

**The Challenge**  
**Remarks to the Gamaliel Foundation 6-Day**  
**Workshop on Community Organizing**  
**Sonoma, California**  
**July 15, 2011**  
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**Introduction**

**Thank you, Gamaliel Foundation, for having me as your graduation speaker. In particular, I want to thank Davin Cardenas, Mary Gonzales and John Norton who, as I understand it, are the members of the Planning Committee for this event who decided to impose me upon you.**

**And thanks to each you for taking a week from your valuable time to explore, or deepen, your commitment to make history. Yes, you are history makers.**

**Tonight, I'm going to talk about why you are history makers, why you should be history makers, and what kind of history you should make if you care about yourself, your families, your neighbors, your co-workers, your faith community, and your friends.**

**I want to start our journey by looking at some Americans and seeing if any of them are familiar to you:**

- A young family in a two-bedroom home with three young children living in a drug, gang and crime infested neighborhood. The mother is the homemaker in the couple.**
- A young lawyer working 70 – 80 hours a week to make her quota of billable hours for the firm. She can do pro bono work only after meeting her quota.**
- A blue collar worker who had a good-paying union job and was laid off when his company moved to China. He finally got another job that pays half his old one's, and doesn't have the health care, retirement, vacation and sick-leave benefits, or the on-the-job health, safety and grievance protections, of his former job.**
- A retiree who lives alone in her home. She fell six months ago, and now requires a cane to go up and down the stairs inside her house. She can no longer walk to the neighborhood store or leave her home except when a home-services program can give her a ride. The home services program just got cut by local politicians.**
- A young couple who wanted to live in the city near the wife's mother, who I just mentioned, and to both of their jobs, but couldn't find affordable housing. The house they could afford is more than an hour commute each way to and from work.**

- Another young couple who bought a house with a small down payment and an initial low interest rate on their loan. They were told not to worry about the big increase that would come in five years because with their equity they would be able to refinance the loan. They were foreclosed because their house lost half its market value making re-financing impossible; they couldn't make the new payments. They now share a single-family home nearby with two other families who were also foreclosed.
- A 19-year old young man who dropped out of high school because he couldn't stand it, and now has been without a steady job for three years. He hangs out in a gang with a bunch of his buddies, two of whom were killed in the last couple of years due to street violence.
- A middle-class family whose income excludes their kids from tuition and other college-related aid; they are struggling to pay those costs at the out-of-state schools their two children attend because they're the best schools for what they want to study.
- A single mother who works a minimum wage job and declared bankruptcy because she could no longer afford the increasing interest on her credit card payments. To make ends meet, she now uses payday loans. Their interest rate is more than 100% per year. She feels she can never catch up.
- An American worker who is now unemployed; his unemployment insurance is about to run out. He was replaced by an undocumented immigrant who earns half what the American worker was paid.
- An undocumented Mexican worker who's afraid to stand up for a union because he knows his employer could fire him any day because he hasn't got the papers to be working here in the U.S.

Are any of these familiar to you?

How many of you can tell a story like these stories?

### **Making Peace With Bad Situations**

In these situations, the people who are directly affected make peace with a bad situation; they make an accommodation. They adjust. They do something to make their lives work as best they can. They take practical steps to solve the problems they face.

Let's look at the first family, the one that lives in a two-bedroom home with their three young children in a crime-drug-gang infested neighborhood.

They keep their children in the house when they come home after school

**To keep her kids quiet and entertained inside the house while mom does all the things a homemaker has to do she turns on the TV.**

**In the 20 minutes of advertising the kids see during every hour of watching the screen, they get a message. When their parents watch T.V. later that night, they get a similar message. Americans see 11 hours a week of this advertising.**

**The advertiser's message is simple: Buy things or services to look good, have fun, feel free, feel good, feel secure, be healthy, be cool, be liked, stand out in a crowd.**

**Looking good, having fun, feeling free, feeling good, feeling secure, living in a nice home, being healthy, being cool...these are all part of the American Dream. We all want these things, or at least most of them. And we all should have them.**

**But there's a joker in the deck. The advertisers want to make a profit.**

**To make a profit there's something that has to be added to the message. The joker says:**

- you should not only look good, but you should look better than the next person;**
- you should not only have a decent, affordable home, but it should be larger, and in a nicer place, than other homes;**
- you should not only have nice clothes, or a nice car, or a nice watch, but they should cost more than those of your neighbors.**

**That's where the race to keep up with the Jones' begins. The race says, "it's up to you. If you can't make it, there's something wrong with you." In one of his less memorable public statements, President Obama said, "Part of what America's all about is going out there and getting rich." Too many people think that's the heart of the American Dream.**

### **The Price of This Peace**

**What if you've bought into that American Dream big-time, and you can't keep up in the race? What if your income doesn't allow you to at least be close to the middle of the pack in this race or a little ahead of it? What is the message you get from society and give yourself? And what is the message your kids get about you?**

**You're a loser.**

**When you get this message from around you, you feel ashamed, worthless, incompetent.**

**Psychologists have a fancy name for these feelings. They call them internalized oppression.**

**People don't like having these feelings. There are lots of things they do to get rid of feelings associated with internalized oppression.**

- **Escape into drugs, alcohol or some other narcotic that soothes the spirit and eases the mind.**
- **If you can't get the money to get the things by having a legitimate job, then get it illegally—enter the world of drug dealing, prostitution, crime or another illegitimate means to reach the material American Dream goals that have thus far been beyond your reach.**
- **Wish for a lucky break, and do things to get one. Apply to be a guest on a big awards TV show. Buy each week's lotto ticket. Gamble on the horses or cards. There are lots of ways you can seek the lucky break.**
- **Try some form of self-improvement: improve your education, get training for a different job, get motivational counseling or go to motivational seminars. That might work for some people, but it won't for everyone because enough good paying jobs no longer exist here in our country's economy.**

### **A Deeper Price**

**There is another price paid for this version of the American Dream, in some ways a more expensive one. What does it mean to be in a world in which you watch out for number one, tough it out and suck it up, in which living is an endless competition, where invidious distinction keeps you on the lookout to see who's one down and who's one up? The meaning of material goods is pretty shallow. There is little enduring meaning to be found in things, especially when they become obsolete each year and must be replaced by the latest model or style. As a result, the constant companion of this version of the dream is spiritual emptiness. This spiritual emptiness is accompanied by loneliness because it is difficult to create community, an experience attested to by every study done on the subject. If the world is a jungle in which you are in a race with everyone else, where do you find friendship and community? What if church is at least as much about measuring your Sunday best against someone else's, and your car against what she's driving? What if work lacks a union that practices solidarity? What if neighborhood is little more than a place on a map? What is left is family, and families have great difficulty absorbing all the pressures that modern living entails—pressures that once were both less and more spread out in a circle of extended family, friends, neighbors, one's faith community and others.**

### **In Rural Nebraska**

**In the 1980s I worked with people in rural Nebraska who were fighting the farm crisis that was driving many small farmers off the land. The low price they got for what they grew wasn't high enough to pay the loans they'd taken when commodity prices were high. An organizer friend of mine there told me this story: He'd gone to visit a farmer who was struggling to stay on the land. My friend Doug asked how it was going; the response was something like, "It's tough, but we're making it." At just about that time, the farmer's young**

son came into the kitchen where Doug and the farmer were talking. The son opened the refrigerator door looking for something to eat. Doug was sitting at an angle where he saw the inside of the refrigerator. There was a quart of milk in it, a few things sitting on the shelves inside the refrigerator door, and nothing else.

That farmer bought this version of the American Dream. It was up to him to put food on the table. If he couldn't do it, he was a failure. So what should he do? "Suck it up." "Tough it out." Farmers like him had been convinced by the government and corporations like Monsanto to plant from fence row to fence row, to buy and use costly chemicals and fertilizers, to grow single crops for export instead of diversifying and selling both locally and elsewhere.

Like the family we earlier identified who lost their home to foreclosure, these farm families were losing their land to foreclosures, or selling to corporate farms that had the cash reserves and borrowing capacity to weather the financial storm. Budget crises led to elimination of their school bands and football teams. Soon their school districts were closing down. Their towns were going bankrupt.

"Suck it up" and "tough it out" are partners of this American Dream. "Watch out for number one," and, at its extreme, "Greed is good" are too. The advocates of this American Dream don't mind your knowing they think that either. While the rest of the country is stuck in a recession, they publicly give themselves huge bonuses, buy new corporate jets, and host parties for their friends that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Doug, my Nebraska friend, had a different version of the American Dream. He was talking to farmers about this version. It is to this American Dream that I want to turn. To get there, we have to go far back into our nation's history.

### **The Other American Dream: Freedom, Equality, Democracy, Justice and Community**

The Puritans who formed the Plymouth colony didn't come here to keep up with the Jones; nor did the Quakers who settled in what became Pennsylvania, or the Huguenots who left persecution in France and came to what is now New York, nor the Catholics who came to what is now Maryland. They came seeking religious freedom, the right to pursue their faith as they understood it. Roger Williams was one of their leaders; he took things a step further. He believed that the government shouldn't tell anyone what religion they should practice, and that the Indians should be compensated for land rather than have it taken from them by the King and given to the colonists. Williams studied and learned the languages of several Native American peoples; he believed the new arrivals from Europe should respect them. The new community he and his co-believers founded, that became Rhode Island after the American Revolution, passed anti-slavery legislation in the mid-1600s—two hundred years before the civil war. It was his ideas that James Madison

borrowed when he wrote, and the Jeffersonians supported, the freedom of religion clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The American revolutionaries didn't declare their independence from the King of England to keep up with the Jones—though among them some used scarcities created by war to make a lot of money. In their Declaration of Independence, they didn't write, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created to be consumers; that they are endowed by their creator with an appetite for more and more and more; that among the rights to which they are entitled are a big house, a fancy horse and buggy, and the latest styles from Paris."

No, that's not what they said. What they wrote is this: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government..."

(By the way, I know that most of them were talking about propertied white men, and that many of them owned slaves. But if that's all we remember about them then we abandon their message that inspired reformers and revolutionaries throughout the world ever since they wrote it. As a matter of fact, that's what too many of our friends have done.)

When these revolutionaries won their independence, and adopted a Constitution, they began that document with this preamble: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution." They didn't write, "We the people of the United States, in order to make more money, and have a bigger house than our neighbors, do ordain and establish this Constitution."

When the Frenchman Alexis De Toqueville came to the United States in the 1820s, he was struck by the abundance of voluntary associations. Whenever there was an interest, a problem, or a cause in which they believed, the new Americans came together in an association to pursue that interest. When there was a barn to be built, they came together and had a barn raising party. The democracy these Americans formed depended for its vitality on the formation of these voluntary associations. The book De Toqueville wrote, Democracy In America, is still studied today, and is one of the key texts for people who become deeply involved in community organizing.

When immigrants came to this country from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s from Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, they formed many such associations, or "societies" as they were then called. There were societies for athletics, language, education, music and the arts, cooking, burial, and even for saunas. As they learned the ropes in their new home,

their societies became important voices in politics. Their communal spirit led them to form collectively-owned businesses, or cooperatives. And it led to collective action in American social reform movements. From the 1840s on, Scandinavian immigrants were well represented in the movement for the abolition of slavery, and great numbers of them volunteered for the Union Army. In the late 1800s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they played a major role in the formation of the American labor movement. They were at the center of the radical union called International Workers of the World (IWW), one of whose leaders was Joel Hägglund, who Americanized his name to Joe Hill. He was falsely accused of murder, and convicted and shot by a firing squad. His parting words were, “Don’t mourn. Organize!”

What does this American Dream say? We are all the children of God. We are our brother’s and sister’s keeper. We have rights and responsibilities. There should be freedom from want. You can either have a democracy or you can have great concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the few, but you cannot have both. A rich man has as little chance of getting into heaven as a camel getting through the eye of a needle.

In pursuit of this American Dream, Abolitionists fought slavery; Suffragettes fought for women’s right to vote; Populists fought the banks, grain elevator operators and railroads to preserve their family farms; Knights of Labor formed unions that included all workers regardless of occupation, race or national origin; southern blacks led a civil rights movement against legal and de facto segregation and denial of voting rights; women organized for equal pay for equal work; the disabled, gays, other racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly and others organized to pursue this dream; and you who came here for this workshop confronted this question: “Will I become part of this version of the American Dream?”

Those who would have you believe in the first version of the American Dream cannot ignore all these things I’ve just been talking about. But they have a strategy to distract you from their meaning. The strategy is relatively simple; it has two parts.

The first part says that the politicians will take care of our problems, and that all you have to do is participate in elections and every once-in-a-while sign an online petition to let those politicians know what you think. Otherwise, the politicians and the lobbyists will take care of public life for you. They know better. They want to make you a consumer of politics, an observer of it whose participation is only minimally required.

The second part of their strategy says that you have to wait for a great leader, a John L. Lewis, a Martin Luther King, a Cesar Chavez, a Gloria Steinem, a John F. Kennedy to lead you before you can change things. Without someone like them, you’ll just have to wait.

Great leaders rise on the shoulders of leaders like you. There would have been no John L. Lewis without the heroic coal miners who built the United Mine Workers Union that defeated the mine operators, and who put up their own dues money to pay organizers to go forth into auto plants, steel mills, electrical factories and the other workplaces that were the source of the 1930s industrial union movement. And without the hundreds of organizers,

thousands of leaders and millions of members who made up organized labor there would have been no Franklin Roosevelt to say we need a new deal in this country.

Great leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. rise on the shoulders of a seamstress like Rosa Parks who was secretary of her local Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and who went to Highlander Center to learn about organizing from the bottom up; on the shoulders of Jo Ann Robinson, who headed a Black women's organization in Montgomery, Alabama that was first to call for the bus boycott; on the shoulders of E.D. Nixon, a Pullman Car porter, leader in his union and trusted leader in the Montgomery African-American community; Nixon shamed the ministers into following Jo Ann Robinson's lead and supporting the bus boycott that kicked off the civil rights movement of the last century. Cesar Chavez, Gloria Steinem, John Kennedy, these and other well-known leaders would not have been who they became if it were not for people like you who acted with them...and on them.

Let's be clear about this: democracy is not a spectator sport or consumer activity. It requires active participation in associations like those the early Scandinavians formed, and that other groups throughout our history have formed. It requires associations like those that sponsored your participation here in this workshop. It requires associations of those associations in things like The Gamaliel Foundation.

The question for you tonight is whether you will today be those leaders for these troubled and difficult times.

### Back To Those Stories

I began these remarks with stories of people who were familiar to many of you. I now want to talk about the undocumented immigrant worker. She or he now represents one of the most difficult strategic questions facing us as community builders, community organizers and community or labor leaders. I want to look at why he—and most of them are men—is here, because we need to understand that to effectively deal with the politics that makes these workers scapegoats for our economic problems.

Maybe he's from El Salvador. In February, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero publicly wrote to President Jimmy Carter: "It disturbs me deeply that the U.S. government is leaning toward an arms race by sending military equipment and advisers 'to train three Salvadoran battalions.' ...Your government, instead of favoring greater peace and justice in El Salvador, will undoubtedly aggravate the repression and injustice against the organized people who have been struggling because of their fundamental respect for human rights." Carter sent that military aid.

Maybe that undocumented worker came from Guatemala, where our government supported a coup that toppled reformers who dared to challenge the U.S.-based corporations that kept their people in misery, a government that was replaced by one that murdered tens of thousands of indigenous people in a more than 30-year



**long civil war, destroyed their farming cooperatives, and drove them into desperate poverty.**

**Maybe he came from Honduras or Nicaragua or the Dominican Republic or Haiti where your tax dollars similarly supported elite control of local government to preserve the profits of U.S.-based giant corporations.**

**But most likely, he came from Mexico. So we need to look at our government's history in relation to Mexico to understand why he is here.**

**In the 1930s, we had a "good neighbor" policy toward Mexico. When the Mexican government nationalized the country's oil so it could keep the profits for the Mexican people, Standard Oil Company wanted President Franklin Roosevelt to intervene and send the U.S. Marines to Mexico. After all, we'd done that earlier in the century to fight against Mexican revolutionaries whose hopes and dreams were founded on a lot of the ideas that were at the root of the revolution that created the United States. Roosevelt said...No; we're going to have a different relationship with our neighbors south of the border and let them develop their countries as they choose...That's the last time we had that policy.**

**You remember the family farmers in Nebraska who sold out to agribusiness because they got deeply in debt and couldn't find a way to keep their farms when commodity prices went down? They were victims of policies that were adopted by our government that favored those corporate farms. Agribusiness had the power to get big subsidies because it contributed lots of money to the political campaigns of the members of Congress who vote on those policies. You and I paid for those subsidies.**

**When the Clinton Administration negotiated NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, those corporations avoided the terms of free trade. They kept their subsidies. They continued to grow things for export. And the things they grew were cheap because of those subsidies. You and I benefit from those cheap prices when we shop here at home. But small Mexican farmers had to compete with the subsidized prices of North American agribusiness because the Mexican government agreed to eliminate tariff protection of their small farmers.**

**A million or more of those small farmers were pushed off their farms because they couldn't compete with subsidized corn. First they went to the big cities of Mexico looking for work. And when they couldn't find it there, they came here to the United States because they wanted to feed their families. And whose money pushed them off their farms? Your tax dollars and mine.**

**When people say about those undocumented workers, "they are taking American's jobs," I don't try to argue with that. What I say in response is a little different from what most people say. "Yes", I say, "you're right." Then I add, "They are taking our**

**jobs because we took their farms; if you don't want them to take our jobs, then we've got to stop taking their farms."**

### **To Turn The Country Around**

**So what do we have to do to slow, halt and reverse our country's present direction? We have to begin where we are. And that place is those familiar stories that began this journey we've been on. We've got to begin by sharing our stories in settings that we control. Those settings are our civic associations, our faith communities, our unions. We have to bring what are now private troubles out on the table and make them public problems. We have to reject the first American Dream that says, "suck it up, tough it out, watch out for number one." We have to agree that we will work with one another so that each of us can live a better, more secure, more noble life. We have to accept the primacy of the second American Dream that says we ought to be concerned with the well-being of one another.**

**We have to reject prosperity theology that says God wants you to make money, or the privatized faith that tells you to wait until you get to heaven where you will live a good life if you aren't a sinner here on earth. We have to tell another version of the biblical story, the one that says God intended us to live in community with others, to share with one another, that tells us of Jubilee when the land was redistributed to its original owners, and of the Sabbatical when slaves were freed, that what God requires of you is to do justice, love one another, and walk humbly with the Lord.**

**Listen to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor leader Eugene V. Debs on the first version of the American Dream: "If you go to the City of Washington," he said, ... "you will find that almost all of the people there claim, in glowing terms, that they have risen from the ranks to places of eminence and distinction. I am very glad I cannot make that claim for myself. I would be ashamed to admit that I had risen from the ranks. When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks."**

**Having shared the painful stories that people have been ashamed to tell, and framed them with values of the common good, public interest and general welfare to proclaim their righteousness, we have to do more. We must be as innocent as doves and wise as serpents in the fight to solve the problems that are part of each of these stories of everyday people. We have to do more because we are in a struggle for power over who gets to define the American Dream. As the noted former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass said close to 200 years ago, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will."**

**Power based on the first version of the American Dream will not concede just because righteousness is on our side. Indeed, its advocates believe righteousness is on their side. If they didn't, they'd hide what they do. They don't. They advertise it so that you will aspire to it. That's how they hook you on their version.**

**No. Power to live in a sustainable community, with decent jobs for everyone,**

affordable housing for all, schools that teach all children, no one too rich or too poor, with respect for the unity in diversity that makes us great as a nation--to achieve that power we must organize. That organizing takes place as you have studied and learned it here in this workshop.

Go forth! Go with determination! Go with spirit! Go in community!

As Tom Paine wrote in the bleak days when the American Revolution looked like it might fail, "These are the times that try men's souls...Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'Tis dearness only that gives every thing its value."

Thank you.

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*His book, A Community Organizer's Tale: People and Power in San Francisco, is both the story of a particular community in struggle and an analysis of what people power is and how it works.*