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You're More Powerful Than You Think

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE *to* MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Eric Liu

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For Jená

POWER IS A GIFT

Why do most people think power is a dirty word? Because they think it means coercion and violence. They associate it with the worst in human nature. And there's no question that power can involve all those forms of domination, and more. Lord Acton's dictum—that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely—is the world's most famous statement on power because it accords with our deep intuitions.

But I want to propose a different way of seeing power. In fact, I want to propose a different way of *seeing*. Though it may not seem as intuitive as Acton's dictum, what I offer is perhaps more true than intuition, in the way that facts of nature like heat or light or weight are true well before we sense them—indeed, whether we ever sense them at all.

How we see is shaped partly by language, especially the metaphors we use. For example, I have said that power is like fire: inherently neither good nor evil, but deployable for both and thus a phenomenon to understand and master. That metaphor treats

power as a tool. It suggests that power doesn't corrupt character so much as it reveals it: *What will you do with this flame?*

Here is another metaphor: power is like water. It flows all around us at all times. Sometimes it takes the liquid form of politics-in-action, a turbulent flow with crosscurrents and strong undertows. Sometimes it takes the solid form of settled law: policy is power frozen. Sometimes it is like vapor in the air, invisibly shaping the climate and our behavior in just the way beliefs or ideology or emotions do.

But how we see is not just a matter of language. It is also a matter of moral imagination. Whether you conceptualize power as fire, water, mass, force, or something else altogether, the deepest truth is that we the people are not merely the passive receptacles or objects of power. We are the very source of power. We do not just receive power as it passes through us or acts upon us. We generate it. We give it.

What I am saying is that power is a gift.

This is the most basic reason that you're more powerful than you think. And it is a notion that, to some, sounds terribly naïve or wrongheaded. So let me explain.

Power is a gift in several senses. First, it is something that emanates from us, that inheres in us. There is a religious way to put this, and many thoughtful believers would describe the life force that God puts in each of us—a force that enables us to exist, and then to make and repair the world—as a sacred gift. This is the power to create, and as the theologian Andy Crouch has written so eloquently, it has not the imperative spirit of "Make it so" but the invitational spirit of "Let there be." The power of genesis is not to oppress but to actualize: to spark flourishing.

I happen not to have been raised in any faith tradition. But in my own secular-spiritual American brand of *civic* religion—based on the texts and acts of our founding creed—I believe that human dignity requires freedom and the power to make of oneself and one's world all that one can. Such power is a gift, a human birthright. Citizenship of the United States, for those of us with the dumb luck to have been born into it, wraps that universal gift in a particular form of privilege—unearned at birth, perhaps, but redeemable by a lifetime of deeds and *contributions*.

Second, power is a gift in the sense of a talent—and more than that, an obligation to pass the talent on. When we say someone is a gifted painter or singer or runner or healer, we mean she has been given something special and precious. We also imply she has a responsibility to cultivate and to share that something special with the world. She has been endowed not only with inalienable rights but also inalienable duties.

A kind of circulation is at work here, and it is perpetual. Lewis Hyde, in his classic book *The Gift*, describes the making of true art as an endless cycle of gift exchange and warns about the dangers of treating art and creativity as commodities. A commodity mindset deadens human bonds of trust and affection. In Hyde's view, talent is not primarily a product for the market. It is first a gift for humanity. And the same holds for power. True power, which recycles endlessly, demands that those who hold it, ever so briefly, must do so for others.

The third, most literal, and most important way that power is a gift is simply that we give it. I cannot underscore that enough. *We give it.* Every person and institution with power in our society today has it because we give it to them. I know it does not feel that

way. Most of us don't remember actively giving power to those people and institutions. But we did. We do.

Whether you live in a democracy that's become sclerotic and corrupt, like ours, or an authoritarian society that wants to control what you do and learn, it is important to remember that others don't take our power so much as we give it away. We give it away by not organizing or participating, out of a fatalistic sense that it doesn't matter, that "my vote won't count anyway." But mark well: there is no such thing as not voting. Not voting *is* voting—to hand power to others, whose interests may be inimical to your own. And not organizing *is* organizing—for the people who mean to dominate you.

Consider every form of power I listed earlier: force, wealth, state action, ideas, social norms, numbers. Every one originates from us. From you. That doesn't mean you can make yourself a millionaire by wishing it so. It does mean that money, which takes the form of a symbol, is an agreement between you, me, and the world to have that symbol mean something. If you refuse agreement, if you no longer honor promises made in that symbol, you are rediscovering your power. That is true whether you are an individual or a sovereign state.

Consider Donald Trump. This man gained power because—and only because—we gave it to him. We gave him our attention, our hope, our belief, our outrage, our fear, our anxiety. Many gave him their own unused, never-activated potential as change agents. We together gave him a vast voice and an omnipresent face because we lent him our many ears and our many eyes.

Trump "took" power, yes, in the sense that he initiated the exchange and invited it. He provoked us to yield power. But make

no mistake: we made him possible. And it's not just Trump. The same dynamic unfolded for Barack Obama in 2008. Candidate Obama had tried to remind us that "We are the change we've been waiting for." But *we* did not have the courage of *his* convictions. We gave him our power, we invested our agency in him, and then many were disappointed when as president he alone could not deliver all that had been hoped for.

That we give power to make the powerful is of course a truth of human relations, not just of presidential politics. It is true with our peers and colleagues, with our friends and relatives. And it is true in everyday civic life, from the neighborhood level up. No one can wield power except as others *yield* power. The power that anyone holds over us originates with us—and can ultimately be reclaimed or redirected by us.

To be clear, this is not "blaming the victim." It does not mean that people who are dominated and demeaned and seemingly stuck in unjust situations somehow asked for it or deserve it. Actually, quite the opposite. It means the victim is not helpless—is, in fact, a source of help.

If the tomato pickers of Immokalee teach us anything, it is that even what looks like a near-total power imbalance is never in fact as severe as it appears. Once those pickers began to help one another, they saw their power compound and grow. From there they found outside help. From there they flipped their fates. Power, they proved, is not only something done *to* us. Power is something done *by* us.

Of course, the "us" in question is an ever-shifting, ever-fragmenting, ever-agglomerating thing. That's politics. That's human interaction in a diverse ecosystem of conflicting desires,

needs, and interests. And seeing this ecosystem properly helps us see our own role within it.

It's impossible to imagine the self in isolation. The self exists in social context. Which means that we are constantly generating feedback loops: my response to your response to my response to your action, always cycling around and around. Sometimes we are creating vicious cycles of mistrust and recrimination; sometimes, virtuous cycles of trust and affinity. In politics we move in halls of mirrors, always responding to each other's images at second and third hand.

The investor George Soros calls this dynamic "reflexivity." It's a reality of the stock market, in which booms and busts arise unpredictably and irrationally from countless individual choices because everyone is always responding to everyone's responses to everyone's responses. In the stock market, though, there are definable assets being exchanged at values that can generally be quantified and standardized.

In the arena of civic power, much of what's being traded is unstated and undefined. That makes it much harder to understand. Yet the same patterns emerge as in the market. Patterns of compounding, in which small initial advantages bloom into bigger ones. Patterns of infinite mirroring that quickly distort our perceptions of each other. Patterns of give-and-take that lead people to act with mindsets—self-fulfilling mindsets—of either scarcity or abundance.

These patterns define our lives, yet much of the time we are not conscious of them. We forget to notice the complex interdependence of the world. We seek out conceptual shortcuts and we start to mistake surfaces for the depths. We pretend in America, for instance, that we are rugged individuals. And over time

this makes us feel less and less powerful. Why? Because in the end (as in the beginning), there is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. And the pretense is tiring and dispiriting.

But if we see power as a gift, a gift in every sense—as an endowment to nurture, a talent to share, a resource to exchange—then we remember that as a moral matter and as a matter of fact, we are always bound up in webs of relationship, exchange, and obligation. And this is not confining. It is *liberating*. These are what the psychologist C. Terry Warner calls the "bonds that make us free." Relationships and obligations, by reminding us that our responses to the world are contagious, reacquaint us with our own power to create contagion.

Earlier, I defined power as the capacity to ensure that others do as you would like them to do. In the context of a Hobbesian every-man-for-himself image of society, that definition seemed bleak and brutish. But reexamine it now in the light of a gift, in the context of a society that exists only because people tacitly and sometimes expressly have been living a life of mutual aid.

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit describes the unexpected communities that arise spontaneously out of disasters, from the great San Francisco fire of 1906 to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She refuses to concede that these beautiful communities of displaced strangers helping each other, these rubble-bound utopias, are the exceptions that prove the rule of selfish human nature. She persuasively reframes them, instead, as the condition we naturally yearn for—a paradise we have lost because we fell into a conception of power as domination.

When we see power as a gift, we realize we are perpetually in the position to choose when and whether we will give and to

whom—and whether to throw it away or invest it. We perceive anew our own capacity to shape how others respond to us, and thus our capacity to shape the world. We recall that this capacity is ours as humans and citizens, even if circumstances have labeled us second-class humans or citizens. We see that we can remake those circumstances if we share and activate our gift wisely.

This is not naïveté. It is how every movement of social and political reform in our country—indeed, in the world—has ever come to fruition.

In Part III, we will explore many such movements and many strategies for activating the gift of power. But before we do that, it's important to understand the basic dynamics of power itself. In particular, there are three core laws of power that I want to describe. They emerge from the turbulent give-and-take of civic life. They shape how we respond to our situation. And they are central to the work of creating change.

THE THREE LAWS OF POWER

Let me acknowledge here: it's always risky to assert there are X number of laws about anything. One author has written a book with forty-eight laws of power. In an earlier draft of this book I had a dozen. There is no magic number. And that's fine. This book is meant to be an argument about how power works in civic life and a guide for exercising it. It is *not* meant to be a catalog or encyclopedia of all theoretical aspects of power.

But my argument—that we are in an age of citizen power; that greater fluency in power is both possible and necessary; and fundamentally, that you are more powerful than you think—leads me to focus on a few great patterns I've encountered in my work and in our history. Those patterns recur with enough force and regularity that I'll call them laws.

Here they are:

- First, power *concentrates*. That is, it feeds on itself and compounds (as does powerlessness).
- Second, power *justifies itself*. People invent stories to legitimize the power they have (or lack).
- Third, power is *infinite*. There is no inherent limit on the amount of power people can create.

Together, these three laws create a cycle of monopoly and monopoly busting—a power cycle that is at the very heart of politics and political history. Laws 1 and 2 mean that all societies, left to themselves, gravitate toward a state of hoarded, monopolized, dramatically unequal power. But Law 3 tells us power is not zero-sum. New power can be created from thin air. Which means you can always bypass, displace, or upend a prior state of monopoly.

Law 3 can save us from Laws 1 and 2—if we remember it, and know what to do with it. That's how the cycle turns, when it does. But the tendency in civic life is to get stuck after Law 2 kicks in, which allows incumbent holders of power to perpetuate and extend their dominance.

It's important again to underscore in all three laws the underlying reality that power is a gift. We give it. We nourish these cycles. We yield our own inherent power and direct it to others. The question is whether we become aware enough of that to decide when and whether to *redirect* our power.

To see all this more clearly, let's consider each law in more depth.

LAW 1: POWER CONCENTRATES

What's the best way to get rich? Start rich.

That's not a cynical take on the 1 percent. Or at least not *only* that. It's a statement of social fact. Even when the rules are entirely neutral, in complex systems advantages compound. Left to itself, a market economy will eventually put a massive share of total wealth into a very small number of hands. Of course, what makes it worse is that the rules are never entirely neutral. They are usually skewed by the privileged for the privileged, which only accelerates the compounding.

And what is true of advantage is true of disadvantage. It too compounds. Being poor is expensive. Living and dying poor eats up a far greater share of your income than living and dying rich. Predatory payday loans, the unavailability of affordable housing, the cost of eviction and relocation, the high price of transportation, the regressivity of bank fees and parking tickets and sales taxes, the disproportionate earnings hole that gets created by illness or accident, which of course become more likely when you're tired or underfed—all these features of everyday life for poor Americans exert a strong gravitational pull, making it less likely they can ever achieve "escape velocity" into economic security.

Is this just a feature of the uniquely skewed system of twenty-first-century American life? No. It may be worse here than in other, more fair societies. But the nature of *nature* is to create concentrated clusters. What starts out as a random distribution always ends up in clumps: certain trees get more of the light initially, which enables them to get even more of the light from then on

and to grow taller, while other trees become stunted in the shade or simply die.

Scientists who study networks and complex systems call this "path dependence" and "emergence." Small initial variations are amplified by positive feedback loops, sending energy ("buzz," "heat") to certain paths of evolution but not others. Nodes in a network that attract more links early on, even if randomly (that is, independent of whether they "deserved" the early edge), emerge over time as the dominant nodes and drive the evolution of the system as a whole. This is how VHS beat Betamax, how Facebook beat Friendster, how Silicon Valley beat any other region.

In our lives as social beings, we make monopoly. Acting in path-dependent ways, we often unwittingly contribute to concentration of opportunity, attention, and power. We get on bandwagons. We are susceptible to contagions of fame or desirability. The same few experts get quoted in the media, the same investors get insider tips in the stock market, the same celebrities get thought of for prime roles.

The sociologist Robert Merton called this pattern "the Matthew effect," after the passage in scripture describing how privilege and privation both compound ruthlessly: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath."

Our politics over the last forty years has used state action to mechanize the Matthew effect. Trickle-down economic policies, giving preferential treatment to the already wealthy and cutting investments in the poor and middle-income, generated economic inequality. This, in turn, generated more political inequality. Most campaign contributions now come from a rich, tiny sliver of the

population. Most lobbying is done on their behalf. So the rich don't only get richer; they get louder. Their voices are heard more than anyone else's. Each form of inequality reinforces the other.

You can extrapolate from there. In the board game Monopoly, eventually someone has everything and everyone else has nothing and the game ends. But in real life, "game over" means catastrophic system collapse for all—including, by the way, the "winner."

In their book *Why Nations Fail*, the economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson surveyed societies across continents and eons and found a common pattern. Some, like the ancient Mayans or the slaveholding American South, were designed for extraction. That is, the rulers set things up to suck the maximum amount of wealth and work out of everyone else. Others, like modern Scandinavian nations, were designed for inclusion. That is, things were set up for ever more people to participate ever more actively in commerce, culture, and civic life.

Guess which kind survives?

Though extractive societies often generate great individual fortunes for the people in charge, they are exceedingly brittle. Enslavers always imagine a slave revolt around the corner. Authoritarian states always sense subversion in the unsupervised communications of citizens. Screwing over everyone is exhausting, and a terrible use of everyone's talent. Such societies never get the full benefit of the full potential of the full populace. Worse, such societies have low resilience in a crisis and little ability to adapt to change. Hoarding kills. Eventually it kills even the hoarders.

Which is why, from the Inca Empire to the Soviet Union, extractive societies have been prone to collapse. Power naturally

flows to the top. We've established that. But where power flows to the top and *stays there*, without correction or recirculation, a society is likely to die a catastrophic death.

So given this, how is it that extractive regimes with monopolized power—and now, I am referring not only to the Incas or the Soviets but also, increasingly, to *us*—manage to endure as long as they do? The second law helps explain that.

LAW 2: POWER JUSTIFIES ITSELF

The powerful tell tales about why they deserve their status, so that they can feel better about it. So do the powerless. Together, these two sets of stories form an unseen edifice, a prison of the imagination that shrinks *everyone's* scope of possibility about alternative arrangements and allocations of power.

This is an insight as old as storytelling and political community. It's now reinforced by some fascinating research in experimental social science.

What these studies show, in the aggregate, is that with greater relative power comes greater sociopathy: more self-centeredness, increased sensitivity to affront, a sense of entitlement, a belief that high status is not just deserved but natural, deep ignorance about people with less power, a lack of inhibition and respect for social norms.

Donald Trump is the contemptible, cartoonish epitome of this pattern of behavior. But each of us experiences such people every day. Indeed, each of us likely behaves this way more often than we admit. So it isn't necessarily surprising that the powerful have

a strong instinct for self-justification. They need to defend their privilege, which is bound up with their identity, and they do so in ways both conscious and unconscious.

What *is* surprising is how often the powerless join them in defending it.

People with low power, these studies indicate, are significantly more trusting than people with high power. Specifically, they are trusting of the people with *high* power. Chalk it up to wishful thinking or what psychologists call "motivated cognition," but when experimental subjects are placed in low-power situations, they very much want to believe that their high-power counterparts are benevolent and worthy of trust. This hopefulness—not based on any particular evidence—arises mainly out of a desire to evade the discomfort of being at the mercy of the more powerful.

Moreover, the powerless must develop sophisticated understandings of the powerful in order to get by. They have to work hard to get in the heads of those who determine what opportunities and outcomes they can enjoy. (The powerful, meanwhile, don't particularly attend to the lives or minds of the powerless because they assume they don't have to.) Consider, for example, how much better enslaved people in the South understood the ways of their white enslavers than vice versa.

But it's not only that those at the bottom must spend a lot of interpretive energy trying to make sense of those above them in the social hierarchy, or that these low-power citizens are primed to assume the best of their "betters," even when it's undeserved. There's one more turn of the screw—by the hand of the powerless.

Psychologists call it "system justification theory," and it posits that people without power tend to blame themselves for their

weak situation; worse, they often actively defend the system that renders them powerless. Why? Because it sometimes can be more bearable to make excuses for the system and its inequities than to admit the possibility that you are truly without agency. The latter is a greater threat to your dignity.

Underlying all these dynamics is the presence of cognitive dissonance—the tension between the image we want to have of ourselves and our actual circumstances. Humans always resolve cognitive dissonance in ways that reduce pain. That means explaining away—rationalizing—the embarrassment of being at the bottom. It means buying into legitimizing myths, the cultural narratives and ideologies that explain why the haves have and the have-nots have not.

In the words of one study, by Rob Willer of Stanford University and several other scholars, "The more participants reported feeling powerless, the more they believed that economic inequality was fair and legitimate." That is stunning.

In America we have been told for decades that the wealthy got that way because they earned it through superior smarts and better choices. The powerful earned it by their superior savvy and skill. If only the rest of us had made the right choices with that level of savvy, we too could be enjoying a life of privilege. But we didn't. So for now, we should defer to those at the top and not overtax them (in any sense), and we should trust that the process is fair and their wealth will eventually trickle down to everyone.

This storyline is part of a larger ideology of rugged individualism and free-trade capitalism. And to be clear: the wealthy and powerful made it up. But why did the rest of us *accept* it? Because it at least implied that improvement was possible with greater grit

and wiser effort. It implied that in a market driven by merit, we too could be winners one day. The alternative—that we are but pawns and cannon fodder, stuck no matter how hard we try, in control of very little of our own fate—was too hard to face. Self-blame became a form of self-justification and coping: *It's not you, America; it's me*.

Until now. What has made a moment like ours so tumultuous and exciting and dangerous is that trickle-down legitimizing myths have lost their grip. People without power—or who feel in relative terms that they've lost power—have decided to reject elite rationalizations of the status quo. Trump supporters and Sanders supporters may not have shared a political style or a moral palette, but they did share in spades this readiness to "burn it all down."

People will tell themselves a self-blaming story as long as they possibly can if it helps keep cognitive dissonance at bay. And in America that is a very long time, because our hyper-individualistic culture blinds us to forces beyond the control of, well, an individual. But when enough evidence accumulates that the game is truly crony-rigged, and that merit and effort have little to do with ascent, that justice is not blind but instead winks at the powerful, there comes a forceful snap-back to reality. Literally, a dis-illusionment.

The pain of such awakenings can be converted to action and reform—as during the American Revolution or the civil rights movement—or it can lead to an utterly paralyzing cynicism. We are in a world of such pain today. The key variable now is whether citizens will remember how to claim power. That's not as easy as it sounds. It begins with remembering that claiming is *possible*. Hence our third law of power.

LAW 3: POWER IS INFINITE

In politics, power is usually seen as a zero-sum game—your gain has to be my loss, because there's a fixed amount of power in the system. But that is a law of thermodynamics, not civics. Citizens in fact *can* create power out of thin air—without taking it from anyone else—and often do. There is no limit on the amount of power in a polity. Power is positive-sum, not zero-sum.

That is because power emerges from the imagined as much as from the material. In fact, it emerges first from the imagined. The material sources of power—whether violence or bureaucratic pressure or financial incentive—are only the manifestation of what is imagined. And in situations that seem like a win-lose conflict, it is often possible to create win-win outcomes—if the parties are willing to imagine them.

I know the idea that power is infinite and positive-sum sounds like a Pollyanna, New Age promise that's of little use to a young black man in a traffic stop or to a fast-food server with a sick child and a late shift or to a laid-off textile worker whose job went to Vietnam twenty years ago. And there are some situations—such as a presidential election—where the choices are mutually exclusive and the game is truly zero-sum. But the claim that power is infinite is in fact pure realism. Every activist who has ever had to engage forces of superior power knows it—indeed, relies on it, in order to alter the terms of the engagement.

What does it mean for power to be infinite? There is a metaphysical answer to the question, which I'll return to. But let's start with a very practical and very local answer.

In the prosperous Chicago suburb of Glenview, retiree Nancy Mullarkey read in the paper one morning that the town Board of Trustees had passed an ordinance allowing landlords to refuse to rent to low-income people who were using housing vouchers. An active member of a church whose slogan was "A house for all God's people," Mullarkey decided she had to act. She organized her church's Faith in Action group, which linked up with a fair-housing nonprofit and the League of Women Voters. Together they launched a repeal campaign, writing letters to local newspapers and board members.

The fight was controversial: landlords complained about interference, neighbors warned of crime. After a year of pressure, the ordinance came up for a repeal vote in early 2015. Fifteen members of Mullarkey's church showed up to speak at the meeting. The trustees voted to repeal, five to one. Two more meetings were needed to ratify the repeal, and more advocates came to those until the repeal was finalized. "If you don't act on what you believe in," Mullarkey said later, "you're not going to live in the society you want to live in. And you can be effective. You can make change."

When Mullarkey first read that newspaper article, there was a particular array of power in Glenview, dominated by landlords, affluent neighbors, and the trustees. When she organized members of her church, she changed that array by creating additional power.

Here are another couple of examples. In February 2006, months after Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans signed an executive order creating a new landfill—named Chef Menteur—to hold post-storm debris. It was to be located

just two miles from the neighborhood of Versailles, home to over 6,000 Vietnamese Americans. This was ominous for Versailles, where elderly residents had spent years gardening in nearby wetlands, growing sugar cane, bitter melon, and other vegetables. The state environmental agency ruled that safeguards to prevent seepage of toxic contaminants were unnecessary, and that the Katrina emergency necessitated a new landfill. Chef Menteur officially opened in April.

Over the next few months, however, young and elderly Vietnamese American residents staged protests at City Hall and the landfill site itself. They were joined by African American community leaders from the Ninth Ward. Environmental activists pushed for testing of the landfill soil and moved a bill through the state legislature to redirect debris to an already existing landfill. By August, the city government, outflanked by citizens at every turn, chose not to renew the landfill's permit. Chef Menteur was stopped, and Versailles saved.

When Robyn Twemlow of Christchurch, New Zealand, learned in 2013 that her nine-year-old daughter, Analise, had Tourette syndrome, she felt utterly alone. She searched for a support group and found nothing. So she took to social media and found a friend of a friend whose child also had Tourette's. Then Robyn, a former journalist, was emboldened to reach out to the local paper in search of other families in the same situation. The response was overwhelming. From around the country and across demographics came stories of exhausted families, all thinking they were alone.

Robyn decided to act. She formed the Tourette's Association of New Zealand to provide support, education, and advice—and perhaps more fundamentally, to make a community out of people

who were experiencing identical struggles in isolation. The association launched "Camp Twitch," a joyful face-to-face convening for children, parents, and adults ("tic loud, tic proud, and give a tic").

Now Robyn has become an organizer of families living with Tourette's. She pushes elected officials for policy changes and funding to address the physical and mental aspects of the disorder. She works the media to increase public understanding and to reduce bullying. In her case, as in the others, organizing other people is the key variable.

So when I say power is infinite, I mean it can be conjured up almost magically by organizing. *Organizing is magic*. It is magic in that it creates something from seemingly nothing, without subtracting from what existed previously. When you teach me to give a speech in public, you add to the amount of activated power in the world. You do not subtract power from people who already knew how to do public speaking.

But there are two words I just used that I want to call your attention to: *seemingly* and *activated*. It only *seems* like power is being created out of nothing when organizing is under way, but what truly is happening is that previously dormant power is being awakened and *activated*. In other words, the dormant power was there all the time.

This brings us to the more metaphysical sense in which power is infinite. Power is what we allow it to be. If we don't allow ourselves to be intimidated or frozen by another party's wealth or muscle or morality, if we remember the unlimited reserves of power within each of us—and within us collectively—then we change the math of power. Smalls can become equal to, or greater than, the large.

This becomes clear in cases of nonviolent disobedience, when underdogs challenge the power structure by ostentatiously *removing* a form of their power from the equation. When you passively resist arrest at a protest, you are denying yourself the opportunity to use the form of power called violent force, even as an agent of the state's monopoly on force is arresting you. In that moment you gain power—more power than you would have had if you had physically resisted.

The same is true when a group of people boycott. Denying a business or a class of businesses the benefit of your money is an exercise of your power. You don't have to be wealthy to have an impact. You just have to have a lot of other non-wealthy people similarly willing to stop giving their power away to the business.

By deliberately withholding power, you generate more. By choosing to redirect it, you remember that the choice is yours. Such acts remind us how much dormant civic power we actually have—and how infrequently we ever activate that potential in full.

Many millions of people today feel stuck in a state of inequality and insignificance. But feeling stuck isn't the same as being stuck. Even in the most static situations we can find reminders of our own agency—and responsibility.

As a clever billboard I once saw on a congested highway put it: "You aren't stuck in traffic. You *are* traffic."

Let that sink in. We aren't stuck in broken politics, rigged economics, and a coarsening culture. We *are* these things. We have authored them, over generations, by our actions and omissions. And we can now reimagine and rewrite them, dramatically.

This means we are all complicit in every inequity we experience. We are co-creators of our own prisons, mental and physical.

To put it in the affirmative: we are co-authors of our own liberation. And that liberation is a non-zero, positive-sum experience.

Susan B. Anthony and the suffragette movement proved this. Granting the franchise to women did not nullify the votes of men or weaken the male sex generally. True, it did curtail the ability of men to legislate for women as if they were helpless children incapable of self-government. And that may have *felt* to some men like a diminution of relative power. But in absolute terms and actual fact, it was a boost of power for *everyone*. By making the entire polity and society more representative and inclusive, women's suffrage ensured that every American had become a more powerful member of a more powerful nation, one more adaptive and resilient in the face of all challenges.

HOW THESE LAWS PLAY OUT

So let's recap the three laws of civic power that I've described. Power concentrates. Power justifies itself. Power is infinite.

The cycle of monopoly and monopoly busting that emerges from these three laws is on vivid display in our politics today, both in the United States and around the world. When the cycle stalls after Law 2—after concentrated power has justified and entrenched itself—we get the all-too-familiar ills of our society: structural racism and sexism, race-to-the-bottom economics, mass incarceration of brown and black men, crony capitalism, bureaucratic bloat, unaccountable representatives. Worse, we get a mass epidemic of learned helplessness among the people.

But when events and catalytic leaders remind us of the truth of Law 3—that those getting a raw deal can create a new deal by looking beyond the confines of their helpless situation and *making more power*—then we get the ferment of these times.

What looks like anger and disillusionment today among so many bottom-up movements—from the Tea Party to striking fast-food workers, from young Sanders fans to angry white Trump supporters, from Black Lives Matter to Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, from campus social justice activists to campus free-speech champions—is in fact a deeply optimistic surge. True alienation is deadly silent and sullen. The upheaval and ruckus of our times are hopeful at heart. People still believe change is possible.

Consider the politics of criminal justice.

For over a generation, there was a consensus across party lines that policy makers needed to be "tough on crime." The only question was how tough was tough enough. So "three strikes you're out" laws were enacted. Stop-and-frisk policies were put into place. Penalties for drug use and commerce were stiffened. Mass incarceration was the predictable result. And from there, the emergence of a prison-industrial complex in which private prison operators and unions representing prison workers became major political donors and players. Public budgets flowed increasingly to corrections. Police tactics became increasingly militarized. And the impacts fell overwhelmingly on communities of color, especially African Americans.

This was a case study of the concentration and compounding of power. What started as a race-colored reaction to rising crime became a self-justifying and self-perpetuating institutional

latticework. A code of solidarity within law enforcement, a policing culture that valued aggression over compassion, electoral incentives that made politicians and prosecutors ignore the grievances of minority communities, a narrative that police brutality and mass incarceration were the price to pay for low crime, and financial rewards for criminalizing everyday behavior and expanding the reach of prisons—all added up to a conspiracy of silence about the injustices of the criminal-justice system.

Although the "tough on crime" consensus seemed fixed, there was from the start a contest over its effectiveness and legitimacy. The challenges played out in opinion journals and think tanks, on street corners and in city halls. The forces of critique and dissent were initially isolated and marginal, but they understood that it is possible and necessary to unfreeze a policy consensus both by attacking it and by proposing alternatives. Works like Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* were devastatingly effective at awakening citizens and helping them imagine a different state of affairs.

And even though it appeared nobody was in charge of unwinding the prison-industrial complex, an ecosystem of activists was in fact emerging, from uncoordinated points across the country, and mobilizing. All of them recognized that even in the face of such a seemingly immovable power structure, they could generate new power of their own.

They were aided by a combination of circumstances. On the right, fiscal conservatives began to chafe at the huge budget outlays for policing and prisons in local budgets. Libertarians resented the rise of a police state that used predatory fines and civil asset forfeiture to fund its operations on the backs of the poor. On

the left, social-justice activists awakened the public to the "school-to-prison pipeline" that sucked brown and black youth into systems of discipline that led ultimately to incarceration. Activists on all sides were motivated by their own ideological reasons to act.

Then in August 2014, the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked protests around the country. Thus began a new era of heightened scrutiny and moral outrage not only about police misconduct but also the way the justice system generally is skewed to make black lives and black dignity matter less.

Now a diverse coalition for change has coalesced. Progressives turned the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter into a rallying cry and the basis for a reform agenda that is broader than police practice and focuses on the carceral state generally. Conservatives and libertarians in Texas and other red states launched a movement to be "right on crime" rather than just tough on crime. Protesting and lobbying, activists have thrust these issues onto the national consciousness, forcing presidents, pastors, police chiefs, and everyday people to face them more squarely—and to make changes in law and custom.

That said, the outcome of this loose reform coalition remains uncertain. Though there are unprecedented levels of bipartisan cooperation today on criminal-justice reform, the fact is that most people aren't clued in to this issue, most aren't willing to fight for change, and plenty of interests, from individual politicians to corrections unions or prison contractors, will opportunistically organize for counterreformation. Meanwhile, the debate over policing has become more sharply polarized by continued police killings—and by the murder of police officers in Dallas, Baton Rouge, and elsewhere.

If reform activists are to succeed, they will have to demonstrate both in their storylines and in their policy proposals that power is positive-sum—that changing criminal penalties and policing procedures does not mean, in a zero-sum way, that bad guys will now get to run rampant or that the lives of policemen don't matter; but rather, that when a system of justice treats all citizens with fairness and respect and not like an occupied population, the entire society grows stronger. The once-occupied become true citizens. The onetime occupiers do, too. Everyone is humanized.

It's not an easy sell. But protesters don't have to get a majority of the public to win. During the civil rights movement, large majorities of the public thought that Freedom Rides and lunch-counter sit-ins and marches across militarized bridges were counterproductive, and that reform was moving too quickly and disruptively. Today, all those tactics have been sanctified in national memory. All that has to happen for the criminal-justice reform movement to succeed today is this: a catalytic minority must cohere—and be willing and able to shape the frame of the politically possible.

Remember where we began in this discussion: power is a gift.

At every turn of the cycle here—the consolidation of power in the prison-industrial complex; the justification of that power in ideologies about crime, punishment, race, and morality; and the upending or bypassing of that structure by reform activists—power is being given. That is true of those whose inaction or inattention passively legitimizes a "tough on crime" status quo. But it is also true of those who actively support such a regime—as well as those who actively seek an alternative.

We are all giving power to others by our actions and omissions. When we surrender it unmindfully or heedlessly, our power

tends to gravitate toward reinforcing the status quo. When we circulate it intentionally, we can direct it as we choose, whether for change or against it. Then we become engaged in a contest over legitimacy.

What is legitimacy? What ultimately makes the exercise of power legitimate? That's the topic of the next chapter.