

## Actualization: Town Meeting In Oklahoma

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I want to share with you the journey of actualizing Town Meeting in Oklahoma over this past year. I want to tell you my experience of Town Meeting, some of the things I have learned, and some keys I have found.

We launched Town Meeting from a very firm launching pad: the Town Meeting that was held in Ada, Oklahoma. We call it the first Town Meeting although we had a couple of LCC's in Oklahoma City. But the Town Meeting in Ada was the first one that had the sort of publicity that you could have reprinted, distributed and shown. The Town Meeting in Ada had 280 people present. The Chairman of the State Bicentennial Commission had been so excited about Town Meeting that she had endorsed it and we had that sort of authorization. We learned something from Ada. That Town Meeting had taken us eight months to set up. We went there once a week. We had three or four strong Movement colleagues on the steering committee. We learned that if you are going to do 72 Town Meetings in the bi-metro, you cannot do them the way we had done in Ada. Something radically new was called for. It was with that sort of wisdom that we took off in August on our trek around the bi-metro.

With our grid in hand, we visited close to 70 communities in 100+° heat. It was a fantastic way of getting to know the territory, of getting familiar with the turf. We had our grid literally branded on our eyelids by the close of that quarter. During that time and since we have become aware of many things. I became aware for the first time of leaves turning from yellow to gold, and then finally to brown. I became aware again of ice storms, of steers on the side of the road in the cold rain, huddled up together shivering. I became aware of spring, of the leaves beginning to turn green. I became aware of spring wild flowers beginning to bloom on the roadside. I became aware of the wheat beginning to grow and finally being harvested with the combines in the fields. But most of all, what I became aware of was the fact that every community was a new possibility, a new relationship and every community was a unique community. It raised the question, "How do you begin to actualize 72 Town Meetings?"

One of the keys for me at that point was the phasing chart. By having your transrational plan you can begin to focus. You begin to cover your geography because what you know initially is that you are going to have a Town Meeting in every polis in order to literally cover the state with Town Meeting. With the phasing chart you had your particular focus for a quarter. You knew, of course, that it was going to shift. But most important in knowing how we might get from one to 72 was the fact that every community was on the journey to a Town Meeting the seed of the Town Meeting had already been planted in those 72 communities just by putting the names on the chart. It was just a matter of time as to when the Town Meeting would happen. For some it would be earlier and for some later. But already the seeds were there. It was dependent on the plans that we made, but it was also dependent on that community and their awakening or readiness to have a Town Meeting. we needed to be watchful and to know when the rich moment was to move on any particular

community. How do you go out on circuits and day after day look for the signs and yet be able to shift your plan when you need to shift? I will tell you the signs I look for.

First of all, I just believe that in every community there are Those Who Care. There are people with a vision, people who are awakened and every community has them. It is a matter of finding those, in order to get the nod for Town Meeting to happen. So you take every possible tool you can find in order to get to that person in a community. You have your network. You get all the names of the presidents of the clubs, the bicentennial chairman and the friends of friends of friends. You go into a community with all of your names and move until you find the one who will say "Yes." It is that one who cares that you are looking for. Sometimes it happens very quickly, sometimes it doesn't, but what I know is that it will happen at some point. But you can't stay in a community too long. If after two or three visits you have not found that one, you need to move onto another community. You bracket that one for a while and move on. Also, when you are in the community, you have to move quickly. You have to listen, you have to move with great finesse, and most important of all, you never want a "no" said to you. You always want to leave the door open to go back.

But, in spite of everything, sometimes no's are said. A graphic example was in Ponca City, which was a key polis city for us. We had found the two who would be the coordinators, we had a steering committee set, and it was going well. They had two meetings and in the midst of the second meeting they raised the question of getting the bicentennial committee of that community to endorse the Town Meeting. That seemed like the right way to go so they sent representatives to the bicentennial committee to ask for the endorsement. To their surprise, not only did the committee say, "No, we will not endorse Town Meeting," but they also said that they would not allow a Town meeting to be held in Ponca City. The steering committee was angry. They didn't know what to do. Having done some framing in that community before we strafed setting up the Town Meeting, we knew that the person who had said "no" to Town Meeting was in fact the stronghold and to fight that would have been a mistake, at that time. So, we suggested to that community that they postpone the town meeting for a year and by that time the Bicentennial would have gone out of being and by that time that town will have been surrounded by Town Meetings. August 26, there will be a Town Meeting ten miles from Ponca City. We are going to go in the back door. So, although a "no" was said, at the same time the door was left open to go back later. It was just not wise to attack that stronghold at that time.

And there are others. We went into Duncan. That was another key polis community for us and we had our list of persons to see and everything. We called, we made appointments and by the second time we went into Duncan we realized that every time we showed up there to see someone we were going to the same bank. The mayor was in the bank, the president of the Kiwanis was in the bank, the bicentennial chairman was in the bank. There didn't seem to be any way to get outside that bank. The bank just sat there as a bulwark of "We're not going to do anything." So we said, "Duncan, you are bracketed for a while."

We moved in another direction and had a Town Meeting in Lawton. Lawton is 30 miles from Duncan and there was a man in the Lawton Town Meeting who happened to be the Director of Mental Health in Oklahoma. After the Town Meeting he was so excited he came over to me and said, "Have you had a Town Meeting in Duncan?" I said, "As a matter of fact, we have not had a Town Meeting in Duncan but I sure would like to." And he said, "Well, I know that there are people over there that would like to have a Town Meeting." And I said, "Well, if you do, I would really wish you would get me in contact with them." In a week I had a call front an office in Duncan: "We have set up some meetings for you to come down and talk about Town Meeting." So we went back to Duncan with fear and trembling. He told the story and Duncan had a Town Meeting --a fantastic Town Meeting on June 19. The thing that was so amazing was that all the people who we could not move were there for the Town Meeting. In the evaluation after Town Meeting, one of them said, "I knew the first time you came to this Town that we needed to have a Town Meeting in Duncan." I am still scratching my head over that one.

What is the key? What is the key that unlocks a community? One key to having a great Town Meeting is, of course, the steering committee. I learned very quickly that there are two kinds of steering committees. One is a committee that is in despair. Their story is that you could not possibly get anybody to come out in this community for a Town Meeting. It is just impossible. No one comes out for anything. No one comes for meetings. We have only two leaders in town and that is it. Then, there is the steering committee that says, "A thousand people are going to be here. We have to have a huge place to hold this Town Meeting." Before you know it they have gotten the coliseum. They are so busy doing the practices of feeding and getting ready for a thousand people they don't have time to care for attendance.

Another thing I learned very quickly was that they were not impressed with our manuals. They looked at them, and they said, "It's nice," but immediately they said, "Here, this is the way we do it." But what I did notice was that they were impressed with the stories of how other communities did it. Another thing I learned was now hard it is to care for a steering committee. It seems that things either go well or they don't go well, but you can never get a handle on it. It doesn't seem to depend on how clever we are, how clever our tools are, or how great our gimmicks are. They just either go well or they don't. But you know that they appreciate the fact that you are sitting in the room.

Walters, Oklahoma, had a great steering committee. They met once a week in the Chamber Office at coffee break time and Garland Petty said, "This meeting will not last but fifteen minutes." And every Wednesday morning we would go in, sit on a table at the front of the room, sit there like a General, and would say, "Did you do this, did you do that, next week you have got to do this, you have got to do that fifteen minutes, we have got to get back to work." And that was a steering committee meeting. Well, Walters had a Town Meeting of 200+ people.

I keep asking myself, "Why is it so hard?" I finally began to realize that if it were easy we probably wouldn't need to be doing Town Meeting. Our contradiction is unawakened communities and the steering committee is a reflection of that community. when you have seen the community as it is, when you have seen the community naked, it is painful and hard and it wearies you. But you trust life, and you build another plan, and they trust you. They trust what we have told them. It is their Town Meeting. You do everything you possibly can to make that a great day, a great Town Meeting without taking the Town Meeting away from them.

In spite of all my anxieties, every Town Meeting has been a great happening. I think of Anadarko. I do not know of a community that was a more broken and pain-filled community. The friction between the Indian and the white there is one that is know all over the state. Some have called Anadarko's Town Meeting a failure --only 35 people showed up. But it was the greatest day Anadarko every had. Those 35 knew at the end of that day that Anadarko would never be the same. You had an awakened core of people in Anadarko.

I think of Guthrie. Guthrie, Oklahoma is a community of around 10,000 people that used to be 30,000 people. It was the territorial capital of Oklahoma, but one night, in the middle of the night, the state seal was stolen and taken to Oklahoma City. Guthrie woke up the next morning and it was no longer the territorial capitol. All of their leaders left, the population dropped from 30,000 to 10,300. This happened in 1906. But when you ask about Guthrie they say, "You can't have a Town Meeting in Guthrie because you understand all of our leaders left." They would tell you the story as if it was last night that it had happened. But there was one man in that town who cared and he said, "Guthrie is going to have a Town Meeting. " Fortunately he happened to be a banker and Guthrie had a Town Meeting. It was a fine Town Meeting and the greatest day that Guthrie has ever had. At the end of the day they were awakened to the fact that, "Of course, we are a community. We are the leaders and we do not have to wait." I went back in the spring when they were celebrating their 75th anniversary. That community was alive. All sorts of things were going on. The Oklahoma magazine did a feature article on Guthrie and the slogan was in the article, "A Glorious Past and a Beckoning Future." Guthrie is a new community.

You know, Anadarko and Guthrie are not alone. It is happening around the world and in Oklahoma we are beginning to see new communities appear. You might ask, "Well, what do you see?" I tell you what I see. I go back to a community and I see a sparkle in their eyes. I go back and see that they walk differently --there is sort of a dance. But I guess most important of all, when we go back. we begin to tell stories about Maliwada, about Oombulqurri, City Five and you know they hear what you are saying.

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