

“The Power of Connection”

A cartoon strip called "Hagar the Horrible" depicts Hagar standing astern his Viking boat, which sits dead in the water, drifting aimlessly, with the crew in disarray. Some crewmen are paddling in one direction, some in another direction, some are holding their oars upside down and others right side up, some shaking their oars in the air. Confusion reigns aboard the ship as Hagar exclaims, "Will you please stop saying different strokes for different folks!"

The comic makes a point. People need to paddle in unison to get anywhere. They have to pull together to make progress. Power—the ability to get things done—lies in numbers and organization. One little pinky can't do much. But five fingers working together become a tool capable of almost anything.

A human hand has infinite potential. It can form a fist and can also reach out in friendship. These fingers can pull a trigger but they can also learn to suture a wound or master a musical instrument. Power, you see, is an instrumental value. It's not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It can be put to good or evil purposes. And power can assume tyrannical forms. A Viking ship with the crew pulling on the oars like galley slaves cuts through the water like a knife. But Hagar, but there's a reason you're called horrible. You represent an expression of despotic power, the strong bullying the weak.

Throughout history, power based on domination and control has made its mark. According to the Bible, Pharaoh used it long ago to put the Hebrews to work building the pyramids. The Soviets used it to build their gulags. Modern corporations use it to build their empires of industry and finance.

But there is another kind of power, too, call it people power. It comes about mainly through a change of consciousness, an altered perception of what's possible. In Egypt, it occurred when the Israelites stopped thinking of themselves as indentured laborers and began to imagine something more than a life of toil. In places like Czechoslovakia and Poland, it happened when people simply stopped cooperating with the commissars, as in Germany, just twenty years ago this week, when the wall came down without a shot. In the modern economy, it's bubbled up in labor organizations and the consumer protection movement, as people demanded a right to have a say in their own working conditions and what they purchase with their dollars.

People power arises in the mind and spirit, whenever subjects start to think of themselves as citizens, when individuals who have spent their lives as passive followers start to realize they can be active leaders, shaping their own destiny.

And when they act in concert, the people can have whatever they want. They can tear down a wall or stop a war. They can win an eight-hour work day or even start a revolution, because they have the numbers to do it. But power, I said, requires two ingredients: numbers and organization. To get things done, you need to have both.

The power of organization can be studied historically in our own America Revolution. That conflict started on the 19th of April, in 1775. The previous night, two men had ridden out from Boston to warn local militias of an approaching British army headed toward Concord to seize stores of munitions stockpiled there. As they headed west, one of the men, named William Dawes, took a southerly route through Roxbury, Brookline,

Watertown and Waltham. The other, named Paul Revere, crossed the ferry into Charlestown and then rode north through Medford and Cambridge.

According to historian David Hackett Fischer, "along Paul Revere's northern route, the town leaders and company captains instantly triggered the alarm. On the southerly circuit of William Dawes, that did not happen until later. In at least one town it did not happen at all." In the north, word had reached Lincoln by one A.M. The news was in Sudbury by three. Bells began ringing and drums beating across the entire region, a marked contrast to the strangely silent territory that Dawes covered, where only a few farmers mustered out. It wasn't that colonists in Brookline and Waltham were less patriotic or pro-British. Instead, there was a communication break-down. The folks down on Dawes' route just never got the alert.

There's a reason Paul Revere was more effective at mobilizing than the other guy. It's because Revere was a natural community organizer. After the Boston Tea Party, as tension mounted between the colonies and the mother country, dozens of committees of correspondence and homegrown congresses sprang up around New England. They had no formal means of coordinating their work. The patriots had numbers, but no internal connection. Revere supplied that missing link, traveling routinely between rebel hubs from New Hampshire to New York and Philadelphia. In Boston, too, he was a connector. There were seven separate revolutionary councils there, comprising some 250 men. The vast majority belonged to just one such council, but Revere belonged to five. In addition, he was a Mason who, as Fischer says, had an "uncanny genius for being at the center of events." When Boston imported its first streetlights, Paul Revere was on the committee that made the arrangements. When the city market needed regulation, Revere was appointed clerk.

Malcolm Gladwell writes, "It is not surprising then, that when the British army began its secret campaign in 1774 to root out and destroy the stores of arms and ammunition held by the fledgling revolutionary movement, Revere became a kind of unofficial clearing house for the anti-British forces. He knew everybody. He was the logical one to go to if you were a stable boy on the afternoon of April 18th, 1775, and overheard two British officers talking about how there would be hell to pay on the following afternoon. Nor is it surprising that when Revere set out for Lexington that night, he would have known just how to spread the news as far and wide as possible ... When he came upon a town, he would have known exactly whose door to knock on, who the local militia leader was, who the key players were. He had met them all before. And they knew and respected him as well."

I don't think it's entirely an accident that Paul Revere was a Unitarian whose foundry forged the first bell that hung in this historic meetinghouse. Because his methods of getting folks organized and mobilized, from the ground up, are still very close to the core of our faith. We believe that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things. We believe that each individual has a story worth hearing. And we believe that history—which is simply our common story, or the larger narrative of human events—can be altered as we begin to pay attention to the voices of our neighbors, particularly those whose tales may be different than our own—the stories of the poor, for example, of women, of Latinos and the descendants of slaves, of heretics and religious minorities, of the disenfranchised.

It's out of those varied stories that we begin to imagine ourselves in a new kind of drama. Not bit players in a script written by Pharaoh, or helpless colonists who can only mouth the lines provided by a far-off Parliament, but actors who can write a fresh chapter in the tired, old chronicle of might makes right--a brighter, more hopeful chapter of justice and peace.

But it's one-to-one relationships, in building connections person-to-person, that a more hopeful, democratic community takes root. Those were the techniques that Paul Revere used, and they're the methods that are still at the heart of faith-based organizing, that Vermont Interfaith Action employs, for example, in its efforts to turn church-goers who are used to sitting in the pews into activists standing up for what they believe. More than mere networking or politicking, such one-to-one conversations are a form of soul work or spiritual practice. It was in such honest, interpersonal sharing, as a young community organizer, that our current President found what he called sacred stories, "a luminous world always present beneath the surface, a world that people might offer up as a gift to me, if I only remembered to ask."

Do you think there might be sacred stories right here, among us in this room? Do you suppose that if we began to listen, we could learn to understand and trust each other and begin to act with a common purpose? Unitarians form a numerically small denomination. But if we're organized, our faith can be a powerful agent for change. Our vision may never be shared by a majority, yet linking with those of similar values across denominational lines we multiply our strength. Recall that just a handful of actors at the right time and in the right place, were able to leverage events back in 1775. Thanks to Paul Revere, there were 4,000 Massachusetts Minutemen with muskets loaded peppering just 700 British regulars before the Redcoats retreated down the long road from Concord back to Boston. That was people power in action.

Yet too often we Unitarians are like William Dawes. We have a message. But we're lonely riders, each headed in our own chosen direction, shouting into the darkness but disconnected from our neighbors, and so unable to reach the people who need to hear.

It doesn't have to be that way. And I invite you this week to experience the power of connection by simply talking to another member of this congregation—scheduling a conversation with someone you may not know well. Take a half hour to meet and get acquainted. Ask them about their dreams and hopes, and the disappointments that have kept some of those dreams from coming true. Learn what problems and worries keep them up at night and where they find the courage to persevere. Find out what keeps them coming to this Society. Ask how they imagine this congregation might make a difference in their own lives and in the wider world. And when you've finished listening, share your own story in return.

Now this is not an easy assignment. To listen deeply can take us outside the comfort zone. As Obama wrote of his experience in Chicago, the genuine interpersonal exchanges that build community go far beyond "small talk and sketchy biographies." But it's out of those moments of real encounter that our solidarity begins to emerge, our awareness that what we have in common is far more important than the superficialities that divide us, our sense of sharing a single goal that enables us to begin pulling on the

oars together—not different strokes for different folks, but differing gifts and personalities all on freedom's journey.

One by one, one plus one, one times one, change happens. We collectively have the power to tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go," but it's only in ever widening spirals of relationship that we'll ever reach the Promised Land. In poet Marge Piercy's words,

It goes on one at a time,

It starts when you care to act ...

It starts when you say *We*

and know who you mean

and each day you mean one more.

Closing Words:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. (Margaret Mead)

Don't get mad; get organized. (Mother Jones)