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—Samuel G. Freedman

MICHAEL GECAN
In September of 1980, after an eighteen-month period of base building, East Brooklyn Congregations “began.” It was a quiet beginning. There was no grand press conference, no ribbon cutting, no march, no promise of spectacular success, no celebrity gushing praise, and no political figures mugging for the cameras. A small team of local leaders met quietly with a newly hired lead organizer, me, to identify other congregations and associations to recruit, to put together a list of other leaders to approach, and to tell me which of the current member congregations would benefit from more intensive local training.

Around this same time, other quiet beginnings were taking place in Texas, where Ernesto Cortes had already created one of the nation’s largest citizens organizations, in San Antonio, and was enlisting people like Sr. Christine Stephens, Sr. Pearl Cesar, Elizabeth Valdez, and the late Jim Drake to assist him as he expanded into other southwestern cities. Larry McNeil, a good friend who has just left the IAF, was starting to scratch out the first power organization in southern California. And Arnie Graf was settling into
Baltimore, where he would be joined by Gerald Taylor, now the senior IAF person in the South.

The previous spring, I had spent two days—dreary, wet, cold days—in a side office in Our Lady of Mercy Church on what was then called Stone Avenue. The view from the window of Our Lady of Mercy was uninspiring. A row of abandoned four-story walk-ups defined the horizon across the street. Windows and doors were long gone. Drug dealers slipped in and out of gangways. Occasionally, later in the day, when the gloom deepened into darkness, light from a match or candle would flicker inside one of the abandoned apartments. Phantom families occupied this broken block.

The leaders chosen by the group to interview me individually—Edgar Mendez, Luella Perez, Alice McCollum, Susanna Lebron, Nellie Hanley, Elda Peralta, and ten others—had watched their community slide into this state over the past twenty years. As I met person after person, hour after hour, I learned that they were embattled, but not beaten. They were stable, solid, and grounded. They treasured their families. They loved their congregations. They trusted their pastors. They all harbored memories of a better time and a better place—whether East Brooklyn thirty years before or a farm in Panama or Puerto Rico. They could still laugh, and often did. They had a steady, workmanlike quality about them. They would never appear in the pages of the New York Times Magazine, but they would press forward, under fire, day after day.

Having passed muster, I returned in mid-September to begin as the sole staff person, the lead organizer, of East Brooklyn Congregations. My second meeting on that day in September was with Ed Chambers. We talked awhile and then he handed me a long list of names and phone numbers—seventy-five other leaders from the congregations who made up the beginning base of EBC. “Go get a sense of these leaders,” he said, “and let them get a sense of you.”

In the middle of worsening deterioration, crime, arson, and abandonment, in a place that looked as if it had been repeatedly bombed and strafed, I resisted the nearly overpowering urge to rush into action and instead filled my schedule with individual meetings. And I began to develop one of the most important habits any leader or organizer can have—the habit of building new public relationships. Power in our society does not just come from the concentration of wealth on Wall Street, the dictates of great governmental agencies, the barrel of a gun, or the fanaticism of a terrorist in the cockpit of a plane. Power can come from the habit of building new public relationships.

The trouble with many of us, and with our culture as whole, is that we don’t take the time to “relate,” to connect publicly and formally but meaningfully with others. Instead, we live in what Richard Sennett called a “tyranny of intimacy”—presidents pretending to share our pain or talk show hosts prying into the most intimate corners of private life. Or we feel a need to maintain constant and superficial contact with others. We see and are seen by others. We sit in meetings and conferences and dinner sessions with scores and hundreds of others. We “touch base” with others or “make an appearance” or “give brief remarks.” We buy and collect better tools—a tyranny of technology—to stay in touch. But all real living is meeting, not meetings. We don’t take the time to meet one to one with others, to hear their interests and dreams and fears, to understand why people do what they do or don’t do what they don’t do.

We forget or deny that the appetite to relate is fundamental, and that the willingness to relate is nearly universal. People who have ideas and drive are on every street, in every project, every
workplace and school, waiting in the wings, ready to be discovered. Someone has to reach them and recognize them. Someone has to ask them to step out, not to be consumers or props or spectators but to be players in the unfolding drama of public life. And that someone is what we call a leader or organizer.

One evening, I met Ide Johnson—tall, trim, and regal—a young African-American woman who belonged to St. Paul Community Baptist Church in East New York, where the then-skeptical Johnny Ray Youngblood was pastor. We met one warm evening, with the streets loud and edgy, and I asked her why she wasn't afraid. “I am afraid,” she said, as she prepared to leave an evening training session and head for the bus stop two blocks away. “I am afraid,” she repeated. Then why not wait for a ride or call a cab? “Because I'm not fearful,” she said. “Not full of fear.” With that, she headed out into the street. About an hour later, after a training session, I did too. And, in a sense, I've been following Icie Johnson ever since.

These leaders were already forged and mature in many ways. They understood in their bones the need for accountability and internal discipline—lessons learned from their lives as leaders in their religious institutions. They accepted tension, conflict, and confrontation as facts of life and the price of progress—perhaps from their own tough encounters on forbidding streets or maybe from raising children and nurturing families among fields filled with rubble.

They knew they had enemies but did not hate them. They weren't distracted by the media, in part because the media found no reason to solicit their views. They had no community reputation to defend or promote because, unlike the South Bronx or Harlem, mayors and presidents rarely visited. They were wary of outsiders—especially white outsiders like Ed and myself—but were willing to give us the benefit of the doubt, at least, for a while. They were sophisticated in ways that the swells on Park Avenue could scarcely imagine.

In my first months in East Brooklyn, I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. I would call leaders for individual meetings, and several would offer to meet me at my office, rather than have me come to their homes or apartments. “Too dangerous,” Domingo Lind said one afternoon. “Can’t be that dangerous,” I countered. We compromised. He asked me to call when I was about to come over. He would head down from his twelfth-floor apartment and meet me in the lobby of his project. When I arrived about fifty young guys were milling around the courtyard and lobby—the same fifty or more guys who “owned” that space every day and every night. Mr. Lind spotted my car and walked toward me as I parked. The guys who were already heading my way backed off just a bit. He ushered me through a cordon of hostile eyes, into the elevator, up to his tidy apartment, where he served us both coffee, and I asked him how the hell he survived. He took me down the elevator and back to the car after our session—the same drill he did at midnight when his wife walked home from the subway and in the morning and afternoon when his kids went to and from school. He wasn't a particularly big or tough-looking man. He didn't carry a gun or knife. He was afraid but was not full of fear. The faith and courage and determination that he displayed to the toughs in the lobby and courtyard created just enough space to live a life. In his twelfth-floor apartment, over coffee, for thirty minutes, he told me what that life consisted of—his work, his role in his church, his dreams for his children, and his attempts to improve his project. And I learned that Domingo Lind was a leader.

A few nights later, as I headed onto the Interboro (now the Jackie Robinson Parkway), guns flashed on either side of the road. Gangs were battling it out at nine at night. I ducked—ducked!—as if somehow that would help me get through.
In the winter, late one night, again on the Interboro, two cars had been upended on either side of the road and had been torched. The shadows of young men danced on the trunks of the trees. The map said Brooklyn. The mind said Vietnam. Like Ide Johnson and Domingo Lind, I was afraid much of the time—still am—but not so full of fear that I couldn't function as an organizer.

One night, a year or so later, I was knocking on the door of Mt. Ararat Baptist Church, in Oceanhill. Mt. Ararat, then, was one of the few occupied buildings in a blighted landscape. Across Howard Avenue was a long-abandoned school. Down each block were vacant lots and abandoned homes. No one lived nearby, so the streets were desolate. Mt. Ararat somehow held on, on the high ground, led by a gentle giant named James T. Reeder.

I knocked and knocked, a little unnerved by the moonscape around me. To my left, three young men sauntered toward me. When they reached me, they stopped. I turned to face them.

"You the pastor?" One of them said.

"No." I said, praying for Reverend Reeder to appear.

"You own this building?"

"No."

"You a cop?"

I paused. "You can stop right there."

My questioner smiled. He looked at his buddies. "Told you" was all he said, as they walked away, nodding knowingly.

By the time Reverend Reeder unbolted the door and opened it, I was almost too tired to meet with him. But he proved to be worth the wait and the risk.

When you develop the habit of doing individual meetings, you stop thinking of people as "the poor" or the "the rich" or the "establishment" or even "the enemy." You don't just size up another person to see if you can make a sale—whether the commodity is the church, the doctrine, the political candidate, or the citizens organization that you happen to be packaging and marketing that day. You resist the urge to find out just enough about Ide Johnson, Domingo Lind, or James T. Reeder to determine whether or not they will follow you or "plug into" your worldview or your set of assumptions.

No, you sit and listen, you probe and challenge. You try to gauge whether or not you and the other can build the kind of public relationship that is mutual and respectful and capable of withstanding the tension that all healthy relating tends to generate over time. You challenge them in a way that you can only do effectively when you are face to face, one to one, "How can you stand to live in this place? What have you tried to do to turn it around? Are you willing to work with groups you say you dislike to make a difference here?" And you let others agitate you, as they did. "What are you, a white guy, doing here?" "What makes you think that EBC will be any different from all the other do-nothing groups around here?" "What does any of this have to do with ministry and faith, anyway?"

Done well, individual meetings allow people to break out of the kinds of relational ruts that limit us all. The person who walks in the door of the congregation is no longer just a congregant or client. And the person who works on the parish staff ceases being a one-dimensional provider. We see more of the many facets of people who have come to think of themselves as invisible or voiceless not just because the powers that be fail to see them and hear them, but because those who claim to care about their concerns also fail to relate to them and with them. And they see more facets of you. They see a not particularly big, not particularly tough, not particularly gung-ho person standing in their doorway—someone with real questions, not a set of slick answers, someone with a feel for politics, not a simple formula, someone who can laugh and who can fight, if need be.
Wherever I went in a neighborhood that one pastor called “a graveyard,” I found vital, able, complicated people. They had an appetite for learning, for relating across the lines of race and culture, and eventually for acting in new and effective ways. The number of individual meetings multiplied as I began to teach the leaders to schedule them—and then multiplied even more when I hired Stephen Roberson to work as my associate. This tall, unflappable veteran of the United Farm Workers traded his beret and blue jeans for a sport coat and tie and dove into the growing number of congregations that made up the organization.

We all ranged beyond the borders of East Brooklyn to meet leaders in other arenas. It was important to hear how other New Yorkers saw the world. And it was important for other New Yorkers to meet leaders from East Brooklyn who didn’t look or sound or act anything like the cartoon characters portrayed by most of the media. Not long after I began, at the suggestion of several local pastors, I sought a meeting with the head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, Bishop Francis J. Mugavero. Some of those who thought they knew the bishop, who passed away in 1991, said in 1980 that he was near the end of his career, that he was out of favor with the Vatican, that he had run the diocese into financial difficulties and was coasting toward retirement. When I arrived at the bishop’s office, he greeted me warmly. His office was across the street from Bishop Loughlin High School, the alma mater of my father-in-law and several generations of Roman Catholic cops and pols, FBI agents and U.S. attorneys. It served as one of the great training grounds for Catholic kids moving from poverty or the working class into middle- and upper-middle-class life.

The bishop was short, bald, soft-spoken, straightforward, irreverently funny, and about as far from retirement as any sixty-five-year-old man I have ever met. He embodied the best qualities of millions of European immigrants who had put one foot on American shores just decades before and now had both feet planted squarely in the center of their cities and their nation. He reminded me of the men from my old neighborhood—the men I used to watch with awe from a booth in my parents’ bar, the hard-working railroad workers who had shots of vo and bottles of Schlitz with the sandwiches and soup my mother prepared in our tavern’s kitchen before they returned for five more hours of hard labor repairing track.

My goal was to get my own sense of him and to give him a sense of me. I hoped that he would refer me to others in the city he thought I should meet with. Given all that I had heard about him I was more than a little surprised to find a man looking for new and interesting things to do. He was “political” in the way Monsignor Jack Egan in Chicago was—curious about how the public world worked, wanting to learn how he could make more of an impact there, hungry for tidbits of gossip or new insights and stories, happy to hear about the craziness and complexity of life in New York and ready to mix it up again in the public arena. Here’s another reason why it’s so important to do individual meetings: sometimes, in fact fairly often, you will find that people bear almost no resemblance to the image others have of them or the public presentation that they and their spin doctors manufacture.

He was called “Mugsy” by his friends—a nickname that accurately captured his openness and informality. I never called him that, of course, in spite of the fact that we met scores of times over the ten years we worked closely together, that we negotiated agreements with the city together, that we sweated out terrible crises and spent many tense nights sorting out our situation with mayors and other officials and plotting the next day’s battle plans.

He was interested in everything—the state of his inner-city parishes, the well-being of his priests, the future of the city, even
the fact that I was asking him for references, for other people to meet with. "What for?" he asked. "For this, Bishop," I said, "so that I can get a sense of other interesting leaders in the city and they can get a sense of me and our work. I'd like to get the lay of the land, so that, when we act, we don't act in a vacuum and we don't act alone."

He gave me a number of names and said that I could use him as a reference. Then, as I was leaving, he added one more, "Go see Mario Cuomo—and tell me what you think of him."

At the time, Mario Cuomo was the lieutenant governor of New York, a largely ceremonial and powerless position. He had been a local civic leader who had made a name for himself by serving as the attorney to vulnerable homeowners in the Corona section of Queens. He was Queens and Catholic to the core in those days, always ready to regale an audience about his upbringing in St. Monica's Parish in Jamaica.

I called for an appointment—an anonymous organizer; new to the city, seeking a meeting with a well-known state official—and got one almost immediately because the bishop allowed me to use his name. When I arrived at his World Trade Center office, Cuomo was on time, welcoming, but fairly fidgety. He listened for sixty seconds or so to my introduction of myself—EBc, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Saul Alinsky, and so on. When I mentioned Alinsky's name, he quoted one of Alinsky's sayings, talked a bit about his own experience in Corona, and said that he had concluded that there were limits to this kind of organizing. I didn't argue, said there were limits to every option, and then asked him why he had decided to pursue the path in public life that led from local activism to public office. By now, perhaps four minutes into the session, he was growing very impatient.

"What do you really want?" he asked. Well, nothing immediate today, I said, I'm in the early stages of getting to know the situation in New York, in Brooklyn...

Before I could finish the sentence, he hit a button on the phone to his right. A side door opened, almost immediately, and two aides rushed in. "These," Cuomo declared, "are my Brooklyn people. Tell them what you want."

The two aides sat down and opened notebooks. Taken aback a bit, I said to Cuomo, "I don't want anything—other than to hear how you see the state of the city..." He wasn't having any of it. "You're the one who said 'Brooklyn.' These are my Brooklyn people. Now tell them what you want."

"What I wanted was a half-hour of your time to get a sense of how you see things..." I knew I was finished. Cuomo was still sitting there but had mentally ended the meeting. I mumbled a few things to the staff and left after a few more minutes. I learned more about myself and how not to approach a person like Cuomo. But I also learned a fair amount about him. Far from being thoughtful, sensitive, and ruminative, as he had been described to me, he was brusque, reactive, and devoid of curiosity. In future encounters, when our leaders did want to talk about specific matters, we made sure to present the important issues early in the meetings, in the very short time before his attention span snapped and aides swarmed in.

The best and most effective organizing—in schools, in corporations, in unions, in congregations, in politics, anywhere—still starts when people discover the habit of doing individual meetings well and then consistently do them. The right public relationship, as a major bank claims in its advertising, is everything.

As a result of these right relationships, in these face-to-face encounters, in the form of confrontation (from the Latin "con" and "frons," foreheads together) that we should be famous for, new leaders and issues begin to emerge. For example, some years ago, in Baltimore, a Baptist pastor decided to take the time to sit down and meet individually with people who came to his church for a
free lunch each day. The pastor noticed a decently dressed young man and sat across from him. The pastor asked, after some initial back and forth, “Why don’t you have a job?” The man responded, “But I do have a job.” Then the pastor probed, “Then why are you here?” And the man said, “Because I don’t make nearly enough money to afford to eat.”

So this mildly astonished pastor listened over lunch to a story of America in the 1990s—a place where men and women could work full-time, as temporary workers, at minimum wage, with no benefits and no time off, and not be able to afford food, phone service, heat, and clothes for themselves and their families. The pastor then made it a habit to sit down with someone each day at lunch. And the people on the line ceased being clients of the congregation’s soup kitchen. They became names, histories, faiths, and tragedies—full and complex human beings, with sometimes beautiful and sometimes painful and sometimes frustrating stories.

The pastor enlisted the help of Jonathon Lange, the BUILD lead organizer, who had come to the IAF to apply what he had learned as a union organizer to the field of citizens organizing and to absorb lessons from citizens organizing that he could translate into the more effective organizing of workers. Jonathon, his staff, and other leaders did hundreds of individual meetings in settings like the soup kitchen, on street corners in downtown Baltimore where the workers gathered to catch the bus after stints as janitors in office buildings or hotels or Camden Yards, and in local fast-food restaurants where weary workers gathered for a quick snack or cup of coffee.

Out of these rapidly multiplying individual meetings, a fuller picture of the day-to-day lives of these workers developed, and leaders emerged. Men and women who could not afford telephones, who sometimes went home to darkened apartments because of unpaid utility bills, who moved from relative to relative with children in tow to minimize housing costs, who lived a shadow life in a shadow city, designed the nation’s first living wage campaign, authored and passed the nation’s first living wage law, built the first low-wage workers’ organization, and started the first living wage job agency for the working poor.

The pastor in the soup kitchen rediscovered the tool called the individual meeting and then disciplined himself to use that tool day after day. Sitting across the lunchroom table from the good citizens of Baltimore, he was reviving and extending an American tradition.

Imagine John Adams and his long rides from Massachusetts to and from Philadelphia. He often traveled with just one companion. He spent days on the road, encountering people in taverns and stables. When he wasn’t speaking one to one or in small groups to fellow Americans, he was communicating one to one through letters, hundreds of letters, to his friends and family and colleagues. The demands of travel by horseback were offset by the countless hours free of beepers, cell phones, and e-mail that he spent reading poetry and thinking, actually thinking.

Remember Lincoln, who rode for years from small town to small town as a local lawyer and anonymous state legislator. He sat outside general stores and met individually with people. He doggedly built relationships over many miles and many years. Our democracy was founded and forged by women and men who were quirky and complex, but profoundly relational. It may be that the very habit of building public relationships is part of the human constitution of a vital democracy, just as the habit of thinking and reflecting is fundamental to our ability to make ethical and moral choices.

Consider my father. August Gecan, a Croatian teenager, immigrated to Chicago in the thirties. The pastor of the local Catholic church in his new Chicago neighborhood, Holy Trinity Parish on
18th and Throop Street, stopped by to visit him and did an individual meeting with him. Then, nearly every year of my father’s life, for a span of sixty years, that pastor and the pastor who succeeded him when the first pastor died, and the pastor after that, took the time to do an individual meeting with my father. It didn’t matter that my father did not consider himself “special.” Was not a professional. Was not rich. Was not a big giver. Was not a model parishioner. Moved away from the parish when he married. Then moved again, and again. Each year, the priest visited. And each year my father was honored to have him visit. And, until the day of his death, he maintained his ties to that parish and that community and those priests.

In a culture of quick encounters and multiple contacts, of instant access and empty photo-ops, there are fewer and fewer public relationships of this depth and quality. The absence of these relationships creates great gaps in our society—where alienated people become more detached, where lost and damaged people spin further out of control, where the apathetic and the enraged drift further away from a human center, where killers and terrorists hide in plain sight, shopping at the supermarket, drinking at the bar. We will never have enough technology or enough security officers or social workers or government programs to compensate for the loss or thinning of public relationships.

But we don’t need an expensive PalmPilot, an MBA, or a costly business suit to learn the art of the individual meeting and to develop the habit of doing them. We just need the clarity, the confidence, and the time—and the support of others who understand what is fundamental to effective organizing and constructive leadership and what is peripheral and inessential.