

# Prophetic Action & Imagination

Ernesto Cortés, Industrial Areas Foundation

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

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

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

Every victory enlarged her vision of power, and with power, justice. And this story is reflected in thousands and thousands of leaders across the country. Leaders like:

- Anselmo Solis, a formerly undocumented citizen who came to Nevadans for the Common Good out of concern over immigration, but expanded in his development to fight for stronger sex-trafficking laws in protection of minors.
- Ofelia Zapata, a Catholic leader and mother who challenged the Austin Independent School District to invest millions of dollars in schools serving low-income children.
- Carmen Anaya, a school teacher from Mexico who only spoke Spanish but whose electrifying voice commanded the attention of then-Texas Governor Mark White, particularly when she called him "Señor Gobernador."

On stage she would thrust out her hip like an irate schoolteacher, making the Governor so nervous he would throw up before facing her in actions. She would call her troops at 5:00 am to make sure they caught the early bus to Austin.

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

- Ellen Israel and Dara Frimmer of Temple Israel, who began working with One LA-IAF out of concern for schools on the Westside and have since expanded their interests to include innovative ways to increase healthcare access in Los Angeles.
- Diane Hanley, of Together Baton Rouge, who started out preaching the prophetic Catholic social doctrine, but went on to secure millions of dollars for transit reform after personally speaking to 2,500 residents.

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

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

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

This is the interpersonal relationship –the collective challenge – that Heschel refers to when he says, "What characterized prophetic existence is, indeed, an interpersonal relationship, either a relationship between the one who feels and the one who sympathizes with that feeling, or the relationships of having a feeling in common. Unlike the experience of the numinous or the feeling of sheer awe or fear, sympathy always refers to a person or to persons....Prophetic sympathy is no delight; unlike ecstasy, it is not a goal, but a sense of challenge, a commitment, a state of tension, consternation and dismay."<sup>ii</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

Living ideas in the democratic tradition drive us into public life. One of the important habits and practices that are developed in institutional organizing is that of executive function – the development of executive agency in adults. When we build relational power what we are really talking about is developing people's capacity to exercise agency in a collaborative way.

When we teach people the skills they need for politics, for negotiation (i.e. problem solving, attentiveness, how to be curious about each other, how to polarize and personalize and then depolarize and depersonalize), people learn that an essential part of acting effectively in the public arena is building trust. The same habits and practices that are developed for public action (imagination, empathy, curiosity, etc.) are the same skills that are needed in the workplace, in schools, and in our congregations.

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

One oft-raised question is, “When did the people of Exodus become the Israelites?” A covenantal community, any covenantal community, happens when selfhood is formed out of relationships of trust. It comes out of the Exodus story. Some may interpret the Exodus story as a saving act of Yahweh. But it is also the story of the burning bush. When Moses asks, “Who shall I say sent me?” The reply is the God of Abraham, what has been, what may be, and what will be – if you want to create a history with me.

We see this formation of a covenantal community in the Pentecost, as the disciples gathered in fear and trembling. The Spirit of the Lord came upon them when they were together, when they were *assembled* in fear and trembling – not knowing what their next move was going to be, nor knowing what was going to happen.

This is not dissimilar to the Muslim understanding of the word *jihad*, meaning “struggle” or “great effort.” In the religious sense it refers to the struggle of the soul to overcome the obstacles that keep a person from God. However, “Islam considers this inward struggle to be inseparable from the outward struggle for the welfare of humanity.”<sup>iii</sup>

Developing a narrative about who we are and who we want to be as a community requires that we engage the Other – and that we rely on each Other.

We also see this lesson in another part of the Exodus story. After Moses led the people out of Egypt and was on the way to the Promised Land, he was confronted with a problem that stopped the march. Moses was the only one who could make decisions. Moses also had a personal problem: he had left his wife and kids with his father-in-law Jethro who was now on his way to see what Moses was doing.

Jethro announces himself, sending word to Moses that “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to see you, with your wife and her two sons.” Moses goes out to properly receive him and shares the story about the work of the Lord – so compelling that Jethro converts, making a burnt offering to Yahweh as the one true God.

The next day, Jethro watches while Moses sits and judges all day – reverting back to his upbringing – acting as the Pharaoh would... while the people stand around him waiting, reverting to infantile patterns of dependence on authority and learned helplessness.

Jethro: “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?”

Moses: “Because the people come to me.”

Jethro: “What you are doing is not good! You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you...*Look* for able men among all the people, men who fear God and hate dishonest gain... “ *Train* them in the Lord’s statutes so that *they* can give counsel to tens, hundreds, thousands and bring to you only the most difficult cases. “It will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden for you.”

Exodus tells us that “Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he said. Then he let his father-in-law depart.”

Michael Walzer reminds us that the Promised Land is not a geographical destination, but rather the creation of a kingdom without a king. Hebrew scholars like Rashi, looking at Jethro’s method, suggest that in order for this to be implemented – about 15% of the men would need to exercise some sort of leadership – whether over groups of tens, hundreds or thousands.<sup>iv</sup>

The Promised Land will never be all that it can be until its inhabitants are transformed into all that they can.<sup>v</sup> What this means is that even when there is a path out of oppression, out of slavery and into freedom – the path is conditional upon the transformation of people -- from masses that simply follow orders into a kingdom of priests and leaders. Walzer says that it took only one day for the people to get out of Egypt, but 40 years to get Egypt out of the people.

In fact, Rabbinical scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg asserts that God led the people away from Egypt on a long and curvy road...not to avoid danger, but to prevent the people from immediately acting on their voiced desires to return to Egypt when things get tough.<sup>vi</sup> Zornberg reminds us that this way is not dignified. Jethro intervenes with Moses, not just for Moses (“You will surely wear yourself out...”) but *for the dignity of the people* (“both you and these people with you”). Jethro’s concern is for what learned helplessness will do to the people—how it will reproduce the dynamics that they had just left.<sup>vii</sup>

Moses ultimately did what he was told. He brought his best leaders together and told them – the people need judgment, but I cannot be the only one. I’ll teach you. I’ll guide you. But I’m not going to violate the Iron Rule: Never do for someone what she or he can do for themselves. Jethro understood that the success of the covenantal community relied on tacit knowledge and the exercise of experiential wisdom.

However, Moses did not ‘get it’ once and for all. Soon the Hebrews, like a lot of us, began to complain. They asked Moses, “What have you done for us lately? Back in Egypt we had it good; we had garlic, leeks, cucumbers and fish every day for free. Now all we’ve got is this crummy manna and it tastes terrible!” 500,000 people began screaming at Moses’ tent, “We want meat!” Crying out to God and to Moses, “We want meat.”

Confused, Moses goes back to God and says, “Why do you treat me so badly? If this is the way you are going to treat me, why don’t you kill me right now? Obviously I have found disfavor to inherit 500,000 hungry people like a wet nurse with them at my breast. Where am I going to get meat for all these people?”

God says, “Moses, you’re a real jerk. Your father-in-law Jethro explained it to you. Gather your 70 best leaders. Bring them to the tent of the meeting and there I’ll put the burden that’s on you on them. Bring people you’ve done one-on-one meetings with. People you’ve done house meetings with, small actions with. People you can trust. People who have done the kind of deliberative engagement we mean by politics. Bring those people to the tent meeting and I’ll put the burden that’s on you on them. And they’ll have meat to eat. Not for one or two or even ten days, but for a whole month, until it becomes loathsome and they vomit it out their nostrils.” Yahweh gets a little carried away.

So Moses does what he’s told. He brings his best leaders to the tent of the meeting. He says, “You want meat, there’s quail out there. Go out and organize. I’m not going to do it for you. I’ll teach you. I’ll guide you. But I’m not I’m not going to violate the Iron Rule: Never do for someone what she or he can do for themselves.”

That’s the way of organizing. That’s the way of developing broad-based organizations and a relational culture through mediating institutions. It does not rationalize social Darwinism; it doesn’t mean you don’t help people who need to be helped. It does mean, however, that you try to challenge our institutions to try to make sure they do not humiliate people.

I told this story once in the Rio Grande Valley and I was later confronted by Fr. John Linskins, a Missionary scripture scholar who asked, “Why did you not tell the other part of that story?” And I asked him, “What other part?” And he said, “The part in Luke’s Gospel:”

In the other part of the story it is not Moses and Yahweh, but Jesus and the disciples. After a successful campaign of preaching and healing they are ready to go on retreat with Jesus, but they find themselves surrounded by the multitudes.

The disciples go to Jesus and tell him there are too many people. They do not have enough food for the multitudes. Jesus should send them back to town. Jesus asks them what they have and they show just five loaves and two fish. Jesus says, “You must think I just got off the boat. Tell me what you have for yourselves, what you have tucked in the pockets of your cloaks.”

So he got the people to break up into small groups and taught the disciples to lead house meetings. And as people began to reveal what they had, others would do the same. And when they shared their substance with each other, there was more than enough for everyone.

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

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

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

# Local Stories of Prophetic Action & Imagination

---

## **Texas: Turning the Tide for a ‘Texas Solution’ on Healthcare**

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

In February 2013, 200 leaders from the Network of Texas Organizations (NTO) convened at the Capitol to call on Governor Perry and the Texas Legislature to expand Medicaid. Valley Interfaith leader Rosalie Tristan agitated the audience with a story about her brother, who has a tumor and can neither afford the needed \$10,000 surgery nor qualify for Medicaid. Organizations across the state leveraged resolutions and bipartisan support from County Commissioners for Medicaid expansion in Dallas, El Paso, Travis, Bexar, Hidalgo and Cameron counties.

In a follow up rally weeks later, DAI and its sister organization Allied Communities of Tarrant (ACT) brought 100 leaders to Austin to join delegations from the rest of the NTO statewide alliance (Austin Interfaith, Border Interfaith, EPISO in El Paso, WIN in Laredo, West Texas Organizing Strategy, The Metropolitan Organization and The Border Organization). Hundreds of other organizations in Texas have since joined the call; pressure is mounting from local chambers of commerce, governments and hospitals, both public and private.

As a result Governor Perry is now talking about flexibility, and the possibility of a ‘Texas solution.’”

## **Louisiana: 250 Louisiana Interfaith Clergy Denounce Governor Jindal’s Tax Plan**

When Governor Jindal proposed that the state eradicate personal income, corporate income and franchise taxes, replacing them with a 47% increase in sales taxes (from 4% to 5.88%), he referenced a report that purportedly showed that all residents would benefit.

In response, more than 250 clergy of Louisiana Interfaith publicly denounced the plan, calling it unfair to the poor, a threat to state services and reliant on “faulty math.” They arrived at the Capitol with a letter detailing the flawed assumption that business would absorb the sales tax increase, a linchpin in his plan.



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

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

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

### **Mississippi: Battling Transnational Corporations One Company at a Time**

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

Automakers in Mississippi are violating international labor standards through wholesale workplace intimidation. While some wages might be relatively high, vast numbers of workers are repeatedly employed as temps (at less than half the hourly rate of full-time workers) and individual workers are subjected to individual and small group anti-union "education" meetings organized by their employers. In one plant, for example, 70% of the workers are permanent temps earning \$10-12 / hour. They work alongside a small minority of full-time workers earning twice that amount. Threats of relocation to another more "labor friendly" place are regularly made when there is even discussion of unionization.

In response, with Congressman Bennie Thompson, twenty pastors of Working Together Jackson helped formed the Mississippi Alliance for Fairness at Nissan which is demanding that Nissan respect workers' right to decide whether or not to unionize.

This is just the beginning of a story about American workers, the international labor market and transnational auto manufacturers, an opportunity to craft a new narrative that includes the support of the Jackson community.

### **One LA Wins Fight to Directly Enroll Thousands in Healthcare Services**

In the quest to make the Affordable Care Act a pathway for universal healthcare in Los Angeles County, leaders of One LA fought for and won "Community Partner Status" with the LA County Department of Health Services, granting the organization direct

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

## **Nevada: Sex-Trafficking Fight Teaches People to Act as Citizens and Prophets**

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

In response, NCG leaders are working with the Attorney General's office and legislators to stiffen the penalty for pimps that recruit minors. Several leaders recently traveled 450 miles to urge their state legislators to toughen state laws against sex-trafficking. While at the Capitol, they noticed they were the only organization of citizens in a sea of paid lobbyists; they also learned that politicians do pay attention to a broad-based power organization.

People who had testified on the issue in prior years report that they "remember testifying to an empty room." Now, those rooms are full. A bill to address the issue is still in committee, but Nevada leaders and prophets are making a difference. Formerly undocumented leader Anselmo Solis remarked, "I have never felt more American."

---

<sup>i</sup> Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets – Volume II*. Pages 64-65

<sup>ii</sup> Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets – Volume II*. Pages 88-89.

<sup>iii</sup> Aslan, Reza. *No God But God*. Page 71.

<sup>iv</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Exodus & Revolution*. Page 127.

<sup>v</sup> Walzer, Michael. *Exodus & Revolution*. Page 101.

<sup>vi</sup> Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *Particulars of Rapture*. Page 200.

<sup>vii</sup> Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *Particulars of Rapture*. Page 252.