

, Industrial Areas Foundation

The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture  
The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life  
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts  
March 26, 2013

What action can we take today to embolden prophetic witness and imagination for tomorrow?

I'd like to start with a story about Carmen Badillo, a public school PTA mother who lived on the wrong side of San Antonio. When I first met her, she was worried about sidewalks. She got involved with 'Communities Organized for Public Service' (and her parish) to organize around that issue and then, with other leaders, expanded her interest into drainage and how that impacted children's safety as they walked to school. She then got involved in developing a counter budget for the City of San Antonio and, in thinking about the management of growth in the City, eventually taking on the developers. Over time she became interested in things like jobs and economic development, and fought for human capital investments with COPS. As a result, the City spent millions on drainage systems, streets, curbs, parks, libraries, schools and college campuses across the West, South and East sides of San Antonio.

Every vic(s)5( a)tn

Carmen Anaya organized her community to get millions of dollars invested in water and sewage systems in the *colonias* of the Rio Grande Valley.

Ellen Israel and Dara Frimmer of Temple Israel, who began working with One LA-IAF out of concern for schools on the Westside and have since expanded their interests to include innovative ways to increase healthcare access in Los Angeles.

Diane Hanley, of Together Baton Rouge, who started out preaching the prophetic Catholic social doctrine, but went on to secure millions of dollars for transit reform after personally speaking to 2,500 residents.

Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel wrote a seminal book on *Prophets*, in which he asserts that a person's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. "The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God it is a disaster."<sup>i</sup>

Prophets are driven by a divine pathos. "It is no mere listening to, and conveying of, a divine message which distinguishes his personal life. The prophet not only hears and apprehends the divine pathos; he is convulsed by it to the depths of his soul." In contrast to the Stoic sage, the prophet can be described as *homo sympathetikos*. "The pathos of God is upon him... it moves him. It breaks out in him like a storm in the soul, overwhelming his inner life, his thoughts, feelings, wishes and hopes. It takes possession of his heart and mind, giving him the courage to act against the world."

By listening to God speak through the collective voices participating in house meetings, Dallas Area Interfaith leaders knew Medicaid Expansion was an issue before the mainstream media did. Time after time they heard stories of people struggling to find their way into the health care system. In November 2012, Governor Rick Perry announced he would 'Opt Out' of the federal proposal to make healthcare available to more low income people in Texas. The media was silent...until DAI leaders moved into action. Leaders spoke early and spoke loudly, organizing a raucous rally that called on the Governor to 'Opt In' and launching a petition drive that drew thousands of supporters and sparked a collective cry across the state.

This is the interpersonal relationship –the collective challenge –

One thing to take from Heschel is that action in the prophetic tradition does not mean howling as a lone wolf in the wilderness, but rather, being driven into action out of relationship and while in relationship with others.

It requires one to learn to collaborate. To collaborate means to co-create, to share in creation with God. To co-create means to acknowledge that we are created in the image of God; it means that we are responsible for what goes on in the world. We are responsible for figuring out *together* how to make the world a better approximation of the kingdom of God.

One way to look at the scripture is that it illustrates the ongoing struggle and negotiation between God and humanity so that humanity can take full responsibility for creation. Periodically, whether it is the at the Tower of Babel, the Flood, Abraham negotiating over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Exodus and ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection story, the narrative is about human responsibility. Humans, being mature in their faith and learning how to collaborate, accept the challenges of the prophets in their midst and understand the appropriateness of subsidiarity.

The cry at the cross is one of abandonment. But it culminates in the embracing of the Holy Spirit so that we can act in the world and overcome barriers of language and culture, not by dismantling or destroying them, but rather by embracing our distinctiveness.

Co-creation is at the heart of social entrepreneurship, which has an important role in both the prophetic tradition and in democratic citizenship. Social entrepreneurship is innovative public and social action that adds value to the world around us. At its best, such action increases the capacity and diversity of a mix of talented leaders through planning, collaboration, and reflection. Such action must be rooted in tradition – which stands in stark contrast to traditionalism, which is constituted by the dead ideas of the living, rather than the living ideas of the dead.

Living ideas in the democratic tradition drive us into public life. One of the important habits and practices that are developed in institutional organizing is that of executive function – the development of executive agency in adults. When we build relational power what we are really

These are lifelong skills, life affirming skills – skills that help people create meaning in their lives. These skills help them develop a narrative, a practice which contrasts with experiencing life as merely a series of undigested happenings.

One oft-raised question is



Confused, Moses goes back to God and says, "Why do you treat me so badly? If this is the way you are going to treat me, why don't you kill me right now"

The lesson is that each one of us has time, money, talent and energy. We all have tacit knowledge, concern for our children and grandchildren who maybe have first claim on that time, talent and energy. But if we mix it up with each other, to build institutions that can make a difference, then we might have more than enough for everyone.

But we have to be mindful of the challenges. We cannot be arrogant. We have to have a sense of humor.

It is important that as prophets we maintain perspective. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

---

By listening to God speak through the collective voices participating in house meetings, Dallas Area Interfaith (DAI) leaders knew Medicaid Expansion was an issue before the mainstream media did. Time after time they heard stories of people fighting to find their way into the health care system. In November 2012, Governor Rick Perry announced he would 'Opt Out' of the federal proposal to make healthcare available to



Until the intervention of the clergy, there had been only muted questions about the Governor's report. But soon after, the *Times Picayune* issued an editorial calling on the governor to withdraw the sales tax proposal; think tanks and businesses soon followed. It took prophetic leaders, in relationship with their constituents and each other, to turn the public conversation around.

On Monday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, Governor Jindal announced that he was essentially shelving his plan. "OK, I hear you," reported the *New York Times*. One week into the legislative session, the House Ways and Means Committee indefinitely deferred all tax reform proposals, calling the Governor's plan dead.

To further develop a broad constituency not just for fairer taxes, but also for fairer lending practices and criminal justice systems, leaders organized a "State of Affairs" issues conference with more than 300 leaders from nine parishes and counties, kicking off a two-year civic academy campaign on these issues of concern to Louisianans.

Over the last 30 years transnational auto manufacturers have built plants all over the world. Everywhere but in the in the US, these manufacturing jobs are high-wage jobs. Everywhere but in the US, these jobs are *union* jobs. In the US, however, most of the new jobs have landed in the South and these jobs are not union jobs.

Automakers i

access to the county enrollment system. 50 leaders will now train to become 'Certified Application Assistants', with the power to directly enroll people at 25 mobile enrollment events hosted by One LA institutions. 30 leaders *from each institution* will also train to become 'healthcare experts' to educate and recruit people to participate in these events. One LA leaders aim to enroll thousands of eligible LA residents, moving closer to their goal of coverage for all.

Nevadans for the Common Good (NCG) is in the early stages of becoming a political force in the state of Nevada and some of its founding leaders have become increasingly concerned about sex-trafficking. While Nevada is known for its legal brothels and sex-entertainment industry, the underside is the practice of pimps targeting younger, high school-age girls. One reverend's daughter was targeted by her then-boyfriend. Another girl was recruited at her high school; her mother found out only when her daughter was caught propositioning a cop. Former prostitutes are now speaking out about brutal violence suffered at the hands of "boyfriends" looking for new blood.

In response, NCG leaders are working with the Attorney General to participate in these