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Human Dignity and Grassroots Leadership Development

Over the last fifteen years, organizers with the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) have developed a model of organizing which differs significantly from the most prevalent approach to organizing in practice today, that of mobilization or campaign-style organizing. In the mobilization model, a small group of organizers engage community members in a short-term campaign focused on a particular issue or election. These kinds of campaign can generate a great deal of activity in a limited period of time, but frequently do not leave much behind when the campaign ends. The majority of community members who participate in such campaigns do so at the level of task. The campaign organizers plug people into a set of pre-ordained activities and usually end their relationship with the volunteers at the close of the campaign.

In contrast to mobilization style of organizing, PICO's model places primary emphasis on the development of local community leaders who build their own organizations, identify their own issues, and learn how to create issue campaigns. This kind of organizing, with its focus on leadership development, is dedicated helping regular people become powerful actors in their own neighborhoods, cities, and states and to building the human infrastructure of communities over the long-term. Another distinguishing characteristic of PICO's work is that it is faith-based. PICO draws upon faith traditions as a source of motivation for the fight for justice and to provide the organization with a value base to undergird the organizing process. A local PICO organization typically will have two hundred or more community leaders regularly engaged in building the organization and in acting on issues. Many of our leaders have been active with our organizations for ten or fifteen years and have invested a large part of their lives in the organizing effort. In addition to these core leaders, a local organization will have a few thousand community members involved in a less regular way, who will join with the organization a few times a year at key moments.

I would like to suggest that much of PICO's effectiveness in developing the capacity of local communities to organize arises from how PICO views people. At the center of the PICO model is an understanding of the human person rooted in the notion of human dignity. The remainder of this article will examine the dynamic relationship between human dignity and the leadership development process used in PICO's work. At the end of the article, I will argue that the interplay between human dignity and the leadership development process is what enables this kind of organizing to have a deep and long-lasting impact. This kind of organizing is ultimately about much more than politics or the issues of the day. It is a culture-shaping enterprise which can serve as a critical source of resistance to the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism and consumerism.

Before discussing the relationship between dignity and grassroots leadership development, I will briefly explain what we, as a network of organizers mean by these words. PICO believes that people have an inalienable dignity which stems from their creation in God's image. The inherent value of every person, regardless of their ethnicity, income, or religion, is a key assumption which underlies all of our efforts. Regarding leadership development, we believe that every person has the potential to become a leader in his/her community. People become leaders one step at a time through a process of action and reflection. Leaders learn to build relationships and engage in the public arena incrementally, and reflect along the way on what they are learning about themselves and the world in which they live.

As people get involved in the organizing process, they grow in their awareness of their own worth. This growing sense of dignity propels people to challenge the status quo and to confront those conditions in the community which threaten their values and that of their neighbors. In our work, leadership development is not simply a set of skills or learned behaviors. Rather it is a dynamic process of *becoming*. This process of *becoming* goes beyond the mere learning of organizing skills and extends into other areas of a person's life. As people become leaders, they are transformed; they become *bigger* people. Their lives become a more true reflection of their God-given dignity.

To further explore the interplay between dignity and leadership development, I will discuss four aspects of PICO's understanding of how leaders are developed. For the sake of this article, I am naming these aspects: awakening, participation, community and learning.

Awakening

Organizers seek to awaken people to a sense of their own worth. Many of us are, at best, half awake to our own dignity. This process of awakening begins with one-to-one conversations, in which organizers agitate people's anger at those conditions in the community which demean them, their family, and their neighbors. Organizers ask questions which surface suppressed feelings. They ask people to imagine a different reality and then challenge them to do something about it. We all become experts at rationalizing what is going on. Organizers put our rationalizations for inaction in front of us and make us confront our own complicity. When leaders tap into their anger, they are also rediscovering their dignity. There is an intimate relationship between dignity and righteous anger. People who have a deep awareness of their own dignity are those with the greatest anger at injustice.

PICO's basic trust that all people can become leaders is a persistent source of agitation in and of itself. When leaders and organizers challenge new members of an organizing effort to take a leadership role, they send a message to that person about his/her inherent worth. The challenge to act like a leader is a challenge to own one's dignity as a person.

Participation

The vast majority of people, in any community, are spectators in public life. We seek to live out our values in our private lives, but do not imagine that we have the ability to act in the public arena as well. We may be concerned about decisions made by public officials, and may be directly affected by those decisions, but we feel powerless to do anything about them. We sit on the sidelines while local corporations take their profits out of our communities, or lay off hundreds of workers while paying their CEO's in the millions.

It's no accident that we live as spectators. Our public institutions frequently carry out public business in a way that makes meaningful participation difficult, if not impossible. They pay lip service to public accountability at the same time they have practices in place which intimidate and obscure. Corporations, by their nature, are unaccountable to the broader community and make decisions with little consideration for their impact on the community's well being. The result is that a small elite in any community regularly make decisions of great impact on our families and communities with little public input. Access to the major systems which structure the life of a community is largely confined to the wealthy and to those already in the system.

As people become awakened to their own dignity, they are compelled to move beyond being spectators to become leaders in the public arena. Their understanding of who they are, of their "self" grows exponentially. They are not only a school aide or a roofer. They are a school aide or a roofer who just met with the mayor. Their renewed sense of their value and that of their neighbors emboldens them to step beyond their private lives into a new world. Their rediscovery of their dignity gives them the courage to challenge the same institutions and their leaders which, in the past, had overlooked them and their community. As they step into the public arena, they bring a new voice and perspective to the public debate, and begin to reshape how those institutions interact with their communities. They face discouragement and at times defeat, but remain grounded in who they are. This grounding enables them to persist and carry out the long term organizing campaigns critical to creating any real change. Through participation in public life, they expand their own identity, and develop a public self, which in turn transforms their private self.

Community

Another critical aspect of PICO's understanding of dignity and leadership development is that people emerge as leaders through relationships with others. The first step taken by a leader in the PICO model is to do "one-to-one's," that is to carry out intentional conversations with others and to build long-lasting relationships based on common interests and values. PICO defines a leader to be a person with a following. A leader is not the most charismatic person in a group, or the most formally educated, or the one with the greatest social status. A leader is one who leaves the television behind to sit in a church hall with others, and who visits her or his neighbors.

In placing relationship building at the center of leadership, PICO organizations actively challenge our culture of individualism. Our society tends to elevate the rights of the

individual above all else. This stress on the individual is a two-edged sword. On one hand, it empowers the individual and restricts a community's claims on the individual. On the other hand, it can lead to the isolation of the person and can impede a community's ability to act together. A person who leads an isolated life is further distanced from recognition of his/her own dignity and that of others.

To be a leader in PICO also means to be in relationship with people of diverse backgrounds. PICO organizations bring people together from different ethnic groups, from different neighborhoods, and from different social classes. Leaders build relationships with those who live in their same neighborhoods but who may be from a different country, or who speak a different language. But they also get to know those who live "across the tracks" from them. Frequently, in any given community, the PICO organization is the one place where people from diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to discuss their most deeply felt concerns and to dream together. As leaders of diverse backgrounds work together, they recognize their common humanity. Any true grasp of one's own dignity must be accompanied by the recognition of the dignity of those who are not like us.

Learning

Our dignity as human persons compels us towards our own spiritual growth and intellectual development. As leaders get engaged in an organizing process, they become active learners. They become conversant in public policy issues, are able to analyze complex issues, and learn new skills in public speaking, and group facilitation. They discover how to use tension creatively and to hold institutions accountable which otherwise would overlook, or exploit them. They learn about how government works, and how government and the private sector interact, and collude with one another. They examine the history of their community with a critical eye to understand why things are the way they are. They are involved in on-going research on how to improve their community's most dire problems.

PICO organizations are structured to maximize the learning of each member of an organizing effort. No one leader chairs every meeting. Tasks typically rotate among the members of an organizing committee so that each person has the opportunity to learn a new skill. Many leaders find that the skills they learn in organizing enable them to get better jobs and to be more effective in their home life. The community organization serves as place for continuing education in social analysis and moral reasoning.

Competing Notions of the Human Person

The above paragraphs sketch out how we understand the person and build organizations based on human dignity. We must recognize, however, that our understanding of the person with its emphasis on human dignity is not the dominant notion in our present society. Our understanding exists in competition with other societal forces which put forward a very different understanding.

One competing understanding of the person may be found in elitist systems which essentially value the participation of some people over others, usually due to factors of wealth, ethnicity, family background and/or formal education. These systems grant access easily to those with the right credentials and will tend to exclude those without. Examples of such elitism abound in our present political system. A wealthy campaign contributor often is able to meet with a political leader on a moment's notice, whereas community leaders frequently have to kick down the door of the politician's office to get a meeting.

Another competing notion arises from, and is fueled by, the marketplace, where the person is treated primarily as a consumer. Advertising tells us that we are what we own. In order to feel good about ourselves, we need the latest product. This understanding of the person has gained an even greater foothold in our wider culture as corporations have learned to target their messages to children. Children are bombarded daily with consumer messages. Longitudinal surveys of college students show that this advertising strategy is working. Today's college students are much more likely to see success in terms of their future income and possessions than in regards to their contribution to their community.

Finally, a long-standing notion of the person present in American culture revolves around perceptions of poverty and wealth. In this thinking, people are poor because they are somehow morally inferior. People who are middle class or affluent are morally superior to people who are poor. This notion surfaces frequently in our work with training teachers in low-income schools to visit parents in the home. When teachers return from making such visits, they report their amazement at discovering that even though their parents are poor, they still care about their kids. Another common perception is that people are poor because they are lazy. They are responsible for their poverty, and hence worthy of blame. This mindset overlooks the present reality of our market economy, whose structure guarantees that we will have large numbers of people earning low wages. Our economy generates many more low-wage jobs than high wage jobs and enables a few to have lavish wealth at the expense of the many. It's easier to blame poor people than to struggle with the implications of our economic system.

The Person and Culture

There is an intimate connection between the understanding of the person and human culture. The understanding of the nature of the person underlies the values and norms which make up culture. In its best moments, PICO's organizing efforts stimulate and energize people's awareness of their own dignity. In doing so, this kind of organizing becomes about something beyond an issue campaign or the mechanics of social and political change. It acts as a countervailing force to our dominant culture. I believe that many community leaders stay with PICO organizations over the long haul, and invest countless hours of their own lives in the organization because they find this kind of organizing offers them an alternative cultural space. In this space they are able to return to the roots of who they are and to resist the influence on their self-identity the dominant messages of our consumer culture. Yet this alternative cultural space is not only the

domain of those who participate in the organization. By acting consistently in the public arena, and by persistently seeking out new leaders, PICO organizations bring this notion of human dignity into the public debate and into the community at large. In this way, the organizing process functions as a culture-shaping enterprise with whose influence reverberates in the world of individuals, in our collective understanding, and in our public life.