## People Power:  Reflections on the Story. **By Bill Droel. *Democratic Faith;***

Truth is hard to spot when we are in the middle of things. We need opportunities, forums and tools to step back and evaluate our experiences and to uncover more of ourselves in that reflection.

People Power edited by Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller (Vanderbilt University Press, 2015) is one such resource for community organizers and for those interested in their endeavors. This 350-page book goes behind the scenes to describe the personality and thinking of an organizer who knows every morning that the ideal is far away yet persists day after month after year. The book is not case studies, comprehensive biographies or a how-to, though it has elements of all those. The setting is the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the evolution of community organizing after the death of its principal founder, Saul Alinsky (1909-1972). The book is structured around a few organizers. Five sections cover people who were employed, at least in their initial career, by Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation: Nick von Hoffman, Fred Ross (1910-1992) plus Cesar Chavez (1927-1993), Tom Gaudette (1923-1998), Dick Harmon and Ed Chambers. The next section features Heather Booth, who attended IAF Training but parted ways and finally Wade Rathke, whose connection to Alinsky, the editors write, was “tenuous” and “indirect.” [Alinsky and Ross were involved with a project at Syracuse University. George Wiley (1931-1973) was a chemistry teacher at the same school and he was a founder of National Welfare Rights Organization. Rathke was later hired by a NWRO staff person.]

Each section then rounds out its profile with comments by or about one or two other organizers influenced by the main person. This gives a feel for differences in style and thinking. Each section also contains valuable primary source material plus Miller and Schutz’ analysis. The book concludes with a section of informed opinion by Miller and Schutz.

Community organizers, at least as reflected in this book, are highly reflective. They are remarkable people, given the stress of funding, of demands on their time, of the complexities of regional and national trends and of the normal juggling act of family and personal life.

Alinsky preached flexibility and openness to life’s contingencies.  Echoing others, von Hoffman told the editors that for an organizer “everything depends upon your ability to observe… Far from going someplace with a model, you really go with an absolute tabula rasa… But if you have something in the back of your mind already, you will not see things or you will not hear things. And also you will think you see things and think you hear things that aren’t there.” This is a major theme in the book. Yet, the editors say, today many organizers rely on “more-or-less replicable models” for guidance because they are under pressure to deliver a quota of people to a meeting, or to raise money or to meet other expectations of their boss or their sponsoring group.

Miller and Schutz believe community organizing has the potential to alter today’s power grid and increase democratic participation among working families. With that aspiration they, in friendly fashion, criticize community organizers for a reluctance to directly engage national power brokers. In particular, Miller and Schutz think that church-based organizing—though appropriate at one time—is too limited.

All community organizers pick their particular way of life because social change is high on their agenda. But community organizers, like everyone else, have multiple, shifting and overlapping reasons for their work. So while Miller and Schutz’ call for a big picture social movement is a worthy one, it might not be and should not be primary at a given time for a given organizer. Some at times might rightly put a priority on their own street-level education and feel distracted or become ineffective looking too far beyond. Along the same lines, at times the fun of retail politics and interacting with urban characters might be a personal and organizational priority.

And for some organizers, as it was for several in this book, their work is an expression of their faith—at least implicitly. At times these organizers or others might really want to renew churches and denominations and that desire—without forsaking social change—is compelling enough in some circumstances. This is to realize that Chavez came out of the Cursillo movement, that Gaudette was formed in Catholic Action through Christian Family Movement, that von Hoffman, Chambers and others were acquainted with Young Christian Worker and Young Christian Student circles and that several others like Harmon were ordained.

During the 1970s I was an “off the bench” organizer for IAF and similar groups. I was privileged to meet most of those mentioned in this book, including a handful of appointments with Alinsky. But I don’t read People Power with a need to look back in nostalgia. A good story is rather an expansion of the truth in my soul and in the collective soul. Bringing incidents and phrases forth from memory’s recesses, mulling them over, telling and retelling another story, reflecting on the story and then refashioning it and mulling it some more is the way toward greater truth and effective action. People Power is useful in that regard, even if the people in this book are mostly unfamiliar to the reader—especially in that case perhaps.

**Note!  Bill Droel edits INITIATIVES (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629), a free printed newsletter about faith and work.   I subscribe.  It's terrific.  Frank C. Pierson, Jr.**