in the world and about developing the skills and thinking of the participants.

One popular framework that teams can use to structure reflection comes from Catholic social teaching in Latin America. It has four steps—*see*, *judge*, *act*, and *revise*—that can serve as the agenda for a single meeting or the elements of a cycle of work unfolding over months.

See refers to people talking about the pain and pressure they experience in their lives. The goal is to develop a shared understanding of the social reality that the group is trying to change. This is the principle of beginning with people's lived experience and emotion, rather than running directly into issues and tasks. This step can be as simple as asking people what pressures they are facing or problems in their lives they are trying to solve. These are also good questions that a team can use when it's building a larger base in the community, which is discussed in the next chapter.

The next step, *judge*, is not about judging people but about comparing the current reality to our values. This step can involve

reading a text or watching a video and then talking about the gap between the world as it is and as it should be and about who is benefiting from the gap. It's meant to build the group's social and political analysis so people understand clearly the forces they're up against and the significance of their work.

Act means taking action to bring about concrete changes in people's lives. Teams aren't just study groups. A group's energy and growth come from acting together (such as meeting with a mayor or bank president to talk about evictions, holding a vigil at an immigration detention center, or walking fast-food workers back to their jobs after a strike). The action a group takes can involve both reaching out to other people (chapter 6) and directly engaging the powers that be (chapter 7). This external work is the oxygen that keeps groups healthy. It's especially powerful when the team designs and leads action directly, rather than just participating in events organized by others. Acting together not only builds trust but also gives people shared experiences to reflect on.

Revise is the point at which people reflect on what was learned from acting together. Reflection and evaluation go hand in hand and are both essential, but they're slightly different activities that shouldn't be confused. Good debriefs begin with reflection, which is about how people feel. This is the emotional stuff people need to say and hear from others. It cannot be argued with: I feel what I feel. Next comes evaluation, which is about comparing what the group set out to do with what was accomplished: what worked, where people fell short, and what lessons were learned. A sign of good organizing is that people know instinctively to circle up after whatever they did together, rather than dribble off—which is the usual tendency—and that before rushing into what mistakes were made, everyone has a chance to say how he or she felt about the experience.

The see-judge-act-revise process is one of many that teams can use to develop their members into leaders. Regardless of

what processes and activities you choose, the starting place for creating a culture of learning is to convey to people that they are ends, not means—that their experiences, emotions, learning, and growth matter to the group's success. And then set aside enough time to stop and think, to hash out all the different ways in which people make sense of the world, to learn together. The payoff for an organizing team comes when it turns its collective experiences fighting for justice into powerful new stories that can be recounted over and over and that provide people with confidence and clarity to take on bigger fights.

Ultimately, for small, self-directed teams to thrive and serve as the fuel cells for social movements, they need to be connected to one another and supported by larger systems and structures. People on teams need training and coaching to carry out their roles successfully. They need ways to communicate with one another and coordinate their work to achieve bigger goals. Without support and coordination, teams can float off, wither, or simply become tools for getting people to do things. If we're serious about acting through many distributed teams, we need to make their health and well-being a primary focus of our organizations. The American Antislavery Society and the populists grew so large because they had agents, lecturers, and organizers who traveled around the country knitting face-to-face groups into a larger movement. A similar dynamic energized the Brazilian Base Communities discussed in the next section.

Pulling the Pieces Together into a Movement

Sometimes, we might feel like we have to choose between small groups that are inwardly focused on the needs of their members and groups that are externally focused on changing the world. But this doesn't need to be an either/or choice. Teams can combine the burning purpose of an antislavery society with the commitment to mutual support and growth

that is a hallmark of small-group ministries at churches like Saddleback. And by integrating personal and social transformation, small groups can be more attractive to people and easier to spread.

One example of the contagiousness of groups that nourish souls while acting politically comes from Brazil. In the early 1960s, Catholic priests and nuns in Brazil began to experiment with small informal groups that brought together laypeople—mostly in poor rural and urban areas—to read the Bible and reflect on its relevance to their lives. The groups typically had fifteen to twenty-five people. Many used the see-judge-act-revise process discussed in the previous section. They would gather weekly for meetings that included prayer, discussion of the political and social dimensions of Christian faith, and sharing of concrete problems faced by members. Often these discussions would lead the group to take action together to resolve a community issue or join larger organizing efforts in their area. Group members saw this participation in the community as "every bit as religious as prayer."[19]

Over time, these groups came to be known as Basic Ecclesial Communities, or Base Communities. People in countries across Latin America were forming Base Communities during the 1960s and '70s, but the Brazilian Catholic Church was unique in the degree to which church leadership embraced this new model of religious action as a primary strategy for growing their institution. While each Base Community was self-governing and led by its members, "pastoral agents" (mostly priests and nuns) would visit on a regular basis. Catholic dioceses developed materials and brought members of Base Communities together for larger regional, and ultimately national, gatherings. Brazil's most prominent theologians wrote extensively about Base Communities.[20] They viewed the ways in which the groups linked popular prayer and social action as God's will at work in the world.

The priests and nuns who first experimented with Base Communities were deeply influenced by liberation theology. They viewed the poor and their struggle for justice as being at the center of history and Christianity. Like Pope Francis today, they made personal encounters with people in poverty a cornerstone of their ministries. Hundreds of men and women—both clergy and laypeople—moved into rural and urban areas to work with people who were most excluded from the Brazilian economy and society. They created organizing structures—small groups grounded in faith, engaged in the world, led by laypeople. These groups spread because they met people's spiritual hunger and material needs and gave them tools to be agents in transforming their communities and, ultimately, Brazilian society. By the 1980s, there were an estimated one hundred thousand Base Communities in Brazil alone, with approximately two million members.[21]

While the leaders of the Brazilian Catholic Church did not *create* the Base Community strategy, they *embraced* the structure and ethic. This institutional support helped the groups grow in the poorest areas of the country. The relationship was symbiotic. Support from the bishops fueled the growth of the Base Communities, making them one of the most dynamic social forces in Brazilian society. At the same time, the Base Communities reinvigorated Catholicism in Brazil. They brought people back to the church. They also gave church leaders a clearer focus on the structural causes of poverty and inequality—at a time when many Catholic churches in Latin America and globally were moving in a more conservative direction.

The rapid growth of Base Communities in Brazil coincided with a brutal military dictatorship, which ruled the country for two decades, from 1964 to 1985. With training and support from the United States and Great Britain, the Brazilian military wiped out peasant and urban social organizations, as well as left-wing political groups. The regime killed and disappeared

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hundreds of people and tortured more than thirty thousand. Its economic policies halted land reform and undermined labor organizing. The dictatorship made life immensely more difficult for the rural and urban poor.

Base Communities were one of the few spaces in Brazilian society where people could resist the generals and the economic interests that stood behind them. Some historians say that by repressing social action, the military dictatorship unintentionally increased the focus of Base Communities on the political education of their members. At the same time, the Catholic Church was one of the only institutions with enough independent power to stand up to the generals. Ultimately, this made it possible for both the Base Communities and the bishops to play a critical role in the gradual process of ending military rule in the 1980s.

Once Brazil began its long transition to elected government, the Base Communities provided the foundation for Brazil's most important political movements. This included the Workers' Party and the Landless Workers Movement, as well as a host of other grassroots organizations. Many social movement leaders began their organizing lives as members of Base Communities. In many areas, Base Communities constituted a large part of the membership of nominally secular social justice organizations. And the democratic ethic and participatory practices of Base Communities shaped the culture of Brazilian social movements, making them some of the most dynamic and democratic in the world.

In 2003, the Workers' Party went from being a broad-based social movement to being elected to lead Brazil. Over the next thirteen years, the party disappointed many in its base by adopting economic policies that were viewed as too pro-business. It doubled down on oil and gas extraction. And then it became ensnared in a series of corruption scandals. At the same time, the party led one of the world's most successful efforts to reduce

poverty and economic inequality. The Workers' Party implemented a conditional cash transfer program, called Bolsa Familia, which provides money to families that meet certain conditions, such as school attendance for children. As a result of this and other government initiatives, the poverty rate in Brazil fell from 22 percent in 2003—when the Workers' Party was elected to lead the country—to 7 percent in 2011. This moved thirty-five million Brazilians into the working class and made the country a global model for efforts to eliminate poverty. Tina Rosenberg described Bolsa Familia as "likely the most important government anti-poverty program the world has ever seen."[22]

The relationship between the Catholic Church, Base Communities, social movements, and the Workers' Party is a long and complex story that merits its own book. For our purposes though, the history of the Brazilian Base Communities provides a window into how teams that nurture spiritual and social development can become mass movements able to transform the lives of millions of people, religious institutions, and society. They show that it's possible to take the nurturing elements of small-group ministries and fuse them with a passion to change structures that perpetuate racism and poverty. That spirit makes it possible for people who've been excluded from decision making to build big enough constituencies to negotiate their interests—the focus of the next chapter on base building.

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6

Base

Recruiting a Following You Need to Lead

The purpose of social justice teams in larger movements for change is to build a large base of people powerful and unified enough to negotiate their own freedom and well-being. Beware of the team that becomes a clique or a social club or takes whoever shows up and hopes things will work out. We don't win because we're right. As I've said throughout this book, we are up against powerful people who are usually very clear about their interests. They will give up only as much opportunity, resources, and influence as they must. And they will work every day to increase their profits and power. We get only as much justice as we can negotiate. That requires going into negotiation with leverage, which is what building a base makes possible.

If we want a company to change its environmental practices, we need a large enough base of consumers willing to participate in a boycott. If we want our employer to raise wages and benefits, we need a large enough group of workers willing to withdraw their labor by going out on strike. If we want an elected official to do the right thing, we need voters willing to throw the official out of office if he or she refuses. Our leverage comes from having enough of us willing to use our bodies, votes, and

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dollars to consistently disrupt injustice and discrimination. The strength of our base is what brings the powers that be to the table. Everything else is wishful thinking.

Like the first three conversations about purpose, story, and team, base building is a way of thinking about change that shifts how we act and build organizations. People will ask, "Why do we need to talk to so many people when we already know the problems?" I heard this a lot when I was organizing in Flint, Michigan, which had no shortage of problems. Going out and meeting hundreds of people on their terms to hear their stories and concerns may seem like slow work, especially when you already have a pretty good sense of what people are angry about. But listening helps us find and enroll organic leaders, people who may not be big talkers but whom others look to for guidance. Many people will tell us no when we invite them to come to a meeting. Some will say maybe but mean no. A few will say yes, but even some of those will also flake out. The true yesses are the people who believe in miracles before they happen, are willing to work (not just talk!), and are respected enough to move other people.

Once people do come together, molding individuals with different identities, ideas, and hesitations into a constituency happens in fits and starts. It's a process full of doubt. When will things ever take off? Why so often two steps forward, one step back? Yet we put everything we're fighting for at risk if we skip this careful work of organizing people into a base prepared to act together against opposition, especially if we are building multiracial organizations and movements, without which we face a bleak future. Seeing a group of people stand up and walk together toward freedom is glorious—even if it doesn't happen on schedule.

This chapter has four parts. The first section explains what a base is and why it creates the leverage necessary to negotiate change. The second describes three beliefs that make base

building possible. The third shares practices that you can use to build a base. The fourth focuses on how to work with a group of people to clarify their vision and goals so that they can act together with purpose.

Base Building as a Path to Freedom

A classic example of base building is the story of Exodus. When God asks Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt to freedom, Moses denies God's request four times. More than whether Pharaoh will listen (or have him killed!), Moses is afraid his own the people will reject him. He asks God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). Moses worries that the people will not believe that he was sent by God, that they will not listen to him because he is not eloquent. God answers each objection that Moses raises, explaining how to organize the elders to win over their support; showing Moses how he could use what he already had in his hand to persuade Pharaoh; and telling Moses, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exodus 4:12). Yet still Moses begs God to send someone else.

Moses worries that the people will not believe that he was sent by God. Even after Moses relents, he keeps returning to God to complain about his base. The first crisis comes when Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites have three days off to pray in the desert. Not only does the king of Egypt dismiss their request; he tells the slaves that since they are making trouble, they will now have to work harder. The Egyptians will no longer give them straw to make the bricks. Moses is clearly on shaky terms with his constituency. The Israelites ignore him and go directly to Pharaoh to complain. Pharaoh taunts them: "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now, and work, No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number

of bricks" (Exodus 5:17–18). The Israelite leaders blame Moses for their plight, saying to him, "You have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hands to kill us" (Exodus 5:21). Moses keeps the cycle of blame going, scolding God, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?" (Exodus 5:22).

In his book *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, Charles Payne tells a similar story about the fight for voting rights in the most violent and segregated counties in the Deep South. He describes a moment in Greenville, Mississippi, when the local power structure made a strategic "miscalculation" that boosted the movement to organize the town. Young organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had done months of slow base building through one-on-one conversations, house meetings, and door-to-door canvassing. Their work was met with beatings and shootings. Most Black people in Greenville were still watching from the sidelines. But some were beginning to quietly provide financial and material support. An increasing number were going to the courthouse to try to register to vote. The county board of supervisors began to see a movement afoot. So they retaliated by "halt[ing] most distribution of surplus commodities from the federal government [which for] 27,000 people in the county, most of them Black . . . were the main source of sustenance during the winter months."[1]

This collective punishment was akin to Pharaoh's forcing the slaves to make bricks without straw or the violence meted out against Black Memphis in response to the sanitation strike. It made some people wish that the waters had not been troubled. But on the whole, it helped fuse the community together. As Charles Payne says, "It put some people in a position where they no longer had anything to lose by trying to register. It made plain a point [that civil rights] workers always want to put across, that there was a connection between exclusion from

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the political process and poverty."[2] Many people from Greenville and allies around the country rallied to create a community food distribution program through the churches. This brought to the fore people who hadn't attended citizenship schools or tried to register, who might not have seen themselves as political. And it began to touch thousands of people directly in their day-to-day lives. Bob Moses, the architect of the Mississippi push, described how "people were standing in line in front of the church waiting for food while their plantation owner was riding by . . . telling them to go back to the plantations . . . and they [the plantation workers] were telling them that they were going to stand there and get their food because their children were hungry."[3]

SNCC's first effort to organize Mississippi in the small city of McComb had failed when the Black community reached a point where they could not take any more of the violent reaction from the White power structure. Community leaders asked the organizers to leave. But in Greenville—as in the story of Exodus—the organizers and the community made it over the bridge. The oppression they faced strengthened them, rather than crushed them. Ultimately, they succeeded in making Greenville an "organized town." That meant that local leaders had built enough of an organized base to continue to fight and win organizing battles long after SNCC had left and the national fervor around the civil rights movement faded. This is akin to what Jane McAlevey describes in her book *No Short Cuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* as the muscle that unionized workers develop through repeated strikes showing employers that they have no choice but to negotiate with their employees.[4]

A paradox of Exodus is that if God had decided to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery, why not free them directly? Why choose to work through Moses and an extended confrontation with Pharaoh? What are the lessons of the story not only about the ethics of slavery but about how change takes place

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and the role that faith plays? First, faith is not always (re)built overnight—it comes from lived experience—from directly seeing justice happen in the world. Second, people need to become ready for their own liberation. They need to build the fortitude to take the risks needed to break free from oppression. And third, liberation is a collective experience that happens in the context of confrontation. Freedom cannot be granted; it must be taken—together.

And just as the base is being tested, so are the leaders. The self-doubt that Moses feels is no different from what anyone faces who is building a constituency for change under uncertain conditions. At times, God tells Moses to stop overthinking things and just lead. Other times, God says to share power with others. God tells Moses to gather seventy elders and says, "I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone" (Numbers 11:17). This is good organizing advice, but the extended and conflict-filled relationship between Moses and God makes it clear that Moses is struggling with something deeper than organizing mechanics. He cannot build a constituency that he can lead to freedom until he figures out whether he believes in himself and in others.

Three Beliefs That Make Base Building Possible

Before we can get to the practical steps of building a base, we need to bring an understanding about people and power to the table. The first belief that we need to have—or act like we have, despite our doubts—is that enough willing people are out there, waiting to be invited into a movement for freedom and justice. Charles Payne says of Fannie Lou Hamer, who became one of the most important figures in the civil rights movement, that "[l]ike so many of the others, it wasn't so much that she was found by the movement as that she had been searching for it."[5] Hamer

had been a sharecropper for years and was working as the timekeeper on a plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi, when she heard from her pastor and a friend about a voting rights meeting. She'd already been involved in the NAACP and other political activities. After she attended the mass meeting organized by SNCC, she attempted to register to vote. Her boss told her that she had to either withdraw her application or lose her job at the plantation. She decided that standing up for her right to vote was worth losing her job. She left the plantation and hid for a while. She went on to teach citizenship classes and become a field secretary with SNCC. Later, as the vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she spoke at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, leading the effort to break the back of formal racial segregation in American politics.

All evidence shows that if you have enough conversations with enough people, knock on enough doors, make enough phone calls, ask enough people for referrals, and open enough doors for people to walk through, you'll find enough people willing to get involved and speak out. You'll build a base of people who will go on to build their own bases. The question, like the one Moses wrestled with, is whether you have the courage to face the rejection, ill humor, and sometimes violence that come along the way.

The second belief that we need is that people are brilliant. They have the skills and talent to build organizations and lead change. People are the precious resources out of which social movements are built. Charles Payne argues that much of the lasting social and political impact of the civil rights movement flowed from Ella Baker and Septima Clark, who taught the importance of leadership development and organizing "spade work" over flashy events. Baker mentored and challenged at one point or another all the best-known civil rights icons, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Moses. Clark founded and spread citizenship schools that taught political and organizing

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skills to thousands of African American working people. Payne writes about the two women: "Part of the legacy of people like Ella Baker and Septima Clark is a faith that ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, of acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people."[6]

When I was organizing with parents at public schools in Philadelphia, a woman named Dolores Shaw started to show up at parent meetings at an elementary school that had a student population that was about 40 percent African American and 60 percent Latino. At the beginning, most of the other parents saw Dolores as disruptive. She would egg people on about how Latino kids needed to stop speaking Spanish and learn English. Other parents pushed back on Dolores. But she kept coming to meetings. Over time, she built relationships with Latino parents. People came to rely on her fierceness and self-confidence, the traits that initially drove everyone crazy. At one point, the group demanded that the school hire more teachers who spoke Spanish. Dolores surprised everyone by speaking out in support of the proposal at a public meeting, more strongly than anyone else in the room. By that point, relationships had shifted her understanding of the world and her place in it.

Dolores ended up playing an important role in a series of high-profile campaigns in Philadelphia, including cochairing the negotiating team that reached an agreement with First Union Bank to keep open eleven inner-city bank branches, and make hundreds of millions of dollars in loans available in her and other neighborhoods, as part of the largest bank merger in Philadelphia history. I remember being in her kitchen as she cooked dinner for her family while she was also talking on the phone to a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter. When the call was over, she looked at me and said, "Who in the world would have imagined that a news reporter would be calling me up about my

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opinion about anything?" The truth is that the call made perfect sense. If you strip away the prejudices that conflate where people live, their formal education, and their race with civic virtue and a right to be heard—which is what organizing does—you get Dolores Shaw and Fannie Lou Hammer. And that makes a movement possible—but only if we believe in each other.

The third belief that makes the difference is that our power in the world to create a good life for ourselves and for those we love flows from the relationships we have with other people. What gives us power is having a constituency. Without a base, we have no choice but to rely on good intentions and on systems being fair, neither of which we can count on in times of crisis. Some people appear to be leaders but are not accountable to the people on whose behalf they say they speak. Those are phantom leaders whose power turns on the fickleness of the media and other elites. The ticket to true leadership and power in a world on fire is a following, which is what a base comes down to. Here's how to build one.

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How to Build a Base Powerful Enough to Negotiate Change

Once we embrace base building as necessary for social change, some useful practices can help us organize a large constituency. These practices boil down to careful analysis of our own networks and resources combined with a willingness to go out and patiently listen to and build relationships with lots of people.

Mapping Power Relationships

The first work is to find people who can help us map power relationships. We need to do careful work to understand the power of the people who run the place. But we also need to

map out the power of our constituency so that we maximize its influence. One of the most interesting parts of the story that Charles Payne tells in *I've Got the Light of Freedom* is the relationship between Robert Moses and Amzie Moore. Moses was the visionary leader of SNCC. He came south from Harlem with a master's degree in philosophy from Harvard. Moore was the president of the Cleveland, Mississippi, NAACP and a longtime civic leader in the state. Moore grew up on a plantation and had lost his mother at a young age. In the 1930s, Moore was involved in the Black and Tan Party, an organization of Black Republicans. Like many other African American men of the time, he'd come back from WWII motivated both to build a more prosperous life for his family and to take on segregation. Moore knew everyone. "Moore gave Moses an oral history of the state and a political map, analyzing and laying out the whole cast of characters across the state, bringing [him] in on who were the players, how to work with them, what to expect from this one, what this one's orientation was."[7] Together they sketched out what would become the "Mississippi movement of the sixties." Moses, Ella Baker, and other SNCC staff taught this same political curiosity to organizers before they began work in any town or county. SNCC was unique in hiring a staff from different backgrounds, but most of those who worked as organizers grew up in working-class families in the Deep South. Part of SNCC's strength was its ability to surface young people who could organize their own towns, paid or unpaid, and build strong trust relationships with elders like Amzie Moore.

Given time and the right conversations, the social networks and power dynamics that shape life in a community can be made visible. Often the most powerful relationships are hidden, just as the best-networked people are usually the hardest to catch up with. But nothing is impossible with time and curiosity. To reorganize a community, we need to understand

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its economic base: who owns the capital and the land, who employs the labor and how that is changing. We need to "follow the money" to understand the economic interests that stand behind the politicians.

As we put a community under an x-ray, we're looking for people with both formal and informal authority. Make a list of fifteen to twenty of the most powerful people in your environment (your community, city, or state). Be rigorous. Identify people who have influence over others—because of their formal positions as employers or government officials, through their control of money or institutions, or because people respect and trust them. We need to get close to people who run things—our mayors, councilpeople, and business owners. We don't have to agree with people about everything, or even much at all, to create relationships with them. We give people in positions of authority too much power over us when we don't hold them close enough to know their ins and outs. Your list should also include people who lead civic and religious institutions (visiting these people often gives us useful information and also communicates that what we are building is meant to be open and collaborative to existing organizations and institutions). But don't stop there. Identify more informal leaders, those who don't hold positions but whom people look to when they have problems or questions. Every town and city has young people like those who took to the streets in Ferguson and woke up the nation. They also need to be part of your power map.

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Start with People Closest to the Pain

As we map power relationships and begin to build a base, the most urgent listening we need to do is with people who

are closest to the pain of injustice, who've been most pushed around. This includes people who are formerly incarcerated, undocumented, low-wage workers, public school parents, bus riders, and public-housing tenants. They've experienced the trauma of systems out of whack. They know how things work. In Faith in Action, we focus on the combustion that is possible when you bring people who have the most on the line together with religious institutions and people of faith, who can frame issues in moral terms (they're often the same people).

For example, IndyCAN, a faith-based organization affiliated with Faith in Action in Indiana, partnered with the local chamber of commerce to win more than $1 billion in financing for an equitable public transit system for their region. As part of this campaign, grassroots leaders from IndyCAN went to bus stops to listen to the concerns of bus riders. They'd invite people they talked with to participate in organizing meetings, lobby days, and public events in support of mass transit. The combination of bus riders, business leaders, and the faith community successfully lobbied the Republican-controlled Indiana legislature and Governor Mike Pence to approve legislation to enable a regional ballot measure to raise taxes to fund a public transit system. Combining a base of people who are directly impacted by policy decisions with a moral message and influential institutions is a powerful recipe for changing unjust systems.

The Fight for $15 is another example of a breakthrough in organizing people who have been most marginalized by society. Contrary to the stereotypes of kids working part-time jobs, fast-food workers are often parents working multiple jobs to sustain their families. They not only receive low wages but also face dangerous working conditions and unpredictable hours. There has been a long history of neighborhood organizers finding low-wage workers who could tell their stories in support of city and state

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campaigns to raise the minimum wage. But the organizers whose work led to the Fight for $15 wanted to go beyond recruiting spokespeople and build an active base of workers. With support from Service Employees International Union (SEIU), organizers in New York City began to experiment with new strategies for reaching out to fast-food workers directly at their workplaces. They developed "raps" (short scripts) that helped organizers go into restaurants and talk to workers about working conditions. Organizers used Facebook ads to create lists of workers who wanted to make changes in their workplaces. These techniques enabled the Fight for $15 to identify thousands of fast-food workers willing to walk off the job for better wages and a union.[8]

A Constituency Is Not Abstract

You need to be precise about the specific people you're organizing into a constituency. SEIU's membership base includes many low-wage workers, who've won better wages and benefits through collective bargaining. But low-wage workers are not really a constituency. It's a label we give to people who do many different jobs in different places under different circumstances. In the 1980s, SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign organized women and men who clean large office buildings. SEIU organizers had to figure out what workers they were organizing, at what buildings, in what cities. The same is true for Fight for $15 (which needed to identify what restaurant chains in what cities) or any other successful organizing drive. Until we can make a list of the people we intend to organize and describe them specifically enough to find them in the flesh, we're just organizing ideas, not people.

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The Power of Listening

The process of building a base is as simple as going out and talking to people about what they care about, what they want to see changed, what makes them angry. When W. W. Law returned home from fighting in WWII, he became a leader in the Savannah, Georgia, branch of the NAACP and found work as a postman. He told me that delivering mail accomplished two goals: it gave him a salary that didn't depend on the local power structure, and it put him out on the streets talking to people every day. As Law walked the streets delivering the mail, he built a political base. Through thousands of conversations over many years, he developed a large and loyal constituency that was willing to follow him and the NAACP into battle. That base sustained sit-ins and weekly mass meetings. It showed the Savannah power structure that it was up against a unified community. Law's ability to represent people whom he was in regular conversation with was his ticket to credible leadership and influence.

Base building works because we're social beings. Over time, if you talk to enough people and then bring some of them together, you'll shift the power dynamic in a community. Take ten people in a community who share common views but don't know one another. Now bring them together to get to know one another. Research shows that they will each become more influential and persuasive in their community.[9]

Similarly, the main factor determining whether people vote is whether their friends, family members, coworkers, and neighbors are voting. People give many reasons for why they voted or not, but these are after-the-fact rationalizations. Research shows that what actually leads people to vote is social pressure from the people around them.[10] This is one reason why door-to-door canvassing, especially by people from the same neighborhood, increases voter turnout.[11] If organizing and base building

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reach a high enough intensity, you can wake up any community. You can create a culture in which political participation is the expected norm.

Hard Asks

The primary skill that drives base building forward is the ability to make hard asks that challenge people to step up and take leadership. We don't do people favors when we talk to them but fail to propose a compelling next step. Giving someone a thoughtful proposition is a gift. Asking is an art form. Propositions should be big enough to be somewhat surprising but not so big that they overwhelm. We're aiming for small steps that are significant. Make the ask and then stop talking. Wait for the answer. Don't step on your ask.

However, the most powerful propositions are not requests for someone to do a piece of work. They're to become a new person. Turning yourself into a public person with the power to shape the world is not easy. Like the Hebrew slaves, we inevitably face harsh opposition that tells us to get back into our passive places in society. We're dismissed as having nothing to offer. We're just making trouble. It's easy to conclude that the struggle to find our voices and our freedom isn't worth the pain. If you're working to build power—whether you're a grassroots community leader working as a volunteer or a paid organizer—your job is to motivate people to keep moving forward despite the resistance they face.

Make Listening a Campaign

Unfortunately, listening and base building often take a backseat to seemingly more exciting organizing activities like protests and rallies. One way to counter that tendency is to treat the work of bringing new people to the table and developing their

leadership skills as campaigns, with specific numeric goals, deadlines, a communications plan, and a distribution of roles.

The United Farm Workers used "house meetings" to build their movement. They propositioned people to invite their coworkers, friends, and neighbors to their homes for an hour or hour-and-a-half conversation. At a typical house meeting, the host starts by explaining his or her personal motivation and the goals of the organization that he or she is helping build. People are asked to share their stories and concerns. At the end, participants are propositioned to organize their own meetings. House meetings create a concrete test for hosts, whose leadership potential is demonstrated by their ability to gather people. The meetings surface ideas and potential new leaders. And the people who attend can decide to keep meeting and develop into an organizing team. Thousands of organizations have used house-meeting campaigns to build their memberships and find new leaders. House meetings were a major component of the 2008 Obama campaign's process for recruiting volunteers and organizing neighborhood teams to contact voters.

Listening campaigns can be structured in other ways as well. "Listening Sabbaths" can bring people together after religious services to share their stories and concerns. When I was organizing in schools in Philadelphia, we learned that you could reach more parents through grade meetings—short listening sessions for parents from each grade. More parents would attend a grade meeting than a schoolwide meeting, presumably because the invitation for all third-grade parents is more personal and relevant. That's an example of the power of small groups. "What matters is not that there was a general invitation that I heard about but that a specific person communicated to me that I was wanted at

"What matters is not that there was a general invitation that I heard about but that a specific person communicated to me that I was wanted at this gathering."

this gathering." That's the key to listening campaigns that reach thousands of people and begin to unlock the social networks within a community.

Imagining a Nationwide Listening Process

In Spain, Podemos (Spanish for "we can") is a populist political party that grew out of the country's antiausterity social movement of *indignados* ("the outraged"). After the party was launched, it held a two-month public discussion process to debate its ethical, political, and organizational structure. More than one hundred thousand people participated. Podemos leaders were trying to build a political party accountable to an organized base of people, unlike any other party in Spain. They were influenced by Latin American indigenous movements, which made nationwide listening processes a key component of their political strategy.

The rapid growth of Podemos flowed from thousands of *circulos* (volunteer groups)—some organized at a neighborhood level, others among people in the same professions—that both debated party decisions and took direct action, such as stopping evictions. In 2014, the Podemos two-month listening campaign culminated in a national congress attended by eleven thousand people. The party membership debated key decisions in public in front of the country. Podemos has also used social networking tools to grow its base. It used crowdfunding to finance its operations and campaigns and two specific social networking tools (Agora Voting and Appgree) to solicit party member preferences on candidates and poll members on policy proposals. It also used Reddit to support discussion within and across *circulos*.[12] This listening and base building has not been easy to sustain over time, but it has helped lead to a shared vision and agenda that fused people together into a movement and has made Podemos the second largest political party in Spain.

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Clarifying Vision and Goals

Because each of us is unique, getting people on the same page and moving forward together can be hard. For one thing, there is the "free-rider" problem, the tendency for some people to sit back and get the benefits of the larger group's work without contributing themselves. Luckily, only a small fraction of any community, state, or country is needed to create a social revolution. Theda Skocpol defines organizations with membership density as those representing at least 1 percent of the target population.[13] For example, Maine People's Alliance has 32,000 dues-paying members from 170 towns and every county in the state.[14] That's about 2.5 percent of Maine's population, which means that decision makers in the state need to take the alliance's agenda seriously.

But even with a small slice of the population, it's still hard to harmonize people's needs and dreams and reach agreement on how to best advance change. Many of us come into organizations with a foggy understanding of how structures shape our lives and which people are profiting from the problems we see around us. Moving a group to clarity about what to do together, and how to do it, takes work and patience. Businesses know their bottom line. That helps them figure out pretty quickly whether they should work together collectively and what demands they should make. But groups of individuals have many different bottom lines that need to be negotiated together through what can feel like endless meetings.

The last thing we want is a base either without a live demand or with a live demand that has no clear strategy for victory.

Getting to a big shared demand and the political strategy to win is a key part of building and sustaining a base. The last thing we want is a base either without a live demand or with a live demand that has no clear strategy for victory. The other common tendency to avoid is that of fragmenting your

base by splitting its efforts and focus across simultaneous campaigns. It's better to spend enough time hashing out strategy and building solidarity so people can sequence demands, rather than breaking into committees and running off in several different directions at once.

The next chapter looks closely at political strategy and policy demands. At this point, I want to focus on how we align people around a vision and specific goals. Let's say that we've listened to the concerns and ideas of fifteen hundred people through house meetings and other listening sessions. We've done research actions with public officials and other people who can help us think through the issues people have raised. We know the biggest pain points in the community and have identified some possible opportunities for action. We want to take everything we've heard and seen and use it to set priorities. We want an agenda and strategy that can unite people and begin to put us on a path toward structural changes.

The first set of questions to ask are about vision. If we release ourselves from constraints for a moment, what is our dream for how the world would look? Describe your promised land as concretely as possible. What would our city, state, or country look like if it reflected your values? How similar are our visions? Then let's discuss our political analysis of the situation we're in: What is our power? How prepared is our base to take action together? Will we hold together against resistance, or will we fold? Whom are we up against? What are their strengths and vulnerabilities? How hard do we think it will be to get them to negotiate? Who are allies who will stand with us? Who's on the fence? This kind of shared analysis helps people begin to consolidate into a base. And it lays the groundwork for people making hard decisions about their priorities.

That leads to the next question: Given our vision and our analysis, what are some concrete goals that we could achieve together? Good organizing goals are *strategic*:[15] they not only

deliver real benefits to our base but also shift power in our direction or set us up for success in future struggles. The SNCC push on voting rights was strategic. It addressed one of the key contradictions keeping Blacks in poverty in the South—a lack of political power to compel investment in education and economic development in Black communities—while forcing the hand of the federal government to pass a national Voting Rights Act.

We also want our goals to be *measurable*. That way, we know if we succeeded or failed and can learn from the experience. A good way to make goals measurable is to ask people to describe what exactly would be different for themselves and people they know if we were successful. In other words, what does success look like? A lot of times when we talk about the changes we want to bring about, we refer to abstract or lofty ideas, such as our children would get a better education or immigrant families would not feel fear of deportation. These fit into the vision discussion. With measurable goals, we want to push into the realm of things that, if we came back from the future, we could legitimately say we won or lost. If it's not possible to say "Yes we won that" or "No we fell short," then we haven't identified a useful measure of success. Say, for example, that the state you live in (Pennsylvania, in this case) is one of three without any standard education funding formula. Instead, politicians decide each year how much money goes to which school districts. Poor urban and rural school systems are underfunded, and the higher the Black enrollment, the worse the disparity. In this case, our measurable success goal could be a funding formula that eliminates the racial disparities immediately and puts us on a five-year path to equalize funding, with extra weights in the funding formula for students with disabilities, English as a second language, and other special needs.

If demands are too small, people lose interest and won't see the necessary effort as worth it. If demands are too large or not

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chunked into pieces, people cannot reach the next step. In 2006, organizations in the PICO network decided to work together and with other organizations toward the goal of covering all children in the United States with health insurance. Some of our labor and community organizing allies felt that starting with children was "low-hanging fruit" that might take pressure off the urgency for broader health reform. But from a base-building perspective, we felt that state fights over expanding health coverage, and a national children's health fight, were good steps toward creating a broader, people-led movement to guarantee health coverage for everyone. Ultimately, winning the campaign to expand children's coverage was harder and took longer than people expected. But it helped build a bigger organized constituency for national health reform. That contributed to the successful push for passage of the Affordable Care Act, after more than one hundred years of failed attempts to provide near universal health coverage in the United States (a victory despite ongoing efforts to repeal and undermine the law).

Some measurable goals might take years to achieve. Still, the goals need to be very clear and well understood. And there needs to be a plausible strategy for winning, with steps along the way or else the goals are just words on paper. The key is that you can say with a straight face, "We'll be back in six months or two years in this room. Let's see if we can get to a point where we could all agree that this goal was met or not." Of course, the greater the goals, the larger and stronger the base we need to win.

In our fight to protect my son's autism program, one of the most difficult moments was when we realized that our base was too small to win. We'd engaged many of the parents who had children in the program, but that was too few people to influence the school board. So we made a decision to begin reaching out to other families without children in special education. For some of us, that meant talking to people for the first time about

our children having autism. We weren't sure what to expect. But hundreds of parents signed our petition, and many came out to board meetings to support us. That response kept us going. I was touched by some of the people I hadn't expected to step forward. And also by those who shared their own stories of struggling with getting the needs of their children met in school. It was a good reminder to not think too small about your constituency. People saw our children as their children. They understood that a web of interdependence tied us together. We don't always see it, yet what we can achieve in the world is tied to our ability to turn that web into a living, breathing movement of people able to confront and negotiate change with those in power.

7

Power
Winning Social Change

In June 2010, as the nation's biggest banks were spending more than $1 million a day lobbying against federal legislation designed to prevent another financial crisis, I took my daughter, Natalia, to New York City for a march on Wall Street. The night before, she'd been in a music program at her elementary school. The chorus sang Black freedom songs and reenacted famous moments in the civil rights struggle. The students (dressed in white shirts and black pants and skirts) captured the moral clarity of that movement. The next day, marching with thousands of people through lower Manhattan, I could feel Natalia's confusion and discomfort. For a time, we were stuck walking alongside people chanting obscenities. But even after we found others to march with, the cacophony of messages and the lack of a clear moral narrative were painful to watch through the eyes of a ten-year-old.

People often associate social movements with large marches and rallies. When strategic and focused, high-profile events can help push demands forward and demonstrate public support. But they can also leave us feeling empty, wondering what we accomplished. For social change to succeed, breakthrough

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moments need to rest on a foundation of strategic grassroots organizing. My Chilean organizing friends describe this as the work of *hormigas* (ants). It involves patiently recruiting people, developing their leadership skills, aligning them around a common agenda, developing strategy together, making demands, and delivering changes that people can see and feel in their lives.

An essential element of this day-to-day organizing is directly confronting (and negotiating with) people who are in positions of authority—those who, if they made different choices, could relieve the suffering and injustice we see around us. This confrontation, which doesn't always feel like a polite discussion, is the fifth conversation essential to social progress. Directly engaging people in power is important because it helps us realize our own power and makes our organizations smarter and more courageous. And the victories we win as a result lay the groundwork for larger-scale legislative and cultural change.

More of this kind of grassroots organizing is going on in the United States (and around the globe) today than we're led to believe in the media—but not enough. Face-to-face organizing aimed at improving people's daily lives is a muscle that we've allowed to atrophy. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam says that participation levels in protests and civil disobedience did not change significantly from 1960 through 2000 (although public acceptance of these activities increased to the point where they no longer surprised people).[1] On the other hand, people's involvement in local political and civic activity fell dramatically during this same period.[2] That has to change if we have any hope of taking on the threats facing our communities and society.

This chapter has three sections. The first shows how face-to-face confrontation with decision makers helps people become agents of change. It offers examples of how this approach works in practice and shares a tool (a "research action") that can be used to structure conversations with authorities and begin

untangling injustice. The second section explains how campaigns working for tangible changes in communities can pave the way for larger state and federal movements. The third section focuses on four principles of strategy that help organizations and movements win change campaigns. The chapter shows how the conversations about purpose, story, team, and base discussed in previous chapters can lead to victories that make people's lives better. It should also help answer the question of how organized people can prevail over wealthy and powerful forces.

Confronting Power

The primary reason for confronting mayors, district attorneys, bank CEOs, and others in positions of authority is to negotiate changes that matter to our families and communities. In doing so we reclaim some of our humanity and agency in the world. Every moment of our waking hours, companies are competing for our attention, trying to sell us products, emotions, and experiences that we may not need or even want. Our political system increasingly follows the same pattern. Candidates, parties, and special interests spend billions of dollars on massive databases and advertising that treat voters as commodities that can be turned out, turned off, or persuaded to vote in certain ways. This "commercialization of politics"[3] can leave many of us feeling alienated from political issues and passive about the decisions that shape our lives.

That begins to change when we sit down face-to-face with decision makers to explain how we're experiencing injustice—whether losing a loved one to gun violence or trying to raise a family on minimum-wage jobs. When we share our pain and probe what can be done about it or demand changes in policies, we go from being objects of someone else's manipulation to agents of our own destiny. The experience can be exciting

and intimidating. It's common for people to have physical reactions of anxiety (like sweaty palms) when they meet with officials. Politicians can use our nervousness and discomfort either to insulate themselves from accountability or to get their way. Lyndon Johnson was famous for using his six-foot-five frame to intimidate people into doing what he wanted (in fact, it has even been called "the Johnson Treatment"). He reportedly would have people come in to talk with him while he was sitting on the toilet, or corner senators whose votes he wanted and lean into them within inches, making his demands.

Although it may not have worked with Johnson, one tool for structuring interactions with powerful people on *our* terms is a "research action." This is a small meeting (attended by perhaps eight to ten people) with a decision maker or someone who has insight into the policies and systems that we're trying to change. Typically, first meetings don't include demands. They focus on figuring out the authority and outlook of the person we're meeting with. We ask questions about how decisions get made. We look for contradictions between what the official says should be happening and what we see taking place. We test out solutions. As with most organizing activities, we prepare ahead of time (to brainstorm questions and distribute roles). Research actions can start with introductions and getting to know the person you're meeting with, move into questions, and conclude with a discussion of next steps (for example, asking the official to attend a larger meeting). What's most important (and sometimes surprising to the person you're meeting with) is showing up with a spirit of curiosity. Often organizations will set up large numbers of research actions after listening campaigns. These meetings with officials and people with expertise help the organization better understand and prioritize issues raised during the listening process and identify opportunities for action.

In studying Faith in Action's work, Paul Speer and Brian Christens found that participation in research actions was the

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best predictor that someone would take on greater leadership in organizations and feel greater agency in their communities.[4] Small meetings with elected officials can be new and unexpected experiences that help people see themselves and the world differently. That's why it's important to move people quickly into face-to-face encounters with decision makers if you want them to stick around and grow.

These experiences help us realize that we're up against other human beings, and human-created rules, rather than fixed truths. Systems that oppress and exclude are more jury-rigged than we think. They're full of contradictions and inconsistencies and especially vulnerable to confrontation by people on whom they've inflicted the greatest pain—like people who've lost their homes to foreclosure or formerly incarcerated men and women working to put their lives back together. That's one reason why social justice campaigns need to be led by people who've had the most direct experience with unjust systems and have the most at stake in change.

The end goal of any system is self-preservation. Survival trumps the loftiest mission statements, which is why people who run systems often violate their stated principles to preserve their privileges. The starting place for transforming a system is understanding that it is governed by a rulebook (a combination of the official policies and the informal ways in which things are usually done). The rules, some of which are usually hidden, lay out who benefits, who is excluded, who can make whom do what, and who makes decisions based on what criteria—who is eligible for health coverage, who can take out student loans at what interest rates, which workers are covered by the minimum wage and which work just for tips. Rulebooks can be rewritten, but we have to understand them first, which is why research actions can be so useful.

For example, early in our campaign to save my son's autism program, we had a series of research meetings with school board

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members and school district staff. These meetings helped us realize that the superintendent was our biggest problem. The school board president was backing him up, which explained why we weren't making any progress with her. When we finally met with the superintendent, he sat for nearly an hour without saying a word. I was sitting next to him and watched his hands shaking slightly (nervousness can work in both directions). Eventually, one of the parents said, "I'd like to hear what the superintendent has to say!" The first thing the superintendent said was, "I don't have children. So I can't know how you feel." And then he said, "I don't want to say anything about the autism program because you'll use what I say against me."

This was the kind of research action where we didn't learn much directly. But when we debriefed afterward (which is as important as the meeting itself), the consensus was that the superintendent didn't have a good grasp of the program. He was, as one parent said, looking at the issue through the "green eyeshades" of an accountant. Our experience of meeting the top guy face-to-face and seeing that he hadn't engaged with the substance of our concerns motivated us to hold another round of conversations with school board members. Showing them the value of the autism program wasn't enough. We had to convince them that they shouldn't defer decisions about the program to the superintendent. In the end, four out of five board members voted to restore funding, with the school board president voting against it. She then voted against the whole $500 million budget, surprising her colleagues, who told her that it was a betrayal to lead a budget process, only to vote against the end result. It turned out that we were caught in a larger debate about the balance of power between the school board and the superintendent. To win, we needed to understand enough about the school board politics to disrupt them—which was possible because we'd done a dozen research actions.

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When we engage public officials on our terms, over time we also become more confident in our power. Here's another example of how engagement can motivate us to keep fighting and help move our agenda forward. On the day after the 2010 midterm elections, I joined two dozen homeowners and clergy who traveled to Washington, DC, to meet with US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner. The night before, we'd ditched our plan to prep for the meeting. Instead, we went to see *Inside Job*, a movie that recounts the extraordinary measures that Geithner and his predecessor, Henry Paulson, took to protect the country's biggest banks.

The next day, we sat around a large conference table on the top floor of the Treasury Building. Rev. Lucy Kolin, from Oakland Community Organizations, chaired the meeting. She did two things that illustrate the personal power that people develop from engaging in lots of face-to-face interactions with decision makers. When the staff wanted to begin without Geithner, saying he would join us later, Lucy politely said, "No, we're happy to wait here until he's available." I wondered if the staff thought that they might end up with a group of clergy and homeowners occupying the Treasury and refusing to leave, because their cell phones immediately came out and magically Geithner appeared soon thereafter. When Geithner sat down at the head of the table, he began to talk. Lucy politely but firmly stopped him and said, "We prepared an agenda that we shared with your staff ahead of time. We'd like to follow that agenda." Geithner did a double take and then said, "I'm not used to that, but okay." And Lucy led the meeting from start to finish.

During the meeting, people shared stories of losing their homes to foreclosure. They told of whole neighborhoods that were financially underwater and half-vacant as a result of the financial crisis. We presented a set of steps the Obama administration could take without Congress (which after the midterm

elections was soon to be in the hands of Republicans) to prevent as many as one million unnecessary foreclosures. We urged Geithner to adopt specific policies that would essentially break the link between homeowners losing their jobs and losing their homes. Geithner listened. He said he sympathized with us and agreed with our analysis but that his hands were tied and he didn't have the power to do what we were asking of him. At that point, one of the pastors lost his temper and asked Geithner how he was able to move heaven and earth to bail out his banker friends but had no power to help families. Geithner didn't have a response.

It was frustrating to see the Treasury secretary's disengagement up close. But sitting down with him helped motivate us to keep fighting. And it clarified our strategy. None of us left believing Geithner's claim that nothing could be done. We saw more clearly the gulf between what the Obama administration said it was doing to stop foreclosures and what it could do. In debriefing after our experience at the Treasury, we recognized that we weren't going to get answers from Geithner. We decided that we needed to focus next door on the White House. So we worked to get a meeting with Gene Sperling, who'd just been appointed to head President Obama's National Economic Council (replacing Larry Summers). Our first meeting with Sperling in the Roosevelt Room was contentious on both sides. We were angry when Sperling left midway. But we'd taken a step forward. We'd been able to put Sperling in a room face-to-face with families who had the most at stake from the decisions he was making—and he'd been willing to argue with us. We knew we were making progress when we began meeting regularly with Sperling upstairs in his cramped West Wing office. But we didn't break through on our demands until Massachusetts Communities Action Network (led by veteran organizer Lew Finfer) was able to get a story about unemployed homeowners facing foreclosure on the front page of the *New York Times* (it

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took six months of working with the reporter to get the story published).[5]

That news story and growing criticism of the Administration's approach to foreclosure gave us leverage to begin negotiating policy changes that covered many of the recommendations we'd originally presented to Secretary Geithner. These included giving unemployed homeowners twelve months of delayed payments to keep their homes until they found new work. The changes that resulted from our cycle of confrontation with the Treasury Department and the White House came too late for many families. But they helped some who would have otherwise lost their homes.

People say that elected officials work for the voters, not the reverse. But this happens only if *we the people* take the initiative. People are less intimated negotiating with an elected official if they've met with that official while he or she was running for office. And when our confrontation with decision makers results in changes that we and others can benefit from directly—such as stopping evictions, getting parents released from immigrant detention centers, or raising wages to put more money in workers' pockets—we become political actors shaping the world. And we lay the groundwork for bigger fights.

Creating Precedent and Momentum for Bigger Changes

Victories that we win from face-to-face confrontation with authorities not only deliver better lives; they also create energy, lessons, momentum, and precedent for larger-scale changes in society—if we connect the dots between the issues we're working on and bigger systems and decisions. People who run things want us to believe that the initiative rests with them. And even our own social justice organizations sometimes fall into the trap of asking us to take small actions for important causes

(say, signing a petition or making a phone call) without giving us ways to engage more deeply. Yet throughout US history, big social change has usually come from collective action that begins in local communities and is led and driven forward by people who have the most at stake in change.

We know from history that large-scale change can take decades of organizing and then come in incredibly short bursts during periods of intense mobilization. The last time that a social movement provoked large-scale structural change in American society was during a brief period in 1964–65. Eight months after becoming president, Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2, overcoming the longest filibuster in US history. The act outlawed discrimination in public accommodations, education, and federal programs (but did not address voting). Four months later, Johnson was re-elected by the largest majority since 1820. He began his term with the biggest Democratic Party majority in Congress since the 1930s. Democrats held 68 seats in the Senate and a 155-vote advantage in the House. Five tumultuous months after the election—a period that included Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama; the successful march from Selma to Montgomery; and the assassination of Malcolm X—Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act, ending four decades of racist immigration quotas that favored Northern and Western European Whites while keeping Asians, Africans, Jews, and Southern Europeans from being able to migrate to the United States. Thirty days later he signed Medicare and Medicaid into law. A week after that, he signed the Voting Rights Act. Each of these laws, plus the Civil Rights Act from the previous summer, fundamentally changed American life. They shifted the racial and ethnic composition of the country, integrated large areas of public life, changed the nature of citizenship, and created a

Large-scale change can take decades of organizing and then come in incredibly short bursts during periods of intense mobilization.

cradle-to-grave health-care safety net. All four laws were deeply intertwined. They were possible only because of a powerful and disruptive civil rights movement that had been building steam for a decade.

The achievements of 1964–65 built on historic legislation won by the labor movement thirty years earlier during a similar window of opportunity. On July 5, 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Labor Relations Act, putting the federal government on the side of organized workers and creating the legal conditions for the emergence of an American middle class. A month later, he signed the Social Security Act, which broke the link between aging and poverty. Pressure for these fundamental pillars of social progress came from a surging labor movement. Working people had lost everything in the Depression and were on the move through a host of organizations making clear demands and willing to disrupt a society that had fallen apart. That kind of social mobilization and structural change is what we need today.

My colleague Joy Cushman describes the process of bottom-up change in the United States as a pyramid. At the base are actions that people can take in their communities to win concrete changes. These are the climate change fights that shut down coal-fired power plants and persuade whole cities to stop buying dirty energy, the mass incarceration fights that get police out of high schools, the jobs fights that remove barriers to airport service workers joining unions. In *Power and Powerlessness*, John Gaventa refers to fights as "limit acts" because they help test the limits of what is possible and set up larger, more structural fights.[6] This level of organizing usually focuses on demanding changes that people can experience in the short term in their lives (like immigrants being able to get driver's licenses despite their not having legal status or returning citizens not being required to disclose a criminal record when first applying for a job).

At the middle layer of the pyramid are campaigns to change policy. Sometimes we use the issues we're working on at the local level to create a new blueprint that can be written into state law. Passing legislation and winning ballot measures requires long-term alliances among organizations that have a broad membership base and political relationships with elected officials. Organizations need to plan ahead (two to four years out or more), sequence campaigns, create the capacity to collect signatures to place measures on the ballot every year (in cities and states that allow citizen initiatives), and build legislative coalitions that can consistently introduce and pass community-initiated bills.

At the top of the pyramid are structural changes that create new rights, fundamentally shift how resources and opportunities are distributed in the society, or significantly alter how political decisions are made. Examples of big transformative national changes include the Emancipation Proclamation, Women's Suffrage, Social Security, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Clean Air Act, the Affordable Care Act, and marriage equality. These achievements involve large-scale social, cultural, and legal changes that are difficult to reverse.

The key to structural changes is that they deliver tangible benefits to people while also shifting the underlying power dynamics in society. For example, state campaigns that re-enfranchise formerly incarcerated men and women help individuals put their lives back together while also expanding the electorate and bringing us closer to one person, one vote. Policies that make state taxes more progressive or that tax capital may not initially raise enormous amounts of revenue, but they create a pathway to a fairer tax system and lay the groundwork for more equitable investment in education. In 2015, the National Domestic Workers Alliance finally won a campaign to bring domestic workers under federal labor protections after seventy-five years of exclusion. That's a big structural victory.

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Some of the most important organizing fights win smaller-scale changes that set up larger battles down the road. For example, campaigns for transparency around police shootings, racial profiling, or mortgage lending disparities have all served as stepping-stones for larger campaigns.

Here is another example of how the bottom-up change process works. In 2010, Contra Costa Interfaith and other community organizations in Richmond, California, organized successfully to bring down youth homicides that were plaguing their city. Clergy and residents held night walks through neighborhoods where shootings were taking place. They worked with city officials to hire and support street workers who connected with gang members to interrupt cycles of revenge-driven violence. And they helped bring a violence-prevention initiative called Ceasefire to Richmond. Rather than flooding neighborhoods with police, Ceasefire refocuses policing on the tiny slice of people who are responsible for most of the violent crime in a community. People at high risk of committing violence are brought in for "call-ins" that include prosecutors, job training and social service providers, and clergy and community leaders. Men and women who are called in are offered a clear choice: either continue what you're doing, and end up going to prison, or decide to exit, and we'll help you build a new life. These different efforts reinforced each other. Ultimately, years of neighborhood organizing, changes in police practices, and unprecedented collaboration among the community, social agencies, and city officials contributed to a 40 percent reduction in the murder rate in the city.

Many of the organizations involved in the movement to reduce gun violence in Richmond went on to work together to reform their county's criminal justice system. An important group driving this change was the Safe Return Project, which was founded by Tamisha Walker and other formerly incarcerated returning citizens. The goal of Safe Return is to break

down the barriers people face when reintegrating into their communities and give those most impacted by mass incarceration a public voice in dismantling it. Building on their success in reducing homicides, Safe Return, Contra Costa Interfaith, and other organizations worked to persuade their county board of supervisors to use new state criminal justice funds to support violence prevention and drug treatment rather than build a new, larger jail. The leadership of people who were formerly incarcerated was a key ingredient in the success of this campaign. They had the strongest personal commitment to fighting for change and the clearest vision for a new approach to criminal justice. And fighting for Ceasefire and seeing it save lives made the grassroots leaders and clergy more confident political players in the county. The night of the vote against expanding the county jail, Jonny Perez, a nineteen-year-old who helped lead the fight, said, "If you told me one year ago that I would help stop the expansion of a jail, I would have called you crazy, but here we are today. I went from being locked up behind someone's jail to stopping the construction at a new jail in my city and county."[7]

Local organizing in Contra Costa and other counties across California in turn paved the way for a path-breaking statewide criminal justice ballot measure in 2014. For years, it was hard to imagine voters supporting policies to empty prisons. Yet that is what organizing does: make the impossible possible and the possible inevitable. Proposition 47, which won with 60 percent of the vote in a midterm election year, reclassified seven nonviolent felonies as misdemeanors.[8] It shifted billions of dollars in savings to education and services for crime victims. It also made it possible for more than a million people to have felonies expunged from their criminal records, removing a hurdle to finding work.

Proposition 47 became a model for people fighting to dismantle mass incarceration across the country. It sent a signal

that public opinion was shifting against two decades of tough-on-crime rhetoric and policy. A year after it passed, Tamisha Walker led a group of formerly incarcerated women and men from across the country into a White House meeting with Valerie Jarrett, President Obama's closest advisor. It took months to persuade Obama administration officials to even allow returning citizens into the White House. The meeting with Jarrett helped break the logjam on a new federal policy to "ban the box" on federal employment applications to reduce hiring discrimination against people with criminal records.

In *The Economy of Cities*, Jane Jacobs writes that "People who run government activities, the world over, tend to seek sweeping answers to problems; that is, answers capable of being applied wholesale the instant they are adopted. [They] do not . . . bring their minds to bear on a particular and often seemingly small problem in one particular place. And yet that is how innovations of any sort are apt to begin."[9] The kind of grassroots organizing practiced in Richmond paves the way for transformation exactly because it starts with the lived experience of people rather than abstract ideas. Similarly, Charles Payne recounts Robert Moses as saying, "The problems to be attacked by the [civil rights] movement were so intertwined that all you could do was break off a piece of it, work on that and see where it led."[10]

Strategy Matters

When you're in the middle of a campaign, it can be hard to know if you're making progress or spinning your wheels. Organizing introduces a new dynamic that tries to disrupt the status quo, making uncertainty about our impact a constant by-product. And the governments and firms that we're trying to influence have little incentive to even acknowledge our existence. Social struggles are inherently asymmetrical because

people-led organizations don't usually have much institutional power or legitimacy. We compensate by thinking together, revisiting our goals, relooking at whom we're really up against (are we talking to the right person or do we need to go further up the chain of command or behind the curtain to where the real power is?), and debating the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of our opponents and ourselves.

If we want to win social change against determined foes, we need to make strategy a constant part of our organizations and movements and include as many people as humanly possible. Strategy, to quote Marshall Ganz, is "how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want."[11] It's the great counterweight to authority. It's how we prevail even when we think we're out of options and how we translate local fights into bigger movements. Here are four elements of strategy—act and adjust, shape the playing field, change the rules, and maximize your leverage—that can be used to increase our power as we face off against well-resourced opponents and work to rip out the roots of racial and economic injustice.

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Act and Adjust

Creating change requires being willing to act despite uncertainty and then adjust your strategy based on how your opponents, allies, and base react. I grew up playing speed chess, which is regular chess using a clock that gives players a fixed (and short) amount of time to make their moves. Like social change, chess involves making the most of your situation in the face of a determined and often-crafty opponent under unpredictable and changing conditions. Experienced chess players

usually begin games by choosing from a long list of possible openings that they've memorized based on thousands of previous games. Yet pretty quickly, you leave the pattern of predictable moves and find yourself in uncharted terrain. The most direct way to play is to look at the threats facing you and the opportunities you may have. You reason out what happens if you do X: "What could my opponent do in response? And then what could I do?"

This kind of assessment of actions and reactions is also important to winning social change. As Ganz has said, "strategy is a verb—something you do, not something you have."[12] We need to constantly readjust our strategy based on new information. We learn about our opponents (including whether they are really our opponents or if they're just standing in for someone else whom we'd be better off negotiating with) from how they react to us. Acting in a way that's surprising or unexpected usually helps us. Often our opponents' response, or overresponse, ends up fueling our organizing. That's what happened in the police backlash against the Memphis sanitation workers, in the decision to cut off food assistance in response to the Greenville voting rights campaign, and in Pharaoh's forcing the Israelites to make bricks without straw in the Exodus story.

Like in a chess game, it's useful to think about campaigns as unfolding in phases, chunking campaigns into pieces, setting clear objectives for each phase, and putting aside time between phases to pause and evaluate what we've learned. For example, in a first phase, the goal of our conversation with decision makers might be just to get on the playing field, to introduce our organization as a political actor with an agenda. At the end of this first phase, we need to stop and reflect on what we learned about ourselves, how we worked together under stress, what support we received, and how the power structure responded. A second phase might be to win the support of powerful allies and officials who are willing to champion our proposal. But the

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content of this phase and those that follow will always flow from the reactions we get to our actions.

In the campaign we ran to save my son's autism program, we spent the first weeks consolidating as a group. We recruited parents from other schools. We figured out how things worked in our county and educated ourselves and the school district about the autism program. We introduced the idea that we were an organized group of parents of children with autism. We tested out who on the school board might support us. The last board member we met with was the president. It was take-your-daughter-to-work day, and my daughter, Natalia, had come with me. She didn't say anything in the meeting beyond introducing herself, but she sat herself at the head of the table opposite the school board president, which added some accountability in the room. Our first campaign phase effectively ended midway through that meeting, when it became clear that the board president wasn't budging. We said that our next step would be to go public and make a big, messy issue out of the cuts, but we weren't a well-known entity, so that threat didn't shift the conversation. So, in what would become phase two of our campaign, we simplified the message. Essentially, we said, "Stop picking on kids with autism." We began generating media stories. We held a rally, with testimony from parents on the front steps of the school district main office. Our decision to go public helped us win in the end, but at the time it generated a lot of tension in the school district and in our own group. We weren't sure that it would work. That is the nature of being in an action-reaction cycle where you have to take risks, adjust, learn from failure, and keep moving forward.

Shape the Playing Field

In chess, even strong players can think through only a small number of (action-reaction) moves ahead. You rarely win

simply by playing out the possibilities. The flow of the game is too unpredictable. Too many variables exist. And each side tends to overestimate the strength of its position. People are willing to wait each other out. This is where you need to look over the playing field at a more conceptual level. You need to figure out how to strengthen your position. You cannot know for certain that moving any particular piece will ultimately lead to winning. But you know that you want to control the center of the board. You want to configure your pieces so they aren't hidden away. It helps to build a wall of protection around your king. You want to put pressure on your opponent's weakest points. All these strategic actions—if you carry them out before being overwhelmed by your opponent—put you in a position to take advantage of opportunities that arise as the game proceeds.

Changing the world is a lot different from winning a chess game. But the idea of a divided mind, one part focused on the back and forth and the other on building power, is similar. For example, base building (chapter 6) is one of the most important steps we can take to strengthen our position going into a fight. Another way to increase our chance of winning is to find powerful allies. Often, we ally with organizations that bring together similar people through different channels. But other potential alliances can be farther afield. We may disagree with parts of the business community over the minimum wage or other issues, but on the question of investment in public transit or expanding Medicaid, we may be able to build strong political alliances with employers. Our opposition is never as monolithic as we think, especially when we're also willing to play political hardball to build alliances around shared goals. The questions of whom to pair up with, when to hold your nose, and what kind of strategic alliances and coalitions to build are among the most important questions that people need to wrestle with when they're trying to make change.

The key here is that everyone is on the playing field, whether they or we know it. And everyone is moving and can be moved. We need to map out who's with us, who's on the sidelines, and who's actively opposing the changes we're trying to make. (You can draw a playing field with two sides and show who's on the field and who's on the sidelines.) A good campaign will track the most powerful players in the environment on a week-to-week basis to see how they're moving. Did we get our strongest supporter to double down on the issue by holding a public event? Did someone on the fence say something positive for the first time?[13] Pay close attention to neutralizing powerful opponents. For example, a lot of bipartisan talk is happening about reforming the criminal justice system to reduce incarceration but there is much less progress in making change because of the fierce resistance of prosecutors and sheriffs, who are often the ones leading the fight against reform. So when we run candidates committed to ending mass incarceration in local prosecutor and sheriff races, we're not only contesting for these important positions but also sending a message to sitting officials that there is a cost to lobbying for more police and jails. Again, we're keeping an eye on both delivering change and shaping the terrain on which we're fighting.

Change the Rules

While you cannot change the rules of chess, that's not true in politics. The people who dream of infinite wealth and power—the handful of rich individuals and families who've taken over state after state and reshaped the American political landscape—spend their waking hours tinkering with the rules. They understand that to control the agenda, and the process by which decisions are made, is to control the outcome. White men with the patience and resources literally ran a fifty-year campaign to

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dismantle the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They put state tax caps in place that tie the hands of state spending (in states such as California and Colorado). They engineered state constitutions that take away the power of local communities to raise wages or regulate businesses. All these are examples of rules that rig the game against working people.

This is why the Koch brothers are such a problem for humanity. Peel back the layers of organizations, rationalizations, and rebrandings and you can see their ambition to amass more wealth than anyone could count in a lifetime by removing as much fossil fuel from the earth with as little interference as possible. Those who extract oil, gas, gold, tin, copper, and other valuable resources from the earth, as well as the politicians who abet them, are the worst. Their logic is to get as much out as fast as they can while leaving society to pick up the tab for damage to humans and the planet. It's no accident that New Mexico has a volunteer legislature or that Nevada's legislature meets for just four months every two years. Mining companies effectively wrote the constitutions in these mineral-rich states. No need for much legislating, writing of rules, taxing, or spending on education if your goal is to get stuff out of the ground as cheaply as possible.

Yet we can always find cracks in the casing surrounding the dreams of the wealthiest and most powerful. The elites rig the system because they're up against the greatest political idea that humans have created—norms about democratic decision making. We owe the ancient Greeks gratitude for their imperfect experimentation with self-governance. They left a lot of people out, but in the face of unrelenting opposition from elites (including people revered in Western thought, such as Plato and Socrates), they created a set of expectations and practices that value people's voices and lives. The Greeks understood that wealthy individuals would do everything they could to

take power away from the people. One way the Greeks tried to counterbalance this tendency was through a process called *ostrakophoria* ("ostracism"*)*. If five thousand people voted to hold an *ostrakophoria*, then people would be called together, given small round disks of clay, and asked to scratch the name of the person in the community that they thought should be forced to leave for ten years. The goal was to eliminate threats to the democracy. In Athens, down the hill from the Acropolis in the Museum of the Ancient Agora, one can see the names of ancient equivalents to the Koch brothers scratched onto clay disks. The need to protect democracy from being captured by the wealthy may be extreme today, but it's not new. It comes with the territory.

In our own time, we face an increasingly oligarchic society, where the wealthy set the terms of the debate. In the United States over the past forty years, the conservative movement, funded by the largest corporations in the world, has systematically deregulated political spending, making it possible for rich people and special interests to spend virtually unlimited amounts of money to influence the outcome of elections and legislative debates. Conservatives and corporate interests have manipulated redistricting in states to take control of dozens of state legislative chambers and made voting more difficult for the poor, the disabled, seniors, and people of color through voter ID laws and manipulation of voting procedures.

To win at politics, people-led organizations need to also focus on changing the rules, to make decision making more transparent and inclusive and our communities more powerful. As we fight for higher wages and an end to police brutality, we also need to work to make our democracy more representative. We can do this by eliminating barriers to voting (such as winning same-day voter registration and making Election Day a public holiday) and removing policies that protect the few at the expense of the many, like supermajority requirements

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for spending measures. We need campaign financing laws that magnify the power of small donors. For example, under a program approved by voters in Seattle, all registered voters receive four $25 vouchers, which they then can donate to political campaigns that agree to abide by spending limits. The rules about the rules are always up for grabs, and our mission needs to include both exposing them and making them more democratic.

A practical way to institutionalize this thinking in our organizations is to include three questions in any strategy meeting:

1. How is what we are fighting for going to deliver tangible benefits to our base?
2. What demands can we make that would increase our power?
3. What is the story we are telling that motivates people to see themselves as part of our work and that builds public support for our agenda?

We need to make demands that both address the greatest pain people are experiencing and make governments more responsive to people than money so we can win bigger changes in the future.

Maximize Your Leverage

In her book *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America*, Francis Fox Piven argues that social organizations and movements cannot necessarily control or steer politics in the United States, but they can create moments of disruption that force elites to respond.[14] That happens when people withdraw from daily participation in structures of inequality and oppression through boycotts, strikes, and mass protests. They disrupt the status quo and create divisions within the coalitions that political parties depend upon.

The best example of this process in American history was the abolition movement, which helped provoke a civil war that led to the end of slavery, despite the fact that neither major political party at the time had a strong interest in freeing slaves from bondage. Piven shows how both the Democratic and Republican Parties in the years leading up to the Civil War were multisectional, that is, they had constituencies in both the South and the North. The abolitionists forced the major religious denominations in the United States to take clear positions on the morality of slavery, polarizing the public, particularly in the North and the West on the issue. Through organizing local antislavery societies and lobbying Congress, they put the issue of slavery at the center of American politics. Slave revolts and the Underground Railroad added more fuel to the fire. Abolitionists created the conditions that led Southerners to leave the Republican Party and Northerners to abandon the Democratic Party. The leaders of both parties would have preferred to remain neutral on slavery to preserve their economic interests and hold together political coalitions that spanned the North and South. But mobilization by Free Blacks, clergy, religious people, and slaves themselves created heat and controversy that made the status quo untenable.

Since Ferguson, we've seen a contemporary example that points to the kind of disruption needed to reshape American politics. The young people who took to the streets in Ferguson did not influence American politics by building a new electoral coalition. They did it by creating enormous discomfort—beginning in Ferguson, then throughout Saint Louis, and spreading across the country. They made it more difficult for Democrats and progressives to take Black voters for granted by publicly pushing elected officials, unions, religious denominations, and social justice organizations to take clearer positions against police abuse and mass incarceration. By putting pressure on

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Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, Black Lives Matter activists made it harder for other Democratic Party candidates and elected officials to support tough-on-crime policies. This is similar to what abolitionists did to the Republican Party in the years leading up to the Civil War—using confrontation to bring moral clarity to the policy debate and purify the party. That's how a committed and relentless group of people who may not seem to have great political access or influence uses their leverage to force elites into choices that they would not otherwise make.

Shifting the Balance of Power

These four strategy principles are closely related and reinforce each other. Seeing the reactions to our actions is how we get insight into the power we're facing. Shaping the playing field is how we test and increase our influence. Changing the rules is how we make the game play to our strengths. And maximizing our leverage is how we use the weakness of our opponents (both their dependence on us and their internal divisions) to increase our power. These principles add up to an orientation focused on finding every opportunity possible to shift the balance of power in society toward ordinary people.

There is no simple answer to how we transform a world on fire. It requires building lots of organizations where people directly engage with decision makers and regularly talk about and test strategy. While we have plenty to complain about and more than enough threats to keep us up at night, we have control over the kind of organizations we build, the fights we pick, and the strategies we adopt. We need to shift our gaze away from what other people are doing wrong and toward how we're using the resources and relationships we have to get what we need. We have power if we choose to use it. The institutions and systems that we most need to change depend on our complicity—to buy

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their products, vote for their candidates, show up for work, and follow the rules. Arrangements of oppression eventually fold to withering moral critique, matched with strategic, creative, and unrelenting people-led direct action. The path to change isn't predictable. It can feel like the system isn't budging and will never change. But, as with a stuck jar lid, what matters is not just how hard we turn but how long we keep the pressure on.

CONCLUSION

What Next?

What will you do when you put this book down? Many readers are already involved in change efforts. The conversations in *Stand Up!* should help you deepen your commitment. In a world on fire, we all need to dig deeper, not necessarily work longer hours, but open our hearts wider, be more honest with others and ourselves, and take greater risks. I especially hope the book will help you find ways to do more to dismantle racism and other forms of human hierarchy as part of any social justice work you're involved in.

Each of the five conversations in the book is meant to make us better leaders—more aware of our emotions (purpose), clearer about the experiences and values that drive our choices (story), able to build closer relationships across differences (team), more powerful in the world (base), and more courageous and effective in confronting oppression (power). These are habits of the heart. They help us become better people with greater awareness and consciousness in the world. The conversations and the practices that flow from them are not magic solutions though; we already *know* them instinctively but don't always *do* them under stress. That's why they need to be practiced and

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repeated (wash, rinse, repeat) so they become who we are and what other people expect from us.

If you have the ability to influence how the organizations you're part of operate (which we all do, more or less), then I hope that you can turn these conversations into rituals (through repetition) and that these rituals become part of your organizational culture. For example, you can include reflection and evaluation at the end of any important activity you undertake, or you can intentionally create community by regularly asking people to share their stories with each other. We need more organizations that are humane, racially conscious, and outward facing, that recognize people as the most valuable resource for changing society and give their members real decision-making roles. Organizations that do this are more likely to develop the strategic capacity (discussed in chapter 7) to adapt in the face of conflict and uncertainty. And by creating in our organizations a slice of the world that we're working to bring into being, we make participation more attractive and valuable to people. Our organizations become spiritual homes for people seeking to feel and act more human.

If you're part of an organization that treats you as a means to some other end, that asks you to do small tasks without involving you in strategy, that isn't speaking to your soul, then you need to change the culture of the organization or look for or create another home for your social change work. A simple test is whether you are on a real team that meets regularly. Be truthful! Here are other measures: Are you learning something new about yourself? Are you having experiences that tap into strong emotions? Are you bringing new people off the sidelines and building high-trust relationships with them? These questions will help you figure out if you're on track or not.

The sad reality is that most of the organizations involved in social justice work in the United States don't ask much from their members or constituents. And even organizations

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committed to leadership development can struggle to keep people engaged and growing. Sustaining social change organizations of any kind is hard, especially when they're grappling with difficult entrenched issues and reliant on ordinary people's time and money. Organizations often run out of steam, devolve into cliques, become captured by their staff, or fracture. Organizations need to be renovated regularly. Sometimes they need to be shut down completely so that we can start anew. Never be afraid to say, "Let's rebuild" or "Let's start from scratch" or "Let's shift our focus given how things are changing around us." What results is almost always better.

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If you haven't yet answered the knock at your door (or heard it), if you're looking for a way to plug in, perhaps by getting off the Internet and into face-to-face organizing, then you need to find or build an organization that will ask enough of you to make it worth your while. Too few organizations are structured around regularly meeting small groups, let alone bring people together across race, class, and other differences; engage in strategic campaigns; and invest in the growth and development of their members.

When my son was thirteen, he had to do a community service project. His first choice was to volunteer with an organization fighting climate change. It turned out to be surprisingly hard to find a chapter of an environmental group in Northern Virginia that met regularly. He ended up volunteering at a soup kitchen in Washington, DC. It was a valuable experience. He did useful work and had some good conversations with people. One thing that surprised me was that the soup kitchen had a waiting list for volunteers—a sign that there's more demand among people to contribute than a supply of opportunities to do so.

I think this imbalance between supply and demand is even more the case for chances to be part of organizing designed to get at the root causes of injustice. So be realistic about what may be limited options for joining existing organizations. Set a high bar for how you spend your time, but expect that you'll need to contribute your leadership to influence the culture of any organization you join—if you want to be part of something that both matters and feeds your spirit. And as Bill McKibben said about community, if you cannot find an organization that meets your needs, build one. If you do that, I hope the example of the autism campaign in chapter 1 and the five-conversation framework can be a useful guide.

One of the most promising shifts taking place in community organizing is that more people are taking the plunge into politics. More and more grassroots leaders are deciding to run for school board, city council, mayor, state legislature, and Congress. The push to elect prosecutors and sheriffs committed to ending mass incarceration is especially exciting. People should see running for office as one of many different roles that they can take on as part of the organization they belong to. That way, if they win, they're accountable to an organized base of people and can work with that base to advance policy change together.

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It might be your turn to run. After all, we cannot just complain that the car we're in is being driven over a cliff; we have to be willing to claw our way into the front seat, grab hold of the steering wheel, and drive our communities and country to a better place. If you do choose to run, and have an organized base behind you, then you can use the principles and practices in *Stand Up!* to design your campaign. You can recruit large numbers of volunteers and organize them into teams that have

clear goals and roles; you can spend your resources talking to people face-to-face to hear their concerns rather than sending them advertising; you can focus on the voters that other candidates and parties write off as mattering less; and you can speak from your heart to people's hopes and dreams, inviting voters into a shared vision of community and purpose, rather than trying to sell them a laundry list of issues. You could even become president by using this kind of approach!

The hardest part about standing up and getting involved today may be the experience of not knowing whether we're making progress. Like the Chilean miners, whose story we began with, it feels like we're underground for an indeterminate amount of time without certainty that we'll get free. It can take decades of sustained and strategic organizing to create enough pressure for large-scale social change. We don't have that much time given the threats facing the planet and our society. The vicious cycles that we're in and the resources and will of our opponents make it hard to know if matters are just going to keep getting worse or if we'll reach a turning point. And sometimes victories look like big steps forward but turn into mirages. The notion that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (coined by Theodore Parker, a nineteenth-century Unitarian minister, and made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr.) is a statement of faith, not a description of how politics works.[1] Social change has no guarantees. Periods of progress followed by reaction and backtracking can be long and arduous.

What we do have control over, though, is what we do in the meantime. Through organizing, we can make a dent in virtually any problem that we're able to identify as a cause of pain to people in our lives and communities. Organizing works when applied with discipline. And elected offices at all levels can be filled with our members if we focus our energies on those positions and are willing to run people for them over and over.

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Small and medium-sized victories don't transform everything, but they build our muscles and give us a taste of our true power. To go back to Lawrence Goodwyn and the populists, organizing victories build in grassroots leaders the "somebodiness," the "high level of personal political self-respect" that makes people willing to challenge arrangements that are said to be natural and unchangeable.[2]

When we do win, we still have to figure out what to do next; and this is often more difficult than it seems. The Utopian Flaw (discussed at the end of chapter 3) is the slip in our consciousness that makes us think that if we can only achieve this change, everything else will be okay. It won't. Our challenge is to find the will to keep going. In his short book *The Dip,* Seth Godin lays out a framework for deciding whether you're on the right track in your work or life. It applies well to social change. He says you should ask yourself if what you are doing now is something that you believe will make you very happy and that you can eventually be the best at. If you're not confident that you can answer yes to both questions, then quit. But if you're certain, then persist, knowing that you'll need to pass through a long and difficult period of doubt and probably failure—the dip—to get to greatness.[3] Organizing for change takes that kind of determination to pay off.

The true value of the conversations and practices in *Stand Up!* may be that they help us stay human amid darkness and uncertainty. They give us courage not only to keep fighting but to care for one another. As the Chilean miners learned, survival under stress depends on our capacity to see each other as brothers and sisters. In times of trouble, we need to resist the temptation to turn on one another. If we can do that in the face of hate, abuse, and confusion, if

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we refuse to give up hope and continue to experiment with our resources, then we have a chance to make it through to a promised land. As Ibram Kendi wrote in the epilogue of *Stamped from the Beginning*, "There will come a time when we will love humanity, when we will gain the courage to fight for an equitable society for our beloved humanity, knowing, intelligently, that when we fight for humanity, we are fighting for ourselves. There will come a time. Maybe, just maybe, that time is now."[4]

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It shouldn't be a surprise then that so much of what is in *Stand Up!* reflects the ideas and creativity of my colleagues in Faith in Action. For the past twelve years, I've had the blessing of working alongside some of the best community organizers in the United States. Fr. John Baumann founded Faith in Action (originally the Oakland Training Center, then Pacific Institute for Community Organization, and eventually People Improving Communities through Organizing) in 1972. His humility and discipline anchored the network in a commitment to treat people as ends and not means. That focus on people and their development along with a willingness to adapt and collaborate explains Faith in Action's tremendous growth over the

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past decade. Our network has become a source of strength and hope for many working people and communities across the county. Faith in Action is now the largest faith-organizing network in the United States with forty-five grassroots community organizing groups in two hundred cities and towns in twenty-two states, with a membership of three thousand religious institutions and 2.5 million people, as well as growing work in Rwanda, Central America, and Haiti. In 2017, PICO renamed itself Faith in Action to better reflect its purpose and work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gordon Whitman has worked as a community organizer and social change strategist and coach for the past twenty-five years. He first learned organizing in Santiago, Chile, and helped found successful grassroots organizing groups in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Flint, Michigan. As the deputy director of Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network), the county's largest faith-based community organizing network, he has coached hundreds of organizers, clergy, and grassroots leaders. He's been responsible for Faith in Action's expansion program, helping people of faith and clergy build some of the most effective new multiracial community organizing groups in the United States over the past decade. In 2008, Gordon opened a national policy office for Faith in Action in Washington, DC, and has led national organizing campaigns on children's health coverage, national health reform, and stopping of foreclosures. Before becoming an organizer, he worked as a legal services and civil rights lawyer in Philadelphia. Gordon has also been the associate director of the Temple University Center for Public Policy. He's written dozens of policy reports and articles on social change and regularly blogs on HuffPost. He has a law degree from Harvard Law School and an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania in history and urban studies. When Gordon's not organizing, you can find him in the wilderness.

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