

**STOKING
THE FIRE OF
DEMOCRACY**



**Our generation's
introduction to
grassroots organizing**

Stephen Noble Smith

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To Ed Chambers

Executive Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation,
mentor and trainer to many could-be radicals, including me,
and grassroots organizer for over fifty-five years.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT WILL WE FIGHT FOR?



**In democratic countries,
knowledge of how to combine
is the mother of all other forms of knowledge;
on its progress depends that of all the others.**

**Alexis de Tocqueville,
*Democracy in America***

My first day as an organizer my boss told me, “I don’t fire people for making mistakes. I fire people for not making mistakes.”

This book is about what de Tocqueville called “combining,” what we today call “organizing.” It is written for young people like me who are trying to figure out what we are willing to fight for and how to be effective while maintaining our integrity.

When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States in 2008 at the age of 47, he became the first leader of our country who started his political career as a community organizer. While Obama did not stick with grassroots organizing of the kind I am going to describe in this book (opting instead for the practice of law and then electoral politics), he used many of his organizing skills and talents to run his campaign and then assemble his government. Obama didn’t learn this stuff at Harvard. (I know; I went there.) He learned it on the street.

Most of the real knowledge any of us has comes from trying and failing. From loads of mistakes. It comes from testing our boundaries, from doing things that make us uncomfortable. At its best, this book is a primer on taking risks and learning from mistakes.



For four years after college, I was an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The IAF is a network of grassroots citizen organizations across the U.S. (with sister organizations in Canada, Germany, and the U.K.). In cities like Los Angeles, San Antonio, Milwaukee, Winston-Salem, Spokane and Phoenix, people from religious congregations and other “third sector” institutions (health centers, universities, etc.) are combining to fight for common concerns and the common good. IAF organizations

built 4000 affordable homes in New York, won a living wage in Baltimore, and brought universal health care to Massachusetts.

The IAF hired me to try and build one of these organizations in Chicago. With a catch. The organization would be created and led by young adults (ages 15-35), a first for the IAF. The young adult leaders named the organization Public Action for Change Today (PACT) to represent their commitment to building power together across the race, class and faith differences that normally divided them. PACT wrote legislation that won health care for thousands of young adults, brokered relationships between youth and police, and helped win back state financial aid cuts for work-

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Maybe so.
But maybe not.**

ing-class kids. After, and largely thanks to, a lot of failures along the way, the organization was successful and I learned enough to believe I could write this book.

It is presumptuous of me to do so. I don't have enough knowledge or experience to write *the* book on organizing. But I might have enough to write *our* book on organizing. There's something to be said for writing about a journey which hasn't yet ended. And

maybe you're reading this because it was written by someone like you who hasn't got everything figured out. Someone like you who's skeptical of the conventional wisdom that says we should hedge our bets, that we should do the safe thing, the thing that makes money—instead of doing the thing we love or fighting the things that make us angry. Conventional wisdom reasons we should wait “our turn” to run things. Maybe so. But maybe not.

I left PACT after four years to study at the London School of Economics and to write this book while it was still fresh in my mind and when it could be useful to my fellow “could-be radicals,” as I will refer to us here. It doesn’t really matter to me if you agree with me. (Among other things, organizing taught me that agreement is overrated.) As I keep making mistakes, I am likely to change my own mind about the ideas in this book. But I offer them here as a challenge to you and as a starting point for action.



I am an organizer because first I was a loser. In high school in Plano, Texas, I lost four consecutive student government elections. With nothing left to unsuccessfully run for, two buddies and I got together and formed a service group at our school. We called it GSI (Getting Students Involved), and it attracted 800 students and generated thousands of dollars and volunteer hours. There was a Charity Garage Sale and a Charity Basketball Tournament, frequent visits to a local shelter, and a campus beautification day. We butted heads with the school administration because we let anybody join and rarely went through “the proper channels.” My first organizing lesson: go do what you think is right. Regardless.

I went from Plano to Cambridge (Massachusetts, that is) to earn my undergraduate degree at Harvard. There I found other young people like me who wanted to make the world a better place in ways more thrilling than Charity Garage Sales. We were a loose cadre of students who believed we could learn more outside of a classroom than inside it. We built a group called “Har’d CORPS” to put on service days and fundraisers and to challenge students to make longer-term commitments to volunteerism. We started BASIC, a link for Boston campuses to initiate joint service projects. We fought for a living wage for campus service workers,

better rape prevention programs at the university, global AIDS funding, and an end to Harvard's contribution to sweatshop labor overseas. We won about half the time, which means we lost the other half.

The living wage campaign at Harvard is a good snapshot of the highs and lows I faced as a student activist. We held dozens of rallies, teach-ins, and worker appreciation days, and eventually we took over the administration building for twenty-one days. We won a base wage of \$11.35/hour plus benefits for all campus workers, but the University never agreed to the principle of a living wage—leaving them wiggle room to cut wages down the road. We were long on energy but often short on smarts. We talked about the importance of human dignity but didn't always take care of one another, letting ourselves burn out. We had some good leaders but paid little more than lip service to the development and training of a next generation of activists. We had the opportunity to build a lasting relationship between campus workers and students. But in this most important endeavor, we ran out of steam and know-how.

Our shortcomings were glaring: weak strategy, not much leadership development, no long-term vision. In our world, you had to be an “activist” to do activism. Too often we fostered a culture that made it difficult for students (or workers) who were not as ideological or committed as we thought we were to join us. We took pride in not being in the mainstream. To our detriment, we failed to learn from those who swam there every day.

So-called “service work” frustrated me just as much. I spent my summers as the children's program coordinator for Family Gateway, a transitional shelter in Dallas. There I tried to emulate the deep passion and soulfulness of my mentor, an underappreciated and remarkable woman named Dot Brown. Despite all I

learned from her, it still made me angry how little we were able to change the circumstances that led to homelessness.

In both student activism and direct service, one thing was constant: Power flowed from the top down. Privileged students or white service board members were running programs or campaigns for poor folks. I remember thinking: How can we really change the world if we are not all equals in the fight?



After graduation from Harvard, I received a grant and took my jumble of frustration to Botswana, a small, landlocked, African country just north of South Africa. My goal was to learn how a different culture was fighting the highest rate of AIDS infection in the world. The U.N. claimed that 20-30 percent of Botswana's adults were infected with the virus, but this was a rough estimate. Most people in Botswana who were infected didn't know it. And they weren't trying to find out because: 1) there is such a stigma attached to the disease, 2) there were not enough drugs available to help anyway, 3) they did not trust the services provided by their government, 4) they did not know the doctors, and 5) the programs are "parachuted in" from overseas. I went to Botswana to learn how another culture approached social change; instead, I saw another version of the problems I had experienced in the States.

The results of the anti-AIDS efforts in Botswana scared me. Smart, passionate people with resources—experts from across the globe—were trying very hard to stop the spread of the virus and treat those already infected. As with our cadre at Harvard, they made strides, but they fought a losing battle. The infection rate was not going down; the drug programs were not catching on. Botswana taught me that social change is not so much about

figuring out the right solutions as it is about who wages the fight. As much as they tried, talented foreigners could not solve the AIDS problem in Botswana. In many ways, our presence stunted the emergence of local leadership, which was the worst possible outcome I could imagine.

The strange thing is that, looking back, Botswana taught me more about what was right with the world than what was wrong.

The most lasting lesson from my time in Botswana was that the appearance of doing good work is not the same thing as making the world a better place.

Watching a village spend three days grieving the death of one of its members taught me about solidarity. Living in a culture that values friendship and leisure a little more (and work a little less) taught me about the importance of joy. Working with folks who saw service organizations more like uncles than government programs taught me about family and the limits of state-provided social and health services. Yet while I was there none of the expatriates,

including me, ever really spoke about what we could learn from Botswana—only what was wrong with the country and its people.

During the four months I spent in Botswana, I wrote grants for education and prevention organizations. I served as the event manager for the government's World AIDS Day commemoration, which sought to educate people about services they could seek. I spent an afternoon each week at a daycare for the children of young mothers. I teamed up with activists to win youth representation in national AIDS advocacy organizations. But I was in over my head. The most lasting lesson from my time there was

that the appearance of doing good work is not the same thing as making the world a better place.

I realized there was much more I needed to learn. I wanted to learn how to agitate and organize people to fight for their own interests, to build power for themselves rather than just accept projects started and owned by others. And I felt I needed to do something in my own country before I could tell anyone else what to do in theirs.



So back in the United States, I linked up with the Foundation for Civic Leadership and spent six months creating a Summer Institute for twenty-five student activists from around the country. I used the opportunity to attempt to understand and then teach the lessons I had learned from my own confused experiences. But I was still going a hundred miles an hour. There were a few victories, and some good training took place, but I had more questions than answers. The program was temporary, national, intellectual, and for privileged college kids. This was not the long haul, cross-class, multi-cultural transformation I sought.

Around that same time, I realized that not one of the things I had helped start—GSI in high school, BASIC and the Living Wage Campaign in college, a little activist coalition in Botswana—was still thriving. This made me sick to my stomach.

While preparing for the Summer Institute, a friend invited me to a ten-day training session organized by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). I had been to many conferences before, and I did not expect much.

At the IAF training, however, I met a group of people much like myself. They weren't all young adults; many had started working for justice before I was born. More than anything, what

struck me was this: I had never seen so many people from different race and class backgrounds actually treating one another as equals. These were parents and teachers and pastors and lay-people who were sticking up for their families and communities. They preached that relationships (not principles or ideas) come before action; and they practiced what they preached. Hours each day during the training were set aside for face-to-face, one-to-one meetings between the participants. No one was doing anything for anybody else. We were all in this together—listening to one another’s stories.

I learned that, at least for the IAF, “combining” happens one conversation at a time. But was it only conversation?

It wasn’t. During another part of the training, we all went to a nearby convention hall. A local IAF organization had approached their state’s governor to address particular problems. The governor agreed to most of the organization’s (notably specific) requests—on issues ranging from education to immigrant labor to health centers. The meeting was obviously planned from gavel to gavel, but it wasn’t paid organizers or staff people who were running the “action,” as they called it. It was volunteer leaders from the organization’s member institutions. The audience, 1200 strong on a Sunday afternoon, represented every neighborhood and religious tradition in the area. The speakers addressed issues that affected them personally, in prepared and practical public statements. What blew my mind was the discipline. Everyone kept to the agenda and the timetable, including the governor. This was not the kind of four-hour marathon meeting I was used to running or attending. The event succeeded because it was owned and led by hundreds of local people who were there with their families. It occurred to me that that’s what happens when relationships come before action.

My notes from the training are filled with bold-print epiphanies: PEOPLE BEFORE IDEAS...BE CURIOUS...TAKE RISKS. Towards the end of the ten-day training, Ed Chambers (the IAF national director) spoke about the IAF's history. At the end of his remarks, he said he was looking for someone who could build an experimental organization based in Chicago focusing on young adults. That turned out to be PACT, and I turned out to be its initial organizer.



What drew me to Chambers at first was that he seemed wholly allergic to bullshit. At his request, I had written an evaluation of the ten-day training and sent it to him. When I walked into his Chicago office two months later to interview for the job, I had nearly forgotten about my initial remarks. Chambers had not. There was no “hello,” no “thanks for making the trip out from Boston,” no “how were your holidays?” He took out my evaluation, dumped it in front of me, pointed to the first thing I had written, and said, “You got this all wrong.”

Chambers taught me that real radicals exist in between the world-as-it-is and the world-as-it-could-be.

I worked with Chambers for about four years. He was the first person who really cared enough about me to agitate and mentor me. I owe him a lot, which is why this book is dedicated to him.

Chambers taught me that real radicals exist *in between* the world-as-it-is and the world-as-it-could-be. In a group of ideologues and optimists, the radical is a pragmatist. In a group of skeptics and

pessimists, the radical is the visionary. Or as Saul Alinsky wrote in 1946, a radical “believes intensely in the possibilities of man and hopes fervently for the future” while “[recognizing] that constant dissension and conflict is and has been the fire under the boiler of democracy.” A *radical* is a true *agent of change*. I’ll use the term *could-be radicals* for those of us who want to organize at a grassroots level but are still learning our way.

This book is for us could-be radicals—young adults, like me, who seek the world-as-it-could-be and who are willing to make some mistakes in the world-as-it-is in order to get there.

Stephen Noble Smith
Chicago, Illinois

CHAPTER ONE

FINDING OUR “WHY”



**How do I know about the world?
By what is within me.**

Tao Teh Ching

We can learn a lot from four-year-olds. Around age four, most kids first encounter the notion of cause and effect. They realize things don't just happen; they happen for a reason.

Kids are awed by this. Rightly so. You hear it in their one-word mantra: “Why? Why? Why? Why?”

The question “Why?” serves us could-be radicals too. We ask it of potential allies and targets often. But we start here by asking it of ourselves.

Why? Why get involved in social change at all? Why care about making the world a better place? Why fight? And for what?

Even at its best, the work of social change is tough. Not only will we lose, but we will lose often—and in public. We need strength to withstand the inevitable setbacks and pitfalls of organizing. Knowing why we do what we do helps us make both strategic (long range) and tactical (short range) decisions. It guides us toward what really matters and away from what doesn't. Knowing our “why” helps us understand that it's not just *what* we do but *how* we do it that matters. Most importantly, knowing why we do things allows us to communicate who we are to others.

Defeat and frustration will find us—whether we are slogging through a campaign for a new neighborhood playground or lobbying for recycling services or opposing a popular war. Knowing why we do what we do keeps us going when we would rather be doing almost anything else.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist thinker and activist, once wrote: “the raft is not the shore.” The journey is not the destination. The struggle is not the outcome. Activists of every stripe tend to talk a lot about shores, destinations and outcomes, but our “why” is our raft, the thing that keeps us afloat long enough so that we might just reach our goals.



Scimone Edwards was a nineteen-year-old, homeless, single mother when she faced the prospect of speaking in public for the first time. She was to tell her story of homelessness to an audience at a local community college that included a state legislator, college students, other homeless youth, and ex-offenders. At the end of her speech, she would ask the legislator to sponsor legislation creating transitional jobs for homeless young adults.

But at this moment, just before the meeting, Ms. Edwards was scared. Another leader, Andre McDearmon, an ex-offender who was chairing the meeting, let her know that we would support her however it went. And then he asked her, “Why did you want to do this in the first place?”

For Edwards, knowing her “why” had nothing to do with harrowing statistics or arguments about the cycles of poverty. Her “why” was her son and her wish that he have opportunities that were unavailable to her. She carried her “why” with her every day—to job interviews, to daycare centers, to meetings with case-workers. She didn’t know it in her head; she knew it in her gut.

Ms. Edwards’s son was not her only “why.” Her mother had kicked her out of the house; she wanted to prove her mother wrong. Her social worker had stayed after work to help her with her speech; she wanted to prove her social worker right. She also knew that she needed and wanted a job as soon as possible. So in addition to asking for new legislation, she decided to ask the state legislator—and everyone else in attendance at the meeting—to help her find a job.

Our “whys” are usually complicated and deeply personal. But when we know what really matters to us, what drives us, what our passions are, we make better decisions. Knowing our “why” helps us understand and navigate our own self-interest.



Rene Delgado was a twenty-year-old student when he joined Public Action for Change Today (PACT), a new group of young adult could-be radicals in Chicago. The son of immigrants, he thought a lot about how he could honor his parents, their culture, and the sacrifices they had made. Underneath his waist-length hair and Che t-shirt, Mr. Delgado was at his core a devoted son. He also suffered from a chronic illness.

Delgado's sense of urgency was almost palpable. Upon hearing of PACT's nascent campaigns (on immigration, health care, financial aid), Delgado joined them all.

That was his problem: He'd do anything. For a while, you could not attend a PACT meeting without seeing Mr. Delgado—and it literally wore him out. During a one-on-one conversation, I challenged him to do only the one thing he was most passionate about and let other folks take responsibility for the rest. He surprised me with his decision to focus on reinstating financial aid for college students in Illinois. Even though this young man had his own schooling paid for by scholarships and grants, his best friend was trying to raise kids, work, and go to school, and Delgado knew she might have to drop out of classes if we could not win back her financial aid.

Knowing our “why” informs how we relate to people within and outside our own communities. But it's not enough to know it. We have to share it too. This potent little act of vulnerability—telling our dreams and deficiencies to people we don't know well, and asking them to do the same—fuels organizing. These moments of mutual vulnerability/accountability form the basis of strong relationships and often lead to action.

Let's flesh this out a little more. If you share with me your “why”—your struggle, the people and things that matter to you,

what wakes you up in the morning—then I can imagine myself in your position. Whether we live on the same side of the tracks or not, we can relate.

When we trust each other not to laugh at our aspirations but to hold one another accountable for them, we take a risk. But it sure beats the alternative: building our relationships—as we normally do—on the flimsier stuff of convenience and commonality.



Connie Garrett is a black sociology professor in her thirties. She struck me initially as antagonistic, indefatigable, hopeful, emotional, and very much an ideologue. She hurried everywhere. She was a fan of big dreams and sweeping generalizations.

My read on Ms. Garrett was simple (and simplistic). I felt she had too much head and not enough heart. Like many could-be radicals, she was committed to ideas and ideals, but that made it hard for her to operate in the world as it is. I worried how she would react when the inevitable obstacles arose and she would be forced to compromise. I figured she would fold under that pressure.

Ms. Garrett proved me wrong. Through hard work, she won a spot in our summer-long organizing class for top emerging leaders. At first, she battled with others in the class and frequently painted herself as a naysayer. In one activity, participants were asked to draw a stick figure of themselves and write in rank order the things that are most important to them (for example: my son, my struggle for citizenship, having enough money to support myself, my faith in God, my mother who is sick). Garrett was the only student in the class not to list a single other person on her stick figure; it was all ideas (“I want a justice-oriented community,” etc.).

One of the last class sessions focused on the importance of storytelling in achieving social change. A veteran leader gave some examples, and the students were asked to relate one personal story that helped answer the “why” question: “Why are you taking this class? Why do you want to change your community?” They had twenty minutes to write a story that would help answer “why?”.

Ms. Garrett’s story started with her mother. They were close, she said, and she lived to impress her mom. They came from poverty, and she wanted to get into the University of Chicago to prove herself. Her mother had been so proud when she was admitted, but Ms. Garrett had to turn down the offer because of the cost. She said she had taken the organizing class to continue to prove herself to her mother. She talked about going to college in Texas and fighting the administration for better treatment of minority students, and how she and her fellow students had failed. She said she had taken the class so she would not fail the next time. She talked about living in New Orleans and being displaced by the storm, about feeling helpless and sidetracked when she came back to Chicago. These truths just poured out of her, in story form. She spoke uninterrupted for nearly twenty minutes, eliciting tears and laughter from her classmates (and from me).

That moment did not completely change my judgment of Ms. Garrett. But it forced me to put myself in her position. It allowed me to see some of the experiences that had made her who she is. It encouraged me to see how she could continue to develop, rather than how she was likely to fail.

Finally, it hit me: Until then, Garrett and I had never really done the essential relational work with each other—learning about where we came from and what matters to us. I had failed in the most important step in organizing: I had failed to share

my “why” and be curious about *hers*. Perhaps we both deserved blame, but I was supposed to be the professional organizer and I had forgotten to do my relational work. She may not have opened up, but neither had I.

Telling someone what really matters to us is one of the most radical things we can do in public life. It may also be the most important. Even if you believe this to be true (as I did), and even if your “why” is something you have thought a lot about (as Ms. Garrett had), our tendency is to skip over these conversations in

favor of something safer, to spend more time writing mass e-mails and less time sitting across from someone face-to-face. This book is about what happens when two people of different backgrounds take the chance to let each other in.

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Learning what matters to us, and to each other, means taking risks over and over again. When we think we have a handle on one of the stories or memories or relationships that really motivates us,

we must take it out for a spin. We must tell others what matters to us. We need to hear how it sounds to us and to them. Then we have to ask others what matters to them and listen to what they say. Their answers often hold truths for us too. Like most worthwhile things, finding our “why” takes time and reflection, action and evaluation. And when we feel as though we have a hold on it, it will change.



The word *interest* owes its origin to the Latin *inter esse*, meaning “to be between or among others.” The Romans understood one of public life’s many paradoxes: Your self-interest (another way of saying your “why”)—though totally personal—is only fully realized in relationship to others.

- Scimone Edwards not only needed her son to help her find the courage to speak out in public; she also needed Andre McDearmon’s encouragement.
- Rene Delgado’s “why” was to fight alongside his best friend.
- Connie Garrett was tired of going it alone; her “why” was finding allies and mentors to support her.

And my “why” was to get into relationship and action with real people like them, who were willing to let a young, white, middle-class, Harvard-educated idealist be part of their lives.

What’s your “why”?