

## CHAPTER 5

### *The Matter of Power: Organizing as Women of Faith of Color*

Mollie Costello and Sandhya Jha

*Note: This essay is written in interview style with each author reporting on the other as well as points where their work is jointly narrated. Subheadings alert the reader to changes in voice. Enjoy!*

**T**he city of Oakland, California, is the activist's wildest fantasy, and the city of Oakland will break an activist's heart over and over. Oakland's powerful organizing history includes:

- Liberty Hall in Oakland is the last remaining building in the country to have housed a chapter of the Marcus Garvey–led United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA);
- C. L. Dellums, one of the earliest leaders of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was from Oakland; and
- the Black Panther Party was founded by Oaklanders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.

But in a city that increasingly resents civil rights activists as disrupting “revitalization,” we don't always remember why the UNIA exists. In

the late 1800s, many black leaders did not think the United States could ever confront its own racism effectively enough to make a safe home for blacks. We sometimes also forget that Dellums was fired from his job as a sleeping car porter in 1929 because he got involved with a union. A union that had the audacity to demand things like customers referring to black porters by their real names instead of calling them all "George." And while we debate the armed nature of the Panthers, we rarely discuss the fact that they came into existence because in Oakland in the 1960s, white officers would not patrol black neighborhoods except to harass, intimidate, and shake down young black men, while refusing to respond to calls for help from those same communities.

In fact, the story goes, when Henry Kaiser sought to build shipyards in Oakland and Richmond, California, during WWII, he sought the most productive laborers to work at those plants: he went to the South and recruited black sharecroppers who knew hard work. Recognizing that he was about to transform the demographics of those cities, while he was visiting the South, he recruited a police force who would know how to manage sharecroppers in their new home. He recruited Jim Crow-trained police to move to Oakland and Richmond and join the force. Now, a lot of the activists in Oakland working to create racial equity and justice are nonreligious, but the fact of the matter is that to be an organizer in Oakland means having a great deal of faith in the face of this history, a history that continues to play itself out today.

As organizers and ministers, we have faith, despite ourselves. There is certainly a church community that buoys that faith, but where we practice our faith is in the neighborhood. In fact, the main reason we are in a church is because we first encountered that church in the neighborhood. The two of us may have met at an action for the Justice for Alan Blueford Coalition, or we may have met at First Congregational Church of Oakland when Sandhya was preaching. Oakland is a city of 400,000, but it's also a small town for the activist set and a small town for the spiritual progressive set. The Venn diagram of the two groups meant that the two of us were destined to be friends and comrades.

### *Meet Mollie*

Mollie is founder and director of the Alan Blueford Center for Justice. The Bible story that might describe Mollie best is the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8), where the woman shows up before a judge who neither fears God nor has compassion, and she keeps showing up until the judge finally relents and gives her the justice she seeks just so she'll leave him alone. Mollie knew and sat with the family of Alan Blueford in the days and weeks and months after Alan, an eighteen-year-old just about to graduate from Skyline High School, was shot and killed by a police officer who then shot himself in the foot, pretending he killed Alan in self-defense. Mollie spoke up alongside Alan's family and other coalition members at city council meeting after city council meeting, demanding justice apply to the corrupt officer, compensation for the family, and an overhaul of a police system so corrupt and mismanaged that the federal government put it into receivership (that is, the federal government took custody of the department because the city could no longer be trusted to manage it). Mollie's persistence did not end there: she began a community center to remember Alan and to foster strong young leaders in the community who will not just demand but create justice in our community.

### *Meet Sandhya*

Sandhya pastored First Christian Church of Oakland (not First Congregational, where Sandhya and Mollie know each other from, described in the next section) for seven years. She started out with the dream of taking the ten people left in that 40,000-square-foot facility and helping them catch a spirit of renewal and desire to participate in God's radical work of liberation. She hoped to take the beleaguered and scared people in the upper room and nudge them into being Pentecost people, connecting to people of every culture and sharing with them the possibility of a community driven by God's abundant and all-inclusive love. When it became clear the congregation was not

passionate about changing significantly in order to be the church that the community needed, she asked a different question. What did the church want its legacy to be?

The remaining members had grown up in Oakland and lived through the ongoing violence: they wanted to create peace in the midst of violence. Knowing that God is at work in the community, Sandhya helped the congregation turn their building into a collective of forty different nonprofits all working to create access, opportunity, and dignity as the means of creating peace in the Bay Area. Sandhya wanted her ministry to be helping a Saul congregation become a Paul congregation; instead, her ministry ended up primarily helping her church avoid being the rich young ruler that clung to his possessions in ways that limited the building up of the Kingdom of God.

### *Meeting and Finding Common Cause*

First Congregational Church of Oakland, or First Congo, as the church is fondly referred to, came onto Mollie's radar because one of its active leaders, Nichola Torbett, showed up for the Justice for Alan Blueford Coalition in real, risking-arrest ways. And Sandhya preaches there regularly. Mollie found herself thinking maybe this was a church where people walked the walk, where Mollie might get to be her full self—her full spiritual and activist and feminist and embodied self. Because that's not guaranteed in churches.

The Justice for Alan Blueford Coalition did not come from his home church. Alan Blueford's family faithfully participated in a large church in East Oakland for years. Alan's preschool was a foregone conclusion: he attended the preschool at the church. But when Alan's life came to a brutal end a week before he was supposed to graduate from high school, his pastor and his church didn't show up for him or his family, didn't demand justice and full accounting from the city, even though the pastor had power and influence among elected officials. Standing up for Alan would have cost the pastor regular access to the police chief and potentially city and state funding for social service projects. Standing up for Alan would have cost the pastor and church

power they had worked so hard to capture for the sake of senior housing and youth programming and the preschool Alan had attended. Standing up for Alan would have cost them power that their pastor courted by briefly campaigning for a Republican governor.

And there it is: power. The thing that makes decisions for us. The thing that justifies the decisions we make. The thing that creates a sense of foregone conclusions. The thing we think we're all defining the same way—even those of us in the church—which God defines in a completely different way.

There is nothing glamorous about having no power. Many of the people we work with day to day have been told they have no power, and so have we. Many of the people we work with have been told they don't deserve power, and so have we. Our community includes children in foster care whose fates are decided by harried strangers. It includes young black and Latino boys whose slightest misbehaviors have gotten them expelled from kindergarten. It includes LGBTQ youth who have been kicked out of their faithful Christian homes and into the streets. It includes girls who have been told throughout their lives that they are unworthy of love until they run away and meet a pimp (sometimes not much older than them) who tells them he loves them and then lets them know that if they love him, they'll help him earn some money by standing on International Boulevard until someone buys them for an hour or so. It includes black and brown men and women who have experienced police harassment and brutality and have lost family members to police-related murders as well as street violence and domestic violence. It includes Asian, Latino, and African immigrants and refugees who contribute immensely to our infrastructure and live in constant fear of whether they can stay together with their own families for yet another day. It includes returned citizens, formerly incarcerated people, who are not allowed to live with family members if their family members live in federally funded homes and who are not allowed interviews for most jobs in the community.

Our community includes many hurt people who hurt people, people seeking dignity and people seeking control, people seeking to

build themselves up and seeking to tear each other down. A sense of powerlessness and a desire for power sometimes drive these actions at the same time that most of the decisions are made by people with power who never question why they have it or whether they should have it. Many of those decisions are made to preserve power for some people at the expense of others. For example, police officers' associations do not create space for restorative justice in communities, functionally requiring officers to uniformly support any police-related violence for the sake of preserving bargaining power, keeping dangerous officers in the system, and punishing officers who speak out against unaccountable behavior on the force.

Both of us have been part of systems that sought to take away or negate our power (Mollie as a nurse at a major hospital and Sandhya as a pastor); both of us have navigated the complex intersection of privilege and marginality of being light-skinned mixed-race women of color. Both of us seek to strengthen in others the same thing we strengthen in ourselves: an awareness of personal power and an ability to honor the power of others so that together we can transform our communities.

Here's where our faith matters the most in the work we're doing: we have the gift of knowing that God defines power differently than men do. (God probably defines power differently than most women do, too, but definitely differently than men.) And we have seen God's definition of power tangibly in the work we do, when we do it from a place of authenticity and a place of love.

## **Redefining Power**

### *Sandhya's Story*

Sandhya works with a multifaith organization to create policies that preserve the dignity of immigrants in our community. The immigrants she works with either fled dangerous situations or could not find a way to support their families in their country of origin on a continent shaped by US policies that limit other nations' economic possibilities for US gain. They contribute to this economy while supporting

families in their motherland, whether they are here legally or not. US residents rely on immigrants' low-wage work for cheap goods and services while demonizing them in political discourse. Our economy is built on their labor, and some of them have read enough of the Bible to know that God values them fully as God's beloved children. Therefore, our political systems should as well. And so they organize and advocate, and the faith community organizes and advocates alongside them.

Our county's sheriff is hostile to immigrants and for years participated in something called "ICE holds": if someone was pulled over for something like a faulty taillight or speeding, and if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had that person on a list of undocumented immigrants, the sheriff had them jailed overnight, long enough for ICE to show up and put them into detention. No matter how many letters the faith community sent, no matter how many community events the organization held, the sheriff refused to meet with them. Showing up at his office yet again, fatigued and desperate, the group—including people who were undocumented immigrants themselves—sat down in the grass outside his office. They prayed silently and fervently that he would finally listen to them. It may be that the sheriff saw them outside his window and felt embarrassed, or it may be that as a Catholic, he recognized people praying and identified with them. It may be that the Holy Spirit blew through his office. But in that moment two years ago he met with them and heard their stories and prayers, and he ultimately reversed his position.

### **Mollie's Story**

On the day after Thanksgiving 2014, Mollie was part of a group called the Black Friday 14. They took over a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station and shut down trains for almost four hours (in honor of the four hours that young Michael Brown lay dead in the street after his murder by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, in August that year). This was on the biggest shopping day of the year,

a day people from the rest of the Bay Area flood into San Francisco to enjoy decorations and cash in on great holiday shopping deals. As the fourteen black community leaders were arrested and taken (ironically, on a BART train) to the nearest police station to be processed through the system, they shared with the police officers their rationale for taking this stance. They looked the officers in the eyes and shared stories of people lost to police violence. And they witnessed the tears in the eyes of the officers who recognized the humanity of the victims and their families, some of them being parents themselves.

### God's Definition of Power

We live in a community saturated with a very particular way of determining power: power over others, power to get what we need even if that means keeping those things from others, power to get as much as we can for as little cost as possible (financially, physically, or emotionally). We live in a community where there are winners and losers. And today more than ever in its history, our city is steeped in people with power moving into the city, not recognizing their power, and not recognizing how their power and agency are pushing out whole communities of people with less money and therefore less power.

We're saddened by the schisms that show up within the movement for justice. We've joked that the right wing doesn't need to divide us; we do it ourselves. We divide ourselves particularly through *purity politics* (Sandhya's term): people needing for everyone else to use the same language they use and the same tactics, or else those other people aren't considered *really* part of the movement. We watch divisions within the groups we work with, whether it be Black Lives Matter or housing justice organizations. Even the most radical among us are vulnerable to the politics of power: how it gets wielded, who is allowed to wield it, and what bright lines divide us even when we are on the same side of an issue.

But we're fueling the revolution with a different sort of power. It is the power of self-love and other-love. It is the power of demanding



accountability but not relying on those with power to give it up, because our power comes from within and from each other. It is the power of a God who can move the hearts even of our adversaries if we speak and act always authentically, boldly, and out of love (even if that love includes righteous outrage at injustice). It is the power of our sister wading into the Pacific Ocean and dedicating her life to Christ and her community and the constant fight for her own liberation and all of ours.

On September 1, 2015, the two of us watched the sun set on the beach in Alameda, California, as we participated in the baptism of a beloved sister of ours. She had written her own baptismal vows, including the following: "Will you strive for justice, peace, and freedom among all people, accepting the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression?" We prayed to the four directions, we called in the ancestors, we invited elders to bless our sister, and she sang "I give my life away" before walking into the Pacific Ocean to be baptized into a life in Christ and into a life of self—and other—liberation. What's true for both of us is that there is nowhere we would have rather been that day . . . and that we know there are very few spaces like that particular church that could create just that kind of baptism.

Che Guevara is quoted as saying, "at the risk of sounding ridiculous, the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." We're set up not to love each other. And perhaps the most revolutionary act we create isn't in the streets or in the faces of police or elected officials. Perhaps it is in the subtle ways that we reject the "us versus them" paradigm the world tries to force on us, knowing that it is a false construct. It is the way we (sometimes gingerly) create connections between radicals and moderates in our programs and events and in our physical spaces. (Even harder can be creating connections between radicals, the way Mollie did when three different socialist groups sought to support the Justice for Alan Blueford Coalition but fought among themselves. Mollie had to remind them that no one but them saw their differences and that they were there because of what they actually agreed upon.)

We spend so much time fighting against ourselves on the edges of this movement, when love is our strongest weapon for ending the systems we seek to resist. And that is what people with power have been trying to kill since the days of the plantation, by tearing apart families generation after generation. It is what people with power have done by pitting each generation of immigrants against black Americans so that we do not realize how our experiences and our future are enmeshed. And so we choose to create love, unity, and community as the foundation of all of our justice work. What we're best known for is our protesting. Our most important work, though, might be the work of weaving people together, not getting trapped in purity politics, and trying in our own way to undo the trap that is purity politics.

We create spaces for young people to be creative as well as fight oppression. We create spaces for people to really get to know each other on a deep level, to trust each other as well as stand up for their rights. We are facing down the economic violence and state-sanctioned violence that result in intracommunity violence in our streets; we are facing down capitalism's contempt for our humanity. And Audre Lorde's statement remains true today that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>1</sup> So we need to use different tools and build a very different foundation. Those tools might take us in some scary directions if we stay true to them. (What does it mean to contemplate the possibility of a restorative justice process where genuinely repentant police and the families of their victims could begin to create healing together?) But we know that using the master's version of power will ultimately harm those on the margins more than those with that kind of power.

THE monumental, defining, all-important, essential *revolutionary act* we have to do as humans is to use our immense collective cognitive powers to find a way to *stop burning each other with the fire*

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<sup>1</sup> She goes on to point out that even if we beat him at his own game temporarily, we're still playing his game. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Berkeley, CA: Crossing, 2007), 110–14

(the power) we discovered how to harness over 100,000 years ago. After we discovered how to control fire as early humans, we continued to advance, in terms of the power we can leverage (wind, solar, nuclear) and the places we can venture (to the ocean depths and to the moon and beyond). Where have those billions of dollar and millennia of intellectual wrestling landed us? They've landed us where we are now: a time of once-again growing inequity and codified injustice. In the name of God, because God is Love, it is time to harness the energies of Love.

The two of us harbor a mixture of pride and sadness that the modern-day civil rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, is led primarily by women of color (and specifically queer and immigrant-connected black women). We are proud because it is a powerful women-led movement. While US white nationalist history often tells the story of abolition and civil rights as a male-only movement, there were many women who led as well, such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Dorothy Height, Coretta Scott King, Ericka Huggins, and many others. Part of the reason for the visibility of women's leadership, and that of trans and queer folk, in Black Lives Matter can be attributed to legal, political, and cultural changes in women's access to power. In our opinion, it is also affected by the New Jim Crow, which has placed so many black and brown men behind bars.<sup>2</sup> There is something deeply horizontal, though, about the modern-day civil rights movement, something deeply relational that indicates that different understanding of power in a women-led movement. It is about "low ego, high impact" and being a leader-full movement. It is about black self-love and black other-love and about solidarity from Asian and Latino and even Anglo allies without misappropriation of leadership. There are men as well as women embracing these values, but there is

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<sup>2</sup>The *New Jim Crow* is a term coined by Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010). It is our opinion that it took brutal systemic racism locking up a generation of black and brown men before the leadership of black and brown women could shine through the patriarchy that muted their voices for generations in the fight for racial justice.

something about women's power that shapes a movement differently, we suspect.

It is the same kind of power we have found—not in very many churches but in a special one, a church that gives both of us compassion when we are fatigued, gentle embrace when we feel battered, and that pushes us out the door to do God's justice, but does not push us out there alone. It is the power of God for the sake of God's people. We hope to encounter it in church, but we do encounter it in the streets every day.