

Si Kahn

'We are all desperate for community, for things to believe in, for things to work for, for things to fight for.'

BY LINDA ROCAWICH

Best known nationwide as an accomplished singer, songwriter, and recording artist in the political folk tradition, Si Kahn is also a community organizer. His daily work at home in Charlotte, North Carolina, is as director of Grassroots Leadership, a fifteen-year-old nonprofit group that, in the words of one of its brochures, "provides caring support to Southern communities and organizations and offers a safe space for community leaders, organizers, and activists to gather, learn, and grow."

He would be the first to object to the distinction I seem to have made in separating his music from his political work, for the two are intertwined in an organic way that we discussed last fall when he visited Madison, Wisconsin, to speak at a benefit for Grassroots Leadership.

When he stepped to the podium, he carried no guitar, but he burst into song anyway. He does this, he says, to "watch the audience shift—shift the categories in which they're going to receive the political message, rethink what they're doing."

Raised in central Pennsylvania as the son of the resident rabbi at Penn State University, Kahn first went south in the mid-1960s to work in the civil-rights movement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When I asked how that came about, he said: "I was a student at Harvard in the early 1960s. I had a marginal relationship to civil rights, but I disconnected. Then one night in the spring of 1965, some friend said, 'Hey, there's gonna be a picket line down at the Federal Building in Boston to protest the failure of the U.S. Government to do anything to protect the marchers, and there's gonna be a great party afterwards.' So, I'm a person of discretion, I know a good choice, so I went down to picket. And the next thing I knew, we're all rushing the building, and the *next* thing I knew we were all sitting on one of the upper floors, about 200 people, having occupied this building. Perhaps that was the party." Kahn ended up in jail, in a cell next to Bob Zellner, the SNCC organizer. He was lured south to the movement and never looked back.

In one of his compositions, he does glance at the past, however—"The songs that we sang still ring in my ears." The song is "I Have Seen Freedom," but it has more to do with the present: "I just can't believe it's been twenty-five years./ Working for freedom now./ Been a long time, but I keep on tryin'./ For I know where I am bound./ Been a hard road, but I don't mind dyin'./ I have seen freedom."

From Forrest City, Arkansas, in 1965, he went on to work with the mine workers' union in Harlan County, with the textile workers' union in the J.P. Stevens campaign, and twenty years

ago began his professional recording career, which Rounder Records is celebrating in 1994 by reissuing much of his work on compact disc.

After the benefit in Madison last fall, we sat in the conference room at *The Progressive's* office and talked for hours. These excerpts of that conversation deal with the marriage of his cultural work to his political work. His goal—besides achieving social, racial, and economic justice in America, of course—is, he says: "In ten years, if someone should ask the members of a community organization, 'Are you a cultural or a political organization,' they would just say, 'Well, what's the difference?'"

Q: You're at the forefront of a cultural style of organizing. So I want you to talk some about the way you personally use music in organizing. In looking around that room this afternoon, I know some of the faces that were not familiar to me, because I've never seen them at a political event in Madison before, came for the music—I overheard them talking later around the dessert table. So in the process they got a little bit of political education.

Si Kahn: The music does a lot of things. It is, in fact, unusual for a political organization to have a staff person who is also a professional musician. But on the other hand, it is not at all unusual for political organizations to have access to many, many artists, musicians, actors, graphic artists, designers, weavers, quilters, all kinds of artists.

But I find there is rarely a mutual understanding that leads to creative use of musicians, of all kinds of cultural workers. Typically, for example, an organization will call on cultural workers for a special event. They'll call somebody up and say, "Could you do a couple of songs for a rally?" I think it's much more constructive to recruit cultural workers as key parts of an organization, and a lot of contributions can be made.

One little-known one is this: A surprising number of cultural workers—using that as a term to cover artists, musicians, poets, whatever—are very successful self-managing businesspeople, because most artists do not have representation, do not have management, and to make a living as an artist, they have to learn small-business skills.

At Grassroots Leadership, two of our three fund-raising committee chairs were musicians: John McCutcheon and Cathy Fink. They both did a brilliant job because of their knowledge as

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artists of marketing, of promotion, of financial management, of fiscal projections. These are not skills people usually think of artists as having. They tend to think of artists as somewhere in a lofty world of ideas and ideals, but not necessarily focused. The opposite is actually often true. So I feel that artists can often contribute to an organization in unexpected ways.

But an organization should begin by saying, "How can we build relationships with artists that help us and also help them?" The creative temperament and the sense of a potential for transformation that good artists have can be enormously important to a political organization that is trying to change people's consciousness. And so I find that artists make great members and are great on boards of directors, and they should be involved in the organic daily life of the organization. The contributions become more defined; the average songwriter or the average performing musician can contribute far more to an organization than just a song or two at a rally. And in fact that's often the worst possible use of a musician.

It's also true that a surprising number of ordinary people have artistic skills. I am always amazed at the number of people who write poetry, who write songs, who paint, who weave, who quilt, who pot, who do all these kinds of things, in addition to their day jobs. And it is *not* a class-based phenomenon. If anything, I find that *more* poor and working-class people write poetry and songs than do middle-class and upper-class people. These are still, in many poor and working-class communities, valid and living cultural forms.

So part of what an organization should be looking at is: How do we get our own members to use this whole range of cultural forms to empower themselves, to empower others, to build the organization? And I will promise you that any organization with 200 members has at least a couple of people who are skilled in theater, at least a couple of people who are good graphic artists or designers, a *number* of people who are in music, who can do everything from play, to choir-direct, to write songs; many poets, many storytellers. It's a resource that we fail to tap into in our own members as progressive political organizations. And the reason for doing it, the political reason for doing it, is to transform people's consciousness in a broad way.

One of the things you can do in music is say the unsayable, speak the unspeakable. Look at many political songs: If you abstracted the ideas and just said them in a speech, people would throw up barriers immediately and would refuse to bring that in.

Q: Do you think the music softens the message, or maybe sugar-coats it?

Kahn: I'm not sure it softens it or sugar-coats it.

Q: But you're saying that, for some reason, music makes people listen when they wouldn't listen otherwise.

Kahn: I think it can operate in many ways. It can sugar-coat, it can facilitate entry, it can soften. It can also allow people to focus on something other than the central message, so that they can listen to the song and not necessarily say they understand what this song is about, that they can put it aside and think about it later. I also think that songs, like all art, operate at both a conscious and a subconscious level, that there are many levels of messages. And people tend to internalize songs by learning them and resinging them to themselves, so there's a reeducational process.

How many people do you know who have ever gotten a tape of a political speech and played it more than once? Over and over and over? And yet we know that people will take Sweet Honey in the Rock and will take Holly Near and will take Ziggy Marley, they'll take Bob Marley, and play them over and over and over and over. And the message, whether you're playing "Get Up, Stand Up," or "Believe I'll Run On (See What the End's Gonna Be)," there is a political message in the music. However much you may be initially resistant to that message, there is a delayed-action response you cannot avoid.

And there's something else that many, many people have said about Southern organizing: that you start with people where

they are. Often that's not where you want them to be at all. And that's actually a practical axiom for any intervention in people's lives, whether you're teaching, doing therapy, doing social work: You cannot pretend that people are other than where they are. The starting point is real, and to the extent that you can identify it, you're one step ahead of the game.

Part of starting with people where they are is finding language, in the very broad sense, which can successfully convey a politically educational message to a particular person or group of people. Sometimes this is a matter of figuring out who are these people I'm working with? What is their culture? What is their language? How do they take in information? How do they change their minds? What do they listen to? What do they shut down on? What do they refuse from the beginning? Sometimes it's even more complex because you are trying to communicate across two or three or more cultures.

Q: Tell me about Grassroots Leadership.

Kahn: Grassroots Leadership is a team of African-American and white organizers working in the southern United States. And it is both a political and a cultural organization. Now, having said that, I want to say that there should not be a separation. My work is partly about breaking down barriers between culture and politics, because I believe they're artificial and imposed, and they diminish us all. I feel that every organization that does political work should weave into its daily fabric a hundred different kinds of culture.

At Grassroots Leadership, we are trying to transform the realities of race and gender and class, and we believe in the importance of those distinctions as organizing principles—which is to say that you have to build bases by doing autonomous organizing. Some people might call that separatist organizing, to have organizations that are only African-American, that are only lesbians and gays, or that are only working people—trade unions or otherwise. That's the starting principle.

But over time, to achieve broad power, you also have to have coalition politics, which means an ability of single-constituency organizations to work across racial lines, across gender lines, across class lines. And if you're going to have power in society, you have to give people the tools of citizenship, which are the tools of power. We live in a society in which we are socialized *not* to work in concert, not to work collectively, not to work *together*. And we're very good at it. But the First Amendment says, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." That's the basis of the trade-union movement, that's the basis of the legal right to organize, but it's also an important statement of principle, of how power is apportioned and reapportioned in a democracy.

Q: Where do you see the most exciting organizing for power happening in the South right now?

Kahn: One thing I find exciting is movement at the very deep grass roots of society. Some very poor communities—generally African-American but also some Native-American communities, some poor white communities—but people who are very poor and very dispossessed. In some ways, you can measure motion in society by what's happening at this deep level. Generally speaking, as people have a sense of rising expectations, they become more willing to take political steps. Historically, it's in periods that precede movements that you often find more ferment, more agitation at the deep grass roots. I see a lot of that happening in poor rural and urban inner-city communities in the South. I take that as a hopeful sign.

Secondly, I think there is somewhat more union consciousness. I find it impossible to believe that you can have a healthy, functioning society without working-class organization. In a period when multinational corporations are consolidating and increasing their power, if there is no effective working-people's counterbalance, then democracy becomes impossible.

So I see such things as the organizing victories of the United Auto Workers at the Freightliner plant in Mount Holly, North



DAVID JOHNSON

Carolina, at the Mack Truck plant in Winnsboro, South Carolina, as hopeful signs. I'm always cautious about the state of trade-unionism in the South, and I'm not predicting a resurgence of the labor movement at this point. But these are hopeful signs.

The third hopeful sign is the generation that is coming up now, the generation that is now in junior high school and high school. It's a politically aware, interesting generation. Compare it, for example, to the fabled generation of the 1960s—which is us—we knew there was segregation but actually didn't understand that there was racism, were only beginning to imagine that there might be such a thing as sexism, did not even venture to suspect that there was such a thing as sexuality let alone sexual orientation.

Compared to that generation, today's young kids, black and white in the South, have a very sophisticated political consciousness. There's an environmental consciousness, there's a racial consciousness, there's a gender consciousness. These are often the issues that are struggled over in junior high schools and high schools. But the presence of that consciousness makes me hopeful.

Q: I think you're right about kids. It often starts with environmentalism—saving the whales and so forth—and moves from that to other things.

Kahn: Now as a parent, it is a shock when a child comes in while you're brushing your teeth and gives you an angry stare and shuts off the water that you were running. But they're also right.

Q: It sounds like you sense a positive political shift.

Kahn: Taking a long view of Southern and American social history, it seems to me that we may be on the edge of a period of change, which we seem to have in this country every thirty or forty years. We go through periods of movement and we go through periods of organization. In periods of movement, success or failure depends in part on what's going on at that time. But it also depends on the groundwork that's been done in the non-movement period of time. Out of a failure to understand this, we create myths that movements are independent, free-standing social phenomena that arise miraculously.

For example, two myths of the civil-rights movement:

There was a poor but honest seamstress who lived in Montgomery, Alabama, whose name was Rosa Parks, and one day she got on the bus but her feet were just so tired that when she was ordered to move by the white bus driver, she said to herself, "I'm too tired to move," refused to move, and then we had the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Slightly revisionist but much more accurate history: Rosa Parks was a sophisticated and disciplined political activist who had many years of leadership in the NAACP. She was an ally of E.D. Nixon, who had political experience in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an all-African-American union. Such folks and many others, who were trying to figure out how to challenge the bus system in Montgomery, had been looking for someone who could challenge it.

So what in fact reflects systematic and structured organizational development, leadership development, and political strategizing becomes popularized as: "Gosh, she was just too tired to move"—an accident in history. This trivializes political work.

Secondly, 1961, North Carolina A&T. Four college students can't figure out what to do, so they go sit in at a Woolworth's lunch counter and the world explodes.

According to this myth, absolutely nothing happened in the 1950s. Now this is fundamentally untrue. With the return of Southern black war veterans from World War II, the threads of struggle which had gone on since the arrival of the first slaves in America begin to be tightened, and there are systematic challenges to segregation.

You also have people like Ella Baker, who was the Southern field secretary for the NAACP, traveling the South systemati-

cally looking for leadership and building leadership. It was the work of travelers like Ella Baker that began to build a consciousness, that began to build a fabric of resistance.

And you have people like James Farmer, who was in divinity school in Chicago and rooming with somebody who had been involved in Gandhi's movement. And he was saying, "Hey, listen, there's this interesting technology of passive resistance, of civil disobedience, and do you think it might work in America?" And they began trying it out in Chicago restaurants to see what would happen, and they founded the Congress of Racial Equality. And they experimented with this in freedom rides in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

So by the time the movement hits, you have some experience. I would call this a period of infrastructure building and organizational development. In this period, you do not see the waves breaking the surface. But underneath, there are powerful currents moving. Out of these currents, people like E.D. Nixon, like Rosa Parks, like Ella Baker are emerging, are polishing leadership, are developing skills. They're building organizations, they're building relationships of trust and assessing relationships of mistrust, they are creating an infrastructure of social change. So when four students sit down at a segregated lunch counter, when Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to move on a segregated bus, those people are available to help shape that movement.

And I think we have been, over the last twenty years in the South, in one of these periods in which infrastructure building is critical. The important work is recruiting and training organizers and helping local grass-roots leadership develop their skills, their capabilities. The important work is the development of networks and communication channels, so that people know each other, so that when things happen there are people available to make a difference.

All these things are absolutely critical. And much of the work Grassroots Leadership has tried to do over the last fifteen years is to build that infrastructure. We wanted to accomplish what *could* be accomplished during what was a very difficult period, the Reagan/Bush years, but we also wanted to lay the groundwork for a long-term future.

Q: Where is the movement in the South now?

Kahn: I think the Southern movement has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths include a reasonable infrastructure of people who have been through the whole series of movements that we've had in the last thirty years. The Southern civil-rights movement is the turning point, but also the women's movement, the working-class movement of the 1970s, the movement of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, of the disabled, and a dozen more—many of which raised issues that previously were unraised among American progressives and that challenge the nature of power and authority within the progressive movement.

But these separate movements also illustrate a weakness. If we look at the history of American progressive organizing, part of what we see is the divisiveness of race, the divisiveness of gender, and the failure to deal with constituencies that are not a part of the mainstream. And these are not simply ethical issues; they're practical issues. In order to build a powerful progressive movement, you have to be fully inclusive, and not just out of principle. We are not strong enough to exclude significant numbers of people who potentially can be part of a progressive movement.

Q: I left the South eight years ago, after living there for thirty-three years off and on, but I continue to keep in touch. And it seems to me that there's more cooperation among the different progressive movements in the South than there is anywhere else that I know well enough to comment on. Everybody gets involved and knows everybody else, in a way that's much different from what happens elsewhere in this country. There's much more of a network among activists and less in-fighting for turf of various kinds. Do you agree?

Kahn: I do think that's true.

Q: Do you think the civil-rights movement explains that?

Kahn: I think there are a lot of explanations, some of which are contradictory. First, it does have something to do with the legacy of the civil-rights movement; that is a transcendent memory. But it is also complicating, because there are certainly many people, both African-American and white, who feel that despite the extraordinary gains of the civil-rights movement, many African-American communities in the South are, objectively, worse off today economically and politically and, in many cases, socially, than they were in 1959. You can certainly document the economic changes, but part of what was lost in the civil-rights movement was the fabric of black life.

You can tell with a singing audience. If you do "Lift Every Voice and Sing," you can do an age map of the audience. Generally speaking, African-Americans who went to school after desegregation will not know the song, whereas every African-American in the South who went to a segregated black school knows the song. This is the black national anthem.

But the memory of the civil-rights movement does create a common fabric.

Q: Now for my second theory: a sense of embattlement.

Kahn: Yes, exactly. A sense of embattlement. To some extent we may be benefiting from our own disadvantage—that there are so few of us relative to the general population. There are, in fact, fewer organizers and activists in the South and we're often at greater distances from each other, so we need each other. Also, the political culture is more at odds with progressive politics, and that creates more of a need for each other.

There are two other things: One of the legacies of the Southern civil-rights movement and of other Southern movements is that you build both power *and* community. To some extent, this is a product of the isolation of the coal camps and cotton-mill villages; it's a product of segregation and of the danger that was attached to organizing. In Southern organizing, I see a more conscious attempt than I see in other places in this country to build community as part of the process of building political power. There are and have been many organizers in the South who saw it as part of their role to empower people culturally and personally and to build community within and among activists—and that it was a political act.

In the South, songs are a part of meetings more often and poetry is more often a part of people's consciousness. The number of Southern organizers who are also artists is quite remarkable. They are singers, they are songwriters, they are graphic designers, they are photographers, they write poetry, they write novels, they direct theater, they direct pageants, they act. And these people are also doing grass-roots political organizing.

I don't want to say it's *much* more common, because I really don't know other parts of the country well enough. But I will say that it's *characteristic* of the South to have this.

Q: I know that a political meeting in the South is a hell of a lot more fun than one up here.

Kahn: Sure. Take our Grassroots Leadership annual meeting. We had Fruit of Labor, a singing group formed by Black Workers for Justice in the Raleigh-Durham area, do our lead-off event. The year before we had Chuck Davis and his African-American Dance Ensemble come; with 125 participants, he led a community dance, like a village dance, for all of us. Outside of the South, I don't think an organization planning its annual meeting would have a community dance led by a dance troupe as its opening event. They would say, "We should have a speaker."

Q: I've heard you talk before about the difference between "textbook organizing" and organizing that reaches the heart. Can you elaborate?

Kahn: Part of my criticism of much American organizing is that it becomes technical and instrumental, it becomes abstracted. At its worst, it teaches people how to get power by using numbers but doesn't necessarily help people learn anything else. You can do very effective organizing around issues by get-

ting people to go to meetings, march, picket, do strategic research, boycotts, picket lines, pressure campaigns. But that can all be done in a way that does not reach the heart of the people involved. They will feel a sense of increased power, but they will not necessarily open themselves up to the power that is inside them. And it will not necessarily open them up to the radical questions that difference raises among people. And I think it's a missed opportunity.

You see it in a lot of textbook organizing. Okay, here you hold your first meeting, you knock on this many doors, you come to people, you talk about the issues. And I want to say, "What about the potluck? Who's bringing the food? And what about the stories that people should tell about why they're there and what their grandmothers did? And what about the songs at the beginning? What about the stories we're going to ask people to tell? Is somebody going to be ready to take photographs to put up on the board so we can say, 'Ooh, you looked so good at that meeting, you were great speaking!'" Are we going to remember what people say? Are we going to create the history of our own efforts to change, or will it only be when the television cameras come that we do this?"

I think that organizing has to be about changing power relationships. That includes the relationship of individuals to power and to their sense of their own power and powerlessness. It has to include overcoming the damage that powerlessness causes in people. And therefore organizing should be a personally transformative process.

Everybody says, "Power corrupts." Some people go further to say, "But powerlessness also corrupts." To grow up black in a racist and segregated society that looks down on people of

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color, to grow up female in a violent and exploitative society that looks down on women, to grow up working-class in a society that looks down on the working-class—in a society which looks down on lesbians and gays and bisexuals, on people who are differently abled, old people—we should not be surprised when people are damaged, often deeply damaged, by years of living under those conditions. And organizing has to restore a sense of wholeness along with a sense of power.

I'm talking about how people feel about themselves when everyone around them says, "You're less than a full human being." I absolutely believe that organizing is good for your mental health, that redressing imbalances of power is a powerful antidote to the damage of powerlessness. As people discover who they are, they change their relationship to power and therefore their relationship to themselves and therefore their relationship to other people. Culture is a large part of what does that. It's not just marching. It's singing, telling stories, poetry, theater, preaching, posters—all the things that people do to express a growing sense of power, a growing sense of self, a growing sense of wholeness. These are mirrors that reflect back to people how they, how we, change through the process of organizing. And that, it seems to me, is a more common perspective in the South than in other parts of the country.

Q: You do so much traveling between and among cultures, and you know multiculturalism can be a barrier, but it can also be a bridge. How can you use multiculturalism to bridge gaps?

Kahn: Good question, but tough question. I remember when I worked for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, on the J.P. Stevens campaign. We would have these huge rallies in Roanoke Rapids [North Carolina], these great rallies, and the union membership there was about two-thirds black and about one-third white. So we would have entertainment. We would *alternate* bands. We would get a black band and a white band. The black band would do soul, funk music, and the white band would do country-and-western music. I always felt there has to be a better way.

Q: You mean you'd have the two bands at the same event?

Kahn: Yes, alternating: play a couple songs, play a couple songs. We would try to teach them *all* "Solidarity Forever."

On the one hand, I think that method is an important recognition that you have two communities and that each music is important. However, one of the complexities of working multiculturally is: How do you continue to be yourself, and to be the same person, and still communicate with a number of different cultures and communities?

I think it's dangerous as an organizer to develop different languages for different situations. An attempt to communicate with different cultures by modifying your own language, your own persona, your own sense of how communication takes place is tricky, because that can develop a split in you. Then at some point you're going to have to talk to everybody together, and you risk abandoning everybody.

I find that it's unaccompanied song that bridges the gap most successfully. So in my own work, when I'm working a multiracial audience, I've generally stopped using a guitar. As a guitarist, my styles are distinctly white styles, and not a wide range of white styles, either. Most people are far more limited musically as instrumentalists than they are as vocalists. So I find that with unaccompanied song you have a greater chance of getting a group of racially mixed Southerners to be able to sing together.

I've been trying to find, and experimenting with, forms that you can use as political educational techniques which are culturally based and which can transcend differences. I've been working to develop a speaking form which incorporates music, and I've been writing what I call "songspeeches." They are talks, but they incorporate unaccompanied song as a part of them. Over a period of thirty or forty minutes, what you get is an unaccompanied song, five or six minutes of fairly rhetorical speech—rhetorical in the sense of using poetic devices, a more rhythmic, more metric kind—not usually rhymed, but often using assonances

and dissonances and alliteration, and other poetic and rhetorical devices in the tradition of preaching.

Q: Grassroots Leadership is about training grass-roots leaders. Talk about that training.

Kahn: I started experimenting with using storytelling in organizer training. I've been relying on a wonderful story originally told by Aunt Molly Jackson, who was a midwife and union organizer for the National Miners Union, a communist coal miners' union in eastern Kentucky, in the 1930s. She was from the same family that produced Sarah Ogun Gunning, they were half sisters. Sarah wrote "I Am a Union Woman." You know, "I am a union woman./ As brave as I can be,/ I do not like the bosses/ And the bosses don't like me." And they were half sisters to Jim Garland, too, who wrote, "I don't want your millions, mister./ I don't want your pleasure yacht./ All I want is food for my babies./ Give to me my old job back." These are all kin folk.

So Aunt Molly Jackson tells this story. She starts out: "To having something to eat up in Kentucky when the miners was all blacklisted and no work. I said if I lost my life that I would do anything in this world that I could in order to keep the children from suffering."

She goes on to talk about how, being a midwife, she has "a permit to carry her a gun," and she's got a good .38 special that she's "used for her protection through them hills for fifteen years." So she puts it under her arm, and puts her coat on over it, and she goes down and she robs the company store at gunpoint and then distributes the food. And Frank the deputy sheriff comes to arrest her, and asks her, aghast, why she has turned into a robber. She says, "Oh no, Frank, I am no robber, but it was the last chance. I have heard these children cryin' for something to eat till I'm desperate. I'm almost out of my mind. But I will get out, as I said, and collect the money by nickels and dimes just as quick as I can and pay them. You know I'm as honest as the days is long." And Frank gets all teary, and he has a change of heart. He says, "Well, if you've got the heart to do that much for other people's children that's not got one drop of your blood in their bodies," he says, "I will pay that bill myself. And if they fire me for not arresting you, I will be damned glad of it." And he walks out.

So I tell this little seven-minute story, and I start asking people, "So what's Aunt Molly Jackson's job? Is she an organizer? Is she a leader? Is she a service worker? What's her strategy?" And then we can argue—for hours, back and forth—the strategy and tactics of the situation. And it's very complex. You can argue that she's a phenomenal organizer, that she's setting an example and that people will rally. You can also say she has taken action without consulting people, and she's exposed people to danger, and that the folks who got the food can be arrested for receiving stolen goods, and this is irresponsible leadership that's not accountable to the community. All sides, right?

Sometimes I ask people to assume the roles. Hey, you be Frank. You be the mine owner. You're the sheriff. Okay, Frank, go back and explain to the sheriff why you didn't arrest Molly. You're Molly. . . .

I did this in Spokane, Washington, not long ago, and it became clear to me that part of the audience did not understand. They didn't know what a commissary was, they didn't know what Aunt Molly meant when she said she could always find "a little scrip." I knew that this was skewing the procedure, so I said, "Is there anyone here who grew up in a company town?" I got three folks: a Mexican-American woman who'd grown up among the copper mines of Arizona, a working-class white guy from Idaho who'd grown up around the hard-rock mines, and an African-American woman from the West Virginia coal mines.

I let them go on for a while: Here we had three folks from three cultures and three very different parts of the country talking about their lives, and far more was comparable than was different in the parts of their lives they were talking about.

They were also connecting with the rest of the crowd. For example, someone said, "Now I didn't grow up in a company

town, but I work in a hospital, and some of what you say is really no different from the way we're treated." I think if I had just said to people, "How did you grow up and what are the cultural implications of that?" we would not have gotten to that discussion.

But here we have this story told by an Appalachian woman, a white working-class Southern mountain woman, that dates from the 1930s, a story told in the voice of a white Jewish male organizer from central Pennsylvania. And here we have people from an extraordinary range of cultures, class backgrounds, genders, races, who are finding something emotionally powerful and who are arguing about it. They are arguing over the ethics of the situation.

Q: Do you find that a group, after discussing it for a while, usually comes to the same conclusion or do they come down all over the map?

Kahn: People tend to come down all over the map, based on their own experiences and their own beliefs, their own set of ethics. There will always be a group who will argue that she broke the law and you cannot break the law. And then there's always a group that says it is a coal company which is starving children into submission—that's not breaking the law? Whose law are we talking about?

With a story like this, I can get the strategy, I can get the tactics, I can get the power relationships, I can get the power-structure analysis. But I can also get to the spirit of leadership. I can get to what it means to be a transcendent and transformative personality. I can get to the questions of morality and ethics that underlie the decisions that organizers and activists should be making. I can get to the nature of class and race and gender prejudice.

But I don't have to do it—I mean, Aunt Molly does it.

Q: You've had a lot to say over the years about building a sense of community.

Kahn: Yes, it's part of what, in the Southern civil-rights movement, made me a believer. What converted me to political activism was that overwhelming feeling of being one of hundreds of people singing for freedom. I believe that the power of organizing is the power of community and that we are all desperate for community, for belonging, for participation, for a place, for something to belong to—and not just for *someones* to belong to but for some *things* to belong to, for things to believe in, for things to work for, for things to fight for.

But that's so hard and so rare to find in a world that exercises power over us on the job, in the community, in the school, in worlds that exercise power over us by separating us radically from each other and by doing it, I believe, systematically and strategically. The capitalists who talk about "managing diversity" and "capitalizing on diversity" mean *exactly* that. One of the reasons that organizing works is that it gives people a sense of community. So when people sing together, when someone comes and says, "Here is a poem I wrote at lunch, let me read it for everybody," there is a spirit that builds.

Does this break General Motors? Of course not. Does this mean that we have racial and gender and class justice tomorrow? Of course not. But does this mean that something different is happening? Yes!

Organizing has got to build bonds among us as human beings. It's not just about seeing how many people we can get on the picket line, although it is *also* about that. It is also about meeting heart to heart. That, I believe, was the power of the civil-rights movement. It is the continuing power of the black struggle for freedom, it is the continuing power of the women's movement.

It's about seeing ourselves, about being recognized, about escaping from invisibility, about being seen—and not just as individuals but as part of a community. And that is how we achieve power and how we break through fear, how we break through the boundaries and the barriers that separate us from each other and us collectively from power. ■