1

Celebrating Self-Determination
Developing a Mind-Set of Powerfulness

My journey as a connected activist began in 1998. My twenty-something programmer was describing to me how we could set up the first website for a national activist organization that I had started, Innovation Network, Inc. (InnoNet), which provides evaluation tools and services for other activist groups. We had the following conversation:

"We should have tools and how-to information that people can download," I said.

"You're sooooo analog," he said. "Why don't you create a place online where people can come and create their own project plans?"

"Huh?" I said.

"Huh" is my technical jargon. It means "I had no idea that we could do that!" Cell phones were still larger than your hand, computers were big boxes sitting on desks, not little wireless gizmos, and eBay and Amazon.com were in their infancy.

An Application Service Provider, my young programmer explained, is software that activists could use on our website. This was an "aha" moment for me. It meant that someone in Wyoming (or Birmingham or Egypt or Pakistan) with an old computer would have the same access to our tools and processes as the richest organization in New York City. All any user anywhere would have to do is go to our site and use software that we would continuously

maintain, update, and fix for them. We will be working side-by-side in cyberspace, I thought, not top-down in lonesome cubicles.

From my perch as a social entrepreneur, and more recently a funder of online democracy efforts, I have found that one does not have to be a technologist to be successful in the Connected Age. I have seen how social media have changed the way we work and, more important, the way we think, particularly the way young people think. The array of tools and pace of change can be terrifying and paralyzing, but we don't all need to be programmers writing endless streams of computer code to be successful. To flourish in the Connected Age, you don't need to create your own website (although you could, it isn't hard), but you do need to be open to change and curious about the possibilities available in this new world. The change I'm describing is not just about using social media, the interactive digital tools, effectively. Using social media without changing how we think about social change will create only more noise, and for this reason a mind-set of connected activism is necessary.

On our journey as connected activists we will naturally encounter pitfalls, potholes, speed bumps, and barriers. The purpose of this chapter is not to dwell on them but, rather, to provide a context for the new strategies that will make sustainable social change possible. As we will see in the coming chapters, working as connected activists brings out our best natural tendencies.

The greatest obstacle to our success is the lack of power—both perceived and actual—felt by activists. This state of being is overcome in the Connected Age by the opportunity for organizations both to be self-determining, to set out their own pathway, and to involve large numbers of people in their efforts in new and meaningful ways.

Connected Activism

In connected activism information is widely and freely distributed and discussions are open to everyone. Social media, which offer simultaneous connections between, among, and by many people at

the time of their choosing, facilitate connected activism. People are encouraged to participate in decisions and actions regardless of their position inside or outside the organization. Resources within social networks, connecting webs of people who are voluntarily associated with one another, are put to work creatively. There are no prescriptions, no right or wrong answers, simply enormous opportunities for participation and change if we engage in the process of connecting with one another.

We have witnessed episodes of explosive, almost convulsive, connected activism over the past several years. In the U.S. national election of 2004, the latent potential and passion of millions of Americans were unleashed. The Howard Dean for President campaign is the most often-cited example, but many other groups have harnessed the power of connected activism, from unions to environmental organizations to local neighborhood efforts to save a park or clean a bay. The battle to date has been uphill, in part because the tools are so new. We are just beginning to use social media at full power to involve many people in community life in meaningful ways. But the struggle also reflects the reality that positive social change is inherently difficult to achieve.

Good cooks are often not good bakers and vice versa. Cooking a good stew is more art than science. It involves finding the freshest ingredients and combining them in ways that are unique to the season and the cook's mood. Baking is a precise science; too much or too little of an ingredient results in too-chewy bread or a flat cake. Like a good stew, connected activism has a set of core ingredients that include but also go beyond social media. These ingredients include self-determination—the willingness and ability of activists to chart their own course. Other ingredients are broadened access to information and strategies, continuous learning, the leveraging of existing social networks, and, perhaps more than anything else, a shift in control from a few leaders at the center out toward the many people at the edges who want to contribute meaningfully but who are, for the most part, now locked out of the process. We

need to understand these ingredients separately and together and to harness the resulting energy so that we can use them to create significant and lasting social change.

These ingredients can feel counterintuitive to newcomers to the Connected Age. For instance, decentralizing decision making increases rather than decreases power for community activists. Progress is made when organizations facilitate rather than dominate. We must learn to leverage more and lift less, to listen better and act smarter, to share and participate, not dictate. We must create and build power where there is none now.

From Powerlessness to Self-Determination

The powerlessness of activists is a quiet suffering. We are the "hear no evil, speak no evil" children in the world of social policy. In the quaint old days of charitable work, just trying to do good was good enough. Today, as a large, visible industry, the activist sector owes its clients and donors more than that. The response to calls by government entities and funders for more accountability on the part of activists so far has been disappointing; the sector is paralyzed from a combination of fear and a lack of knowledge of how to break out of the cycle of defensiveness and intimidation. The reluctance to be accountable, the inability to define who we are and what we do best, and the resistance to learning are key contributors to the sector's lack of power in shaping funding decisions and public policy.

Powerlessness has many negative consequences; for example:

- Charitable watchdog groups are able to set seemingly arbitrary limits for acceptable overhead rates; 14 percent is acceptable but 16 percent isn't. We are not supposed to be like the business sector that Woody Allen describes: "Organized crime in America takes in over forty billion dollars a year and spends very little on office supplies."[1] The insistence on random levels for

administrative expenses is nonsensical at best and disingenuous at worst because it tempts activists to hide or manipulate their real costs to conform to arbitrary standards.

- Donors are often able to set performance benchmarks with little or no input from front-line activists.

- For every activist organization that pushes back or refuses to take a grant with unrealistic expectations, another organization is willing to take the money.

Activist organizations have a "little-sister" complex. We believe that we're not worthy of new equipment. Hand-me-downs are fine. We expect to be underpaid for our professional time. We are happy to have office space at all, let alone a telephone and chairs. We cannot have too much money in the bank because funders want our appeals to project a sense of urgency, and we can't have too little money in the bank because no one wants to fund a project on the brink of disaster.

The sense of powerlessness on the part of activists is reflected in a fear-filled environment in which we follow rules not of our own making, have virtually no voice in funding decisions, and keep taking it on the chin when funding priorities change without warning. We often and unfortunately have no real intention of improving communications and relationships with funders over time. Funders and activists seem to just want to survive one another. Punitive benchmarks set by funders are met with hyperbolic reporting of outsized results by activists. The power imbalance creates a painful, half-hearted tango of half-truths.

Powerlessness and fear are the activist's chicken and egg. It doesn't matter which came first—they work hand in hand to prevent us from working and learning collaboratively. If we're environmentalists, we fear that the developers will win. If we're child advocates, we fear that specific legislation will pass or will not pass.

We are fearful of being seen by boards and outsiders as spend-thrifts. We are fearful of not being able to raise another dime, of not making payroll, of cuts in government funding. And, at the end of the day, we are dreadfully afraid of not knowing whether we're making any difference. This isn't a little bit of fear: this is the boogey-man-in-the-closet type of terror.

In an era of unbridled consumerism it appears that we have come to a collective societal decision that greed is good. Everyone it seems is lining his or her own pockets. Politicians go through a revolving door to become high-paid consultants and lobbyists. Corporate CEOs, including those whose companies lose millions of dollars a year, have huge salaries—a record three hundred times the average of their workers in 2004.[2] If greed is indeed good, it stands to reason that people who have money are more important and powerful than people who do not have money. Sadly, too many activists believe this statement even if it proves to be unfounded time and again. It certainly has never been less true than in the Connected Age.

In the activist realm the common belief that more money will solve any problem is simply not true. Yet, we have fallen into this trap and indicate wholeheartedly by our actions and deeds that funders and donors are more powerful than the social activists who do the work. This belief is magnified by our collective Achilles heel: the sector lacks market mechanisms that can automatically create agreed-on indicators of success. The lack of clear agreement leads to a fair amount of lurching and flailing around, and the distance between the desires and wishes of donors and those of service providers grows ever wider.

A by-product of the growth in the size and importance of the sector has been increased pressure on social activists from board members, individual donors, and government agencies to demonstrate that their money has been well spent. Rather than defining ourselves with clear, specific measures that tell the world how well we are doing, we are, in fact, defined by what we are not—as in *not-*

for-profit. Beyond the all-encompassing "public good," we have not agreed with any specificity on what the sector is for and how we are supposed to solve problems.

Only a shift toward self-determination will help us agree on these sticking points. One of the fundamental rights of people around the world is the right to self-government. Revolutions over the last several centuries have been mainly focused on struggles of religious and cultural minorities to free themselves from authoritarian rule. In every corner of every continent, people have asserted the right to determine their own fate. We have witnessed the lifting of the yoke of colonialism in Africa; we have also watched in frustration as efforts to win freedom in places like Tibet have been thwarted. Regardless of place, race, or rights, a successful shift toward self-determination produces a fundamental realignment of power.

In order to make a significant leap forward in improving social conditions in the United States, those of us working as activists need to push for a similar shift in how we see ourselves and how we behave in relation to funders and regulators. Self-determination is not an activity as much as a mind-set, a state of being. It is a belief and desire to set our own course fueled by clear plans and an innate sense of our own powerfulness. Becoming self-determining begins with clarity of thought about what we are doing and how we can make a positive difference for the clients and communities that we serve. From clarity of thought comes a plan, from clear plans come good actions. And all these good thoughts and behaviors need to be wrapped in a willingness to learn and improve over time.

We must define success ourselves. Because activists generally do not have a clear understanding of what we are trying to achieve in more measurable terms than "we are trying to save the world," we put ourselves at the mercy of others to define the end results. For instance, an after-school program needs to decide whether the ultimate reason for its existence is to increase reading levels for the participating children or to create a safe, comfortable space for kids to play and enjoy themselves after school. Donors and foundations

may want increased reading levels, but they may not understand that that result cannot be achieved in three or four hours a week after school. If safety and comfort are the goals, then the activists need to describe the importance of this effort in ways that are compelling. Most often activists contort themselves to fit the reading goal in order to get the money. Once they do, any hope of the group's becoming self-determining has been lost.

In other words, success depends entirely on what one is trying to achieve. One size does not fit all in social change efforts, particularly because local environment and culture have such a great effect on the kinds of services that need to be provided. For instance, pregnancy-prevention programs look and feel different in inner-city African American communities than in largely Catholic, Hispanic immigrant communities. Programs in African American areas may emphasize birth control; those in Hispanic areas may stress abstinence.

Defining oneself requires a level of introspective analysis that doesn't always match the natural tendency of activists to be, well, active. It also requires overcoming the fear, mentioned above, that the results may not initially match our aspirations. One feels naked putting hopes and dreams into words that will now be measured and judged. But only by defining who we are and what our goals are can we measure them and improve over time.

More than going through the motions of articulating and measuring success, activists need to truly value learning to increase their power. There is a world of difference between learning in order to improve and going through the motions of learning primarily to complete a report for an eager funder. Do activists want to improve services to the community, or do they want to sweep mistakes under the rug? The impulse to cover up difficulties is understandable, but the cold and hard truth is that until we take charge of measuring success ourselves, we will be poor and powerless.

Without getting too Dr. Phil, changing the way that we activists view ourselves and the way we are viewed by others will not happen if we don't first believe that we are powerful. Beggars can't be

choosers, they say, but in a self-determining world, *choosers* don't have to be *beggars*.

From Proprietary to Participatory

Traditional activist organizations tend to work in silos and in isolation from sister organizations. These proprietary organizations keep information they consider vital to their survival, like strategic plans and membership lists, tightly sealed. They falsely believe that this information alone equals power. These closed, proprietary tendencies lead to false measures of success. Increasing membership is not the same as positively affecting public policy; having a large staff budget does not equal raising awareness of an issue. These measures may have been meaningful in the past, but now they are superficial at best.

If the leaders of a proprietary organization were to draw a picture of how their entity relates to its environment, chances are that they would draw an inner circle representing themselves. Then, they would add spokes going out to resources, partners, and clients in the field. In other words, their entity would be the sun-center of the universe with multiple planets orbiting around it. As we will see, however, knowing where knowledge and expertise lie within a wide network of people and organizations and activating these networks are the new levers of power.

Proprietary behavior is amplified in an environment marked by intense and increasing pressure to raise funds from donors. A crowded, frenetic activist field creates a sense of desperation—and no good behavior comes from that feeling. Some fundraisers say and do almost anything to get money. There is no penalty for cannibalizing sister agencies in order to get to the funding finish line first. Rather than working together to identify potential donors, activists keep information about funders locked away like state secrets. Again, fear fuels their secretive behavior.

In addition, proprietary behavior has been reinforced by the growth in the consulting class of experts and advisers who come to

activist work without necessarily having a background in it. Look-
ing toward for-profits as our only guides is a mistake; genuflecting at
the altar of corporate effectiveness is not getting us any closer to
heaven.

Although many activist groups have moved into a me-first
mode, an interesting countertrend has occurred in the world of
computer programming. Open-source programming code is a great
example of participatory democracy. Rather than keeping the
instructions to computer applications locked away, a growing num-
ber of programmers have decided to share their code with the hope
that users can collectively improve systems and programs. Discussed
in more detail in Chapter Eight, open-source software serves as a
herald of where activism can and should head. So far, the social sec-
tor has been slow to embrace the open-source revolution. Our ves-
tigial proprietary habits have woefully compromised our ability to
include colleague organizations as partners in open and trusting
ways. Until now.

Not only are activist organizations wrapped in a cocoon of pro-
prietary isolation, social activists, particularly volunteers, often feel
alienated from their organizations. An estimated 100 million Amer-
icans are involved in the activist sector.[3] These people are par-
ticipating because they want to help make people's lives, their
communities, the world better. There is no greater feeling than
knowing that you have participated in a meaningful way to help
someone else. There is also no more frustrating feeling than the sense
that your efforts have been useless, ignored, or worthless. A question
often unasked is whether volunteers feel as though they are simply
punching the clock, spending a lot of time and effort with little to
show for it, or whether they feel they are making a difference.

Broad participation is the wellspring of community power. Wide,
deep, meaningful participation is more than a theoretical possibil-
ity today; it is a cornerstone of the Connected Age. Understanding,
improving, and broadening participation is critically important to
moving us closer to solutions to social problems. We have the abil-

ity to make participation possible for a breathtakingly large number of people. We now need the will to make it happen and the perseverance to measure it over time.

Participation is a two-way street; individuals need satisfaction from their volunteering, while the organizations they are serving need results. In order to have an explosive impact on social change we need to understand participation; what makes it meaningful or not for both individuals and the organizations they are serving?

Participation comes in lots of different shapes and sizes. One can physically volunteer: build a house, clean up a park, make meals, donate book bags. Contributing brainpower—by serving on boards, providing legal and accounting services, doing research, writing letters—is also effective volunteering. Or one can donate money or goods, like canned food and school supplies, or even social capital by connecting friends and family to a cause. People can also participate by clicking. One common example of click volunteering is going to a website, like that of the Avon Foundation, to support a cause like breast-cancer research. The more clicks, the more dollars that are donated by the Foundation and other corporations to fight breast cancer. Another example is clicking on a petition that will be sent to a decision maker or public official.

We are participating in astounding numbers, clicking away like mad, serving soup, and building houses, but is all this activity meaningful? Meaningfulness is completely subjective. A meaningful experience for me, like watching a baseball game, may be completely pointless to someone like my husband, who prefers watching a Swedish film with French subtitles. Meaningful is not just personal; it is also contextual. I do not ordinarily find collecting toiletries in my neighborhood meaningful, but I certainly did when I collected them to send to the victims of the bevy of natural disasters in 2005.

For participants, activities fall along a continuum from low intensity/low meaning to high intensity/high meaning. Intensity here is defined as the emotional impact that a particular activity has on a person, not the amount of time spent on an activity. For

instance, a one-hour conversation with a Holocaust survivor may have a much greater emotional impact on a person than a month of Sundays hammering nails into a house. Board members often feel that their service falls in the low intensity/low meaning area because they are not allowed or encouraged to participate in ways that make them feel useful and constructive. A friend of mine with an extensive management background was a board member of an arts organization. After a year of service he complained, "All they do is keep asking me for money, not for my expertise."

To create meaningful opportunities for participation, activist organizations need to carefully examine what they need to do and accomplish for social change to occur—not just the gigantic picture of, say, passing legislation, but the specific steps and activities that need to happen every day, month, year to get to that result. They also need to ask participants for their input and ideas. Participants will think of ways to raise money, reach hard-to-reach populations, and recruit volunteers. And they will then be more enthusiastic and excited about helping to implement plans than they would be if they were simply presented with a list of tasks.

To reach the broadest possible audience, organizations should present a continuum of opportunities and ways for people to participate from low to high intensity. All participation should be meaningful, not just exhausting, and should provide an opportunity for the activist organization to have conversations with its activists. Creating opportunities for meaningful participation is a critical part of creating a sense of community and common bonds for action between and among participants.

In his book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Morris Fiorina debunks the myth of an extremely polarized country. He writes that "*partisan* polarization, not *popular* polarization," is occurring across the country.[4] He means that most people, regardless of the area of the country in which they reside, feel similarly about most issues, but their political choices are polarized because the political system is being held captive by small, ideologically noisy

segments of the electorate. Strongly self-identified conservatives and liberals are pulling at the edges, writes Fiorina, and they control more of the political infrastructure since the decline of the party bosses and the advent of primaries for electing presidents.

We can learn from the mobilization of these extremes, particularly from the brilliant use of social, educational, and religious organizations as communication and organizing vehicles on the far right. For instance, the recruitment and training of conservative activists on campuses have been extremely strategic and successfully implemented. But, to date, these ideological efforts have been exclusive rather than inclusive. Their goal is to create a tightly bound group that is then galvanized against other segments of the population.

For our goal of developing sustainable social solutions that have broad input and agreement, the key statistic isn't the 20 percent of extreme partisans but the 80 percent in the middle. We can energize this 80 percent, the Nixonian silent majority, to help find solutions to entrenched social problems because we have the tools to reduce the barriers to meaningful participation. A critically important part of empowering activist efforts is engaging key people in thinking about what success means and looks like. If our results are going to be meaningful and propel us forward, we must have clients, volunteers, and funders wrestle with where we are going and how we will know that we are on the right path.

As important as having each activist organization improve its connections with its constituents is having organizations connect in meaningful and sustained ways across organizational lines. If one social activist begins to work in a self-determining way, her chance of success is slim. When a collection of activists comes together, their voices will be heard, and they become the drivers of where and how funds are used. Social activists represent the people and communities who are unlikely to have a voice of their own. But a lone voice isn't enough; one campaign, one handout, one bed won't begin to solve problems. Instead, we need activists to join together to tell the world the real story of how hard this work is and of what we are

learning and accomplishing. Every electoral-campaign strategist knows that the candidate who goes on the offensive and defines the campaign issues is the candidate who wins. We cannot score points playing defense. At some point we have to play offense to win.

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Self-determination and participation are conjoined principles powering social change in the Connected Age. They require intentionality, a fear-free analysis of where we are and where we are going. Our success will come when our efforts are reflective of, and connected to, the communities in which we work. We must reduce institutional barriers that are stopping us from improving relationships with people who care about our work and with other institutions that share our passion and dream of turning the tide on social ills. These are all themes to which we will return often throughout this book.

The change from the proprietary Information Age to the open Connected Age is made much easier if we all decide that it's a different world, not better or worse, just new and different. To be successful we don't have to be bigger, we have to be smarter, more agile, more open, and more facilitative. Defining, encouraging, understanding, and insisting on self-determination and meaningful participation are the greatest changes that have to occur for activist organizations to be effective and powerful.