Reclaiming Our Social Justice Organizations
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"We seek not rest but transformation. We are dancing through each other as doorways." ~ Marge Piercy

[I]The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality." ~ Dante

At a time when social injustice seems as rampant as ever, there are no two more appropriate quotes than these to remind us of the flow and urgency of change. The "transformation" that Marge Piercy describes is relational: we need each other, we inspire change in each other, and we provide doorways for each other. Dante, on the other hand, is abruptly candid: remaining neutral when injustice demands action is unforgivable. Martin Luther King would echo Dante more than six hundred years later when he declared "[the] tragedy in this great period of social transition is not the glaring noisiness of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people".

Nonprofit organizations are at a crossroads. We are increasingly asked to fill the gaps created by cuts in government services, to respond to those left in the ruins of ill-conceived public policy, and to do so without additional funding support or political influence. The current anti-immigrant rhetoric and racist initiatives to deny undocumented immigrants access to even basic emergency services will inevitably confront nonprofit organizations with the prospect of denying assistance to community members who, by virtue of their immigration status, have been determined unworthy and contemptible.

Whether nonprofits are willing and prepared to respond in this time of "great moral crisis" has everything to do with how we understand and define the social justice nature of our organizations. This is the story of one organization's reclamation of its social justice roots.

Organizational Transformation

In August 2004, the domestic violence organization I have had the incredible fortune of being involved with for the past 15 years, proudly and publicly reclaimed its social justice roots. After 25 years of serving the community, Boulder County Safehouse announced a new name and an expanded social justice agenda. Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN) would carry its vision of a just and equitable world for women and their families into the future. SPAN affirmed its mission as a human rights organization committed to ending violence against women, youth and children through support, advocacy, education and community organizing. Promoting economic, racial, and social justice would be the focus, an equal balance of direct services and social impact projects would be the method.

The transformation of Boulder County Safehouse into SPAN was a several-year process, involving countless discussions, exploration and inquires, jittery starts and stops, conflict and confrontation, hurt feelings, inspired ideas, risks and recoil, and finally, a well-calculated leap of faith. The August 2004 announcement of our name change and expanded mission was the public unveiling of efforts that had already begun to show extraordinary results. Two years prior to the public announcement, the organization looked and functioned like many battered women's programs: a predominantly white staff provided shelter and counseling services to a client base of 40 percent people of color; advocacy services centered on the criminal legal system; prevention efforts focused on "family violence"; and the agency's referral network depended on mainstream human services organizations and government systems (child welfare, family court, TANF, etc.). Fundraising to support these services was the responsibility of a designated few— primarily the executive director, development director and board of directors.

By mid-2004, the face and focus of SPAN looked quite different. Fifty percent of the staff, 50 percent of the leadership/management team, and 40 percent of the board represented communities of color, reflecting the demographics of those served by SPAN. Programs had been reorganized in response to client needs. Client-defined advocacy, which often challenged status quo collaborations, was the norm. Prevention efforts were broadly focused to include race and gender-based violence. Primary alliances and partnerships were with community-based, social justice, antiracist organizations and groups. New models of fundraising were introduced to lessen the gap between "raising money" and advocating for social change. SPAN's transformation was being realized.

In the two years since the 2004 public unveiling of the transformed SPAN, the organization's social justice focus has matured, deepened, and informed every aspect of our work. An unanticipated benefit has been an increased level of staff continuity and longevity. Prior to 2004, the SPAN staff of 30 experienced

an annual turn-over rate of 35 percent , resulting in costly and time-consuming recruitment, hiring, and training processes. Today, the annual turnover rate is less than 15 percent. Defining one's work in terms of activism and justice–on both an individual and social level–can guard against burnout and cynicism that are often the demise of "service providers." (Of course, there are plenty of stresses that keep many social justice activists on the edge; but believing in one's efficacy to create lasting personal and social change helps make that edge a bit less jagged and steep.)

Why Bother?

The impetus behind SPAN's transformation was multifaceted. But most compelling was the realization that the organization had settled into a routine that prioritized "services" over social justice and failed to integrate a race and class analysis into our work. We asked ourselves "Are we really making a difference? If so, to whom? If not, why not and how can we change?"

The transformation of SPAN also occurred within the context of a movement increasingly scrutinized for its reliance on the criminal legal system and questioned for its relevance and accessibility to diverse communities. Like many social justice movements before and since, the Women's Anti-Violence Movement was born of inspiration and tamed by institutionalization. Since the birth of the movement more than three decades ago, hundreds of battered women's shelters and rape crisis centers have been established across the country. Unquestionably, countless lives have been saved and individuals helped as a result of these programs and services. However, hundreds of thousands of women continue to be physically and sexually assaulted each year and tens of thousands go unnoticed and unserved by the very organizations established to help them. This is particularly true for women of color and poor women who, despite these services, continue to experience intimate partner violence at rates nearly three times greater than do white, middle-class women.

How is it that a movement that began with such determination and passion has become a network of agencies whose services are questionably relevant to those who need them most? The answers, and there are many, have little to do with the dedication of staff and volunteers in domestic violence and sexual assault programs. This is not a problem of commitment. Rather, it is the predictable consequence of a social justice movement's slide from activism to service-delivery.

From Activism and Mobilization to Pragmatism and Institutionalization

Most social justice movements—and the organizations that emerge from them—have a predictable life cycle. First is the activism and mobilization stage, during which impassioned activists expose the identified injustice and champion social change. Solutions are broadly stated and sound great at rallies and on bumper stickers: "End Patriarchy!" "Wage Peace!" "E-Racism!" "Every Home a Safe Home!" "No Means No!" The careers of countless social workers and political science majors have been inspired by the "activism and mobilization" stage of social justice movements.

Next is the stage of pragmatism. The onset of this stage is typically marked by a no-nonsense activist who, after a rousing speech by the charismatic leader, asks "Seriously, what are we going to do about this?" Organizations are established and programs are developed to serve the needs of those affected by the injustice. Putting vision into practice is the focus and challenge of this stage; institutionalizing the movement is typically the outcome.

It is during the transition from "activism and mobilization" to "pragmatism and institutionalization" that fundraising strategies, and those charged with implementing them, grow increasingly formal, professionalized, and disconnected from the grassroots origins of the movement. It's one thing to organize a car wash or bake sell to raise a few thousand dollars; it's something entirely different to write and manage a hundred-thousand dollar federal grant. Or so we've come to believe.

A very strange haze tends to engulf social change activists during a movement's transition to the stage of pragmatism. The same people who can organize seemingly disinterested communities in response to injustice, who are unfazed by hostile crowds and personal attacks, who commit their very breath to the struggle for justice, can crumble at the thought of fundraising. Of course, this has less to do with the actual mechanics of fundraising (a skill most of us learn as young children instructed to sell Girl Scout Cookies, Easter Seal stamps, school calendars, and the like), and more to do with beliefs about the nature of money, who has it, how to ask for it, and who controls it. Rational or not, conscious or not, our unexamined beliefs about money can undermine the grassroots strength of social justice movements.

"Activism and mobilization" and "pragmatism and institutionalization" are necessary stages of a social movement's development. They are neither good nor bad; they are simply predictable. What becomes problematic in the transition between stages is the tilting away from social change—the impulse that inspired the movement—toward an uncritical embrace of programs and services that may meet some individuals' immediate needs but fails to address sustainable, far-reaching change. Balancing direct

service with social impact is the key. Unfortunately, the symptoms of imbalance are evident in most social justice movements. Whether the Women's Anti-Violence Movement, the HIV/AIDS Movement, the Homeless Prevention Movement, the Environmental Movement, the Peace Movement, or the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender (aka, Queer) Movement, the challenges are the same. The evolution toward meaningful and sustainable social change requires that we take a boldly honest look at the fundamental problems of our social justice movements.

The Breakdown of Social Justice

Our movements are too white.

With the exception of movements and organizations that emerge from communities of color, the visible leadership of most social justice movements are white, traditionally educated, well-intentioned liberal folks like me. Despite the fact that most social injustices disproportionately affect communities of color, organizations addressing these issues have systematically, albeit unconsciously (through unexamined white privilege), excluded people of color from leadership. Even social justice movements initiated and led by people of color must contend with the eventual influx of liberal white folks accustomed to the role and power of leadership.

Coloring-up social justice organizations through "diversity trainings" and "diversity recruitment efforts" has been, not surprisingly, woefully unsuccessful. Creating effective, multiracial, antiracist organizations and movements requires a level of personal and organizational commitment that is too often and too easily dismissed as a "distraction from the real work." Implied here, of course, is that the needs, issues, voices, and leadership of people of color are secondary (at best) to "the real work" of our movements and organizations.

Our movements are too conciliatory.

We have confused collaboration with cooptation, often sacrificing broader social justice goals to settle on conflict-avoidant middle-of-the-road solutions. Like the awkward tension that often engulfs family holiday gatherings (particularly those during election years), we learn what not to talk about for fear of the conflict and discord that may result from an honest airing of differences.

"Collaboration" has become the mantra of funders and communities tired of—or maybe just confused by—the plethora of seemingly disjointed nonprofits vying for limited funds and a chance in the spotlight. In response, we have signed letters of support and Memorandums of Understanding to appease funders

without critical discussions of how these partnerships may or may not serve our constituents or our social justice agenda. Any effective collaboration requires not only agreeing on our shared values but clearly defining where our goals diverge or even collide.

Similarly, our public policy agendas have become too conciliatory, driven by "what can get passed" rather than "what is really needed." This is not to say that strategy, timing and patience aren't fundamental ingredients to social change; clearly, they are. But too easily our vision for equity and justice has been blurred by the logistics of getting there, mistaking diminutive steps for true progress.

Our movements are too disconnected and too service-based.
When grassroots organizations grow out of social justice movements the trajectory toward specialization seems unavoidable. A problem is defined (such as intimate partner violence against women); a program or service is proposed to address the problem (battered women's shelters); and first volunteers then professional staff are engaged to run the program. As services expand, greater expertise is required within the organization to secure resources and support and manage growth. Over time, the organization institutionalizes its services through protocol and standard, and if all goes well, reinforces its place in the community as the "expert" in its identified service area.

While this trajectory toward specialization allows for focused programs and services to address a specific community need, it comes with a cost. Disconnected, service-based organizations oversimplify the complex nature of people's lives by encouraging a single-issue approach to injustice. Providing a battered woman and her children with shelter responds to their immediate basic need for safety, but does nothing to address the economic inequities that keep her reliant on her partner's income for survival and vulnerable to his future abuse. A battered women's shelter is no more the solution to gender-based violence than a hospital emergency room is the solution to heart disease. It is a necessary resource, not a fundamental answer. Without equal investment in addressing the roots of an injustice, we inadvertently confuse the quantifiable task of *serving clients* with the immeasurable charge of *preventing injustice*.

Our movements' fundraising strategies are too disconnected from our social change efforts.
 The expansion of the nonprofit sector in the past decade or more has sprouted a "fundraising industry," replete with (mostly white) fundraising experts and professionals. While this industry has enhanced the ability of some nonprofits to compete for economic survival and has introduced innovative and entrepreneurial strategies to the world of nonprofit fundraising, it has also served to disconnect raising

money from creating change. This undermines the very essence of grassroots social change by placing the resources for creating change in the hands of a select few. In this scenario, those who know how to play the fundraising game, who represent the organization's public face, who interpret (and tame) the organization's social change message to mainstream funders, are rarely the same people who "do the social justice work" of the organization. At some point, the strain of this disconnect will unravel an organization.

Fundraising for social change requires a stern commitment and a strong stomach. Too many organizations are tempted to sacrifice urgent social change work that may be controversial or unpopular (like pro-immigrant and antiracist initiatives) if it risks offending a major funder or funding source. And many funders, particularly government departments and mainstream foundations, expect nonprofits to de-politicize their work (or at least how they describe their work in grant proposals) to keep the funder's funder (trustees, politicians) happy.

Seeking Transformation

So, where do we go from here? How to we begin this transformation? First, let's deal with the racism in our organizations and movements and stop behaving as if doing so is inconvenient to "the real work." Our national legacy of colonization, racism, and white supremacy, combined with the changing demographics of our country and the fact that the injustices we work to end disproportionately affect people of color, should leave no room for hesitance or squeamishness. Racism is alive and well in our white-led social justice movements. Let's confront it through honest conversations about power and privilege that demand accountability, not euphemistic trainings on "difference and tolerance" that leave people of color tokenized and subject to white folks' paternalism.

Second, let's build genuine alliances and partnerships that promote real change, rather than settle for "collaborations" that are little more than self-serving referral networks. Let's agree that unabashed truthfulness about our differences as well as our shared goals should frame every alliance. I am a proponent of complex, even ironic partnerships (SPAN's alliance with a local evangelical church is such an example), but they must be founded on honesty and candor, leaving no room for surprise or personal affront when we vehemently disagree.

Along these lines, let's bring this same level of frankness into our relationships with funders and supporters. Let's ensure that those investing in "our work" understand that this work includes not just a

service but a social change objective. Let's push funders to get as comfortable with social impact outcomes that may take a generation to manifest as they are measuring individuals served annually in a program.

Finally, let's broaden our thinking and integrate our strategies regarding social justice. Our organizations, public policy agendas, and social change efforts must work with not against each other. "Oppression Olympics" (to borrow from a brilliant colleague), setting "my injustice" against "your injustice," is a waste of our time and passion. Let's stop doing it. Breaking through the isolation and disconnection of social justice movements affords us room to create more meaningful solutions to multifaceted social issues.

Coming full circle to SPAN: We've learned invaluable lessons and made some painful mistakes in the process of our organization's transformation. Here are few lessons to share with others embarking on a similar journey:

- Expect conflict— it means people are paying attention. Be prepared for conflicts within the organization as staff, board and volunteers question their place in a changing structure as well as conflicts with other organizations unsure what this shift means to them. Some of the most painful and surprising conflicts we experienced were with white-led, liberal organizations and activists who felt threatened and judged by our social justice, anti-racist efforts. Which brings us to the next lesson…

- Maintain humility— it makes it easier to live through mistakes. Transformation is a messy process; approaching it with humility and openness allows for more genuine and lasting change. At the same time, don't confuse humility with acquiescence. Failing to vehemently speak out against injustice because of a concern that we'll look righteous isn't humble, it's cowardice.

- Acknowledge fundraising anxiety— it helps keep paranoid fantasies in check. SPAN has a long history of diversified funding and fundraising, which made it easier to tolerate the possibility of losing the support of conservative or mainstream donors while building support from funders and community members inspired by our expanded social justice agenda. We have experienced very few instances of individual or institutional funders pulling their support because of the organization's expanded social justice work, and many more instances of gaining support from donors interested in investing in social change. Ironically, the primary concern raised by other organizations reluctant to speak openly about social justice issues is fear of losing funding.

- Communicate frequently— it reduces conjecture and helps people relate to the changing organization. Being clear and direct about changes in the organization and the rationale behind those changes provides an open invitation for the community to become part of the organization's social justice efforts.
- Implement necessary structural changes— it removes operational barriers to change. A critical assessment of formal and informal organizational culture is needed to identify barriers to organizational inclusivity, particularly for people of color. In addition, structural shifts are also necessary to establish and integrate new fundraising roles and strategies. SPAN is exploring new ways of fundraising to augment current efforts. We have introduced "community fundraising support" into each staff member's job responsibilities, with the focus on linking staff's community activism with raising funds. We have also developed and marketed a two-day "Building a Multi-Racial Anti-Racist Organization" training, which now accounts for $25,000 in annual earned income.

In championing these efforts to reclaim our social justice organizations, I have no illusions about the personal and professional challenges faced and the toll taken when embarking on this journey. Being part of the transformation of SPAN has been both the most enriching and the most agonizing experience of my career. It is also an ongoing transformation, and over time I expect we will be tempted by habit, limited resources, or simple exhaustion to narrow our gaze and lose sight of the breadth of our vision. I trust, however, that our gaze will never narrow, not because of mere grit and determination, but because of the remarkable board, staff, volunteers, clients, and community of SPAN that bravely declared they would never remain neutral amidst injustice and instead danced through a doorway together, never to turn back.

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