

Changes in the Valley:  
The Role of the Individual in Community Development

By

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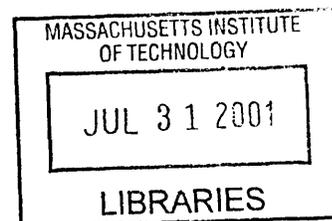
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**Changes in the Valley:  
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**ABSTRACT**

Citizen participation has long been deemed essential to the creation of strong and democratic communities. This thesis expands upon traditional discussions of "civic skills" as a prerequisite for participation. It considers the role of individual development in the field of community development. The relationship between individual and community development is explored through a case study of Valley Interfaith, an Industrial Areas Foundation community organization. An alternative to the traditional analysis of the Industrial Areas Foundation is presented, whereby community organizations serve not only to develop relationships among individuals, but in fact develop the individuals themselves. This research is based on a qualitative analysis of narratives with Valley Interfaith leaders. The findings indicate that individuals undergo dramatic intrapersonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes as a result of their participation in the organization. Individual and community development are presented as mutually reinforcing processes. The conclusions suggest that a greater understanding of and attention to individual development is essential to the success of efforts to develop institutions and communities.

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## **Preface:**

The following is just one piece of a larger work about the role of the individual in community development. I chose to approach this thesis through various media with the intention of better capturing, documenting, and interpreting the complex and powerful changes that occur within individuals in the Rio Grande Valley. In order to watch these individuals speak for themselves, please view the corresponding website at

<http://yerkes.mit.edu/~tashafr/home.html>

or view the video available at the MIT library or upon request from the author.

## **Acknowledgements:**

In my research I present the IAF as a mentoring organization, one which supports individual development through the collective. This spirit of mentorship has pervaded every step of my research; my own development through this thesis is the result of the relationships that I have formed with the numerous individuals that have supported, encouraged, and challenged me along the way.

I never would have imagined that a class in labor market policy would lead me to south Texas. I can not extend enough thanks to my advisor Paul Osterman, who not only provided me with the opportunity to conduct this research, but who forced me to channel my enthusiasm and "gushing" into a coherent argument. It was through our multiple conversations in Cambridge and in the Valley that this work emerged, and it has been a pleasure to share my excitement with him. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have met him so early on into my time here at MIT, and can credit Paul with breaking down any stereotypes I had of economists.

It was Ceasar McDowell who led me to consider the relationship between form and content, and I owe him a great deal of thanks for encouraging me as I embarked on the task of presenting this work as a multimedia project. His support led me to translate my visions into reality, and pushed me to reach my own potential.

As if I didn't have enough stimulation at school, I somehow landed the best internships in Cambridge. I owe numerous thanks to Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana of The Right Question Project, who both validated my interest in individual development and taught me the power of questions. Much of my analysis can be attributed to the numerous questions they asked and forced me to ask myself. I also would like to thank the staff at Cambridge Community Television for their support of my interest in media as a tool for community development.

And to my fellow comrades of "thesis support group" and my other friends and roommates, both near and far, I appreciate their incredible way of knowing when to ask me about my work, when to change the subject, and when to send me tortillas. The effort I have invested in this work is a result of the balance they offered.

As always, my family has served as my biggest fan club. I know that my own interest in individual development is rooted in the belief they have demonstrated in me from day one. A special thanks to my mother who is always my best editor and took the time to read through all my scribbles, send me references, and read me quotes over the phone.

Above all, the true motivation behind this thesis was sparked by the extraordinary stories that I heard in the homes, the churches, the workplaces, and the Dairy Queens of the Rio Grande Valley. It was the feeling that text was an inadequate medium to express these stories that led to my "multimedifying" this thesis, and text continues to be an inadequate medium to offer my thanks. Your words, your faces, your gestures, and your belief have infused me with an energy and faith I can only hope will continue to grow. You have taught me that cynicism is a choice and power is ours for the taking. Thank you.

## Chapter One: Introduction



*" I've learned that I can do more than I think I can many times. That there's solutions to problems. . . That there's a process that takes place and it takes time and it takes commitment. I've learned. . . that all of us have some gifts that we are born with and that we have to develop that gift. And we do it through working with other people. And that I'm just one part, because there are many others that come together that form that whole."*

- Valley Interfaith Leader, 2000

*"My position was that I believed in changing society by first changing individuals, so that they could then struggle to bring about social changes. There's a lot of pain in it, and a lot violence, and conflict, and that is just part of the price you pay. I realized that it was part of growth--and growth is painful. A plant comes through the hard ground, and it breaks the seed apart. And then it dies to live again."*

- Myles Horton  
Highlander Folk School Founder, 1998

## Chapter One:

*Picture a conference room. Wide oak table, glass doors, newly carpeted floors. Picture the people around the table. On the one side all men: a white engineer with a deep Texan drawl, a local city official, the water company representative with a wide handlebar moustache. On the other side all women: Lidia Flores is a fifty year old Mexican American, she wears a large cross around her neck. She is accompanied by five of her neighbors, all Mexican in their fifties and sixties. Most are monolingual Spanish speakers. Lidia shakes her finger at the men and admonishes, "We are tired of waiting. We have been waiting for ten years. When will our neighborhood get sewer lines installed?" The men squirm uncomfortably at her tone and reaffirm their pledge of support. They take out their appointment books, agree to give the women an update next month. The meeting is adjourned.*

*Lidia grew up in Rio Grande City, a small Texan town just north of the Mexican border without electricity, without sewage lines, without any of the basic infrastructure that most Americans take for granted. Lidia also grew up in a culture where one was taught to respect authority, where poverty was expected, and where corruption was deeply embedded in the political system. Forced to leave school at age ten to take care of her younger siblings, Lidia has spent the majority of her fifty years working---working as a waitress, working in the fields, working as a bus driver. Never working for a decent wage. Never working in a job that would enable her to move out of the poverty she, like many of her neighbors, had come to take for granted. Lidia is still working, but, for the past five years her work has taken on a different twist.*

*Lidia currently lives in San Juan, about an hour and a half west of where she grew up, in a neighborhood with conditions only slightly better. Lidia's work is now a mass of countless hours in meetings, planning sessions, and phone calls. She successfully led a campaign to bring an elementary school to her neighborhood, and is now embroiled in a battle with the*

*municipality to obtain running water. Lidia's effort is only part of a struggle that has received national attention in the past few years as the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation has lobbied successfully for over seven hundred million dollars from the state legislature to bring infrastructure to the colonias<sup>1</sup> (Sanchez, 1999). Over the past decade, Lidia has worked with Valley Interfaith, a broad-based community organization spanning Texas's Rio Grande Valley to bring about these changes in her colonia. Paved streets, electricity, schools, and a city government that knows to stop and listen when the organization comes calling. But Lidia's neighborhood isn't the only thing that has changed through the organizing efforts of local churches and schools. Lidia herself has changed. No longer afraid of authority, in her own words, Lidia is a woman with a voice that makes people stop and listen. She herself is astounded by what she refers to as "her new self" and explains that she has learned about "...the capacity. The intelligence that we can come up with. The power. The things that I never dreamed that I can do." (Personal Interview, 1/00) In short, just as Lidia's neighborhood is undergoing a transformation from a place of despair to a symbol of hope, she herself is undergoing that same transformation. And the two are intimately related.*

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"Unity equals power." "*La union hace la fuerza.*" "Together we stand." These are the mantras that organizers and activists have carried with them into the depths of low-income communities. Be they revolutionaries or "social capitalists", advocates for community development have long emphasized the role that collective action plays in bringing about sustainable change. One of the most frequently cited models of success for such action lies literally on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Colonias* are defined as settlements that lack basic services such as running water, sewers, street lighting, and paving. Eighty percent of *colonia* residents live at or below the poverty level in trailers or self-built constructions. Residents are almost exclusively Mexican or Mexican-American. Ward. Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico. (University of Texas Press, 1999) Introduction.

outskirts of this country, in the historically impoverished and neglected Rio Grande Valley. In this southernmost corner of Texas, where neighborhoods still go without basic infrastructure and the per capita income is a meager \$12,045, an increasing number of citizens have found success in their battle for socioeconomic justice (Valley Interfaith, 2000). These citizens work through the forty-plus institutions that make up Valley Interfaith, an Industrial Areas Foundation organization. Traditional explanations of IAF's broad-based model of community organizing focus on the increase of power that results from the careful, deliberate, and painstakingly slow work of building relationships. It is the strength of these relationships to which the multiple victories of Valley Interfaith are attributed. While it is obvious that collective action and strengthened institutions play a paramount role in the organizing of the Valley, this thesis will explore the hypothesis that changes are occurring at a more fundamental level, the level of the citizen.

Educators, organizers, feminists and civil rights leaders throughout history have argued that it is impossible to transform society without first changing the individual. It is actually the individual that is the base unit for most social movements. Yet, in the theory and practice of urban planning and renewal, the point of departure is that of the polity, the *collection* of citizens. In this thesis I will consider the role of individual development and transformation in the field of community development. Specifically, I will argue that an understanding of and attention to the individual is essential to the success of efforts to develop institutions and communities.

Why consider individual development in the midst of social and economic problems that confront urban areas? Possibly because we can no longer afford not to. Citizen participation has long been deemed essential in creating strong and democratic communities. Likewise, proponents of community development have suggested that engaging residents in the decisions that affect them will facilitate effective and efficacious growth (Stoecker, 1999, Boyte, 1980). However, in the midst of efforts to rebuild community through constructing affordable housing, creating job training programs, and granting loans to local businesses, what is inevitably overlooked is the investment in the people that will live in these houses, work in these jobs, and run these businesses. What is inevitably assumed is that if the structures for participation are in place, the people will follow. Unfortunately, time and time again efforts to engage neighborhood residents result in empty chairs and frustration. While housing, employment, and social networks are all viable components of healthy communities, just as critical are the ways in which people interpret and act on their roles within the collective. It is time to engage in a dialogue about community development that not only envisions seats at the table, but fosters the growth of the individuals who will sit there.

In a time where our national prosperity stands in marked contrast to income inequality and astonishingly low rates of citizen participation, the *belief in the potential for change* is a critical first step to strengthen democracy. Creating mechanisms for citizen participation will only be effective if the citizens themselves see the value of their voice and their vote.

This thesis, therefore, expands upon the traditional discussions of “civic skills” as a prerequisite for participation. In my analysis, I will explore how a sense of personal and political efficacy can grow as individuals bear witness to the power of collective action. I will argue that an investment in individual development can lead to profound transformations in people’s sense of power, their understanding of citizenship, and the actions they take based on this efficacy and understanding.

Advocates for regionalism have recently called attention to the social, political, and economic forces that manifest themselves downward at the level of the neighborhood or city (Orfield, 1997). This thesis will turn that argument on its head. I will consider how the cumulative impact of individual change can catalyze and manifest upward to impact these same communities, often serving as a countervailing force to larger pressures affecting families. I will suggest that this relationship is reciprocal—the development of individuals can impact communities just as community development can foster the health, the well-being, and the growth of individuals. Mark Granovetter, in his groundbreaking work “The Strength of Weak Ties”, claims that understanding micro-level interactions is key to understanding relationships on the macro-scale. He critiques current sociological theory, “A fundamental weakness. . . is that it does not relate micro-level interactions to macro-level patterns in any convincing way” (Granovetter, 1973). The Granovetter framework of “micro-macro” bridges reinforces the need for a careful exploration of individuals and communities, the need to start at the micro to better build on the macro. In order to move from a theoretical argument to

practical application, such an approach immediately raises two questions central to this thesis:

- ***What are ways in which community development efforts can foster the development of individuals?***
- ***What evidence is there to suggest that investing at this level can result in changes at the level of the individual?***

This thesis is exploratory in nature. My intent is not to prove a causal link between individual and community development. Rather, I intend to demonstrate why I believe that it is important to consider human development in the theory and practice of urban studies. This argument will require an exploration of current models that demonstrate the complex interplay between individuals and communities. In *A Tradition That Has No Name*, a study of organizations dedicated to women's development, Mary Belenky writes "Organizations that sponsor the development of a public voice among their members seemed particularly important because people are withdrawing from civic life at an accelerating rate." (1999, p.9) In order to illustrate the power and potential of approaches designed to combat this increasing withdrawal from the public sphere, I use a case study of Valley Interfaith, one of the Industrial Areas Foundation's community organizations along the Texan border. The IAF provides a strong example because its approach to building grassroots organizations is acknowledged as one of the most successful efforts to bring about change at the local level (see Berry, Portney, et.al, 1993, Boyte 1980, Warren, 1999). Also unique to the IAF is the extraordinary ability of its constituency to articulate and name how they have developed through their participation. Valley Interfaith, therefore,

not only serves as a basis for understanding the relationship between community development and individual development, the stories of its members provide empirical evidence of how people can change as a result of such a model.

### **Rationale for study:**

Much of my own motivation to explore these questions is rooted in what I see as a disjuncture between theory and practice. Before beginning graduate school, I worked in the field of adult education as a teacher of English as a Second Language, family literacy, and citizenship. I had been highly influenced by the model of Paulo Freire, in which adult education serves as a vehicle for politicization as individuals learn to read both “the word and the world”. (Freire, 1972) It was through my work in adult education that I learned about Pima County Interfaith Council (P.C.I.C.), an IAF affiliate based in Tucson, Arizona. From 1995 to 1999 I became progressively active in the organization. I attended both local and national leadership trainings, and participated in campaigns ranging from a battle for living wages to lobbying the city for funding a new adult education building. I also engaged in numerous individual conversations that are at the root of the IAF’s approach to relationship building. Shortly after becoming involved, I remember Frank Pierson, the lead organizer for P.C.I.C., asking me, “How are you thinking about your own development?” The question floored me. It was the first time in my professional or academic life that anyone had showed an active interest in my own growth, in pushing me to reach my own

potential. Yet this question was common, this attention to people's growth part of the organizational culture. As I became more involved, I listened in awe to both my students, and other leaders of P.C.I.C. as they shared their stories of their own personal change. I was inspired by both the intensity of the faith and power that surrounded me, and the emphasis that the community organizers and leaders placed on cultivating and challenging individuals to develop.

After spending two weeks conducting initial research in the Rio Grande Valley in January of 2000, I found that much of what I saw and heard resonated strongly with the themes of voice, connectedness, and efficacy that I had experienced over and over in my experience as an adult educator. I was also struck by how noticeably absent these themes had been from my academic studies of community development. I have moved away from my work as a community educator and organizer to consider issues of participation, civic renewal, and community from theoretical vantage points. Both the theory and the practice of community development draw on economics, political science, sociology, and numerous other disciplines. While the literature in these fields addresses social systems, it lacks an in-depth discussion of the individuals that make up these systems. If it is true that there is a strong link between individual and community change, this would suggest that avenues for human development should be further investigated and implemented. This thesis is an opportunity to close this gap, to consider the theoretical models of individual transformation and citizen participation in the context of practice.

## Methodology:

In Acts of Meaning, Jerome Bruner writes of the power of narrative. He explains, "It can even teach, conserve memory, or alter the past." (1990, p.53) It is with great deference to Valley Interfaith that I embark upon the daunting task of documenting and interpreting their story. The use of narrative is a particularly appropriate research tool in this context; while existing studies of the Industrial Areas Foundation often employ more traditional methods, the nuances and changes that occur in human development are difficult to capture with surveys or other quantitative measures. This research is therefore grounded in a narrative constructed through personal experience, intensive interviews, and participant observation.<sup>2</sup> My first hand experience in the organization's approach to community organizing was supplemented and enhanced by the opportunity to conduct research with Valley Interfaith. After conducting a primary series of interviews in January of 2000, I established a relationship with the organization that permitted me to participate, observe, and videotape several subsequent events.<sup>3</sup> My experiences include, but are not limited to, a regional three-day training for leaders from throughout the Valley, *comunidad de base*<sup>4</sup> meetings, and local and state actions designed to influence the agenda of the Texas legislature. The combination of my

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<sup>2</sup> See Worthen, et.al. 1997, Lofland and Lofland, 1984 for discussion of these methods in qualitative research.

<sup>3</sup> Lofland and Lofland describe this process as that which ". . . an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purposes of developing a scientific understanding of that association." (Lofland and Lofland, p.12)

<sup>4</sup> *Comunidades de base*, or base community meetings are rooted in the tradition of liberation theology. They provide a space for individuals to reflect and act on the Bible's teachings.

personal experience, renewed participation through the lens of an observer, and conversations with experienced leaders and organizers provides me with rich data to analyze the organization.

In order to understand how people change through their participation, I begin with what Valley Interfaith organizer Sister Judy Donovan refers to as, “their greatest treasure”, the stories of the individuals that make up their constituency. The majority of the data for the “findings” chapter is based on the transcripts of two series of interviews. This first interview series of twenty-five leaders of Valley Interfaith formed the basis for further investigation and query. Interviews were semi-structured; while I used a protocol to cover specific themes, the questions were open-ended and designed to provide a space for individuals to explore and expand on areas of interest. I spent from one to two hours with each individual, and all interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and later analyzed and coded according to both pre-determined and emergent themes.

The initial sample of twenty-five leaders of Valley Interfaith was primarily obtained through a combination of self-identification and snowballing. While there is not an exact number of Valley Interfaith leaders<sup>5</sup>, it is estimated that there are about one hundred individuals who are equally involved in the organization. Valley Interfaith organizers presented the opportunity for participation in the research project at an executive steering committee meeting of a few dozen leaders. About half of the sample expressed interest at this point. This initial dozen then recommended others.

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<sup>5</sup> All active individuals are known as “leaders”. Please see chapter three for discussion.

The second half of the sample agreed to participate after either myself or one of the organizers initiated contact upon my initial arrival in the Valley. The sample is therefore composed of a mix of participants—both relatively new to the organization and individuals who had been involved since its beginning. All participants, however, had been working with Valley Interfaith for a minimum of two years. The sample ranged in age from twenty seven years to seventy five, with an average age of fifty two. Their education ranged from completion of second grade to masters degree, with an average of twelve years of schooling. With the exception of two priests from some of the more active churches, the rest of the participants were Mexican or Mexican-American. Just under half of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the rest were conducted in English, depending on the preference of the individual. Quotations are presented here in translation when necessary. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals, with the exception of IAF staff and local clergy.

These first conversations were open-ended, with the intention of providing the participant the opportunity to present his or her story in his or her words. In order to gain insight into how people had changed, it was critical to first understand who they were. I began each interview by establishing my familiarity with the IAF approach to individual meetings outlined in chapter three and explaining the intent of the research.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This research was conducted as part of a larger study by Professor Paul Osterman of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the Sloan School of Management. As Professor Osterman had been working with Valley Interfaith for several years, I was able to access both the organization and individuals in a way I might not have been able to had I been conducting research on my own.

I explained that the conversation would be based on this model of eliciting the story of the individual. These initial interviews, therefore, focused on learning about the backgrounds, interests, and motivations of the participants. When I asked people if they had changed, I was impressed by both by how emphatic people were in their responses, and by their ability to articulate the dimensions of these changes. While I had anticipated that participants would speak of changes in their sense of efficacy and levels of political participation, numerous other themes consistently emerged from these interviews: the development of voice, new understandings of power, even a deeper religious faith. I collapsed these themes into the framework of changes in beliefs, understandings, and actions that were consistent with the literature on empowerment psychology reviewed in chapter two.

These emergent themes became the framework for my second set of interviews. I conducted follow-up interviews with ten of the original participants in January of this year in which I focused directly on their perceptions of their own development. I chose to re-interview participants based on obtaining a representative sample across gender, immigration status, and education, as well as availability and interest. As the majority of these second interviews were also videotaped, I was able to base my analysis on both the text and video documentation of our conversation.

The stories I heard over these four weeks were rich and powerful. Yet, as a source for analysis and interpretation, it is important to bear in mind that each narrative offers a perspective of a participant at a given time, his or her view of who they are as it intersects with the identity s/he hopes to

project to others. Eliot Mishler expands upon the notion of identity performance within personal narrative. He writes, "We express, display, make claims of who we are—and who we would like to be—in the stories we tell and how we tell them." (2000, p.19) This analysis, therefore, is based not only on these life narratives, it is based on these narratives as they were told to me at a specific time in a specific place. While the retrospective nature of these changes is a limitation in terms of strict social science, this analysis rests on the incredible consistency across these stories that the participants chose to tell. These stories of individual leaders tell a larger story of a community where hope now exists and where traditional power structures are bowing to an organized public voice.

The practice of Valley Interfaith and the IAF is unique in that it intentionally incorporates a range of theories that I draw upon to contextualize their work. The intersection of these theories with the practice of grassroots organizing illuminate the complex ways in which individuals grow, change, and take charge of their communities. This thesis therefore begins with a review of the existing literature relating to the role of the individual in community development practice. In chapter two I will also define and clarify related terms and concepts. From this broader perspective, my focus narrows and I move on to the case study of Valley Interfaith. After providing a brief background of the IAF and the Rio Grande Valley, I lay out the IAF's approach to fostering individual development in chapter three. In chapter four I argue that Industrial Areas Foundation organizing results in profound changes at the level of the individual. This

section provides a careful analysis of the results of the IAF approach through the presentation of the interview findings. The intent of this research is not only to call attention to this often overlooked component of IAF organizing, but to consider the broader implications for community development. I therefore conclude by drawing out some of the lessons of Valley Interfaith; I explore the potential for an alternative conception of community where we pay the same kind of attention to fostering individual development as we do to creating safe highways, public spaces, and strong schools.

## Chapter Two: A Review of Relevant Literature



*" . . . Things can be different because you see yourself differently. You can get water and sewer lines in your neighborhood because you see yourself differently. . . And there's a direct connection between the two."*

- Sister Judy Donovan,  
Lead Organizer, Valley Interfaith

*"Perhaps most important is the understanding that a reciprocal relationship exists between development of power for community organizations and individual empowerment for organization members."*

- Speer and Hughey, 1995

## **Chapter Two:**

Despite the recognition that citizen participation -- individual participation, is at the root of a healthy and functioning democracy, there is a noticeable absence of work bringing the bodies of community development and human development theories together. Few writers directly address the connection between individual and community empowerment; none that I have come across do so through an empirical study of individual development. In this section I begin by discussing some of the leading proponents of individual change as key to social change. I proceed to review the current literature on community organizing followed by an overview of human development theory. This literature review concludes with a brief discussion of the limited literature relating to the intersection between individual and community development.

### **The Individual and Social Change:**

The role of the individual in social change crosses several disciplines—from psychology to theology, from political science to pedagogy. One example of an analysis which cuts across these fields is The Aquarian Conspiracy, by Marilyn Ferguson. Ferguson is a strong advocate for the relationship between the individual and the society in which s/he lives. She writes, "Self and society are inseparable. *Eventually, anyone concerned with the transformation of the individual must engage in social action.*" (1984, p.191, sic.) Ferguson discusses the historical basis for an emphasis on

individual growth and transformation. She presents the doctrine of the sixties, "We must change society through changing ourselves," as part of a larger legacy of American individualism (see Bellah, et.al. 1985). Ferguson goes as far to assert that "Personal transformation, in effect, is an enactment of the original American dream." (1984, p.124) Stephen Brookfield also acknowledges this relationship in his work on critical thinking, "The histories of the labor movement and of civil rights activism graphically demonstrate the connection between individual improvement and social change. (1991, p.63) The work of Ferguson and Brookfield is based on a belief in the citizen's capacity to self-govern, the principle premise of democracy.

Since Aristotle, advocates of participatory democracy have argued that participation contributes to the intellectual and moral growth of citizens (Mill, 1991, Dahl 1989, Mansbridge, 1980). Recent efforts to rebuild participation at the neighborhood level have drawn on these earlier works, arguing that face-to-face participation is essential to making democracy meaningful at a daily level (Berry, Portney, Thompson, 1993, Boyte, 1980, Moore-Lappe, Dubois, 1995). These advocates of civic renewal argue that participation extends beyond voting to " a set of attitudes and behaviors that makes common decision-making possible." (Moore-Lappe, Dubois, 1995) Stressing the notion that citizenship is an art that can be learned and cultivated, they describe a role for community organizations to serve as a "school for democracy", whereby the organizations teach social and civic skills (Putnam, 2000, Moore-Lappé, Dubois, 1995). When a direct discussion of the relationship between

democracies and individuals is addressed, however, most theorists argue that *democratic experiences lead to individual development*.

To understand the inverse of this relationship, the role of individual development in bringing about democracy, I turn to the theory of progressive education. From the time of Dewey, education for citizenship has been understood as critical to social change (Dewey, 1916). While much of the earlier work on democratic pedagogy focused on children, later theories spawning social movements looked to adult education as a potential catalyst for democratizing society. The relevant literature on individual transformation is rooted in popular education theory first expounded on by Paulo Freire in his revolutionary work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. According to Freire, social change will come about as individuals realize their oppression, and transform their world as they transform themselves (Freire, 1982). Likewise, Myles Horton, who founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, claimed that individual development was central to democratic change (Horton, 1998). The lessons of progressive pedagogy and participatory democracy, while directly relevant to this work, often operate on a theoretical level removed from the realities of urban areas. They do not look specifically at the community as a unit analysis. To what extent is the recognition of the role of the individual integrated into contemporary community organizing and development?

## **Community Organizing as a Means to Community Development:**

Community organizing is a term that has taken on a multiplicity of meanings as it is applied, adapted, and utilized in a variety of contexts. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the model of community organizing typically known as Alinsky-style organizing, after the late Saul Alinsky, or broad-based organizing. The Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO, the Gamaliel Foundation, and DART are four national networks that promote and train organizers in the model that Alinsky developed in the late thirties.<sup>7</sup> Beckwith, Stoecker, and McNeely define community organizing as "...the process of building power that includes people with a problem in defining their community, defining the problems they wish to address, the solutions they wish to pursue, and the methods they will use to accomplish their solutions." (Beckwith, Stoecker, and McNeely, 1997 in Stall and Stoecker, 1997) Although the focus on individual *development* is negligible, the community organizing literature presents three distinct, yet related explanations for organizing's success. While not presented in these terms, each explanation directly relates to the individuals active in the organizations: organizations serve as a source of social capital, impacting individuals through relationships; they draw on a moral tradition, impacting individuals through faith; they teach democratic skills, impacting individuals' capacity to act.

*Broad-based organizing*, typically operating through congregations and existing institutions within a community, is differentiated from *issue-based organizing* in that rather than focusing energy around any one area, the

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter three provides a deeper discussion of the Alinsky-model of organizing.

ultimate goal of the organization is to build power. Power is gained as the organization builds relationships among its members. Part of the attention that community organizing efforts have garnered is due to recognition that more than merely starting programs or obtaining funds, community development processes must involve a shift in both power and other resources (Warren, 1998, Wood, 1997). Many community organizations explain their approach to power, both internally and externally, in the term Robert Putnam made popular as "social capital". Social capital, according to Putnam, ". . . refers to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." (2000, p.19) In this past decade, as community based organizations have met with success using relational tactics, theoreticians have further developed the role of social capital as key to civic renewal and community development. (See Gittel and Vidal, 1998, Warren 1995, Byrd, 1997, Wood 1997) They argue that organizing serves to rebuild relationships in churches that suffer from a lack of cohesiveness in the face of poverty and political pressures (Slessarev, 2000). These explanations are based on earlier works, such as de Tocqueville's classic study examining the role of associations in democracy (de Tocqueville, 1969). Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, among other recent advocates of associational democracy, further support the role of "mediating" institutions as a means to democratic engagement (Cohen and Rogers, 1995, see also Bellah, et.al. 1991).

Others argue that not only do religious institutions function as a resource for institution building, they also provide a moral foundation upon

which to act (see Wood, 1997, Byrd, 1998). In this analysis, organizations draw on faith a *motivator* for action. For example, Mark Warren writes:

The IAF unlocks that capacity by searching for the community welfare traditions within religious denominations and by stressing the active engagement of those beliefs. Since community can be conceived of quite narrowly, the IAF emphasizes a broad, inclusive interpretation of the meaning of "God's children." Unleashed in that way, religious beliefs can serve as an inspiration for political action and provide a moral foundation for the organization.

- Warren, 1999, p. 2

According to this analysis, individuals are motivated by and reconnected with their moral and religious traditions through their participation.

Beyond the building of social capital, beyond the call of a higher moral authority, analysts present a third explanation for broad-based organizing's accomplishments—a meticulous and comprehensive dedication to leadership development through the teaching of civic skills. Brady, Verba, and Scholzman make the distinction between developing social capital and developing individuals' capacity. They argue that religious institutions serve to teach the skills of public life (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman, 1995). Wood also makes this distinction and writes,

Religious institutions also contribute powerfully to the success of community organizing efforts in a second area: by developing their members' capacity in the simple skills useful in the practice of democracy. Such democratic skills are an element of human capital rather than social capital, because they are carried by individuals rather than residing in the relationships between individuals.

- Wood, 1997, p.2

While the elements of social capital, moral agency, and civic skills are indubitably at the heart of the broad-based organizing model, they only tell

part of the story. Just as relevant are the multiple stories that lie behind each community organization. What happens to individuals as they form new public relationships? As they are exposed to a faith that calls for action? How do people change as they gain the “skills of public life”? What is the relationship between the power that exists in a community, and the power that individuals possess as believers in themselves? Beginning to answer these questions requires turning to a body of literature examining the individual as a unit of analysis.

### **Human development:**

How does one go about measuring and documenting individual change? The development of a human being reflects the complexity and diversity of humanity itself. From Kohlberg’s theory of moral development to Carol Gilligan’s model of feminist psychology, there are numerous lenses through which to consider the complex questions of human growth and capacity. Each uses different terminology to refer to the process of adult growth. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the terms “change”, “development”, and “transformation”. *Change* refers to a new set of beliefs, understandings, or behaviors. *Development* refers to the stages through which individuals come to make meaning of themselves and their world. *Transformation* refers to the intersection of change with development, the points at which adults shift in their relationship to themselves and the world around them. According to these definitions, individuals may experience both changes and transformations in their developmental experience. In order to ground and

contextualize the rich stories I heard in the Rio Grande Valley, I draw upon three approaches to human development: empowerment psychology, developmental constructivism, and social constructivism.

Empowerment psychology looks at the individual as a level of analysis, while acknowledging the interdependency of the individual with his/her community. It is therefore a useful construct for this research in that it directly addresses the development of the individual in the context of public life. Zimmerman describes this approach "that integrates perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment" in terms of three categories: The first, the *intrapersonal*, looks at how people think about themselves. The second, the *interactional*, addresses people's way of understanding their community and related sociopolitical context. The last, *the behavioral*, considers people's actions, the activities that they participate in. In other words, empowerment psychology considers changes in in terms of what people believe, what they understand, and what they do (Zimmerman, 1995).

Another perspective on empowerment psychology is offered by those who examine the type of learning that takes place within the Freirian pedagogy of "conscientization". Educators interested in transformative learning also articulate the relationship between emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes (see Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993). Griff Foley, for example, discusses how the participants in an Australian informal education program learned not only new skills and knowledge, but a transformation of "meaning perspectives" that involved self-awareness, an awareness of

structural factors affecting their lives, and a new recognition of the complexity of interpersonal relationships (Foley, 1999). What empowerment psychology and transformative learning do not explicitly consider, however, are the different stages of development that can occur within each one of these realms, the increasingly complex ways that people come to know themselves and their worlds.

In order to consider how people's meaning making systems develop, therefore, I turn to the work of Robert Kegan and other developmental constructivists. Developmental constructivists believe that there are distinct stages of consciousness that humans experience transcending different aspects of our lives. Kegan presents five orders of mind in his work. In the initial stages, individuals externalize all responsibility and are unable to differentiate their own emotions from the emotions of others. Human development represents a shift from subject to object, in which individuals increasingly take ownership of their worlds, and become "self-authoring" agents of their realities. As they process through these stages, adults are increasingly able to hold "object", or outside of themselves, what was once inseparable from their sense of self, or "subject" (Kegan, 1994). While the intent of this analysis is not to present a developmental constructivist analysis of the data, this lens is helpful in that it may suggest the changes individuals experience as a result of their participation in Valley Interfaith represent a shift in meaning-making systems.

What Kegan's theory less explicitly discusses, however, is how the development of the individual is both grounded in, and potentially fostered by,

his/her relationship to the collective. Elliot Mishler writes, "I found it ironic that the study of individuals isolated from their social and historical contexts was assumed to be the basis for a scientific understanding of human behavior, when it seemed obvious to me that we are social beings from the beginning of our lives." (1999, p. 16) The gender based models place a larger emphasis on the social nature of development. Mary Belenky et.al. set forth a different stage model in Women's Ways of Knowing. Their model looks specifically at how the development of women's voice emerges as they learn to take control over their own lives. (Belenky, et.al, 1986) They, like Kegan, present a developmental model as well as discussing how our society can both hinder and foster women's development. Belenky's work, influenced by Carol Gilligan, offers a unique perspective in that it examines how women's development can be supported through their interactions with others, a "connected way of knowing".

The feminist approach to development also builds on the work of Vygotsky and other social constructivists. The social constructivists, like the developmental constructivists, see individuals as actively constructing and reconstructing their experiences. They differ, however, from pure constructivism in that they present a dialectical model through which the individual and his or her environment are mutually transformative. Like Dewey, who emphasized the social nature of development, Nager and Shapiro write, "As individuals participate in or come to internalize practices, they transform them. They reproduce them not exactly, but uniquely, and so continue the development of the culture." (Nager and Shapiro, p.79)

Individuals, therefore, can impact their society just as a society impacts individuals.

### **The individual in the community:**

Feminist approaches to organizing, in concordance with feminist theory, often hone in on developing voice and power at the individual level. Based on the mantra that "the personal is political", feminist organizers have traditionally focused on consciousness raising and empowerment (see hooks, 1984, Stall and Stoecker, 1997, Belenky, et.al 1999). Stall and Stoecker contrast the "women's centered" model of organizing with Alinsky based organizing, suggesting that traditional "male-centered" tactics do not pay attention to the development of individual actors (Stall and Stoecker, 1997). Such a contrast, I would argue, presents a simplified and outdated view of contemporary Alinsky-organizing, which I will later demonstrate invests great effort in fostering individual growth.

Beyond the feminist literature, it is only in the past decade that community development theory has directly addressed the role of individual development in the context of community power. Recent research on community development acknowledges the limitations of traditional sociology, Randy Stoecker, one of the leading academic voices advocating community organizing writes, "When we study collective identity, we must also consider individuals. . ." (Stoecker, 1995) Witting et.al. also move from pure sociology to psychology in gaining a deeper understanding of the process of community

change,<sup>8</sup> They acknowledge the changes that occur in individuals through organizing.

“While the mobilization of people has traditionally been viewed as a sociological phenomenon, it also involves psychological components that operate at the individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and cultural levels. . . Perceptions of self-esteem and self-efficacy may improve, new social identities may be formed, attitudes toward the political system may be altered, and skills and resources maybe acquired.”

- Wittig, et.al., 1996, p.5

These findings, however, suggest that changes in the individual come about as a *byproduct* of community change. They do not look at how intentional efforts to foster adult development may in fact contribute to community development efforts. In order to do so, I look south, to the Rio Grande Valley. It is here where the Industrial Areas Foundation provides a context to examine the intersection of individual and community development.

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<sup>8</sup> Speer and Hughey also merge empowerment theory with social power through a case analysis of PICO, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations. (Speer and Hughey, 1995)

## Chapter Three:

### The IAF, Valley Interfaith, and Individual Development



*"This organization is admirable because it prepares you. So that you aren't any longer a person that is ignored, or, as they say, that struggles along blindly. No, we don't struggle along blindly now, now we are organized. We are a well-prepared group. It develops and prepares leaders, it's fantastic."*

- Valley Interfaith Leader, 2000

*"What does the Radical want? He wants a world in which the worth of the individual is recognized. He wants the creation of a kind of society where all of man's potentialities could be realized; a world where man could live in dignity, security, happiness and peace—a world based on a morality of mankind."*

- Saul Alinsky  
Reveille for Radicals

## **Chapter Three:**

The Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, grew out of the work of the late sociologist and activist Saul Alinsky. Beginning in Chicago in the 1940's, the Alinsky model of teaching citizens about self-interest and power was subsequently replicated throughout the country. Alinsky advocated for "people's organizations" committed to training "ordinary people" to take charge of their own neighborhoods (Alinsky, 1945). He envisioned a national network of community organizations, a dream that was realized only after his death in 1972. The modern day IAF consists of more than sixty organizations throughout the country, with fifteen active in Texas. Their goal, "building power for long term social, economic, and political community revitalization through institution based leadership development and action" (Valley Interfaith, 1999)

The IAF, like most organizations, has developed both a language and a methodology of its own. These can at times be confusing to the outsider and merit a brief explanation. "Members" of the Industrial Areas Foundation are not individuals. Rather, membership in organizations is by institution. Churches and other faith based organizations make up the vast majority of IAF members, although schools, unions, and other secular groups have played an increasing role in recent years (Warren, 2001). As an interfaith organization, the IAF is not affiliated with any one organized religion. Their work is based on what they refer to as the Judeo-Christian and democratic ethic, "...The institutions of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim

congregations, school and unions, bring together a rich diversity of poor and middle class, liberals and conservatives, across ethnic and racial lines who can struggle with one another around the decisions that affect their families.” (Sanchez, 2000, p.8)

Individuals who belong to these institutions and are active in the organization are referred to as leaders. While the IAF differentiates between primary, secondary, and tertiary leaders, *all* active members are considered leaders.<sup>9</sup> I therefore use the term “individual development” in this thesis interchangeably with what is referred to as “leadership development” in the IAF terminology. While “leader” is an appropriate term in that it highlights the connectedness of the individual to the community, it can be confusing since traditional notions of leadership development suggest the teaching of specific civic skills to a limited number of individuals. I therefore choose the term “individual” to highlight that although change occurs on numerous levels, it is the level of the individual which is the focus of this research.

While maintaining true to its vision of “people’s organizations”, the IAF itself has changed and developed organizationally since its beginnings in Chicago. The rebirth of the IAF is in large part credited to the organizing of Ernesto Cortes, who founded the organization C.O.P.S., Communities Organized for Public Service, in San Antonio in 1974. Mr. Cortes left San Antonio to continue his organizing work in several cities throughout the

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<sup>9</sup> According to the IAF, tertiary leaders are those people interested and active in specific tasks related to their own interests. Secondary leaders have a larger interest in the political power of their institution. Primary leaders are interested in the growth and development of the organization, as well as their personal growth and development. (Training notes, 2000)

Southwest including one of the most impoverished areas of our country, the U.S./Mexican border.

### **The Rio Grande Valley and Valley Interfaith:**



Figure A: The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is off the map, in every sense of the word. These four counties, nestled in the Southernmost tip of the state, are bounded by the international border and the Gulf of Mexico. Unlike California, where the chain link fence between Tijuana and San Diego marks the extreme contrast between rich and poor, between first and third worlds, in the Valley poverty is embedded along both sides of the river. Of the Valley's population of over 900,000, almost forty percent live in poverty. This is more than twice the percentage of individuals living in poverty in the state of Texas, and more than three times the percentage in the entire United States. News of the recent U.S. economic boom seems distant and irrelevant in the Valley, where unemployment is as high as 12.2 percent. The median family income is \$25,538, again half of the median income of the

state of Texas and less than half of the United States. Trends in health care and education are also dismal— forty percent of working age persons and thirty two percent of children went without health insurance in 1999. The dropout rate in 1998 was sixteen percent, as opposed to nine percent in the country (Valley Interfaith, 2000).

Angry and ready to take action on these conditions, local Catholic leadership invited the Industrial Areas Foundation into the Valley in 1983. The subsequent formation of a sponsoring committee marked the beginning of Valley Interfaith. Valley Interfaith is currently made up of forty-three institutions, primarily Catholic churches with an increasing number of schools. Situated in a bilingual and bicultural region, Valley Interfaith's leaders are almost exclusively Mexican-American and Mexican immigrants. Local IAF organizations typically have anywhere from one to six paid organizers on staff who guide and work with an executive committee of active leaders. Ernesto Cortés, Jim Drake, and Sister Christine Stevens served as the Valley Interfaith's first organizers. Under their tutelage, subsequent organizers have included some of the most experienced in the network. Currently, Sister Judy Donovan is the "lead organizer" of Valley Interfaith, supervising an organizing staff of four.

The IAF in Texas has created some of the most powerful community organizations in the country. Valley Interfaith is no exception to this rule. They, in conjunction with other Texas IAF organizations, have called national attention to the problem of the *colonias* along the border; they have leveraged over 450 million dollars in state and federal funds to bring water

and sewer services to over 160,000 Valley residents. Other successful efforts include bills supporting indigent health care, a collaborative parent-school-community school reform effort (Alliance Schools), a job training and labor market intermediary known as VIDA, and a living wage ordinance that has increased the salaries of over 8,500 workers. The current power of the organization is a direct testimony to the almost twenty years of creating what the IAF refers to as “a culture of conversation”, a culture based on building relationships and cultivating leadership.

### **Individual Development in the IAF:**

In the previous chapter I argued that individual development is often overlooked in the field of community development. In this next section, I present the model of the IAF as a means to highlight both specific techniques and rationales for exploring the relationship between individual and community. This analysis considers how the IAF facilitates and stimulates changes within the individual as a tool to build power. My premise here is that IAF does in fact emphasize this level of development-- the first underlying question I explore is “Why does the IAF engage in individual development?” From the “why”, I turn to the “how” and look at how the theory plays out in the context of local organizations. This analysis serves to both underscore the complexity of individual development, and the potential tools community development efforts can employ in working with individuals.

## Why the individual?

*The personal growth and development of people is why we do what we do. . . That's what broad-based organizations do for people—change their lives and integrate their values and vision. The first revolution is internal. It requires a commitment to operate on your center.*

Ed Chambers  
(Rogers, 1990, p.61)

According to the IAF, the careful attention to leadership development is precisely what distinguishes it from “civic organizations” or “social movements”.<sup>10</sup> The push for individual development emerges both from the top, at the national level, as well as from the bottom, with the day to day teachings of local organizers. Ed Chambers, director of the national IAF, is extremely explicit about the role of the IAF as a teaching institution. “The mistake of the first forty years of Alinsky organizing was the absence of political education. We were very good at the action, very clever and imaginative, but we didn’t make a commitment to the growth process of the people. We never forced people to reflect. We never took retreats, or did extensive evaluation.” (Rogers, 1984 p. 9) Chambers’ message is born out by the IAF staff throughout the country; On the grassroots level, organizers repeatedly emphasize that identifying and developing leaders is the foundation of their work.

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<sup>10</sup> A central piece of IAF training is a workshop outlining the differences between broad-based organizing, social movements, and civic organizations. In this workshop it is emphasized that broad-based organizing emphasizes leadership development as a means to building power over any other area. (Training notes, 12/00)

Sister Judy Donovan, lead organizer of Valley Interfaith explains, " Our only purpose is leadership development, and when we stray too much the ranks thin out.... it's the bread and butter of what we do." (Personal Interview, 1/01)

There are two fundamental reasons that the IAF focuses on this level of leadership development. The first—a deep belief in democracy, that people are capable of governing themselves. The second—an acknowledgement that while people possess this potential, there has been a breakdown in the institutions that teach the skills of politics. Leadership, therefore, needs to be cultivated within existing institutions in order for citizens to realize their potential. Leadership development, individual development, is the foundation upon which the organization builds power.

In developing his vision of "people's organizations", Saul Alinsky built on historical arguments for participation. In Reveille for Radicals, Alinsky claims: "After all, the real democratic program is a democratically minded people. It is a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and interest, become informed, educated and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men, and the future." (1945, p.79) The benefits of democracy, therefore, extend beyond specific policies or decisions to foster the potential of an engaged citizenry. The inverse is also true: without citizens capable of making decisions, democracy ceases to exist. Ernesto Cortés, in a speech to the fifteen hundred leaders throughout the Southwest underscored this last point, "Democracy only exists to the extent that there are active citizens." (Austin, 3/5/01) Investment in individuals is an

acknowledgment of the reciprocal relationship and mutual dependence between citizenship and democracy.

While the IAF believes in people's *potential* to make the decisions that affect them, they also acknowledge the weakening of community institutions, schools, churches, unions, that traditionally provided a forum for citizenship. Community organizations thus exist to develop leadership and power within existing institutions---to teach the skills of public life. The IAF conceives of itself precisely as a "university of public skills"; a university that cultivates leadership in individuals as a means to building institutional and community power. Organizer Ernesto Cortés describes the San Antonio-based Communities Allied for Public Service as following: "In short, C.O.P.S. provides a civic education, as well as a philosophic one, enabling people to conduct their lives effectively and to build and sustain their communities." (1995, p. 2)

Cortés highlights the complexity of citizenship when he refers to both the civic *and* philosophic nature of the IAF education. Civic development, therefore, is not reduced to an understanding of accountability, or the basics of public speaking. Rather, in the context of the IAF, the development of an individual involves a reawakening, a renewed sense of self that comes about through the process of learning one's story. The remaining section of this chapter describes how the IAF provides a training that embraces the depth and holistic nature of human development through the interrelated elements of story, relationship-building, action, reflection, and faith.

## **Learning to tell your story—The public processing of private pain:**

*"To get them in contact with their stories, to make them realize that they have richness of experiences that have formed them... And that story has not ended. It has not ended. Those stories are used so that you can connect and listen to other people ...so they realize we're in the same boat. So we begin to share the pain and make the pain public and say, "OK, now what are we going to do with the pain?"*

- Valley Interfaith Clergy, 2001

*Luz, a petite woman in her fifties, counts off on her fingers the three impediments that the Texas public health care system currently imposes on all applicants. Her voice trembles as she describes the humiliating experience of having her social worker tell her to "dress down" for her appointment. Luz's anger overpowers her nervousness at speaking to the crowd of hundreds from all parts of the state. Throughout the audience, people nod and bristle at Luz's story. A young student walks up to the microphone and shares how she was forced to cross the border to find a doctor when denied services. A mother describes waiting for months and months to hear from the system while her daughter grew progressively sicker.*

Central to the relationship between individual and community development is the understanding that one's experiences are connected to larger structures, that there is a relationship between the individual and the collective. Underlying all the specific strategies the IAF employs to develop leadership is the theme of story as a means to drawing this connection. "Story" in this sense refers to the culmination of experiences and relationships that make one unique. (Bruner, 1990, Nager and Shapiro, 2000) In concordance with Freirian pedagogy, which views the public telling of one's story as a stepping stone to a political consciousness the IAF believe that individuals develop as they learn their own story and in turn learn to share that story publicly. Sister Judy Donovan explains,

*"A lot of people have been taught, and through their experience have learned that their story is meaningless, that nobody's interested in their story, or that they better do the best they can to hide their*

*story. I think that one of the things that's attractive to people is that we see the story as a primary resource. That is the resource that people bring, their experience, their relationships. How to use that story publicly, how to develop it, how to create a new story.... So their own little experience, their pain, their failure, doesn't remain just their little experience that nobody cares about, it becomes public, it creates something new."*

In teaching individuals to recognize and honor their own stories, the IAF draws on the work of the theologian Walter Brueggeman. In Hope Within History , Brueggeman outlines three distinct moves of the faith dynamic as told through the story of Exodus. The first, the *critique of ideology*, rests upon the individual or community recognizing their oppression, it involves being able to name and understand power. The second, the *articulation and embrace of pain*, refers to what Brueggeman describes as the public processing of private pain. He believes that "Hope emerges among those who publicly articulate and process their grief." (1987, p.84) The last move, that which stems out of the second, is the *practice of social imagination*. Again, this work parallels Freire's articulation of a belief in an alternative to one's reality—a belief based upon a transition of atomized individuals to connection through community. It is specifically through the concept of publicly processing one's pain that the IAF teaches its leaders the power of story.

Any IAF organizer will explain that one of the main attractions of this type of work is the opportunity to develop and work on his or her own story. Joaquin Sanchez describes his experience: "*The way I see it is that this is the first place I've worked at where I've seen people challenge me around my story...as I've gone through that process it gives me the context and*

*challenges me to do it with other people.*" He proceeds to describe the role of story in this work:

*"If you want to build anything long-term that means that you have to invest something of yourself. In the same way, if I'm meeting with a group of people and I'm trying to teach anything- I can teach it through my head, or I can teach it through a story that I've been through. What that means that the leaders don't just talk about the problem or the issue, they're connecting with it—they aren't just dealing with private pain, they're changing the conditions that caused the pain to exist."*

Joaquin has learned his story in order to be a more effective organizer, in order to connect with the stories of the leaders he is developing. His telling of that story serves to train others to recognize their own anger, their own potential.

### **Training:**

*Twenty-two adults from across the Rio Grande Valley crowd into the "Ceramics Room" at the Howard Johnsons in Donna, Texas. They are here for a three day training conducted by IAF organizers throughout the Southwest. The clay they are molding is themselves. Sister Judy Donovan begins the session with the following, "This weekend is not a "how-to" session, it's really about you. It's an opportunity to think about your own development . . . "*

*- Field notes, 2000*

The concept of story, often abstract, is taught by the IAF through a variety of tools and strategies. For many individuals, one of the first entry points to learning the collective power of story is formal training. The death of Saul Alinsky and the subsequent revival of the Industrial Areas Foundation under Ed Chambers marked the beginning of a systematic and professional approach to training. Chambers envisioned the professionalization of community organizing through guided development (Robinson and Hanna,

1994). This vision has become a reality; the IAF currently sponsors four annual national trainings of over a week, and numerous condensed regional three-day trainings. Contrary to expectations, these trainings do not focus on lobbying tactics or issue campaigns. Rather, the centerpiece of these trainings is the development of participants' story through workshops on power and self interest. Experienced organizers probe individuals to reveal their influences, their ambitions, and their values. Extended trainings typically begin with "rounds" in which participants are asked to share an experience in which they took a risk to "make something happen". Organizers teach off of these experiences, highlighting issues such as anger, leadership, and tension. Later sessions emphasize that the first step of organizing is understanding one's own self-interest, one's own motivations. While the specifics of IAF training are not relevant here, it is important to bear in mind that these workshops lay the groundwork for understanding the key elements of organizing: relationship building, action, and reflection---all entry points for beginning to learn to tell one's story.

### **Building relationships:**

*At five p.m. on a Monday in January there is a knock on the door of Stacy's apartment in Port Isabel, Texas. Organizer Joaquin Sanchez enters and accepts a glass of water as the two sit facing each other on the living room couches. "I wanted to follow up with you to see how you reacted to three day training," Joaquin begins. The two proceed to talk for forty minutes, sharing pieces of who they are, of what's important to them, of where they want to go.*

Learning your story does not take place in isolation. Rather, it is through the development of what the IAF refers to as "public relationships" that

individuals engage in a dialogue that agitates, that stimulates, and that challenges people to reflect upon and share their stories. This process takes place through the deliberate building of relationships in two specific forms: individual and house meetings. Through these conversations, people not only build the relationships that are required for organizational power, they become enmeshed in a process of reflection that often forces individuals to grow and learn in ways fundamental to their sense of self. Development and change take place through conversation and discourse with others. Typical questions an organizer or experienced leader might ask include the following: "How are you thinking about your own story? About your own development? In what ways are you developing? What part of your story are you working on?" House meetings in which groups of people come together to identify common issues and concerns get at the same questions of identity. These conversations are traditionally conceived of as a means to building relational power, a means to building social capital. I suggest here that as Ernesto Cortés writes, "Relational power is both collectively effective and individually transformative." (1995, p.2) Therefore, as two people learn each other's story, the line between social and individual power is blurred. The relationship between individuals provides them with the ability to act in a new way. Such a relationship can also lead each individual to independently reconceptualize his or her sense of self, providing him or her with a new sense of capacity.

In this way, as organizers challenge individuals to process their story publicly, they serve as mentors. Frank Pierson, the supervisor of Arizona and

New Mexico IAF, repeatedly refers to the IAF as a "mentoring organization". Mentoring takes place on all levels, beginning with the training of organizers and carrying down to leaders in institutions throughout the country. In this sense, mentoring is a dual process through which individuals are challenged to mentor others as they themselves are being mentored. For example, in an individual meeting with Martha, Sister Judy Donovan questioned her, *"I see you growing, I seeing you taking on roles you didn't take on before. Who are you developing? Who are you working with in the same way that Ms. Figueroa worked with you?"* Just a few days later, Sister Judy spoke in detail about her first years organizing, and the mentoring she had received from Sister Pearl Ceasar. Thus, a central component of relationship building becomes challenging others to reach their potential. Or, in the words of one of Valley Interfaith's leading clergy, *"Mentoring is trying to bring people to a level where they can walk on their own. Where they can be masters themselves in their own right."*

**Action:**

*"We believe that development really happens out of action, not just talking about it. Putting your story out there publicly, taking risks... I remember one woman with very little formal education who was asked to co-chair a meeting. Seeing this woman, she just transformed, as you watched her in that action you watched someone develop before your eyes, she stood differently, she spoke differently, she was absolutely radiant. . . she had been recognized by others, others saw something in herself that she did not see. After that action she could see it."*

- Sister Judy Donovan

As individuals begin to "walk on their own", they take on public roles they would never have anticipated: posing difficult questions to public

representatives, speaking to the press, telling pieces of their experiences in large forums. Public action is, in fact, the stage upon which the IAF classroom rests. Oftentimes local organizations “create” actions in order to provide opportunities for learning and growth. While these actions are essential to bringing about changes in local policies, they are also essential to bringing about changes in individuals. Rogers writes, *“People’s experience of ‘transformation’ comes most directly from public roles, connected to feelings of power which result from lessening dependence on experts, professionals, and even organizers themselves.”* (1990, p.92) The education of the IAF is an experiential one—people learn by doing. The learning, however, does not occur solely through the “performance”; just as critical is the reflection that takes place after the applause has subsided.

**. . . and reflection:**

*“I think the victories of course give a boost, but then always after the victories comes the reflection. And it makes people think about themselves about their self worth and about who they really are.”*

- Valley Interfaith Clergy

*I spent the morning of January sixth videotaping a Valley-wide action in preparation for the statewide legislative agenda. I caught individuals speaking publicly about a variety issues, I ran from workgroup to workgroup to capture their action plans, I gathered scene after scene of people cheering, of laughter, of clapping and energy. As I moved to pack up my camera after the closing prayer, Valley Interfaith worker Alicia Sanchez stopped me. “You have to tape the evaluation. That’s the most important part.”*

In her urging me to document the morning’s evaluation, Alicia echoed the teachings of Saul Alinsky who wrote, “Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized.” (1971, p.69) The IAF model of action-reflection

also echoes the work of Don Schön, who explains how doing and thinking are mutually reinforcing, "Each feeds the other, and each sets boundaries for the other." (1983, p.290) After all actions, be they small meetings with local officials or statewide rallies, all participants come together to evaluate the day. For example, after the action described above, Sister Donovan asked the leaders, "Did the day help us move forward? How?" In the weeks following large actions, organizers meet with both new and experienced leaders in individual meetings and group meetings. In these conversations, organizers encourage leaders to reflect on the action, how they understood the action, and their own development. The model of action-reflection provides another opportunity for individual development within the context of a community.

While organizers encourage reflection on the role of individual and community power, reflection takes on a spiritual tone within the context of specific institutions. In this sense, reflection becomes an opportunity to connect not only with oneself or with community, but with a greater sense of meaning in one's life.

### **The role of faith:**

*Luz runs back and forth from the dining room to the living room carrying stools and chairs to accommodate the group of women that is beginning to overflow the couch space. As the meeting is called to order, heads are bowed, hands are held, and voices murmur the Lord's Prayer. They sit, they sing, they discuss the sweatshop labor that went into the scooters sold at the local Wal-Mart. A grey haired woman reads a section from the Bible about Jesus' love for the poor. She asks the group, "Do you think that God favors the poor over the rich?" A lively discussion ensues.*

Perhaps one of the greatest impediments to political participation in the United States is a lack of faith in the ability to effect change. While religion is a common denominator for IAF organizations, Ernesto Cortés explains, "In this context, "faith" does not mean a particular system of religious beliefs, but a deep and profound affirmation that life, and the human condition in particular, have meaning and significance which transcends death." (Cortés, personal conversation, 3/5) Local organizations challenge religious leaders to be facilitators of citizenship. Trainings and issues are reinforced through religious services, through mentorship of clergy, and throughout all aspects of the church. According to local clergy in the Rio Grande Valley, teaching the tenets of Catholicism goes hand in hand with good citizenship. Thus spiritual development is in fact a political process, and the development of faith is intimately tied to community. Faith based institutions reinforce faith in one's self, in one's community, and in one's God,.

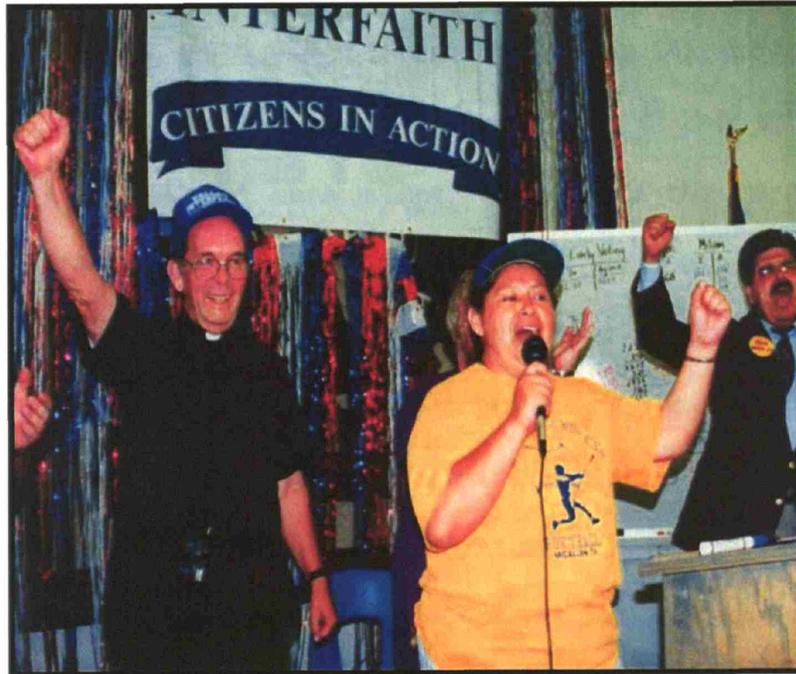
Faith based organizations have been influenced by a wide range of theologians examining the relationship between faith and social justice. In the Rio Grande Valley, where Catholicism is the dominant religion, the IAF has built on the Latin American model of liberation theology. Deeply affected by Freire's work in Brazil, liberation theologians have long argued that liberation of society will come about as individuals undergo spiritual and political transformation. In A Theology of Liberation, Gustavo Gutierrez demands that the Catholic Church take a leadership role raising consciousness among the poor in Latin America. He emphasizes that social change will come about as individuals experience liberation one by one, ". . . conversion means a radical

transformation of ourselves; it mean thinking, feeling and living as Christ-present in exploited and alienated man." (1971, p.205)

Faith grows as individuals begin to see the possibility of change within their own community. The IAF targets issues that are "winnable" in order for individuals , often people who have never experienced victory in the political arena, to gain a taste for political power. It is through directly experiencing and seeing the changes in their communities that individuals who never before thought that they could effect change, begin to see the potential of the "social imagination" to which Brueggeman refers (Brueggeman, 1984).

The results of this attention to individual development through dialogue, action, reflection, and faith are not only "civic skills" in the traditional sense, but profound intrapersonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes. These changes in individuals strengthen their institutions, their organization, and their community. Chapter four will consider these changes, using individuals from Valley Interfaith as a case study.

**Chapter Four:**  
**Findings — How Individuals Change Through**  
**Valley Interfaith**



*"If you can change, and I can change, we can move mountains."*

- Valley Interfaith Leader

*"Beyond these new homes, and infrastructure, however, the most important accomplishment of the IAF organizations is the development of nontraditional leaders in historically disenfranchised communities."*

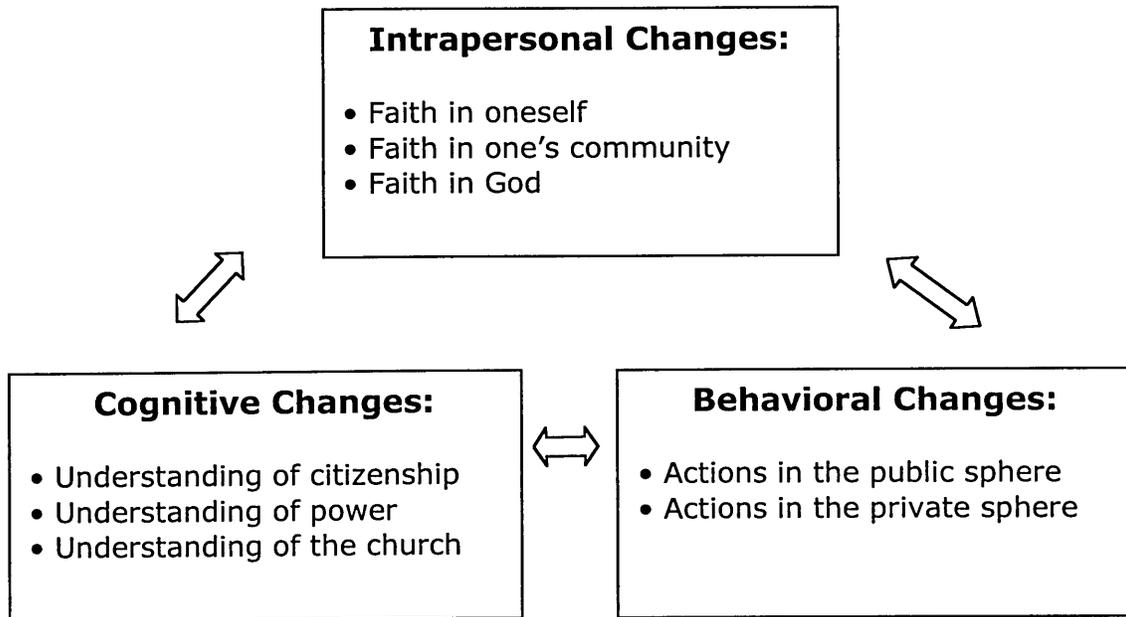
- Ernesto Cortés , 1995

## Chapter Four:

In this thesis I have argued that central to the IAF approach to building power is an investment in the development of their leaders. This investment extends beyond traditional notions of civic skills to consider the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of human growth. While the previous chapter explored the ways in which Valley Interfaith and the IAF support and foster development, this section will address the *results* of this approach. The central question I address here is not, "Do people change through their involvement?" My initial interviews in January of 2000 established beyond a doubt that individuals have indeed changed when one hundred percent of participants immediately responded affirmatively. My analysis is thus based on the premise that people have developed, and the focal question becomes: **How** have they changed through their participation in the organization? What empirical evidence can we draw on to understand the ways in which an investment in individuals leads to development?

Valley Interfaith is based on the intersection of three core elements: faith, power, and action. The stories I heard from these leaders embodied all three—faith in their ability to effect change, the power of organized people to do so, and the active steps they are taking to alter the inequities of their community. This chapter presents the findings of these narratives—the voices and testimonies of Valley Interfaith's leaders' perspectives on their own growth and development. The following chart illustrates and summarizes the

intrapersonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes that participants demonstrated:



It would be impossible to report the full story of each of the individuals I met in these travels. And yet, I believe that the power of these voices is difficult to portray without providing a brief description of the people behind these quotations. Although my analysis primarily draws on the ten individuals with whom I conducted multiple interviews, I will provide a brief background of three individuals to whom I refer frequently in my analysis. I do so in order to represent some recurring identity characteristics of participants, as well as some of their differences.

**Sara:**

*Sara is one of the matriarchs of the organization. Almost seventy and barely five feet tall, state representatives throughout Texas greet her by name when she makes one of her frequent trips to Austin. Unlike many of the Mexican immigrants in the Valley, who make their way north just a few*

*hundred miles from bordering states, Sara was raised in the south of Mexico in the state of Yucatan. Her eyes quickly grow moist as she speaks of her childhood. She tells of following her parents around as they worked selling tacos. She tells of having to leave school after the second grade to help put food on the table. And she tells of the day to day struggle for survival.*

*Sara met and married a shrimper, and they moved to Port Isabel, Texas in 1960. Port Isabel is perched on the edge of South Padre Island, a tourist destination for hundreds of spring breakers who come for the long stretches of white sand, the year round sunshine, and the low prices. The family settled in Port Isabel, raised seven children, and lived off the shrimp trade for decades. During these years, Sara's experience reflected the isolation of many women who immigrated from Mexico. "I didn't know anybody, I didn't know anything." Afraid to even go to church, Sara dropped off her children at mass for years before finally attending herself. This decision was perhaps the starting point of a new trajectory for Sara. Through the church, Sara was exposed to the social teachings of Catholicism. Father Joe, the priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea, was one of the first religious leaders involved in Valley Interfaith. Sara demonstrated the natural curiosity that IAF identifies as one of the key qualities of leaders. "In the religion classes they mentioned Valley Interfaith. And I asked what Valley Interfaith was. But nobody could tell me." Sara had the determination, the sense of injustice about the struggle her husband and other shrimpers were experiencing, faith in the church to bring about change. What she didn't have were the tools, the knowledge, and the sense of self to put her anger into action.*

### **Lidia:**

*The first time I met with Lidia she barely spoke for the first five minutes. Her responses to my questions were brief, and she was clearly inhibited by the tape recorder and microphone that lay between us at the kitchen table. The inhibition, however, disappeared rapidly when I asked her about Valley Interfaith. Lidia began to tell stories. She told me the story of how her colonia rallied together under her leadership to demand a local school for their children. She told me stories of sleeping in the barn with the cows during the decades that she worked in the fields, of waitressing and driving a school bus for years for minimum wage, grateful for penny raises. And she told me stories of two Lidias: the old, quiet Lidia who would hide her head whenever attention was called to her, who thought her main responsibility was to stay home and defer to the powers that be, the old Lidia that still thinks at times that someone is going to "find her out" when she speaks up. The voice that calls "Here I am standing here telling them what to do and I'm not employed, I'm just a housewife. But they don't know how weak I am and there are so many things I don't know." She contrasted that with the new proud Lidia who spells her name clearly, L-I-D-I-A when interviewed by the local press so they'll get it right in the paper the next day. The new Lidia that points her finger angrily at the officials of the local water board when they don't deliver as promised. The new Lidia that burns at the abuse she perceives and works day after day to alter the conditions of that abuse*

**Jon:**

*At first glance, the Jon of ten years ago was a role model for residents of the Valley. Born and raised in McAllen, Jon grew up with his five sisters and brothers following his grandfather in the fields to pick cotton. Lucky enough to have parents that always stressed the importance of education, he ignored the lack of encouragement from his high school guidance counselor and went on to college to study medical technology. Coming of age in the late sixties, Jon was greatly influenced by the farmworkers movement. He describes himself as having always been politically radical and angry at what he saw a racist and unjust economic system. After marrying and beginning the first thirteen years of family life in Corpus Christi, Jon moved back to the north side of McAllen, the area traditionally home to the Anglo and professional Hispanic residents of the city. As a member of the middle class parish, Holy Spirit, Jon became involved in Valley Interfaith about eight years ago. Earnest and sincere, Jon describes his initial impressions of Valley Interfaith with humility and humor: "Well, the first time I ever met or went to an leaders assembly at Valley Interfaith I looked around and here I was a forty year old guy surrounded by seventy, eighty year old ladies and old men. And I was going, 'What am I doing here? Why am I hanging around with these people? They don't know anything about politics. I know everything about politics. . . boy was I wrong.'" Jon's development was not about a "coming to consciousness" but a combination of political skills and spiritual grounding that will be further discussed later in this chapter. Jon's story is one of how much the "educated" have to learn, the potential for all of us to grow regardless of professional or educational status.*

**Intrapersonal Changes:**

*"They walk differently. They stand differently. They are radiant."*

These are the words used by both Valley Interfaith organizers and clergy to describe the changes they have observed in the individuals that they have mentored. They refer to that inexplicable glow deeply rooted in a belief in oneself. Zimmerman explains that the intrapersonal perspective is based on how people see themselves (Zimmerman, 1995). Changing understandings and changing behaviors are predicated upon a sense of self-worth, a belief in the unseen, and faith in one's own potential. Regardless of age, regardless of

gender, regardless of education, all individuals reported changes in how they see themselves as they shared discoveries of their own capacity, the capacity of their community, and the capacity of their God.

**Faith in oneself—The discovery of individual capacity:**

*"I didn't want to talk, I didn't, I felt that I was nothing, without the language. . . I thought, I'm not going to be able to do anything here, I'm nothing, I'm nobody. But, (I thought) I'm going to continue, and I continued, and I continued..."*

Sara

*"For a lot of people there's a real taking seriously of one's self that happens, that people will say that their primary relationships change... they begin seeing themselves differently and they begin imagining new possibilities and that's what the work is about, discovering themselves for the first time, discovering their capacity."*

Sister Judy Donovan

The development of self-esteem, of confidence, and of efficacy all come about as individuals participate in the relationship building, the workshops, and the actions of Valley Interfaith. In "Reweaving the Social Fabric", Ernesto Cortés writes, "When ordinary people become engaged and shift from being political spectators to being political agents, when they begin to play large, public roles, they develop confidence in their own competence." (1995, p.3) Moving into the organization, moving from passivity to an agent of change, involved a growth in self-esteem. Although this was not a direct question, forty-six percent of respondents in the initial interviews volunteered that they felt more self-confident as a result of their participation. This was most common in those with little formal schooling who had previously deferred to people they perceived as better educated. Lidia explained

*"I really got some confidence through this organization because I never thought I could do anything. You stay home because you think, people think the city knows what they're doing. Engineers know. Teachers know what they're doing. We all stay home and do what we're supposed to be doing. Because that's what my attitude was. I really thought that was the way that it was. But no. It is not and that's what we're all learning through the process of this."*

For Martha, a woman who spent the majority of her life working as a migrant worker, Valley Interfaith opened the door to what she dreamed possible for herself. She laughed when I asked her if she would have volunteered to co-chair a meeting a few years ago. *"No, . . . I guess I didn't believe in myself the way I did now. I didn't think that I could do anything but work in the fields, now I know that I can do whatever I can set my mind to."*

While my research was not conducted specifically to highlight differences in the gender development of women and men, it is impossible to ignore the consistency of the theme of voice that emerged from the interviews with women. In her study of women's development, Mary Belenky underscores the importance of this metaphor: *"When a woman said she was developing a voice, it was likely she was claiming the power of her mind and becoming more self-directed."* (1999, p.7) Belenky describes the "silent" stage of knowing common to many women. Emerging from this silence, both literally and figuratively, is an initial step that many women identified as critical in their own development.

Valley Interfaith women leaders also consistently spoke of the growth in their confidence through the symbol of voice. In the context of political participation, the ability to express oneself verbally is clearly central. Speaking out, however, represented more than merely talking. Several of the

women I spoke with explained that earlier they never would have felt comfortable talking to people they did not know, and provided the example of speaking with me. Olga, whose ability to articulate and reflect on her growth defies her descriptions of a previously "silent" self, admitted *"I never used to speak, as I'm speaking with you now, like I speak in the house meetings. It developed in me, (I heard them talking about) knowing my story, getting out your story. But I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't...and I realized that I have begun to speak more."* Maricela, like Olga, a monolingual Spanish speaker with little formal education, also spoke of the energy she derived from seeing the organization work. She then immediately proceeded to say that previously, she was "unclear". *"Unclear, without any way of speaking. No, no, no. I never could have imagined speaking, or having a conversation with somebody. Even here with you, I thought, well, maybe I won't have much to say to you."*

While less dramatically, men also described changes in their ability and comfort level with speaking. For men, however, speaking seemed to be more directly tied to taking on public roles. Jon talked about gaining a new "political" voice: *". . . Before I didn't know how to talk to people. How do you talk to a senator, How do you talk to a congressman?"* Even local clergy, individuals in leadership roles already trained in public speaking, described how the organization had provided them with greater confidence in the public arena. As one religious leader explained, *"And I had no problem with doing a homily on Sunday -- several on Sunday, but to speak in Sidney Hall was a totally new experience for me. And so I grew a lot by doing these things."*

The theme of voice was not limited to speaking in public, to speaking with strangers. Rather, emerging from silence is intimately tied here to a growing awareness of injustice, and a sense of power to battle this injustice. For both Lidia and Olga their discussion of "voice" was rooted in their critique of their socio-economic conditions, a "coming to consciousness". Olga discussed how others see her differently now:

*"They tell me: You speak more, you have other ideas, you aren't like you were before, quieter. They used to tell you something and you accepted it."*

For Olga, not speaking was not only silence, it implied acceptance of economic and racial oppression, acceptance of the conditions in which she had always lived. She immediately related the following story:

*"I went to Houston with one of my sisters and I saw the injustices against the immigrants, and in a city where there are many Anglos. But they are also abusive in terms of salaries. I went to church and there was a ranch, where they work cutting down trees and they pay very little to the people that work there, they pay them minimum wage and it's hard work. So in the church I met many of them and I asked "Why do you let them pay you so little if this work is good work?" My sister told me "Be quiet, don't even start, be quiet." I told her, "No, they need to come together, with the Hispanics and the Anglos, there are also Anglos working there." She said, 'Don't even start.'"*

The voice of Tania, another leader, also emerged as she was provided with a space to critique and act on her reality. *"Because you wake up, you're more alive, you're more involved in things and you understand more, you ask, you ask, you go and you look, you go and you ask for, you go and you give...this is what I mean when I say I feel more alive because it's not like it was before where it was just 'you there and me here.'"* For many, this space to question is the first step to participation. Documentation of other

educational strategies like The Right Question Project demonstrates that many low-income individuals do not participate because they “don’t even know what questions to ask.” (Right Question Project, 2000) As people who struggled economically their entire lives, Valley Interfaith not only provided Olga and Tania with a space to vocalize their questions, it provided them with a conceptual framework to understand and name these conditions as unjust. As they name, they question, and they act, Olga, Tania, and others have a greater sense of agency and a greater awareness of their socio-economic context. If “power” is the ability “to be able” these individuals possess a new sense of power as they are able to act on their own behalf. They also recognized, however, that their power is rooted in the relationships they have built in their community.

### **Faith in one’s community: The discovery of collective capacity**

*“. . . And one day we’ll – like it is now, we’ll become a tremendous political force that if anything needs to be passed in a legislature it will have to come by us. And I really believe it can happen. It’s happening now.”*

- Jon

*“What Valley Interfaith has done is to bring hope to the Valley.”*

- Valley Interfaith Clergy

One hundred percent. Of the twenty-five people I interviewed, twenty-five responded that they believed that when people came together they could bring about change. After the first few interviews, I was almost hesitant to ask the question, as I met with responses like Alicia’s, *“Of course, little one!”* While this percentage is impressive in and of itself, it becomes

even more impressive when considered in light of the historic marginalization of the Valley. This sense of efficacy is not indigenous to the region, it has been cultivated through the deliberate teaching of power described in the previous chapter:

Political efficacy is not necessarily a component of the emergence of self. The flurry of “self-help” literature and “empowerment” groups is testimony to the thousands of individuals throughout the country that seek some form of “self-improvement”. In Valley Interfaith, personal efficacy occurs within a context of community efficacy. People demonstrate not only changes in how they see themselves as individuals, in their own confidence levels, but how they see their ability to effect change as part of an organization. Efficacy grows as individuals participate and observe the results of their participation. People believe they *can* effect change because they *are* effecting change. The concept of making a difference is not an abstract one, it’s a central and recurring part of their reality as active members of Valley Interfaith. Lidia described the process of finding other parents in her neighborhood who were concerned about the schools, *“You can’t do anything with one person, but a group of people can do it...we had to yell a lot though, they aren’t just going to give it to you.”* Another emerging leader of the organization reported how she, working with other parents, obtained a covered walkway at her children’s high school:

*“I said, ‘Wow.’ I couldn’t believe it. This is what a few of us can get done. Think of how much we could do if we all worked together. And like I tell a lot of my parents here, you know, I said, O.K. maybe you might have one issue and maybe she might have another one and I have something else, but if we work all together and focus on one of them and get that finished and then maybe focus on the next*

*one, you know and take it like that. Because if one of us is going to pull in a different direction, we're not going to accomplish anything. But if we all work together, it can be done. Because we've seen it. We've seen that it can be done."*

Time after time, people expressed absolute faith when I asked them why they believed they could bring about change. "Look at the proof," they told me. Individuals like Tania, who had never been involved politically in any way exclaimed, *"Well, we've had the changes, we've seen the changes in our city, in the Valley. Because, we've seen true changes, there's proof, there's proof of it."* This "proof" becomes motivational, confirmation of the potential for the organization to grow and become more powerful.

The sense of efficacy for participants transcended lines of class or education. Just as individuals used the metaphor of voice for critiquing society, many spoke of being "woken up" through the accomplishments of the organization. While individuals with more education may have been comfortable speaking in public previously or attending a public hearing, they did not necessarily believe in the power of collective action. Valley Interfaith teaches its members that power comes in two forms: organized money and organized people. For Manuel, a social worker who had been active in his church for years, this concept was a revelation:

*"We don't have the power of money, we definitely don't have it, but we can create another type of power, the power of organized people. I believe that yes, I think that the people united can be even more powerful than organized money. I have seen it in the conventions, when we go and we see there, five, six thousand people. I'm astonished, completely astonished. It's something in me that is waking up, it shakes me up and gives me strength. Its awakens my energy."*

Maricela used strikingly similar language to describe her “awakening”:

*“Anything is possible when the people are organized. . . I have seen it, when we’ve been in the conferences or when we’ve gone and we’ve seen five thousand, seven thousand people from Valley Interfaith. And I’m astonished. Sincerely astonished. It’s something that awakens in me. It awakens me more and makes me stronger, It awakens my energy, it gives me strength, . . . it fills me and it makes me believe and gives me energy.”*

How far does this sense of efficacy reach? In my initial interviews I simply asked individuals if they believed that people could bring about change through working together. In subsequent conversations, I expanded on this to ask if change could extend beyond the reach of the Rio Grande Valley to influence state and national politics. The answers remained positive. Many people cited the funds they have received for the *colonias*, and the Alliance School effort as evidence for potential to influence the political process on a larger scale. They see this as the outcome of collaboration with other IAF organizations in Texas. Others state how the potential for change is limitless. Alicia, for example, shook her fist at me saying, *“If we were to unite as Christians, as voters, we could change the entire system. I promise you.”*

Having born witness to the numerous visible changes in the Valley partially accounts for such consistent belief in the organization’s capacity. While belief in the visible, the seen, is critical, what is just as critical is Valley Interfaith’s leaders’ belief in the invisible, the unseen.

### **Faith in the unseen:**

#### **The discovery of religion as a call to social action**

*“For me, God manifests himself through Valley Interfaith and that is why I believe more, I am more sure of God. I feel strong because I know that*

*through this organization, God manifests himself to do great things for the poorest of the poor."*

Alicia

For the leaders of Valley Interfaith, the development of citizenship is inextricably connected to the development of faith. As spiritual leaders of the organization, both priests speak with passion of the development they've observed in their parishioners. One Father describes this process: *"Your basic leaders will transform, Your primary leaders will. And for many, for many leaders this has become a way back into church"* For another clergy member, acting on one's responsibilities as a Catholic is one and the same as acting on one's responsibilities as a citizen. His mentorship, therefore, is one that fosters a faith that not only acknowledges, but is rooted in a community context. He explains:

*"The development of a person is really a spiritual event. As a person discovers their own dignity, their worth. . . that is discovering who they are as children of God. . . So that anything that enriches that is part of coming to develop ourselves. The more spiritual you are, basically the more human you are. The more compassionate you are. The more that you feel for other people. The more that you embrace other people. That is, for me, a consequence of faith."*

Valley Interfaith has not brought about a conversion to Catholicism. The Valley has always been a deeply Catholic part of the country. Rather, through their participation in Valley Interfaith, individuals explain that their connection to, and understanding of God has changed. While these changes manifested themselves differently across gender, across education, and across socio-economic level, all individuals spoke of the different role that faith now plays in their life.

For those that struggle financially, especially monolingual women, their faith has taken on a new meaning to them as they came to understand the Bible and the word of God as a call to social justice. For these women, their new faith in God is embedded in faith in themselves and faith in the potential for change. Olga explained, *"If before I had faith, now I have more faith. Because you spend your life saying "Señor, señor, help me," but nobody does anything to help themselves, so you don't get anywhere. But that's where your faith comes in and God says 'help yourself, so I can help you.'"* Another woman was able to articulate the difference between her faith before and after her involvement in the organization. The following is just one small excerpt from a larger conversation we had on her faith development.

**Tania** *Now I have faith that everything is going to change. I have faith that we can accomplish our goals. . . we can't get unmotivated, no. We need patience to accomplish what we're doing because we've already accomplished many things.*

**Interviewer:** *And your faith before, what was it like?*

**Tania:** *Well, my faith before was a weak faith, very conformist faith. Before one had a faith that was the kind of faith you always had, in God, in the Virgin, but always wanting things to come to us, not going out to look for them and that's what you need to do. It's not just because you have faith or because you are very Catholic or very Christian that you can sit down and wait for things to come to you, you need to look for them, you have to do your part.*

**Interviewer:** *So now your faith isn't just in God...?*

**Tania:** *It's in oneself, in oneself. It's in the people ourselves, we can't just say that God is always with us, we have to do something ourselves, we need to work, we need to act . . .*

Not only does Tania's story represent a deeper faith, it is also critical in that it suggests her taking on greater ownership in creating her reality. God is no

longer solely responsible for what happens to Tania, she herself has a role to play.

For many of the middle-class individuals, particularly for men, it is the development of their spiritual life that has motivated their commitment to and interest in Valley Interfaith. Jon, for example, spoke in both interviews about the new sense of meaning in his life through his involvement. He explained that before, *"I don't think I really had any convictions in my life,"* and proceeded to discuss his new religious identity: *"I realized there's more to life than just coming to church on Sundays. There's more to my spirituality. And so it helped me find my prayer life, so now I can sit down and whenever I have a problem I can always turn to God and help me through the crises."* Manuel also spoke of how his friends might talk about him differently, *"I think I'm a more peaceful person at some level...so I think what people would see is maybe less frustration or more peace. More centered. Spiritually centered, and pretty content."* Many of the issues Valley Interfaith has taken on, living wages, *colonias*, do not affect Jon or Manuel directly. It is a new commitment to and understanding of Catholicism that calls upon them to act on their beliefs. In doing so, they experience a new spiritual fulfillment. This spiritual aspect, therefore, becomes critical in understanding how and why middle class and individuals with more formal education can grow through their involvement in community development efforts.

Faith in God, faith in community, and faith in oneself all develop in tandem as individuals experience dramatic interpersonal growth. While the specific nature of the development varies greatly according to the individual's

point of departure, what was consistent throughout the narratives was *development itself* as a phenomenon. When we turn to questions of cognitive development, however, we will see greater consistency in the ways that individuals grow in terms of their understanding of citizenship, power, politics, and the church.

### **Cognitive changes:**

Valley Interfaith is an organization dedicated to teaching the principals of power and politics. The new sense of personal power described above occurs as individuals cast aside their old conceptions of power, and are provided with a new framework for understanding their role as citizens. This section will trace the cognitive changes that correspond to the intrapersonal changes described in the previous section. I will explore how people's belief in themselves mirrors a new understanding of their role as citizens, how people's belief in their organization's potential reflects a changed conception of power and politics, and how their spiritual growth emerges from a new understanding of the church as a vehicle for social justice.

### **Citizenship and ownership - moving to the front row:**

*"At the very, very beginning, my very first meeting going to Austin for the water board meeting . . . I wanted to sit in the very back. And then the organizer said, 'Sit in the front' And I said, 'No, no. That's where the mayor and the city manager sit.' I thought that they sit in the front..we would sit in the back.. And she said, 'No you sit in the front because you are the one that are the taxpayers and you are the ones that are paying for their salary.' I was so embarrassed. . . I said, ' I feel so guilty seeing them sitting behind me. ' But now it is very different. We go there and we sit in the front. And we cross our legs, I get a paper and pencil and I don't know how to write, but they don't know I don't know, and I write. I'm using my poor spelling, I*

*spell it out so that I understand it. . . I carry my things and I lift my face. I lift my head. You people are going to have to respect people. Before it was just like, humbling yourself. But it's not that way anymore and it doesn't have to be that way."*

- Lidia

In choosing to tell me this story, Lidia understood that one of the most critical changes that occurred within her was a new understanding of her role as a citizen. The civic skills of speaking, of advocating, of organizing, are predicated on this notion that in a democracy, public representatives in fact work for the citizens.

One of the most consistent themes throughout the interviews was the concept of accountability; in the first round of interviews, fifteen out of twenty five individuals brought up the topic without prompting. Therefore, on the follow-up conversations, I directly questioned people about citizenship. They repeatedly explained that their lack of knowing "how" to talk to public officials only accounted for part of their lack of participation. Even before knowing how to speak, individuals had to understand that they had a right to speak. Jon encapsulates this change in understanding.

*"My understanding also has changed because being a citizen is more than just sitting at home and watching the elections It's more than just sitting at home and reading the newspaper... It's actually going out there and making your voice heard and being involved in the process"*

He like others, proceed to expand on what he perceived as his responsibilities as a citizen:

*"We need to bring them more accountable of what they do. And, you know, some of my friends say, 'Well they're already elected. To go ahead and do their job.' I said, "It doesn't work that way." You have to present your needs. Otherwise they're not going to go out there, go visit your area and ask you what is it that affecting you. We've got to bring them. We've got to talk to them. We've got to be in relationship with them. You know, let them know what's going on."*

This new sense of entitlement was revolutionary for many, regardless of their self-esteem or leadership capacities prior to involvement with Valley Interfaith. For those individuals, like Alicia, who had been taking on leadership roles their entire lives, this was the most critical change. Unlike many of the other women, Alicia was quite explicit about never having been afraid of politicians. Yet, like the others, she felt that in some way, they were "above her". Alicia's arms gesticulated strongly as she paused for emphasis and told me of the change within her.

*"For example, I didn't know. I used to speak with all of the politicians. I was tremendous. . . however, I used to think that politics was about the politician coming and how was I supposed to treat him, he's a politician. But not anymore. I understood with Valley Interfaith that the politician is my servant and I am his boss. See the difference?"*

Accountability is only an initial step for active citizenship. For many, seeing themselves as agents of change brings about a sense of outrage at a historically exploitative system and a responsibility to act on that outrage. After explaining how it is her role to keep tabs on her elected officials, Lidia grew angry. She said, *"I feel that I was abused because if there is a law saying that children must go to school, there must have been one back then."* For Lidia, understanding that public officials in fact work for her has evoked anger at their neglect and irresponsibility. For Olga, citizenship also involves a set of responsibilities she hadn't considered earlier. *"A Good citizen is "What does my city need? What do I need? How can my city improve? How can I participate in this process?"* Participants are aware of their own position as citizens. They have the ability to name themselves as

actors, to articulate their roles as different from but related to the roles of politicians. Their doing so supports a developmental shift whereby adults take on increasing responsibility for their realities; as citizens, as Catholics, individuals externalize less blame, and possess a new sense of agency.

### **Understanding of power and politics:**

*"Because to me politics was dirty politicians who have pachangas<sup>11</sup> and buy you tamales and all in the hope of getting that vote. And so I wanted to be as far away from power and as far away from politics. My philosophy at that time was, what does it matter? They're all dirty.. . . So what I realized that I had the wrong definition for politics. That politics really meant the will of the people.*

- Manuel

A new understanding of one's role as a citizen comes about as individuals alter their perceptions of their political and economic context. In the initial interviews, all individuals but one reported that they understood politics differently as a result of their participation. Through its organizing, Valley Interfaith not only provides individuals with a space to critique their reality, it presents a vision of a political and economic system based on equity and justice. The IAF teaches the difference between "The world as it is" and "The world as it should be". Individuals, when provided with this framework, come to understand the tension between these worlds, and the need to build power in order to close the gap between the two.

As Tania developed a sense of responsibility as a citizen and Catholic, she understood and considered the community in which she lived differently. She explained

*"Well, it's important to know, what they're (the politicians) are doing for you, what you can do for yourself, for your city. I didn't know how to relate to people, I didn't even know the names of the people that spend our money or why you paid money for taxes. . . I was very ignorant of everything. I think it's the responsibility of all of us because the government is us. I think that we are the ones that have to educate ourselves and come together as a strong voice so they listen to us. And so they send us funds. . . like for education, for training, so that people can educate themselves, so that students don't have to leave the Valley. They can earn the same here as they do there."*

Understanding the political system and understanding the economic system go hand in hand as Valley Interfaith has struggled to change the culture of low wages in the region. As individuals learn how the economy functions, they also learn about the political power required to raise wages. Participants repeatedly explained that low wage workers were paid so little because they had no political clout to influence their conditions. Sara, for example, critiqued the exploitative nature of the tourist industry on South Padre Island, *"Because the owners of the businesses aren't here, like the hotels for example, the owners are in other states. Here it is just the administration, they (the managers) earn a good salary and they pay them (the workers) whatever they feel like. And the major industry here is shrimping, which is getting ruined because these people aren't prepared for the changes in technology... If people don't fight for themselves, nobody is going to do it."* Sara and others are not only able to explain how the economy of the Valley functions, they can articulate the changes in their own perceptions of their

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<sup>11</sup> The word *pachanga* means party. Politicians in the Rio Grande Valley have historically thrown *pachangas* as a way to gain votes.

socioeconomic context. For Olga, learning to critique the economy came about as she ceased to take for granted the conditions in which she lived, as she developed a voice as discussed in the previous section:

*Olga: Because if that industry would pay more to its workers, it would benefit the economy. Those workers would buy a better car, improve their house, they'd live better economically and with less stress to support their family. They wouldn't depend on food stamps and would get off of these programs (welfare).*

*Interviewer: And before, did you see the economy like that?*

*Olga: No*

*Interviewer: How did you see it?*

*Olga: Well, you have to work so they pay you—case closed. You might have to work two jobs so that you can support your family.*

Individuals therefore not only learn to understand their context and the role they play in that context, they have developed the metacognitive awareness to understand their shift in thinking. One of the key facilitators of this shift in thinking, for the majority of individuals, is the Catholic church.

### **Understanding of the Church:**

*"For me the Bible without action was....there was something missing for me. When this priest came with all of his energy to listen to our needs, then we put the bible into practice with action and it's something we're proud of. We're very proud."*

- Olga

For the leaders of Valley Interfaith, a critical factor in developing a new understanding of their political context was an introduction to the church as an agent for change. Residents of the Rio Grande Valley, like residents throughout the United States, have historically understood the church and

state to be necessarily separate entities. Through the patience and dedication of local religious clergy, leaders like Tania are now able to reflect upon that reality, *"Before it was like they taught you, it was that you shouldn't mix up politics and religion with the church, but that's how it always was."* Eva, a devoutly religious Catholic, also described the shift in her understanding

*"For me the church was those people that visited the sick, those people that were present at a funeral to offer support, to bring messages of love and caring and hope for healing. Those people that worried about the families that were suffering. . . for me this was religion. Valley Interfaith for me was politics, it was something that didn't interest me. But I came to mature and to understand it."*

The religious leaders involved in Valley Interfaith introduced a new approach to reading the Bible and understanding the word of God to the Valley. They presented Jesus Christ as a political actor, one who called upon Christians not only to pray, but to act. Manuel, who had been a regular churchgoer for years, had an initial resistance to the church becoming involved in politics. Yet, his interest and revised definition for power came about as he participated in Valley Interfaith activities. *" . . . Another key realization is that being a Catholic, what I learned was that Jesus Christ was a political figure. And that's a major shift for me. . . . And so Jesus wanted to come and show us a different way of living and being and relating to each other."*

As individuals cast aside their old beliefs about the separation of church from politics, they came to interpret the word of God as a call to action. Thus, as their beliefs and faith in God are strengthened, they understand their responsibilities to act on these beliefs differently. Olga explained that this new interpretation resonated with her:

*"Because sometimes God speaks to us about these injustices and we do nothing but listen in the church, we leave church, and it stops there. But if we listen to how the Bible speaks about poverty, about injustice, about how God tells us to do something for our brother, and then we walk out of the church and leave it there, we aren't doing anything. Before the activities of the church were limited to celebrating Christmas, Easter, CCD class, but it stopped there. . . but now we have Christmas, we have el Via Cruces, we have CCD, but they are focused in activities of the community. For example, in the celebration of the Virgen of Guadalupe, they say that she appeared before an indigenous man, before an indigenous man who wasn't educated but with desire to struggle. And many of us are not educated, we come from other countries, but we also are motivated to struggle, to improve ourselves, to make people listen so that we won't live oppressed like those indigenous people. We can be something great if we have the chance."*

Reading the Bible through a socio-political lens connects the spiritual and often abstract world to the immediate needs and pressures of one's day to day existence. This understanding not only made sense to people, understanding God differently led to the deeper spiritual connection as described above. For Amanda, this understanding was critical: *"Especially when we have the trainings with Valley Interfaith, that's where really I understand more about the Bible because they give examples of what we do and what God wants us to do. So that kind of changed...I would go to church and I don't know—I wouldn't see really what God was trying to give with the message until I got involved with Valley Interfaith."* For Amanda, for Olga, for Manuel, prayer decontextualized from action was less fulfilling, less meaningful, and less potent than a Catholicism that called for a different belief system, a different way of understanding, and a different set of behaviors.

## **Behavioral Changes: Taking Action**

*Interviewer: What have you participated in that you didn't participate before?*

*Olga: What haven't I participated in?*

*"And ultimately we believe that change doesn't happen until you act on it. Insight never liberated anybody."*

- Sister Judy Donovan

A heightened sense of efficacy. The ability to critique the socio-economic conditions of the Valley. Increased self-confidence. A deeper relationship with God. These changes, while profound, do not in and of themselves lead to better jobs, to safer neighborhoods, to health insurance. Active citizens must believe in their potential to effect change. They must understand how to bring about change. But they must also act on these beliefs and understandings. In what ways do these people now participate in their community that they did not do previously? From testifying in front of thousands to organizing voter registration campaigns, from countless hours of local planning sessions to waking up at three a.m. to be in Austin for the nine o'clock rally. Individuals throughout the Valley are participating politically in ways they never dreamed possible.

Through their participation in the organization, people feel a sense of belonging to a whole, a sense of belonging that generates action. It is critical to note here that this participation is in fact a change. With very few exceptions, the individuals I spoke with were not politically active prior to their involvement. Martha, for example explained, *"I didn't vote, I didn't participate in anything that doesn't concern me. . . Now I vote, something I should have done a long time ago, I get involved, in the school board."* The

following year, I spoke with Martha again just days after she spoke publicly at a local action and she added, *"I feel that I have become a stronger person because I can go out and do things that before I never would have even dreamt about."*

Sara also emotionally related how the confidence she gained through the organization has led to her serving as a representative on several boards, leading public actions in Austin, and chairing multiple meetings.

*"It's educated me. For me the organization has been a small university. I'm not afraid anymore, I'm not embarrassed. Even in my home, with my husband...now I feel that I am not afraid, that I'm not ashamed, I can make an appointment with anybody, I can speak to them."*

While these interviews did not directly probe into changes in actions in the private sphere, Sara was one of many who mentioned different behaviors in the home. Olga explained that as a result of her influence, her husband finally decided to become a citizen after decades of being eligible. Manuel, one of Valley Interfaith's most active leaders, also attributes his involvement in the organization to his wife's enthusiasm. Thus, despite the IAF tradition of drawing a firm line between the personal and the political, in practice the development of an individual's voice and mind does not remain in any one sphere.<sup>12</sup> Increased engagement in public life manifests itself in multiple venues. From defending oneself in Austin to defending oneself in the kitchen, from speaking out to marching, everyone I spoke with is involved in multiple actions that represent a dramatic increase in participation. The majority

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<sup>12</sup> Greater investigation of the manifestation of these changes in the private sphere could serve as a basis for further inquiry.

actively work to further engage their friends and neighbors in their work. Tania talked of bringing information to the people she knows: *"We carry the word, we teach what they talk about, what is going to happen, what we know to the people that don't know and don't participate. "*

The link between individual and community development is reinforced as individuals understand that when they participate in new forms of public action, they are not doing so as individuals. Rather, they are doing so as members of an organization. Sara articulated this connection between personal and community efficacy and action:

*"I used to say—who am I to go and ask for money? Or to go and ask something of someone? I say, well, I have the backing of my church, I have the organization, it's not me. And that's what gives me strength and I do it. I don't feel alone, I know that something is backing me up."*

Action, therefore, while carried out by individuals, occurs within an institutional context that provides a sense of courage and power.

***"What Valley Interfaith does to bring about these changes is actually - let you discover yourself."***

- Jon

The stories of Valley Interfaith suggest infinite potential for growth as individuals begin "to discover themselves". The changes that the people of Valley Interfaith have undergone are as diverse as the individuals involved. For Sara, it meant developing an ego, a confidence in herself. For Alicia, it meant the skills, a renewed understanding of power and politics. For Jon it was about a new sense of meaning. For Olga it involved a transformation in

the way she understood the call of the church. Each individual demonstrated change in the areas of beliefs, understandings, and actions. For all, these categories were mutually dependent and reinforcing. People's faith grows because they understand the church differently. Their belief in themselves grows in the context of community. Their faith in their community grows as they witness their own actions and the actions of others.

The sum of these elements suggests something stronger than change, something more powerful than development. Listening to these stories and analyzing these narratives compel us to consider that what is actually occurring as individuals participate in Valley Interfaith is a transformation. According to Robert Kegan, transformation is not only "filling the container with new information", but involves, "a shift in the container itself". (Kegan, 1994) Individuals, therefore, are not only learning the names of local politicians or the intricacies of the Texas legislature, they are developing a new way of making sense of their worlds. In the concluding chapter I will explore how this transformation in individuals' self-concept, in efficacy, and in action can play a critical role in community development efforts to achieve social, political, and economic change.

## 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>13</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

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<sup>13</sup> The Right Question Project explores the potential of these sites to develop civic and critical thinking skills. (Right Question Project, 2000)

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.

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, cannot 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

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.

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### **Field Research:**

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Valley Interfaith Three Day Leadership Training, December 1-3, 2000.  
Valley Interfaith Leader's Assembly, January 6, 2001  
Texas IAF Human Development and Alliance School Conference,  
March 4-5, 2001.

### **Personal Interviews:**

- Sister Judy Donovan. Lead Organizer, Valley Interfaith. January 15, 2001  
Joaquin Sanchez. Organizer. Valley Interfaith. January 15, 2001  
Valley Interfaith Leaders: January 12-28, 2000  
January 7-21, 2001