Episode 2: The Basic Tool of Organizing: The One to One or Relational Meeting

Luke Bretherton (LB) [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Luke Bretherton, and this is the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, which focuses on the history and contemporary practice of organizing in democratic politics and transformational change, paying particular attention to the role of faith and religious communities that work.

LB [00:00:24] This podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation, Duke Divinity School, and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. In this episode, I discuss why and how listening is the beginning point of democratic organizing and the role of the one to one, or relational meeting, in that work. In the first part, I talk to Lina Jamoul about what is a one to one, what it involves, and how it differs from other ways of engaging with people in democratic politics. In the second part, I talk to Arnie Graf and Dean Deida in order to reflect further on some of the tensions and issues that arise in doing one to ones. I'll introduce them after I talk to Lina. Lina Jemal herself is executive director of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees. She has wide experience of community organizing both in the US and the UK. And about eight years ago, she switched to being involved in union organizing, which is her current role.

LB [00:01:38] So, Lena, it's great to have you on the podcast. Thank you so much for doing this. I think the last time I actually saw you in person—and this was brought back to me recently—was in 2008, which is many moons ago. And you—amazing—you were organizing in Chicago at the time. And by some remarkable feat of hutzpah and cunning, you managed to get me into Grant Park to hear Barack Obama's victory speech, which is—feels incredibly kind of relevant to the moment as we're in this time of transition. And they played—before Obama came on, Michelle and Obama came on—they played John McCain's concession speech that night. And I think it was the night of the election—it was the night of the election. So, yes, I have very many happy memories of that last time I saw you in person.

Lina Jamoul (LJ) [00:02:36] I've been thinking about that concession speech, actually, quite a bit these days.

LB [00:02:42] I know, it's remarkable. It's had all these views as well, because it stands in stark contrast to the current moment. But, Lina, just tell me a bit about your journey into organizing, where you've organized, and something of your current role.

LJ [00:02:57] Yeah, well, I think my journey into organizing began before I was born, like a lot of us. My parents had been political activists in Syria in the late '70s trying to form some kind of semblance of a Democratic Labor Party that happened to be in opposition to the Assad government. And so that was really the formation of our family's trajectory and definitely my trajectory and, kind of, DNA and contribution to the world. So, I was I was born in Syria. We immigrated to Cyprus in 1984, when I was seven, and then grew up between Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, and then London—but grew up always with politics being talked about at the dinner table and the sense of—if people, ordinary people aren't organized, power can't be held accountable. So that's—I came across the IAF—the Industrial Areas Foundation—when I was in graduate school—and really found that to be my calling, vocation, in a way that there is a way to make a difference in the world. There is a way to connect people to one another—and through those connections, build power that can have impact in people's lives and neighborhoods and communities and workplaces—and, you know, maybe more importantly in themselves, from the inside out.

LB [00:04:46] And was your first organizing job in London or was it in the U.S.? I can't remember.

LJ [00:04:50] It was in the U.S. It was in Chicago. So, in London, I was a volunteer leader, as a graduate student, and helped lead campaigns on a voluntary basis with the organization, and then moved to Chicago in 2006.

LB [00:05:12] And that's when you took up full time organizing. And tell me a little bit about your current role.

LJ [00:05:19] I'm currently the executive director of a labor union with fifteen thousand members in Minnesota. It's a labor union of professional state workers. It's called MAPE: the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees. And I've been in the organization for almost seven years.

LB [00:05:38] So, turning now to the one to one—and sometimes it's called the relational meeting—what is it? In organizing terms, people often bang on about the one to one as the basic tool of organizing. Can you just give us a sense of what is it and what does it involve?

LJ [00:05:57] A one on one is a twenty to thirty minute conversation with someone face-to-face in order to get to know them and in order for them to get to know you. And through that conversation, figuring out what that person's self-interest is, what makes them tick, what's their hopes and dreams for themselves and their community—their families, their communities—whether they have any appetite to do anything about those hopes and dreams, and what kind of leadership potential following or network that they have.

LB [00:06:38] So, what would you say is the point of it? What do—why? I mean, it's obviously interesting to hear people's stories. It's a nice way to get a sense of who they are. But why do this? What's the point of it? What are you trying to achieve through having these relational meetings?

F6 [00:07:00] I think politics is really hard. And I think folks and politicians or activists or campaigners—or whoever—are always trying to figure out, what's the message? What's the thing that I can get on TV and tell people or print in social media or whatever? And I think there isn't a thing. I think there is, actually, is relationships with people and connecting with them. And that's labor intensive and requires a lot of time and patience, and the ability to suspend judgment, and the ability to resist selling an ideology, and the ability to be OK with not knowing what the answers are and to go and try to talk to enough people. So an answer emerges or a set of answers emerge. And I think those are all—those are actually really things at the heart of our politics. And, so why do one on one? It's to really bring that back in a real practical and real way of this—how you invest your time as a as a leader or a political person.

LB [00:08:11] So, central to it—what you're describing—is if politics is really about people and people coming together to determine the conditions of their lives and having some say over that, being able to act together to determine that—it's crucial we need a way to put people before program. A lot of politics is about selling ideological programs or recruiting people to campaign—but in that, actually, the person gets lost in the program. And the one to one is, in a sense, a way of actually saying, "No, we need to put the person first and the program—whatever it is, a campaign or working together or an issue, an election process—is secondary and comes or flows out of the relationships with build together as persons." Would that be a fair characterization?

LJ [00:09:03] Yep, exactly.

LB [00:09:05] Right. And building on that sense, how, then, does the relational meeting differ from other kinds of ways in which politicians and those in NGOs or even planning processes listen to people? Because, you know, you could turn around and say, "We actually do polling. That's a way I'm listening to persons and trying to put people first." Or focus groups is a way of doing that. Or, I know you did some of this—I was involved in this during the election—phone banking. These are all ways in which one tries to engage people in political processes. How does the one on one meeting differ from them?

LJ [00:09:52] That's a good question. It differs in a number of ways. One is you're not trying to sell anything. And also it's a mutual exchange. So, you're also sharing about yourself and you're learning and the other person is learning. So it's a two-way mutual exchange. There's also less of a script that you follow. And for a focus group, for example, it's like you're trying to get something out of that exchange, where this is—you're trying to build a relationship and you're trying to identify leaders. And so, there's more—there's just more space around it. You're coming into it with a more open mind. Although, you know, I will say the dynamics of a one to one is a pliable tool.

LB [00:10:53] So, that does seem to me—there's a tricky dance in the one to one. It's not casual chit chat or sports talk or just a, "Hey, let's get a coffee and hang out," kind of thing. And it's not this very focused one-way conversation where I'm trying to extract something from you or sign you up to something. But there is a sense of—there's there's a direction to it. There's a direction of travel to it; and while, at the same time, one is genuinely trying to connect to what the hopes, dreams—what someone has energy for, what their real concerns are beyond simply passing the time of day or talking to the weather—and get a sense of what will they act around or on? And do they connect to the things I'm engaged with or trying to work on?—in your case, building up a union membership. So is there is this tricky dance, isn't there, between actually having a meaningful conversation—really connecting relationally to someone—and, on the other hand, moving them to act in a certain way? I always find that's a tricky, tricky dance. And in your experience—I mean, the example you've just given is a good one—there can be moments of agitation where you're trying to press people to say what really is motivating you, or why didn't you do X, Y or Z, or why won't you join? What's going on with you? How do you handle those agitations? What are some of your experiences of that, and handling that tension?

LJ [00:12:32] That's right. These—they're not—they are purposeful conversations with the purpose of building power. So, there's there's got to be a direction to that. You're right. And part of the agitation piece is because we—public life asks us to stretch ourselves. But being public or doing something outside your family and your individual social life—I think that's why agitation is important to the one on one piece, because it primes you and tests you, and also makes it more memorable—makes the interaction more memorable. But it's important for that to come out of a relationship and to be agitating people around their own self-interest. So, you have to spend some time with people to get to know what what that is.

LB [00:13:35] The sense in which, then, it's not simply treating people as campaign fodder, but actually—even though one's trying to work out how you can act together with others, as it were, there's a sense in which that has to be borne out of a genuine relational connection, rather than simply it's not—it's too reductive to call it a recruitment drive, even though one hopes one would generate shared speech and action—to put it at its most abstract—coming out of it. And in that

sense, going back to your example you just gave, how do you handle talking to very different people to you? And when it's clear you do disagree with them? How do you—there could be real points of disagreement. But if it's a relational meeting where I'm not only—I guess this goes back to a more philosophical point: If politics begins not by demanding everyone you disagree with leaves the room before the conversation begins, but actually involves talking to people you can radically disagree with or are very different to, or have different cultural or religious backgrounds to you—how how do you handle those kinds of differences in the one to one setting?

LJ [00:14:50] Going back to twenty sixteen, I had a series of one on ones internally with our members who were Republicans, people that I knew and respected and were involved in the union, but had voted conservative—and wanting to understand where people were coming from. And so I approached that conversation: I'm not trying to change anyone, not trying to—I'm just trying to figure out what's the motivation. And I had some really good conversations with people who had voted for Trump in 2016. I think of a member who works in the Department of Corrections, who said the most important issue for her is for folks coming out of prison to be able to have work. And because that's the thing that keeps them out of prison—but had a particular family and religious upbringing, and that was what her role was. And then, towards the end of the conversation, she asked me jokingly, "Can I still be a member of the unit? Are you going to kick me out of the union." [laughter] "No. We need you." So, I think that's partly it—being able to—and we've worked with her on really, really great campaigns of getting more funding out of the legislature for probation and community services, which is her her work.

LJ [00:16:27] So that's interesting. Do you think that's part of why the one on one—or, the relational meeting—is such a key tool that actually—if if it's much more about how do we change things together, it enables one to build relationship across ideological differences. You don't come in defined by your ideological differences. You come in that you're a person, and I'm a person. And how do we talk together and see what—are there points of connection here? I can't pre-know that. And, it seems to me, particularly in our polarized context, people operate with an ideological checklist and they seem to think they already know whether this person is going to be prepared to work with them or not. And that's certainly one of my experiences in organizing: People I would have—who have very different religious backgrounds to me, very different cultural backgrounds to me—one of the delights of organizing work is that—I've been haunted by the fact that, on the one hand, people I thought would radically disagree with me, and do radically disagree with me on lots of things, turn out to show me love and respect beyond which I deserve. And we did lots of wonderful work together. People who agree with me about many, many things turn out to stab me in the back quicker than I can blink an eye. So it's this curious thing in politics that ideology doesn't necessarily make for the ability to work together, or even cultural sameness or religious sameness, or lots of things we think ease the wheels of genuinely working together don't. And so therefore if we're making our political judgments based on those, we're often going to make bad judgments about who actually we can work together with on an issue. Do you have experiences like that?

LJ [00:18:15] Yeah, you know, a textbook answer: power is organized people and organized money. And so to organize people—I think you can really only do it effectively relationally. And the tool for that is the one on one meeting. I also think it does—you know, you have to have a certain level of patience and commitment and be willing not to know it all and—all of these kinds of qualities that go into someone being willing to invest prime time in one on ones that I think lend themselves to just good leadership. And so, when you have an institution that says, "OK, one on ones are at the heart of the way we build power and carry out our mission," then you attract

leaders who are willing to do that, who are willing to be tested on it and follow through. Then you build a different kind of infrastructure that's more solid.

LB [00:19:25] Right. And I guess it's a more leader full form of organization rather than a one person at the top dictating kind of command and control structure style of these things. Dig into the practicalities a little bit. If you, let's say, wanted to think about this as a minister or you were running a small organization and you wanted to start doing one to ones and create this more relational culture and draw people together to act together in more concerted ways—just talk us through: How do you explain to someone, "Hey, come and meet me for this weird kind of conversation." How does how does that go for you? How do you—if you've never met someone before and they're outside the union or outside the community organizing coalition—how would you set that up? Talk us through the steps that involve setting it up and a little bit about that first, initial moment of having the conversation.

LJ [00:20:27] So, this is the point where people really struggle and where I really struggle. I'm an introvert. Pre my organizing days, I liked my social circle, and that was it. You know, it was pretty narrow. So this is not easy for most people. And I remember on a graph describing it as "you have to run an action on yourself to do it." First, just decide you want to—decide that you're going to do it. And then the second piece is really set time on your schedule to do it, because no one is going to make it urgent for you. So you have to make it urgent for yourself and decide, you know, I'm going to do X amount of these a week or a month or whatever it is—there's just some kind of thing that you're going to keep yourself accountable to. And then I suppose if you were a minister at a church or a small organization, you'd need a little bit of frame for the meeting. So it could be—if you're new somewhere—it could be, "I've just started here, and I'm getting to know the neighborhood or the parish or I'm getting to know our stakeholders" in whatever context that you're in. Tell them why them—they're going to go, "Why me?" So either someone recommended you and said you'd be a good person to talk to or I heard you say this at a meeting and I want to find out a little more about what you mean or your experience. And I want to get to know you. Then they're going to want to know—what it's good to tell people is that you're not singling them out. So I'm trying to have conversations with a number of people. So you're not just—you know, make people feel comfortable. So folks generally tend to need a little bit of a frame. And then treat it as normal. That's the other thing. If you're awkward about it, it'll be awkward. But if you treat it as the most normal thing in the world for you to be doing, then it'll be normal for the other person, too.

LB [00:22:38] And how much do you begin by sharing a bit about yourself? Do you open by just saying a little bit about yourself?

LJ [00:22:44] Yeah, I do. It just it eases the conversation. And I'll do a little framing in the beginning of the conversation, too, because they might have probably forgotten what you said on the phone while you were setting the meeting up. So you do another frame at the beginning and, yeah, I'll generally tend to open with a little bit about myself.

LB [00:23:07] And, generally, what kind of—what are some of the kind of questions you ask to get at what is really motivating people or what they're angry about or what they're passionate about?

LJ [00:23:25] I think you just start—you can ask that: What gets you up in the morning? What do you worry about for yourself or your family? If you could change one thing that you think, "This would be great if it happened, but it would never happen." What's that one thing? You can ask

people, what's what's the mark you want to have in the world? Or in your organization? Or does anything make you angry? What is that?

LB [00:23:52] Yeah, because those are not the kinds of questions we ordinarily ask. And yet we all have thoughts and feelings around this kind of question. So it's the opportunity—I think often, in my experience, giving people the opportunity to talk about those things, actually, one can go quite deep quite quickly as one gives people the opportunity to think and reflect on those aspects of what they're doing and why they're doing it. I think that gets at a very important point about beginning one's politics with listening through something like the tool of the one to one—It sounds odd to call it a tool because it's a relational meeting—but that sense in which, are we taking seriously what people care about, what they cherish, what they love, and beginning there? Or, are we—as so much politics is—it's either, even at its best, a kind of "if we build it, they will come," and then we've got to work out a mechanism to get them to where we're at. And they'll get very frustrated when people don't want to come to the places we're telling them will be good for them. Or, it's all about a kind of technique of recruitment. It's not the sense that we talked about earlier of actually beginning with people rather than program. But I think that is also true in—and I'd be interested to hear your experiences of working with institutions in the community organizing setting, whether in Chicago and London—it's also true, certainly in my experience of churches, there's a decided lack internally of that kind of relational approach of actually rooting what the church is doing, and its programs and services and its ministries, in actually where people are at. It's much more, three people who run the church have an idea and then spend a lot of time trying to get people to turn out on a rainy Thursday to come to that ministry or volunteer for it, rather than beginning with, "Hey, what do you care about? What are the problems in your community you want to see and you want to act with others to address it through forming a ministry here?" Part of it is, I think, saying—by wanting to engage with people about what they care about—is saying that they matter, that they have value, that they're important to you and important to the organization or an important member of this community. And that, I think, is also a very powerful thing to say in so much of the world that doesn't only have value as a consumer or only value as a client or only value as a vote on a—or a signature. It's stepping beyond those ways of valuing people and saying, "No. You, as a person, matter."

LJ [00:26:41] Yep. I think that's exactly right. And you can tell people that they matter, but sitting down with them and having a conversation communicates to them that they matter. And you never have to say, "I'm doing this because you're important or you matter." It sounds a little weird. But people do—I've had this experience quite regularly that at the end of the conversation, people will say, "Thank you. Thank you so much for doing this. I feel like I matter." I've had that experience quite a bit of people reflecting that back to me.

M7 [00:27:23] What comes through from talking to Lina is that the one to one—as a practice—embodies a distinctive vision of democratic politics: one which puts people before program. As a practice, it involves having a very particular kind of conversation with someone, one that seeks to identify what they are passionate or angry about, what they want to see change where they live and where they work, whether they will act on that desire for change, and whether they get others to act with them to address a shared concern. As I mentioned at the outset, I wanted to reflect further on some of the tensions and issues that arise in doing a one to one. To that end, I talk to Arnie Graf and Dean Deida. I wanted to talk to Arnie as he is one of the most experienced organizers in the world and has helped shape its contemporary practice. He began organizing work as part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and then went on to work with the Industrial Areas Foundation for over forty years. More recently, he's worked with the British Labor Party to

develop the insights of organizing for local party politics in the UK. It was great to have Dean as part of the conversation. Dean has in some ways gone in the opposite direction to Arnie. He recently joined the IAF as a community organizer and is learning the craft, having worked for the Democratic Party in New York for a number of years. Dean made the switch because he grew disillusioned with party politics and wanted to do a form of democratic politics that did not instrumentalise his community but took them seriously as people. Dean and I questioned Arnie about his experience of doing one to ones and training others to do them over many decades of involvement in community organizing. I joined them just as they were finishing doing a one to one with each other.

Arnie Graf (AG) [00:29:22] It was really a priest that recruited you.

Dean Deida (DD) [00:29:24] Indirectly, yeah.

LB [00:29:26] Can I just intervene at the moment. I'd love to ask—and beginning with you, Arnie—can you give some examples of not just how to do the one to one, but more like, when one's doing a one to one, what are the kind of responses in oneself when you're identifying leaders or potential organizers? What are the kind of things that go off for you affectively, emotionally, mentally that you think, "Whoa, yeah." They tell a story and you think, "Oh yeah, they're a leader." Or, you get a—they're telling you something about themselves and what makes them mad or what they really cherish, and you think, "I need to press into this person." Almost the kind of internal world of the one to one. Because we don't often—you know, we can read about how you do it—but actually, I think, it would be really helpful to know something of how you approach that and what you're looking for and what gives you energy.

AG [00:30:30] Well, if you're out in the community, I'm trying to—the first thing is, Do they have any kind of following? So, what's going on in my head is, Who do they relate to? What are they part of? If you're not part of anything—which you can find in some communities; so many things have collapsed—the church is gone or whatever, there's not much there—then I'm trying to figure out, Do they know their neighbors? Do they relate to—how long have they lived there? If they lived there—do their kids, if their kids are older and grown today, do they relate to people, if they're still living there? So the first thing is—that I'm looking for is—are they relating to other people? And would they have any pull on people? I'll ask, "Well, I'm not a leader or I know some people." I'll say, "Well, you know, people were talking to me about the school that's a problem or garbage in the community, whatever they're talking about. Could you pull together five people? You know, we could talk about this." And if they answer me, "Yeah," well, "Who would they be? And why? What is it about Mrs. Simon that you think would be a person that you would pull together and would be good for this?" So one thing is—is there—do the have anybody behind them? And, given their story—if you pull out your story or a story that they're willing to share with you—does what they're saying relate to what I think could be a good leader. And some people tell stories and they're nice stories, but they're not—it's nice for their life, I mean, but it's not anything that would necessarily lead you to think that you want to have a second meeting.

LB [00:32:27] So, in relation to Dean's story—the story of Rikers Island—and that he's...

AG [00:32:32] It would be very interesting to me, right? Because at 16, he got himself—he described himself as a violent person and he got himself into difficulty. And he winds up at Rikers. And he's 16. And so he's got anger, which you look for. The question is, with anger, can he direct it?. So I've met people who have anger, good anger, but they can't direct it. They can't discipline—

no matter what you do to try to—it interests me. But in the second or third, I'm trying to think of, what do they do with it other than, you know, something that's destructive. Or they do nothing with it. You meet people who say, "I get so angry. I just—I better stay stay away, because I'll lose my temper and that's not good." All of that. And I'll ask him a story about when they did lose their temper and what happened, and if they if they lose their temper ten times, they tell you, you know—so, I'm looking for their level of anger. And I am—in the question that I asked Dean—I am looking for if they want some power. I mean, I'd ask it in that direct way, because you're talking to somebody and "You want power?" is a weird question. "What do you want to make happen?" And when people say, "Well, I'd like to see the community come together." "Well, what are you willing to do to bring them together?" Most people often give you the general answer: "Well, I'd like to see the community come together. I'd like to see us do this. I'm tired of all the violence. I'd like to see—or whatever. I'm tired of all the garbage the city never comes around and picks up the trash. We don't have any"—whatever they're talking about. Those are the types of things. And lastly, I would say if they have any curiosity about me. "Who is this guy?" [laughter] If they want to know who you are. Not deep and all that. You're only meeting first time, but, who are you? "And so you work for the AIM organization. What do you do that for?" That makes me even more interested in a person.

LB [00:35:00] Because they have a kind of curiosity and interest in the world around them. They're not—it's not all focused on themselves. There's an external point of reference.

AG [00:35:11] Exactly.

LB [00:35:12] And Dean, what are some of the things that you've—both on the online form of this—it's a strange kind of mode—but some of the insights you've garnered for yourself around how you're responding and what led you to see that teacher—that had that principle—as someone who had an energy for change when you first met with them and did a one to one with them? What were the points of when you thought, "Oh, yeah, this is someone here?"

DD [00:35:37] She was really, honestly, and genuinely interested in how some of the kids and parents and families in her school are doing. But beyond just the interest of getting the school to function academically—and I think one of the reasons why we clicked was because I also have a genuine interest in people that are just genuine. And so because of that, we had some good chemistry in conversations. And it was kind of ironic because she had someone working for her that at first was the person that you would have pegged clearly as someone that could really make people move in the community—because he's was was once an actor. So he's like, a very handsome guy, a very charismatic person, and always has people around him talking to him. And every time I'd meet with him—she just would assume because she doesn't have any of that, she doesn't feel like she's an extrovert or anything like that—so she would always direct me to him. And so she'd direct me to him and I'd have meetings with him. And all the guy would do is talk about himself and the things he wants to do for himself, not for the school or the community. So at some point I'm talking to Michael—Michael's my supervisor—he's like, "You got to stop talking to this guy." And I'm like, "But she keeps directing me to him. So I finally sit down and I'm like, "I'm not talking to him anymore. I want to talk to you." And then that led to where we are now.

LB [00:37:10] And Arnie, can I come back to you? In terms of the anger piece, what Dean just said there about someone who had a genuine care and love for the institution or for the people in the community—how far—it's not just a question of that external—they're looking beyond themselves—but there's a care for the world around them. And how often do you encounter that?

How do you hear that articulated? What are some of the pointers towards that that you register when you're doing one to ones with people?

AG [00:37:47] Well, if the care is more than general. right? So, you say, an issue is—one of the things that makes an issue instead of a problem is that it's specific, not general. Look, people can say, "Well, you know, I really care about the community, but.." Or, "I care about the school or the church," or whatever they're involved in. But if they're not—I try to take that as a kind of, in our language, take it down from a problem to an issue. So, specifically, what have you done? Or, specifically, what are you doing?" "Well, I tried to do it, but then the principal wouldn't let me." So, "Why did you let that—why did you let him get in your way?" So you look—care has to—if there's no anger behind the care—the anger we talk about—I don't mean temper and crazy, but the anger we talk about—and they care, I want to know what they've done about it. And if they've not done anything about it, are they willing to do something about it? And if they're not really sure, then I don't necessarily care to come back a second time.

LB [00:39:03] So it's not a vague sentiment—like I have a generalized sense of, isn't it terrible there's poverty in the world or isn't it terrible that poor kids don't get a good education? There's a sense in which you're looking for folks who've—they've got—there's an active concern to try and address a real problem in the world. There's a real wound here that's got concrete shape—that they're trying to do something about it and that organizing, then, is—you're coming with a means to actually bring meaningful change. And so they've tried different ways or they've—that's certainly my experience of it. That's one of the things: they've tried various things, and then are they going to be hungry, if you like, for a meaningful way to bring change to address that issue or other kinds of things they're concerned about?

AG [00:39:55] Right. Or, they haven't, but they want to. I don't know how many times I said to people, "That's that's a nice expression, a nice sentiment, a nice feeling. But it doesn't do a darn thing." [laughter] Different language from that. But, you know, for the community it doesn't do a damn thing. It means nothing. It might make you maybe feel better because you care and you pine for something or other. But generally it's a waste of time. And so, you know, "Fine. I mean, you be how you want to be. It's not for me, but I appreciate meeting you. And if you ever want to do something, you know where I am and you can call me up and we can see if we can do something." So you do—because you get a lot of people who generally are concerned about the local school or this or that or whatever, but they don't do anything at all when you challenge them and you say, "Well, OK, great, you are concerned about it? Here are some—what would you like to do about it?" And they say, "This should be changed, that." "Well, are you willing to get together with some people and myself and we could figure out what to do about it." "Oh, well, you know, I'm busy. I got two jobs." Whatever. "I've got my favorite soap opera to watch at 3:30. I can't go." They don't say that, but whatever. And if you're meeting a person—you're in a home—you're not angry. You're polite. I just say to myself, "I'm moving on." And I cut the individual meeting short.

LB [00:41:42] How agitational are you ever in a meeting?

AG [00:41:48] I try to be every time I'm meeting somebody, but it takes different forms. People, when they think of agitation they think of somebody just coming at you, coming at you, coming at you—I call that irritation. You don't want to irritate somebody. So there's a difference between agitating and irritating. And some of the organizers get confused. They irritate the hell out of people. They irritate me. [laughter] You're not agitating. You've got to agitate inside of a context

of how you try to—and you agitate in different ways, given the person. But after about twenty minutes, twenty five minutes...

LB [00:42:29] I don't want to lose that. What would be some of the—give us some examples of that agitation.

AG [00:42:36] Well, irritating, to me, is just—let's say the person says, you know, there are problems in the local school and my child goes there and I don't like the fact that recess is only ten minutes instead of twenty five minutes—I'm making stuff up, but whatever. And so I say, "Well, what do you think should be done about that?" "Well, we should—" "Well, who could make that change?" "Well, the principal could decide." I said, "OK, how many other people feel that way?" "Well, I don't know. I'm not sure." And, "I've talked to a couple of parents and I said, would you bring those couple of parents together?" "Well, I don't really have the time." "Now, look, you just said that you were interested and you were concerned, but now you say you don't have the time. I mean, what is it you want to do it or you don't want to do it?" That's irritation. A lot of organizers do—you know, in my experience, running with them, I can't even tell you how many individual meetings I've run with the organizers over the fifty years—I mean, thousands—that irritates the hell out of me. And when we go outside, I'll say, "Who are you to go into somebody's home and irritate the hell out of them? First of all, it's lousy for the organization, because we get a terrible reputation. These people are great, you know? But anyway, who are you? Why are you so self-righteous? What the hell are you doing?" But agitation would be would be coming at the person differently. "Well, if you could do something about it, what would it be? Who would you have to—let's think together how we might do something about it." "Well, why—I'm not an expert. What do I—" "Look, you're expert about your child. You know your kid better than anybody else and what he needs or she needs. So, I take you as an expert. Now, look, what do you—if we could, what would you do and who would we have to talk to?" And, "Well, I don't know if I want to." "Well, maybe it's not as important to you that as you thought." "You know, I didn't say that." I said, "Well, then what do you want to do?" I think that's more agitation than irritation and saying what's wrong with you? And you say you care about something, but you really don't—you won't do anything about it. And that's the kind of person that I'll leave after about twenty five minutes. I'll thank them for me being in the house. And it was lovely meeting them. And I wish them well.

LB [00:45:18] That's really helpful. I think that's a great distinction. That's really, really helpful. It's easy to get caught doing one or the other...

AG [00:45:26] Yeah, and it's easy for organizers to get self-righteous.

LB [00:45:31] And I think that's—just say a little bit about—from both of you I'd be interested to hear on this— a little bit about—it is easy, if you're passionate about an issue—let's say you're going out, there's a living wage initiative or having to do with housing or, you know, increasing internet access—these are important issues. You're passionate about it. You see the need of it, as an organizer, and you're not getting a response from someone. What are the ways in which you approach or help yourself not get angry with them or not come over as a self-righteous vanguard who knows better how everyone else should live? In my experience, it's partly just—I'm just interested in them as a person and I'm trying to hear from them as a person rather than I'm recruiting them to an issue. But I'm interested in how either of you have a—Dean, if I start with you—how you handle that.

DD [00:46:33] Sure. I mean, the issue can't be more important to me than than to them. I remember going up in the elevator with the engineers for the wifi program in a public housing building, and this old timer is screaming and cursing on us: We're stuck in the elevator and it's not moving; it's like one hundred degrees outside; it's like one hundred and thirty inside the elevator. And we're saturated. And the guy's upset and he's banging on the door and he's saying he deals with this all the time. So I look at him—I'm not here for this, but I look at him and I'm like, "Let's do something about it. Let's do something about it." And he looks at me and he's like—he thinks for a second—then he says, "How much you going to pay me?" "Get the fuck out of here. I'm not going to pay you to do something about the elevator. Stay stuck in here, then." That was the end of the conversation. [laughter] But that's really a perfect example of how a lot of the conversations might go, particularly—I don't know where other people are organizing—but I organized with a lot of folks that live in poverty, and they don't want to make time for something unless it's got some kind of monetary interest for them. Or the issue is just that desperate that they don't care—whatever it takes to do something about it. And so figuring out who those people are—or people that have been exposed to a different way of thinking or organizing or they have some kind of affection for the people that are going through the problem—they don't necessarily live in poverty, whatever—somebody that has space in their life to try to make a change by doing something and not just waiting for somebody to do something for them. There's a lot of people that are really—my biggest challenge, I think, is that everybody thinks we're going to do something for them. They're like, "Alright, here's the problem. Alright, thanks. Fix it for me." I'm like, "No, no, no. What are you going to do to help me fix this problem? Otherwise, nothing's going to happen here."

LB [00:48:48] Arnie, any reflections from you on that—on the problem of how do you prevent yourself either ending up using the one to one to recruit people to an issue you're working on or your own kind of, "I just know better what's going on and why can't this person get it?" I call it the self-righteous vanguard problem. It's like, "We know better how everyone else should live."

AG [00:49:15] Yeah, well, I fight that a lot. I guess what I, what I do is I call it the twenty minute rule. If it's going like that and I'm feeling self-righteously angry, it's time for me to get out of there. And so I thank them for their time and I excuse myself—because anything that I do in there, if I'm feeling that way, is useless and could be damaging—because sometimes you do individual meetings and the person shows no interest. And two months later, they're at a meeting, a bigger meeting, and they'll come up to you or you notice them and you say to yourself, I wonder what Joe's doing there, man. I walked out on that meeting—not rudely, but I mean—well, some guy brought him there and a friend or whatever, and then, you know, so it isn't always—you also don't want to burn all your bridges, and there's no point to it because it is self righteous anger. And so what's the point?

LB [00:50:28] Listening to Arnie and Dean reinforced what I learned from Lina—that doing one to ones is not just about building relational networks, but crucially, it is also a way of finding people who care about their community and are prepared to act with others to make it a more just and generous place to live and work. The conversations with Arnie and Dean help me see that the one to one demands a way of listening to others so we both hear what they care about and also who they are and what makes them tick. This kind of double listening is difficult, but thankfully the practice itself trains us to do this kind of listening well. As we've heard, the one to one—or relational meeting—is a distinct practice and discipline that ensures democratic politics puts people before program, grounding shared action in the actual lives, experiences, and stories of people. As a practice, it ensures action to bring change for the better is done with those most

affected rather than to or for them. It takes time and patience and can be hard work, but it also changes us, helping us become more attuned and responsive to the people among whom we live and work. So I encourage you to start doing one to ones yourself. If you're interested in learning more, I include suggested reading in the show notes. Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, in which I explored the one to one as the basic tool of a relationally driven form of democratic politics. I hope you'll join me next time as I continue this journey through the different elements of community organizing.