

Presented to AriseChicago Breakfast, November 24, 2009
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I'd like to say how pleased I am to be here. Organizing evolved in America through the work of labor unions and religious communities. This morning, I want to use some observations about my experience training Barack Obama as an organizer to look at the collaboration between labor and faith communities.

One of the things that people frequently ask me is why Barack said yes when I offered him a job which paid \$10,000 a year, was low in status and would demand that he move to a city he did not know. If I had known that he would describe that job interview in detail in what would become one of the best read biographies in American history, I would have planned it out more. I knew fairly quickly that this guy had possibilities and I wanted him to say yes. I tried to convince him to take the job by describing what had happened to people on the South side of Chicago. I told him that the Calumet Region had once been the largest producer of steel in the world, but had seen the mills shut one by one. The factories in other industries began to close, then stores and offices. Without jobs, without fair wage union jobs, neighborhoods began to unravel and kids became easy prey for gangs and drugs. He took that job because the plight and struggle of these workers and these communities moved him. Why did it move him?

In chapter 23 of Exodus, we are reminded that we know what it feels like to be a stranger, an outsider, because we were once strangers. AriseChicago is standing up for the outsider, for the stranger...for workers who are denied the basic right to organize, for immigrants, for those who are not paid a living wage. I think if we want to understand Barack Obama, then we need to understand how he transformed himself from an outsider, from a stranger, to the most powerful person in the world. I want us to consider the possibility that labor and people of faith will succeed at their respective missions, only to the extent that they can help the outsiders of our communities transform themselves.

I'll begin by sharing some of President Obama's inner struggles during the time he was organizing and how his training as an organizer helped him with these struggles. When I met Barack for the first time at a coffee shop in New York City in 1985, most of the issues that he would have to grapple with in political life, and the gifts that he would draw on to overcome them were already present. Barack was African American on the outside. But on the inside, he was a citizen of the world. He was struggling to figure out how to respond to the varied misconceptions that people had of him. People judged him by his skin color. Some liked it, some did not. People judged him by his pattern of speech and the prestige of his education. Some liked it and some did not. Being judged by whom people think you are, rather than who you know yourself to be is difficult for anyone, but it was particularly difficult for a young man who wanted to make a difference in the world.

What Barack learned in his time organizing in Chicago, was to not let others define him but to define himself. This was the single most important lesson Barack learned as an organizer. It may be the most important lesson that any of us ever learn. It is the lesson which enabled him to be elected President. The power of Barack's ability to define himself has been so great that in the process he has redefined America for Americans.

I hired Barack, on behalf a handful of Catholic parishes, to reach out to those who were on the outside, folks who were poor and Black on the south side of Chicago. But Barack had never been poor or Black. Well of course, he had been Black, but largely he had been protected by his life from the problems of racism. But what Barack had been almost his entire life was an outsider. We all know the biography. Barack told it to you in his book as he told it to me in that coffee shop almost twenty-five years ago. An American kid growing up abroad, not knowing his father, sometimes physically separated from his Mom, moved to Hawaii where he was one of a very few African Americans, he was very much an outsider. Outsiders basically have two choices. They either try to be like everyone around them or they identify with other outsiders. Barack chose to identify with other outsiders.

I want to describe how this ability to define himself although he was an outsider was shaped by his experience as an organizer and how in turn he used this experience to shape his campaign for President.

There was a peculiar resonance, between who Barack was when I met him and the training we would provide him as an organizer. When Barack and I came to know one another, he was torn between the idea of a career in public life and a career of telling stories, of writing fiction. Until, we got him visiting churches on Sundays, often he would spend his Sundays writing short stories. It was a rare organizer who would hand me a short story along with his weekly report.

The first thing he was assigned to do as an organizer was to listen to people's stories. The basis of organization is relationships. Relationships are built at the deepest level around personal stories and narrative. Like any organizer, Barack spent hour after hour in one on one interviews, in small group discussions listening to people tell their stories. It was in learning to tell his own story that Barack was able to define himself. It was in teaching others to tell their stories that Barack learned to be an organizer and later a leader.

The Catholic spiritual writer Paula D'Arcy says that God comes to us disguised as our own life, as our own story. Stories are powerful because they describe and name the world for us in a more profound way than any data or even photograph can convey. If you can tell your story, you know who you are. If you can not tell your own story, others will define you. Were the lower income African Americans and Hispanics that Barack worked with and that we continue to work with on the south side people who were ONE - lazy and could not compete OR TWO - victims of closed factories and bad luck OR THREE- part of a multi generational struggle to overcome the worst kind of

adversity and would they find a way to overcome obstacles once again. If you listened to his inauguration address, you know he learned to hear the story of how if we struggle, we can overcome adversity. The poet TS Elliot wrote that "we had the experience, but missed the meaning." We tell stories so that we won't miss the meaning.

David Axlerod, the strategic heart of the Obama campaign, believes that politics is about competing stories. So responding to his own experience as an organizer and Axlerod's advice, Barack told his story again and again. He told the story he wanted to tell about himself. He told us that he came from a family that has overcome adversity, from a Grandmother who overcame barriers of discrimination against women, from a father who believed America was the promised land, from a single mother who gave him everything he needed, from a wife who grew up in the most segregated city in America but went on to live the American dream.

When the campaign organizers gathered people in small groups, they asked potential campaign workers to discuss three questions. These questions are not so different from the questions asked throughout Latin American in small basic Christian communities. The first was... "What is happening in your life that you are participating in this discussion? What life experiences brought you here?" In other words, they were asked to tell their story.

The next question was, "How does your story connect with the others who are here and with others in the United States?" The discussion participants came to see that what unites us is always greater than what divides us if we are listening to one another's stories. Those in power pursue a strategy of divide and conquer. Organizers help people find their commonality. The great secret of those who try to take away your dignity for the sake of their own power is that they do it by turning brother against brother and sister against sister. One understanding of the Biblical Hebrew word for Satan is that it means "one who divides." The Holy Spirit can only arrive when people are gathered together.

There was a third question and that was "how do the stories we have told and heard relate to this Barack Obama, this obvious outsider who believes that he can be elected President of the United States?" Organizers and ministers will recognize that question from countless house meetings and small theological reflection groups. Although Barack was taught to ask it like this, more or less. "Understanding your grief and hope, and how your grief and hope connects you to one another, what is the opportunity of the present moment?" For organizers, this is the action question.

Because as much as we used stories to define ourselves and not let others define us, as much as we use stories to connect ourselves to others who we previously thought we had nothing in common with only to discover that they were just like us, stories without action were incomplete. They were a dream without a future.

We use stories to define ourselves and to prevent others from defining us. We also use stories to form connections. But those who are busy defining us and taking more and more for themselves, who are busy eating off the plate of a hungry brother and sister, would like nothing more than to have us tell our stories to one another all day long. If you want to define yourself, your stories must always result in action. We describe large efforts for social change as movements. The first instruction that Jesus gives to the Disciples is to keep moving. Sooner or later, we get to the point where we say to ourselves, "I don't have to live this way."

The points I have tried to make so far about the experience of training Obama are that (1) often it is the experience of being an outsider, of being a stranger, that moves us towards compassion and justice; (2) that if we are unable to define ourselves, others will define us and (3) we learn to define ourselves through stories and action.

The AriseChicago Worker Center works with immigrants. When I asked CJ and Adam what percentage of those they helped in the worker center spoke Spanish, what percentage spoke Polish and what percentage English; they answered eighty percent Spanish and twenty percent Polish. Immigrants have always come to America to work or for freedom or for both, to contribute to American life and in return find dignity for themselves and their families. They have almost always made America stronger in every way including economically. Yet they have been defined as a threat to American life, as people who take but don't give, as people who don't deserve the rights that others receive. So one of the questions I think those of use who are immigrants or who work with immigrants must answer is, are immigrants going to define themselves or are they going to let others define them?

One of Barack's hungers was to understand what it meant to be an immigrant. The family he knew was from Kansas, included GI's from World War II and only spoke English. While he was in Chicago, he would go to great lengths to spend time with his half brothers and sisters from Kenya and learn as much as possible about where his father came from and the journey he made. Symbolically, his first trip to Kenya was an attempt to retrace the journey.

In 1987, I sent Barack out to meet with Robert Healey, who had been President of the Chicago Teachers Union, and at that time was state president of the Illinois AFL-CIO. I asked Sister Mary Bernstein to set up the meeting. Mary was a Jewish nun. Her Mom was Catholic and her Dad was an influential Teamster leader, Joe Bernstein. Her Dad called Healey for us. Obama asked Healey if he would help us organize parents to improve the Chicago public schools. Healey explained to Obama that there was a long history of parents being turned against teachers and teachers against parents. He felt that organizing together would depend on developing strategies to overcome those divisions. We are still trying to overcome those divisions. I am suggesting that we can begin to overcome them by sharing our stories with one another, parents, teachers, church members, union members, immigrants.

We have immigrants and union members in all of our churches, and synagogues and Mosques, in our community and parent groups. Obama is president today because of many reasons - amazing fundraising, the state of the country, his own gifts and more. But he never would have been elected unless thousands of people had gone out and told the story face to face. We will not pass the right kind of civil rights bill for immigrants or move labor into a more significant place in American life unless we organize to tell the story in a much larger and more strategic way than we have. We will define ourselves or others will define us.

We believe in a God of second chances. The Labor movement has been battered for decades now by the tactics used against it, by unfavorable laws and by the collapse of America's manufacturing economy. Yet despite its own struggles, labor continues to fight and sometimes win the struggle to protect the poor and the powerless. We need organized labor in America. The election of Obama provides an opportunity for organized labor. Obama understands the need to organize. We may never have another President who will defend our right to organize and support an environment hospitable to organizing as much as he will. America now understands what it means to organize. It is now part of the fabric of American life in a way it has not been for several generations. Labor has an opportunity to tell its story, once again. Faith communities have an opportunity, once again, to become involved in the struggle for the dignity of work.

While on one level, we have gather here to honor John Manz, Tom Dart and Tim Foley, we also gather to help take the work of AriseChicago to the next level. As union, faith, and community leaders, we understand that the movement depends on its members. Union members can tell their stories and use those stories to build relationships with others. There are significant opportunities to organize workers - union and non-union -- because of the work of AriseChicago. The campaigns of AriseChicago provide a moral voice and an opportunity to act for unionized workers. The AriseChicago Worker Center brings us face to face with immigrants who have been deprived of their wages and with employers who systematically exploit immigrant's vulnerability. As AriseChicago helps workers tell their stories in their own faith and community network and to connect those stories to others, we continue to build a movement for dignity and for justice.

I want to finish with a word on ministry. This is a challenging time for faith communities. We struggle with money and numbers and in other ways. I think the way we resolve these problems is by helping people find God in their own lives and their own stories and standing in solidarity with them as they do so. Ministry must be about allowing the lives and struggles of people to be the focus of our liturgies, our formational and our pastoral work. What we do for immigrants, for workers, for outsiders, for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do for ourselves and we do for God.