

**Chapter Five:  
Conclusions — The Connection Between  
Individual and Community**



*"If it's going to be, it's got to start with me."*

- Manuel

*"I think if people weren't changing we would not have power. The organization wouldn't have been able to sustain itself, for 18 years . . . it's critical, we're about individual development, if we're not than we aren't Valley Interfaith."*

- Sister Judy Donovan

## **Chapter Five:**

The narratives of Valley Interfaith's leaders serve as powerful testimony to illustrate how individuals, change, develop, and even transform as a result of their participation in the organization. They, however, are only part of Valley Interfaith's accomplishments. Successful community development efforts are typically evaluated on more tangible grounds: public funding obtained, new buildings, attendance at meetings, all standards that Valley Interfaith meets and exceeds. Are these changes in individuals a side effect, an added bonus, to a successful community development strategy? Or do they serve in some way as a catalyst to Valley Interfaith's efficacy? In this concluding chapter I move away from a pure focus on the level of the individual. I consider the intersection of community development with the little understood and even less applied concepts of human development. Underlying this discussion are the overarching questions with which I began this thesis: What role can individual development play in holistic community development strategies? How can this analysis of the Industrial Areas Foundation enhance our understanding of the theory and practice of community development?

### **Lessons from practice, lessons for practice:**

The metaphor of the "public university", often cited in reference to the IAF, serves as a useful way of understanding what occurs within the network. IAF organizations provide a space for adults to learn in the context of a community. The practice of these organizations not only reinforces the idea that adults are capable of learning and developing, it provides them with a classroom, a means of doing so, thus tapping into the natural curiosity and potential of their constituency.

What is happening within this "university"? Probably what should be happening in any good educational institution: The IAF education is one that *begins where people are*—with their own stories. It is an education that provides *strong mentorship*. It is an education that presents opportunities

for *experiential learning*, and requires *reflection* on that learning. Furthermore, it is an education that takes place in a context where the *individual learns as part of a collaborative*. These learning tenets resonate with the arguments of educators beginning with Vygotsky who argued that people learn best when they begin with what they know, Freire, who advocated a dialogic process of reflection, and Dewey, who emphasized the essential role of the collective and experiential process of learning (Vygotsky, 1974, Freire, 1982, Dewey, 1963). This education is embedded in the interconnectedness of the individual with his/her community. Its outcomes, therefore, do not rest at the level of the individual. Individuals learn and change, but their communities in turn takes on a life of their own, growing collectively wiser and stronger.

Beyond building on the tenets of good teaching, a critical factor leading to individual transformation is that individuals are explicitly encouraged to take an interest in their own development. The IAF deliberately provides its leaders with a space to say “Not only do I care about the development of my community, not only do I care about the development of my church, I care about my own development.” The organization therefore challenges the norms of a society where an interest in one’s personal growth is looked down upon or perceived as selfish. For many, becoming involved with the IAF is the first time where people understand that they have a story, that their story has meaning, and that their story will continue to grow. Again, in providing a stimulating environment for individual growth, the IAF fosters changes in individuals as well as a change in the culture of the community in which they exist.

The combination of engaging its participants in a process of reflection and action and validating people’s interest in their own development results in a learning that is not only informational, but is actually transformational (Kegan, 1994). The lessons of Valley Interfaith, therefore, point to the ability of the organization to foster adult development. The students in these “public universities” are learning at astonishing rates. The emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes they are experiencing extend beyond civic

skills. Not only do individuals learn how the legislature functions, they learn a new way of thinking about themselves. In short, their growth represents a type of “civic development” through which individuals see both themselves and their relationship to their community differently. Inherent in the notion of civic development is an acknowledgement of the collective—individuals can not, do not, develop as citizens without a sense of belonging to a community.

Viewing the IAF through the lens of transformational pedagogy is supported by contemporary theory on professional development. Current research applies these educational lessons to the present day in an approach remarkably similar to that of the IAF. They advocate reflective practice in order to not only bring people new information, but to bring about developmental growth. *“The immediate as well as ultimate purpose of reflective professional development is not knowledge acquisition per se but behavioral change and improved performance.”* (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993, also see Basseches, 1984) Through engaging ordinary citizens in the reflective practice of public life, the IAF’s goals and their achievements reflect the type of behavioral change to which Osterman and Kottkamp refer.

Bearing in mind these “lessons from the field”, what are the implications of this research for the theory of community development? The inquiry into Valley Interfaith and the Industrial Areas Foundation’s approach to individual development suggests that traditional explanations of the organization’s success are overlooking an essential element of their strategy. While the IAF’s focus on building relationships indubitably results in increased social capital, closer examination suggests that *the relationships* are not the only changes that are occurring. Through these changed relationships, through these new experiences, and through becoming part of a collective, *individuals* are also changing. When we neglect this level of analysis, we are in essence reducing the complex intersection of the individual and the social to a simple and misleading model. When we overlook the stories of individual change, we construct an incomplete story of community change.

### **Limitations of and alternatives to the IAF model:**

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the IAF as a means to fostering individual development. I do so not only to provide a fuller picture of what takes place in communities with a strong IAF presence, but to underscore the need for alternative approaches. Probably the greatest limitation of this model is that due both to its capacity and its goals, local organizations are clearly not able to work with all of the individuals in a given community. As the first priority of the organization is always to build power, organizers and experienced leaders are very selective about who they “invest in”. This is only problematic in so far as there are not other avenues for individuals who may not be interested in, or ready for, this specific approach to political organizing. Furthermore, there are many people who may not meet the IAF criteria for “potential leaders”, but would flourish if they were to receive similar attention. Another inherent limitation of an institutionally based organizing model is that the IAF does not reach individuals who are unaffiliated with their local congregations, schools, or other organized groups. Broad-based community organizing, therefore, while extremely effective in working with a select group of individuals, only provides us with a hint of the potential of using similar tactics in alternative contexts.

As explained previously, the IAF focuses on issues they see as “winnable”. They avoid engaging in battles that would pit local organizations against forces operating on national or global levels. Similarly, in an effort to build solidarity across race, class, and gender, the IAF does not directly tackle issues that require explicit alignment along these lines. What would it mean if national organizations encouraging community development in these areas were also actively engaged in the growth of their members? What would it look like if fostering individual development was central to the mission and practice of places where people already naturally gather, Parent Teacher Associations, job training programs, adult education centers? What about places where people are intentionally brought together such as tenant groups, unions, and issue-based organizing efforts? What would be the impact of a strategic approach to human development or traditional service

providers such as TANF, housing and health care advocates, food pantries, etc.? <sup>1</sup> To what extent is this already happening? For many who work in these areas, an explicit focus on individual development is a natural extension of what they already do. Part of drawing attention to individual development in practice, therefore, requires naming, explaining, and developing our own understanding of these concepts.

### **Lessons for theory:**

As often occurs in this field, the practice of integrating individual and community development is leaps and bounds ahead of the theory. Mary Belenky explains that while often “nameless”, community organizations that respect the growth and capacity of their members are common. Although they may articulate their work in other terms, many organizations have found success because they are focusing on developing individual’s potential. Belenky sets forth four cases of community organizations they name as “public homeplaces” defined as “. . . *places where people support each other’s development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace.*” (1999, p.13) These four organizations range from mother’s centers to neighborhood associations. Despite their diversity, they, like the IAF, not only acknowledge but build upon the interactive relationship between individual, community, and society. Belenky writes, “*Leaders of public homeplaces, . . . are intensely interested in the development of each individual, of the group as a whole, and of a more democratic society. These leaders want to know each person, what they care about, and where they are trying to go.*” (Belenky, 1999, p.14) While this study carefully considers the role of these organizations in fostering women’s development, it is limited in its exploration of how these approaches build the “public voice” of women. The relationship here between women and community is unidirectional—the women are developed through their community, but is the community developed through these women? It is to illuminate this point that both an interdisciplinary and multilevel mode of analysis become essential.

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<sup>1</sup> The Right Question Project explores the potential of these sites to develop civic and critical thinking.

Beyond looking directly to practice for further research, this research also points to the potential of existing theory as a source for inquiry. Currently, the application of models of adult development are noticeably absent from the literature on community development. As discussed previously, theorists interested in the potential and possibilities for community development rarely tap into the fields of education and psychology. The inverse, however, is also true; while models of adult development consider applications in the realms of family, work, and partnering, there is extremely limited literature that looks at these models in the context of civic life. The development of citizenship, of how the individual participates in his/her community, is a critical, yet absent part of understanding the stages of human development. Considering the numerous fields that relate to this work, there is a need for greater interdisciplinary dialogue. Our knowledge of the individual can inform our understanding of communities, and our knowledge of communities can inform our understanding of the individual. The theoretical gap in this area, therefore, can not only build on the lessons from practice, it can, in turn, provide a framework for practitioners to engage in reflective framework of their own.

### **Conclusions and open questions:**

The findings from the IAF example, both in terms of *how they go* about tapping into the potential of their leaders, and the *results* of this approach suggest two different ways of looking at the relationship between individual and community development. The first is to think of *individual development as an end in and of itself*. In *In Over Our Heads*, Robert Kegan considers the increasing demands and pressures placed on adults. He argues that oftentimes, adults do not possess the capacity to meet these demands. Kegan suggests the need for “holding environments” to foster and nurture the development of adults (Kegan, 1994). Community development efforts, therefore, could incorporate strategies to develop adults with the understanding that healthy communities rely upon healthy individuals. This

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skills. (Right Question Project, 2000)

way of thinking about the individual and the community would imply that regardless of whether or not people are actively involved in organizing or advocacy efforts, the community as a whole will benefit as its members experience greater self-esteem, higher cognitive abilities, and increased activity. In other words, if the community is a sum of its parts, the aggregate effect of individual changes would in and of itself bring about changes in a community.

Based on my research, however, I would suggest a second way of considering the role of the individual in community development. In this perspective, individual development is still an end in and of itself, but can also serve as a *strategical means to a different end*, a means to intentionally bringing about change at the level of the community. The changes in policies in the Rio Grande Valley would not have come about without the active participation of an organized community, a community consisting of individuals equipped with the skills and vision to take on the often intimidating and overwhelming political structures. At the same time, however, the changes that I have demonstrated occur within individuals would not have taken place without the concrete changes at the community level. These two levels of change are mutually dependent and reinforcing. It is this mutual dependence that Valley Interfaith has recognized and built upon in a deliberate strategy designed to foster individual growth in a collective context. Individuals therefore become stronger as their communities become stronger, and communities become stronger as individuals become stronger. The process is recursive, and individual development becomes just one entry point of many in a multidimensional process of community change.

In his application of adult development theory to the workplace, Michael Basseches articulates a similar recursive process: “. . . . *such change must occur gradually through a dialectical process in which changes in individuals lead to changes in organizations, which in turn to further changes in individuals.*” (1984, p.363) Basseches also explains that in order to bring about democracy in the workplace, people must be placed in

positions for which they are not always prepared. The Sara of seventeen years ago would not have been capable of taking on the public roles, cultivating the leadership in others, or serving in the types of positions that she presently embraces. Now appointed a federal Empowerment Zone, her town of Port Isabel currently has an increasing number of schools aligning themselves with the Alliance School movement, a workforce development program, hundreds of newly registered citizens, and an organized constituency. Democracy in the Rio Grande has been strengthened as citizens like Sara are better capable of making decisions and acting upon those decisions. Citizens likewise grow as they take on new roles, as they challenge themselves, as they become fuller members of their societies.

This research has shed some light on the complex interplay between individual and community development. As any initial exploration, however, it also has raised numerous questions relating to the universality of and limitations to this model. One of the most obvious is that of the role of organized religion in bringing about these changes, a critical question at a time when faith based organizations are playing an increasing role in national politics. Is the fact that most individuals were already observant Catholics somehow more conducive to this type of transformation? Does the religious homogeneity of the organization help or hinder its work? How would the faith piece play out in other more diverse contexts? What about the potential of this model in secular institutions? In facing such adverse circumstances, do people need some type of faith in the unseen to guide their work? These questions suggest the need for further research both in diverse spiritual settings as well as secular models.

Other research possibilities include a further exploration and application of the notion of civic development in community organizations. While the consistency of my findings suggests that individuals are integrating a new way of understanding power, such consistency also raises several important questions. For example, it is unclear to what extent the IAF fosters critical thinking—do individuals learn only to understand the IAF model of community organizing, or are they able to critique and integrate

this model with competing ideologies? What happens when individuals “develop” in a way that causes them to question the organization? Do people ever “outgrow” the IAF model? Is the role of community organizations to promote a specific way of understanding the world, or to challenge people to determine their own way of knowing? Further studies could examine these issues in the IAF context, as well as comparing the IAF experience with other organizing networks.

The difficult nature of these questions not only serves as a call for ongoing study, they reinforce my initial assertion that the IAF approach is more complex than it is often portrayed. As discussed earlier, IAF organizations by no means invest in the development of all individuals; I would argue here that their political power, however, is based on the fact that they are developing hundreds of individuals in any given city. Thousands of people turn out at IAF rallies because of these hundreds of individuals. Imagine the power if there were other organizations reaching these thousands in the same way. Imagine the potential for community development if we were to create alternative models to reach adults in the hidden depths of our neighborhoods.

The challenges of modern day cities require interventions that operate on all levels. Just as we would not overlook housing, employment, or transportation in our attempts to bring about social, political, and economic change, we can no longer afford to ignore the tremendous untapped capacity of the citizens of our cities. Doing so demands a willingness to delve into new fields, an openness to accomplishments that are more difficult to quantify, and a curiosity to look into the deepest corners of the country through new perspectives. Our struggle for democracy, however, will depend on the unmining and retelling of narratives such as the extraordinary transformations along the border of south Texas.

The story of Valley Interfaith is one of faith, of individuals believing in themselves, and of a community believing in itself. It’s a story of marginalization, a community on the edges geographically, culturally, politically. It’s a story of power, a sense of the potential of the collective. It’s

a story of change, of change occurring on the streets, in the schools, in the workplace, in the individuals. And it's a story that challenges us to understand the complex ways in which individuals come to be co-writers in the unfolding of their own narratives. These are the changes that are taking place in the Rio Grande Valley. These are the changes that are taking place in other communities throughout the country. And these are the changes that must serve as models for us as we struggle to restore hope to our cities.