

"RELATIONAL POWER:  
BRINGING MORALITY BACK INTO PUBLIC LIFE"

By Robert C. Linthicum

Ten years after I had graduated from Wheaton College, I was pastoring a medium-size Presbyterian church in the Uptown community of Chicago. Uptown was, at that time, an ethnically diverse community made up primarily of the poor and the powerless.

I was working in my study one afternoon, when there was a knock on the door. When I answered it, I discovered 20 elderly ladies who lived in our neighborhood wanting to speak with me. So I ushered them into my study and asked, "Ladies, how can I help you?"

"Pastor Bob", their spokeswoman, Vivian said, "we ladies have lived most of our lives in this community. Some of us were raised in this neighborhood. Others of us moved into it as newly-weds. But all of us have lived our adult lives here. This was a wonderful community in which to raise our children. We saw our children grow up, graduate from high school; many of them got married in our churches. We brought our grandchildren here to be baptized. And some of us have buried our husbands from here. All our lives are bound up with this community."

I nodded sympathetically. But Vivian pressed on. "But now our community is being taken away from us. We are afraid of our own neighborhood – this neighborhood in which we have lived most of our lives and in which we've raised our children."

"What do you mean that your community is being taken from you, Vivian?" I asked.

"Crime!" Vivian shot back. "Crime. We just made a horrible discovery as we were having tea together. We just discovered that every one of us twenty ladies has been the personal victim of crime in this neighborhood in the past six months. Some of us have had our purses snatched, some of us have been accosted, some of us have had our homes broken into, and one of us was even robbed at knifepoint in her very own home. We're afraid to even go out on the streets of our own neighborhood in broad daylight! Pastor Bob, what are you going to do about it?"

What was I going to do about it? I didn't have the foggiest idea what to do. But there they stood – 20 very determined ladies. And I had to come up with some response.

"Ladies," I replied, "I don't know what to do to stop crime in this neighborhood. But I know someone who does – our community organizer. Let's go to him and you can tell him the story you just told me."

That's exactly what we did. I called the organizer, whose name was also Bob, and warned him that 20 angry ladies and I were coming over to his office to see him.

Bob met us at the door and ushered us into the meeting room of our neighborhood organization. Once the ladies were seated, he asked them, "Ladies, what's your problem?"

“What’s our problem? I’ll tell you our problem”, Vivian replied. And then she began her recital of these ladies’ concern all over again. I waited in breathless anticipation for the punch line to come. And come it did!

“Mr. Bob, what are you going to do about the crime in our neighborhood?”

The organizer’s answer was masterful. He replied, “I’m not going to do anything about crime! You are! It’s not my problem. It’s your problem. What are you going to do about it?”

“What are we going to do about it?” Vivian indignantly answered. “What can we do about it? We’re nothing but little old ladies!”

Bob shot back, “You may be little old ladies. But you are NOT ‘nothing but little old ladies.’ You are very powerful little old ladies! And if you want to learn how to use the power you already have to stop crime in this community, you can!”

“But we don’t know what to do”, Vivian wailed.

“Of course you don’t know what to do,” Bob responded, “because if you knew what to do, you would have already done it and there wouldn’t be any problem of crime. But that’s my job as an organizer – to teach you how to use the power you already have at your disposal but which you don’t recognize, and to help you organize to use it. My point is, however, that if you want crime to disappear from this neighborhood, *you have to make it stop yourself!*”

The ladies looked at each other. And then Vivian answered for them all. “We want to stop it”, she replied. “Okay”, responded the organizer, “let’s get to work”.

And to work they got! Trained by Bob how to recognize, accept and use the power at their disposal, those “little old ladies” organized all the little old ladies and all the little old men of that community – hundreds upon hundreds of them – to confront the precinct captain and eventually to negotiate directly with the police chief to get the Chicago Police Department to increase the number of police patrols in that neighborhood, to organize “Neighborhood Watches” on each block, to get cops walking beats for the first time in 37 years. Crime plummeted overnight, and those little old ladies won back their community and safety once again!<sup>1</sup>

“You may be little old ladies. But you are *not* ‘nothing but little old ladies’. You are very powerful little old ladies. And if you want to learn how to use the power you already have to stop crime in this community, you can!”

As I look back on this incident, I realize that those “little old ladies” felt powerless – not because they were powerless, but because they *perceived* themselves as powerless! They didn’t discern the relationships they had built over the years as a base of power. Therefore they viewed themselves as victims rather than the victors they had the potential to be.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Robert Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making A Difference In Your Community* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 91-93.

But also, in a profound sense, I was powerless, as well! As a pastor, I felt helpless to help them with their problem. And I felt helpless because I didn't have a sufficient understanding or experience in using power to help them deal with their exploitation.

Why didn't we recognize the power we had at our disposal? Simply because we had never learned how to use power and because, as good Christians, we felt it was inappropriate for Christians to act powerfully.

Power has long had a bad name in Christian circles. We believe that Christians ought to be gentle and kind and loving, because we believe Jesus was gentle and kind and loving. But my brothers and sisters, he was not. Just read the Gospels from the vantage point of observing how Jesus used power. He was confrontive, agitating, and even "in your face" with his disciples.

Christians often see the exercise of power as inconsistent with a loving and compassionate Christian faith. We have come to that conclusion, I believe, because we have experienced the misuse and abuse of power in our own lives. We have seen power used to manage people, control situations, gain the response a leader desires, and to manipulate. In fact, if the truth be told, most of us can look back on incidents in our own lives when Christian leaders or educators or political figures or bosses have used their power to manage, control, manipulate and dominate *us*. And we respond to such domination by concluding that all power is evil – when, in reality, it is not. Power simply is power! It can be used for evil purposes. But it can also be used for great good. How it is used depends upon the intentions of the user!

We have all heard Lord Acton's dictum, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And we love to quote that dictum to justify our avoidance of the use of power. But that is not what Lord Acton actually wrote. What he wrote was, "Power *tends to* corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Understanding the context in which he wrote that dictum tells us a great deal about power, and about the point Acton was seeking to make.

Lord Acton was part of the British nobility in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was a faithful and active Roman Catholic. He was asked by his bishop to be a lay delegate to the First Vatican Council that had been called to vote upon the proposed doctrine of papal infallibility. At that council, Acton became disillusioned at the flagrant abuse of power he saw being exercised by the pope in order to get this doctrine approved. He wrote back to his bishop who he knew opposed both the doctrine and such abuse of power, stating his fear of the doctrine of papal infallibility because it would both give to the pope absolute power and would destroy the balance of power that currently existed between all the bishops and the bishop of Rome. Therefore, Acton shared with his bishop, his belief that since power tends to corrupt, giving the pope absolute power would guarantee he would use that power absolutely.

Earlier I said that power is neither good nor evil. It simply is a reality of human existence. Well, what is power? What do I mean when I use the word "power"?

I would define *power as the capacity, ability and willingness to act*. A powerful person or a powerful institution is a person or institution that has developed the capacity, ability and willingness to act powerfully.

Every word in that definition is important. First, *power is the capacity to act*. To have the capacity means that you have the resources at your disposal to act. For example, in our “little old ladies” story, these ladies had the people resources of all the little old ladies and men of that community at their disposal. Therefore, they had the capacity to act. The problem was that they didn’t recognize that.

But *power is also the ability to act*. To have the ability means that you have the skill, aptitude and competence to act. The “little old ladies” didn’t know how to take action to stop crime in their community; therefore they didn’t have the ability to act. However, the organizer in this story taught them how to use their capacity in order to negotiate acceptable agreements with the Chicago Police Department that would reduce crime in their neighborhood. He got them to hone their abilities. Thus, these little old ladies developed their ability to act.

Finally, *power is the willingness to act*. As long as these leaders didn’t have the ability to act nor to perceive their capacity to act, they were unwilling to stop crime – even though they had always had the capacity to act. Once they received the training and coaching that gave them the necessary abilities and were taught to recognize their capacity, they then became willing to act, and that neighborhood was profoundly changed.

But we all recognize that power can be used to accomplish great evil. Just consider for a moment the immense evil power exercised by Hitler, Stalin and Saddam. They certainly had the willingness to act, and they had the ability and capacity to turn that willingness into tyrannical machines of death and terror. So how can power be good, as well?

I believe power is always exercised in one of two ways. Either power is used unilaterally. Or it is exercised relationally. Let’s unpack what I have just said.

Power can be used unilaterally. Unilateral power is essentially the exercise of power “over” people; it is placed down upon them, often without their consent. It is essentially designed to control the people, and get from them a desired response. It is the kind of power most often used by governments, mega-businesses and often even religious and educational institutions. It is the kind of power about which Lord Acton wrote to his bishop.

A clear example of unilateral power used in scripture was King Ahab’s treatment of Naboth when he both took from Naboth his birthright – that is, his vineyard -- but also took his life. That was tyrannical power in action.

Another example of unilateral power -- but an entirely different kind -- was that exercised by the Roman procurator, Pilate when he condemned Jesus to death. Whereas Ahab had acted tyrannically, Pilate exercised his legally constituted power because Pilate was acting within the limits of Roman law when he pronounced Jesus’ death sentence. But although it was

action clearly within the limits of Roman law it was still unilateral power because it deprived Jesus of his life.

But there is another kind of power – relational power. Relational power is not as obvious as unilateral power; it is much more difficult to discern. Therefore, we tend not to recognize its existence, or if we do, we tend to minimize it. But relational power constitutes immense power when it is intentionally and knowledgeably exercised.

Relational power is built around the trust that grows between people as they act together around common issues or concerns or commitments. It is power that people share with each other. It is the power that is generated by a Habitat for Humanity project as people who have had no previous association with each other and would never have the occasion to meet work together to physically build a house. It is the power activated between members of a number of churches normally divided by doctrinal differences, who work together to conduct an evangelistic campaign. It is the power generated by little old ladies who build relationships of trust with all the little old ladies and all the little old men in their community around their common fear of crime to create the mass of people needed in order to convince the Chicago police chief to work with these little old ladies in stopping crime.

Jesus thoroughly understood and practiced power. One of the most definitive statements Jesus made about power is found in Mark 10:42-45 when he declared to his disciples, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In this teaching, Jesus contrasts the exercise of power by “Gentile rulers” with his own style of leadership. He begins by observing, “Among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (10:42). The Gentile rulers and their Jewish counterparts rule by domination. They “lord it over” the people and are “tyrants”. The very words Jesus uses to describe this exercise of power is as “power over”, power that “is placed down upon” the people. It is, in other words, unilateral power. Whether their leadership is political, economic or religious, the exercise of such power is all built on the premise that “might makes right”. It is based on the premise of an unequal distribution of power that results in a selected and even self-selected few having authority and domination over the rest.

“But it should not be so among you” (43a), Jesus declares. Jesus offers an alternative to such abusive use of power. He offers an entirely different understanding of how power should be exercised by his followers. He is not suggesting that his followers *not* use power. Instead, Jesus is teaching that they are to use power, but a different type of power -- a power that has the potential to turn the world upside down! What is that power that Christians, that followers of the Christ are to use? Here is Jesus’ alternative way.

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (43b). He then uses himself as the prime example of this strange use of power: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In this statement, Jesus is proposing here is an entirely different way of exercising power. The root of our problem with power, Jesus is in essence saying, is our very understanding of what power is. Israel was divided at the time between two primary “actors”, with the mass of the people as the “victims” of these two actors. There were those filling the positions of power – political power held by Rome and the nobility, economic power held by the landowners and the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy, religious power held by the Pharisees, Sadducees and priests. The second group was the revolutionaries, the Zealots organized against Rome and the Jerusalem aristocracy and committed to their overthrow.

What was significant about all of them – whether Roman governor or Jewish revolutionary, whether Jewish priest or peasant – is that they all understood power in the same way. They all understood power as unilateral, as dominating, as controlling, oppressing, exploiting. But what if Godly power was something entirely different? What if true power was relational?

In his statement, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all”, Jesus is proposing an entirely different way of exercising power. In this radical statement by Jesus, he is stating that *the image of a servant – not a master – captures the essence of true power!* The “one who gives his life as a ransom for many” is in reality the truly powerful person.

In other words, what Jesus is teaching his disciples in this passage is relational power. He is teaching them – and therefore, is teaching us – the power of intentional relationships of trust exercised in public life. Rather than “power over”, relational power is “power with”, shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power, people power. It is not the power of weakness, of acquiescence, of apathy. Rather it is direct power, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. But it is a power that is built upon the public relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as one’s self.

Such an exercise of power is, *ipso facto*, a moral and ethical power because it is committed not to build power for one’s own personal aggrandizement, but to seek and carry out a politics of justice, an economics of stewardship of God’s wealth invested in us for the sole purpose of eliminating poverty, and a faith that draws people into the most intimate of relationships with God and with each other. Therefore, by definition, it is a power that seeks “not to be served but to serve”, even if that means giving one’s life “as a ransom for many”.

Does it work? You bet it does! For example, in Los Angeles, the clergy and lay leadership of nearly 100 churches and congregations expect politicians to come to a public meeting to deal with community issues that we have identified together. Those meetings will have upwards of 10,000 people at them. Will they come? Of course they will, if they value their re-election or their credibility. At those meetings, we present our case for what we want to see

happen regarding education, health care, protection of workers rights, housing and homelessness. And then we request their commitment to support our agenda, and they make response to our request.

But that is not the significant part of our use of relational power. That is the public debate, the theater of action. What is significant is what happens *before* the public meeting. Before that meeting, we have spent considerable time meeting with each politician, educator, public official. We have reviewed with them our positions on the issues we have taken. We share with them the actions we will publicly ask them to take in regards to those issues. We tell them that we will ask for their response at the meeting and that we will give them one or two minutes to respond – either explaining why they will support our request or their rationale for opposing it. And we make a promise to them that we assiduously observe; that promise is that we will never “blindsided” them; we will never surprise them in these public meetings; we will never make a demand of them in public that we haven’t already told them in private we will make. And we will treat them with respect and as people of integrity, good will and worthy of our trust. And we ask them to treat the people in the same way.

And guess what? They do! They rise to the challenge. They don’t pontificate. They don’t obfuscate. They don’t patronize. Treated with respect, they will be respectful. Treated with trust, they will act trustworthy. Treated with integrity, they will become integrous in their dealings with us. A different kind of public life will be modeled. And morality will creep back into public life – simply by following the Jesus way of building relational power!

After 25 years of urban ministry and engagement in public life in Milwaukee, Chicago and Detroit, I accepted the call of World Vision to head their urban work in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There, I worked with World Vision national offices on those three continents and with communities of the poor in 28 cities, teaching them how to use relational power to work for the human rights of the poor, to empower the people, and to bring about systemic change in their governments. We did this through the strategies of community organizing. Let me share with you the story of one such organizing effort, and how ordinary people could build together their relational power in order to give themselves a future and a hope.

In July 1990, the Slum Clearance Board of the City of Madras, India (now Chennai) decided to rid that city’s streets of its “untouchables” – the Dalit people. Overnight, six thousand street-dwellers were rounded up, their makeshift thatched homes or lean-tos bulldozed, the people were tossed into the back of army trucks and driven to an inaccessible flood plain on the outskirts of the city named Vellachery. There, all 6,000 of them were unceremoniously dumped on the ground and told to fend for themselves, with no housing or infrastructure of any kind provided for them.

Vellachery was a terrible place to abandon these people. It was an immense floodplain, separated from the Bay of Bengal by a narrow ridge of sand. When the monsoon storms surged up the Bay of Bengal every six months, they flooded Vellachery. Therefore, nothing grew there – no plants, no trees, no nothing. And because it was flooded twice yearly, no human being lived there. Further, because it was unpopulated, there was no public transportation from Madras into Vellachery – no way to reach the outside world and no way for the outside world to reach it

except through four-wheel-drive utility vehicles. It was an absolutely dreadful place to be dumped.

World Vision India heard what had happened to Madras' street people. It sent its lead community organizer – a man whom I had trained – Rajkumar to investigate. Rajkumar began visiting with the people, seeing their plight. He instructed World Vision to enter Vellachery with emergency relief, and soon the people were living in temporary tents and were being fed on emergency rations and receiving health care from World Vision.

But emergency aid wasn't enough to solve the problems of the people abandoned at Vellachery. They needed to be empowered, as well. So Rajkumar continued visiting with people in Vellachery, listening to their stories, hearing their woes and hopes, and building relationships of trust with them. Soon, he identified potential leaders – particularly among the women. He urged them to begin meeting together, which they did as he and other World Vision organizers sat in on their conversations.

Rajkumar asked the women what they considered their most pressing problem. Together, they all agreed it was housing. They and their families needed to have permanent homes before the construction of a permanent community could begin. But housing is expensive to build, and time-consuming as well. How was sufficient housing to be constructed to adequately house the 6,000 people of Vellachery? What should World Vision do?

Because World Vision India was committed to community organizing, it decided that it needed to organize the people to address together the issue that the people had identified as their most pressing issue – housing. As the people talked about getting housing built, they also felt that the government had to be held responsible for building that housing. After all, as one resident put it, “It is the government that created the problem; now the government should solve the problem!”

Rajkumar and the other organizers met with the women and asked them if they would be willing to hold the government accountable to build the housing. They said they would. So he began working with them to create a campaign that would get them their homes.

Over the next 18 months, the organized women and youth of Vellachery met with the various bodies of both city and state government, exerting creative pressure to win agreement after agreement (including the building of a floodwall that kept out the monsoon floods). But the ultimate goal of housing eluded them.

Finally, after 18 months, they met with the prime minister of the State of Tamil Nadu, who was a woman. At this point, the people did a brilliant thing. When they met with the prime minister, they asked her, “How would you feel if you and your children had been rounded up like sheep by the police and dumped in Vellachery with no roof over their heads?” In other words, they appealed to her as a woman and as a mother, rather than as a government official. And she responded to their plight. They had built a relationship with her, and that relationship paid off. She ordered the construction of homes in Vellachery.

The state of Tamil Nadu eventually built close to 7,000 homes for a swelling population of 20,000, so that every family in Vellachery got a home! The government land upon which each house was built was deeded to each family, and the homes were sold to them for \$30.00 apiece. Thus, for the first time in their lives, these “untouchables” became legal homeowners. But there was more.

The people created their own plan for their new “city”. Because of the organized pressure of the people and the powerful relationship they had built with the prime minister, the people could exert the level of pressure that would get the appropriate agencies in Madras to install street lighting, plumbing and sewers throughout Vellachery, as well as toilets and running water in each home. The city paved the streets, planted trees and built several playgrounds for the children. The people met with the public school administrators of Madras, and they agreed to build a school building and a library, and to staff both. The city built a community and health center for the community. And the people organized to get the Madras Transportation Authority to run bus lines to Vellachery so that the people could have access to the city, its jobs and its commerce.

The people elected leaders to administer their community. They selected their own people to run their health center and the community center. With the guidance of World Vision India, they formed several employment cooperatives that employed the people of Vellachery and provided a steady income stream to the community.

Thus did the people of Vellachery learn how to build and use relational power. Thus did the state and city governments learn to respect the power of the people. And the result was a future and a hope for the former street people of Madras, now the proud creators of the town of Vellachery!

A profound spiritual renewal also occurred in Vellachery over the years of this organizing effort. Of course, energy and optimism was created as the people experienced victory after victory and as they built a town together. But there was significant faith sharing as well. Vellachery was about 90 percent Hindu, 8 percent Muslim and 2 percent Christian. That reality is potentially divisive. The organizers worked at overcoming this religious division by getting the residents who were involved in the organizing to identify the values they wanted to build their community upon. They studied each other’s holy books (including the Bible) to better understand and embrace these common values. That gave people permission to talk freely about religious faith, and fostered a growing respect for each other. It also increased opportunities for considerable faith sharing, especially by the Christians, about whose beliefs the others proved very curious. Finally, it led to the birth of a Christian church in that community, as the gospel was shared with inquirers who wanted to receive Christ because they trusted the Christians in their midst and World Vision’s Christian organizers.

Just before I left World Vision in 1995, I returned to Madras and was privileged to be asked by its residents to visit Vellachery. There I toured the rapidly transforming slum and met with the leadership team of the women’s association. I asked them how they felt about Vellachery when they first came there. I heard words like *angry, upset, afraid, betrayed*. Then I asked them how they felt now. Responses demonstrating pride, power, joy and hopefulness

filled the room. But I will never forget in particular what one woman said. “When I lived on the streets, my soul was very unhappy; it was restless, it had no place to sleep. But now that I live in Vellachery in my very own home, my soul is quiet within me because it has now found a home where it can be with God.”<sup>2</sup>

My brothers and sisters, do not underestimate the people engaging in public life. Do not underestimate the power of the community of faith or the power of the people. Do not underestimate the power of intentional, organized, focused relationships. Because when you do underestimate the power of the people, you underestimate God!

If you want to make a difference in your city, use the considerable relational power God has placed at your disposal. Use it to build the power base needed to have an impact in public life. Use relationships as the base for bringing morality back into public life. Use the relational power God has placed at your disposal to become engaged intentionally and in community with other Christians and people of good will. Use that power to build a more just political order, a more equitable economic order, and a society centered in relationship with God and each other. When we do that, when we commit ourselves to build relational power for the common good, then in a most profound way, my brothers and sisters, we are working as God intended “for Christ and His Kingdom”.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Transforming Power*, pp. 176-179.