

Ideology and the Prophetic Tradition
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The language and ideas inherent in our faith traditions, particularly those of the prophetic tradition provide us with resources for cracking through the predominant political ideologies of the United States to imagine a new day. Faith language and ideas provide us counter-cultural dissonance. They allow us the perspective from which to question prevailing beliefs. In this paper, I am looking at some of the critical components of our public actions, offering some reflections and vignettes that relate, borrowing liberally from the Book of Exodus and Walter Brueggeman's "The Prophetic Imagination".

TESTIMONY AND PUBLIC GRIEF

"The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". (Exodus 2:23)

When the Israelites cried out, and God heard their groaning, a new day was beginning, a world was being born that was fundamentally different from the static world of Pharaoh. The process of allowing public grief is a necessary first step for change to occur. Public grief breaks people out of their numbness and isolation allowing the possibility for relationship and community. Those cries are a necessary step in order for people to heal. Public grief also powerfully criticizes the dominant consciousness or ideology, by making it plain that not all is right with the world.

I think this is why **testimony** is so crucial to good actions in faith-based community organizing. It provides a public catharsis, allowing the cries of grief to be heard. In November, in an action of 600 people in Wyandotte County, Kansas, a young minister told the story of attending the funeral of his 10-year-old niece, who was the victim of a drive-by shooting. His testimony was healing and redemptive for him personally. His story also provided catharsis for all of us, who are burdened by the loss of our young people. Our cries go up to God and God hears our cries.

In our internal experience, grief is primary. It comes before the process of research, which is driven by a desire to respond to grief. This is indeed the sequence of events in Exodus. First, God heard the cries of the Israelites and then sent Moses to Pharaoh. However, when we present an issue to external parties, we turn the experience inside out. The research must be presented first, to provide context and definition to the pain which is to be shared.

RESEARCH ACTIONS AND THE PLAGUE CYCLE

In the parlance of faith-based community organization, **research actions** are planned meetings between community organization leaders and representatives of government,

private industry, media or non-profits to develop relationships and learn about a particular issue. We call them “actions” because they produce movement. They teach people about an issue; they develop public relationships between community organization leaders and other institutions. They often help to develop a consensus regarding direction.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go’”. (Exodus 4:21)

Now why would God choose to harden Pharaoh’s heart? I have often wondered exactly that in research actions when I see our people exploring reasonable avenues to address the pain of their people and some official says, “No, you can’t have that”, or “That won’t work because...”

Organizers say, “the action is in the reaction”. Pharaoh’s first reaction to Moses and Aaron was to tell his taskmasters, “you shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.” (Exodus 5: 7-9)

Beyond our concern for tangible solutions to serious issues, research actions are a process of testing our people: their capacity for public dialog and debate; their ability to negotiate; their clarity regarding public issues. Research actions provide praxis for the development of public skills. The **research phase** of our organizing process is crucial to forming the discipline and sense of solidarity among our leaders that leads to effective organization. In the early stages of research, each sign of the Kingdom we produce is met and negated by the technical experts at Pharaoh’s court. If the victory comes too easily, without testing the people, they will not break free of prevailing ideologies and they will never leave Egypt. In the early parts of the plague cycle, the people are tested.

ACTIONS: GOD INTERVENING IN HISTORY

Last summer, the Wyandotte Interfaith Sponsoring Council conducted youth forums in which over 500 youth expressed their concerns and dreams for their communities. From these forums, we heard about violence, in all its forms, in schools, in neighborhoods. Young people expressed a strong distrust and alienation from the police as well as the need for a safe place with constructive activities

In September, seven churches opened Wednesday afternoon youth programs, during an extra two hours the children are out of school on Wednesdays. On November 23rd, 600 members of WISC churches met with the Superintendent of Schools, the President of United Way and Captain Rick Armstrong, a representative of the Police Department. Dr. Daniels committed to opening the swimming pools at Sumner, Wyandotte and Washington High Schools by the summer of 1999. Captain Armstrong committed the Police Department to monthly meetings with youth and adult leaders of WISC.

The banner that hung over the sanctuary said “Every child is a child of God. Therefore every child deserves to be safe. Every child deserves opportunities to learn and grow.” Just as prophetic ministry breaks people out of their numbness into public grief, so prophetic ministry serves to energize people by bringing to expression the signs and symbols of hope. First, we must grieve, then we can speak a vision of hope.

Every child is a child of God? Well of course, we all know that, at least that’s what we’re told one way or another in our respective places of worship. Nevertheless, our actions and the actions of our public institutions do not reflect this understanding. When Wyandotte County has one public pool for 150,000 people. When one quarter of the juveniles in Kansas State detention facilities come from Wyandotte County. The contradiction between the “child of God” faith statement and the reality of Wyandotte County provides us (in the words of Walter Brueggeman) with energy:

- By offering symbols adequate to contradict a situation of hopelessness in which newness is unthinkable,
- By bringing to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there,
- By its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move

The focus of our public meetings, at their best, leave the people with a sense of amazement or awe. I can tell when individuals in WISC or CCO begin to attend each other’s actions. They just like coming; it gives them hope. Our symbols cannot be empty symbols; they must tap into deep values. They must also be accompanied by tangible progress in addressing issues, both local and county-wide. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake for organizers to allow faith communities to move into major actions without challenging them to probe in a deep way the reasons why they are doing what they do.

When actions go well, in the midst of all our work and preparation, there is a tremendous sense of grace present, of God working among us. The Exodus story leading up to and following the parting of the Red Sea presents God interceding in history with awesome power. Not all of it was very pretty or comfortable. Not all of the Israelites present could handle the tension of the conflict as it was underway,

“Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” Exodus 14:12 (At least there I had a job and they didn’t whip me too often before you came along!)

As Brueggeman asserts, “No prophets ever see things under the aspect of eternity. It is always partisan theology, always for the moment, always for the concrete community, satisfied to see only a piece of it all and to speak out of that at the risk of contradicting the rest of it.”

Similarly, we have to draw a line and speak for the concrete community if the promise of God is going to have any meaning to people. Nevertheless, when we stand on the opposite shore and look back at the waters through which we have come, we are amazed at the great work God has done.

In order for people to find their own power and grow as people, they need not only skills, but a change in perspective, a set of ideas and beliefs that support their growth. The methodology of faith-based community organizing provides people with tools and skills. But faith-based community organizing can only reach its full potential in the United States in the context of deep and sustained reflection on our faith. That is where people will find the internal resources to overcome obstacles and grow both as individuals and as communities.

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my salvation;
This is my God, and I will praise him,
My father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15:1-2)