

Why This Book?

Working for community, for the healing and protection of the earth and for justice has organized my life in Canada for over forty years. Life as a community organizer has shaped my values and analysis of the world around me. This book is a product of that work and of the work of other organizers from all over the world.

At the base of community organizing is a belief that all people want to be able to deal with what life visits on them and their loved ones, and that all people want to create the changes they need and to resist those that hurt them. The power to make this happen is only possible when people work and act together.

Over centuries of human existence, peoples have organized themselves in different ways to accomplish the social project. For the last five thousand years — out of 150,000 years of modern human existence — cooperative and earth-based peoples have been conquered or dominated by peoples who were organized hierarchically and who treated the earth as a resource to be exploited. Most history is about the battles between rival hierarchies for power over resources, peoples and territories. The unwritten story of the last five thousand years is the efforts of ordinary people to resist this oppression and build some kind of life for themselves and their children despite the battles for power that have raged in their midst.

Resistance is not new. History is full of stories of the oppressed rebelling against the oppressor, only to create an equally oppressive system. What we learn from oppression is how to oppress. If we want a truly transformative politics, then we take up methods that embody the kind of world we want to create; we have to change deeply embedded beliefs and behaviours.

We are all a product of the culture we want to change; our strategies are based on a paradigm of competition and conquest. Doris Lessing points out that in times of war we are permitted to be brutal and cruel, and those of us who engage in the actual fighting often enjoy it. The “dreadful public elation” that comes with the culture of war is strong because war requires living in “that extreme of tension, alertness and danger”; it creates heroes; it speaks to our need to be significant; it allows us to act out our fear of the

Other.¹ If we want to construct a society that can live in harmony with the earth; that sees human beings as one part of creation, we have to understand and undo the destructive, hierarchical patterns we have internalized.

Starhawk writes:

Domination is not the creation of some evil force, but the result of millions of human choices, made again and again over time. Just so can domination be undone, by shaping new choices, by small and repeated acts of liberation.... Domination is a system, and we are part of it, and in that lies hope. For any system is always in delicate balance, dependent for stability on the feedback of its parts. When the feedback changes, so does the system. At first it reacts to regain its stability, but if the new feedback is sustained, the system will be transformed.²

In Canada organizing is having a tough time. There is frustration with our inability, despite our activism, to halt the power and predations of the global economy. We feel overwhelmed by the number and complexity of issues that we are expected to deal with. People working for change in community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unions and campaigns are frequently unaware or dismissive of the efforts of other activists. We are fragmented and don't know what to do to be more effective. In the meantime, the political right has been gaining legitimacy, and our numbers appear to be shrinking.

It does not have to be this way. Indigenous cultures use a holistic paradigm called the "medicine wheel" to understand issues and to plan their activities. The Wheel can have many configurations, but one of the most common has culture and spirituality in the east, social relations in the south, physical relationships (environment and economy) in the west and administration and governance in the north. If we pay equal attention to all parts of the medicine wheel, our lives and communities will be in balance. This teaching applies to the work of activists in Canada. We may know how to organize in political parties, do cultural work, group process and political strategy, or create economic/environmental alternatives, but whole chunks of experience and information are often missing from our work. Like a wheel that has one or two flat sides, we are out of balance and our plans get stuck. To make the wheel turn again, we need to work holistically, to pay attention to all the quadrants of the wheel.

Organizing effectively is contextual; it is about using the collective power of people to shift and shape the cultural, economic, political and social aspects of the environment around us. How we analyze and understand the structures and characteristics of that environment determines our strategies. The better we know the context, the more effective we can be.

The current global context is a frightening one. The unfettered greed of globalization and the financial casino has deepened poverty and misery around the world, further weakened governments and strengthened a global elite. The welfare state is under attack. China (with its centralized government and economy) has emerged as a global power, owning most of the American debt and buying up resource properties around the world. The environmental crisis has intensified, as governments find themselves unable and unwilling to act to reverse climate chaos, pollution and the depletion of water and food supplies. Forced migration of entire populations has become endemic; civil wars, water shortages and famine threaten much of the world. In 2001, the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York launched the “war on terror,” increasing state surveillance and public paranoia, justifying sophisticated spying and the suspension of hard-earned civil liberties, and creating new theatres of war.

Perhaps most disturbing has been the galloping epidemic of “hyper-individualism” amongst the affluent in the Western world. “We change religions, spouses, towns, professions with ease.... Our affluence isolates us even more. We are not just individualists; we are hyper-individualists such as the world has never known.”³ We believe we can create our own identities; we purchase services we used to exchange with our neighbours; we fail to understand the role of the public good and the commons; we reduce taxation and impoverish the state. We are lonely and we are afraid, and our fear makes us crave order and security. Political leaders that offer safety and simplistic analyses are gaining ground.

The past two decades have also seen the rise of the global justice movement, as the internet has become a valuable tool for research, networking and building solidarity. South African apartheid was defeated in 1990. The Berlin Wall came down. The Declaration on Indigenous Rights was passed at the UN. In Bolivia, an Indigenous mass-based movement came to power. Suharto’s thirty-two-year reign of terror in Indonesia came to an end. Argentina threw out the World Bank and workers took over factories. Venezuela elected a socialist president, and Cuba survived the fall of the Soviet Union. The Zapatistas in Chiapas provided a new language for political transformation. In Canada, the events at Kahnasatake (Oka) and many subsequent assertions of sovereignty by Aboriginal peoples have energized the work, as Indigenous struggles around the world have inspired the vision of the global justice movement.

Peoples from around the globe have laid siege to transnational corporations and the institutions that serve them, gathering in unprecedented numbers outside the meetings of the powerful, from the World Trade Organization conference in Seattle to the meeting of the G20 in Toronto in 2010. All around the world, people have been working at the local, regional

and national levels to create the changes they want to see in the world and to resist the predations of global capital. As Paul Hawken's research indicates, internationally there are now over a million organizations around the world working for ecological sustainability and social justice.⁴

Everywhere, there are activists who have learned and are learning how to put the creation of relationships and building of community at the heart of their efforts. They are building up the soil that will nourish real change. What they do "works." Change activities that work do the following:

- They create vision and enthusiasm so that many diverse people want to be committed to the work; they build a growing base of support for an equitable society.
- They make understanding about and effective work on key issues accessible to previously uninformed and inactive people.
- They create and model sustainable alternatives for the provision of food, shelter, energy, transportation and the care of children, the disabled and the elderly; they re-create and protect the "Commons."
- They establish multiplying numbers of relationships of respect for all beings and each other, kindness and dignity; they do not seek to increase public fear.
- By focusing on key contradictions in the system, they transform the power of predatory elites, redistribute wealth and establish equity.

Organizing is like making soup out of leftovers. We may be dreaming of bouillabaisse, but when we open the fridge and find some beans, a potato and an onion, we use our imagination and creativity to make the best soup we can. This book offers a number of methods and tools to build our capacity to make life sustaining soup. As the slogan from the World Social Forums said "Another World Is Possible." It is up to us to create it.

My Life as an Organizer

We never organize by ourselves; anything organizers accomplish is a product of time and place and the work of many different people. However, since the perspective of this book is a product of my history, let me tell you a little bit about my life as an organizer. I began my work in the "movement" in the midst of the tumult of the 1960s, as a researcher with the Company of Young Canadians (CYC), an attempt by the Canadian government to contain young radicals and put them into community service. Since I was a personable, young white woman, they hired me to interview national voluntary organizations to ask what they thought young Canadians should be doing. Some of the people I met in this work were to change my life.

First were a few experienced adult educators, who introduced me to

something called “community development,” and, because of the abysmal lack of knowledge about it in the CYC, I became in two short months the CYC’s expert on it. Second were the student radicals in the Student Union for Peace Action. I fell in love with the movement. After five months, converted to participatory democracy and community action, I quit my job and went to work for \$75 a month on the Kingston Community Project in Kingston, Ontario. The project members organized tenants’ associations, a teenage drop-in centre, two residents’ associations, a food co-op and a range of other activities with the people of Kingston. ATAK, the Kingston tenants’ rights group, grew out of our efforts, and, when we realized that we had to change the law to get anywhere, I hitch-hiked around the province to convince groups in Ottawa, Toronto and other cities to form the Ontario Tenants’ Association. In 1970, the Ontario Tenants’ Association won rent control and tenant protection under the Ontario Landlord and Tenant Act.

Running for ATAK, I was even elected to city council as the “alderman” for St. Lawrence Ward. I have always felt that my real education came from those people in Kingston who had the patience to spend some time with me.⁵

During that time, the women’s liberation movement started up; it felt like the logical extension of the work we already did. I became a lifelong feminist. Applying the learning from community organizing work and from the women’s liberation movement to other activities just made sense. The principles were the same after all: helping people achieve their own goals, building cooperatives, taking care of the earth, taking care of one another.

In 1970 I moved to Sudbury — the country’s biggest mining town at the height of a boom. Inco and Falconbridge, the two enormous mining companies that dominated the community, were expanding rapidly. Inco had 20,000 miners on its payroll, most of them young, from all over the country. We used to say that you could get stoned in the bar just by taking a deep breath, and the bars did a booming business. Within three years, the payroll had been reduced by half, and most of the young people followed the jobs to Alberta and Elliot Lake.⁶

Some of us started the first daycare centre in Sudbury in 1972. When I was a teller at the Royal Bank we tried to organize a union; we supported union organizing at lumber companies, department stores, white collar workers at Inco. Our Sudbury women’s group put out a guide and a film for Sudbury women in crisis called *Alternatives to Hysteria*.⁷ We demonstrated and submitted briefs about health care and abortion issues. My friend Sue Byron and I ran an unsuccessful but interesting bookstore called The Book Mine. During a nine-month strike at Inco in 1978–9, we organized strike support in the community and across the country.⁸ Because people don’t usually get paid to organize, I have worked in a variety of jobs over the years. Every one

of them has been a great learning experience. I have worked in legal clinics, community colleges and universities, retail stores, the telephone company and nursing homes.⁹ During that time, too, I raised two children of my own and a daughter by choice — experiences that taught me more than anything I ever learned from paid work.

In the 1980s, as the national staff person for a three-year project of the United Church of Canada called *The Church and the Economic Crisis*, I had the privilege of travelling across the country many times doing workshops to help people understand how the economy worked and assisting folk to develop programs for economic justice in their church and community.¹⁰

Later I became the half-time Canadian contact person for a program of the World Council of Churches, called the *Urban-Rural Mission (URM)*. This creative program was a worldwide network of community organizers from all faiths (including animist, Judaism, Islam and atheists), committed to justice, peace and ecological integrity. My job was to create and maintain such a network in Canada. Because our funds were limited, we created a network of eighteen active organizers from across the country that met twice a year in different communities to share what they were learning from their work. Each person sat in the group for three years and then was replaced by another organizer on a rotational basis. A third of the members were Indigenous organizers, a third were from racialized groups and a third were Euro-Canadian (split evenly between Quebec and the rest of Canada). Annually, some of us travelled to other continents to meetings hosted by contact groups there. What a learning opportunity for all of us!

Following the URM, I was hired as the founding program coordinator for *Sudbury Better Beginnings Better Futures*, a community development program with the families in my own neighbourhood. *Better Beginnings* forced me to bring all that I had learned from other organizers and movement activists home: to weave these experiences into the equally valuable life lessons and wisdom of the people in my own city.

In 1998, exhausted by the *Better Beginnings* work, I was contracted for a year for the *Urban Issues Program* of the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation to travel across the country to help them evaluate one of the most innovative funding programs in Canada.

And then in 1999, I moved to Ottawa to lead the formation of *MiningWatch Canada*, a collaboration of many local, regional, national NGOs, battling the impacts of mining on communities in Canada and by Canadian mining companies around the world. I retired from the staff in spring 2008. Since then, I earn my living teaching in formal and informal settings.

Notes

1. Doris Lessing, "When in the Future They Look Back on Us." *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, CBC Massey Lectures, 1986.
2. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) p. 314. A holistic description and analysis of the state of the world, with ideas, exercises and incentives for working to change it.
3. Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007) p. 96.
4. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty to the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).
5. Richard Harris, *Democracy in Kingston: A Social Movement in Urban Politics 1965–70* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988). Provides a detailed history of the Kingston Community Project.
6. Jamie Swift, *The Big Nickel: Inco at Home and Abroad* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1977). Provides a detailed history of Inco to 1976.
7. Women Helping Women, *Alternatives to Hysteria: A Guide to Sudbury Women in Crisis* (Sudbury, 1977).
8. Sophie Bissonnette, Joyce Rock and Martin Duckworth, *A Wives Tale*, 1980. A film about the organizing of Wives Supporting the Strike made during the 1978–9 strike.
9. Joan Kuyek, *The Phone Book: Working at Bell Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1979).
10. Joan Kuyek, *Managing the Household: A Handbook for Economic Justice Work* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1990). Records the learnings from the Economic Crisis project.