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Melissa's Story: A Tale Illustrating Some Aspects of the Vernal Education Project

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A BAD MEETING GETS BETTER

A group of twenty caring people gathers on this Tuesday night at Linda's house. They are concerned that a growing number of pre-teens in their town seem to be heading toward juvenile delinquency. They hope to formulate a proposal for positive action to present to the town council. They are a diverse group: a dozen concerned parents, an anti-drug crusader, a librarian at the public library where teens often gather after school, an owner of a local business that was vandalized by teens, a social worker who often works with teens, some good-hearted humanitarians, and a few people who seem to come just for the opportunity to hear themselves talk. Once again they are faced with a difficult decision.

This time around the group seems to be divided into three distinct camps aligned around specific positions, plus a few people who are unaligned and a few who are very con-

fused. The gulf between their many positions seems enormous and impossible to bridge. Evidently believing that the best defense is a good offense, members of each camp have rehearsed their invectives, and they now sarcastically ridicule each other's positions. People begin to interrupt each other and make snide comments under their breaths. As the meeting grinds on and everyone's frustration mounts, subtle insults give way to direct attacks. What seemed at the beginning to be a simple problem is now a convoluted tangle, poisoned by personal venom.

After forty-five minutes, the group seems further than ever from reaching a solution. Moreover, a great deal of ill will has developed among these people — enough to poison every other agenda topic, too. It looks like this will be another disastrous meeting — perhaps the one that finally splinters the group into oblivion.

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You have probably seen this before. Business meetings, club meetings, congressional debates, informal discussions — everywhere the same scenario plays out. The United States Senate — idealized as the greatest deliberative body in the world — frequently looks more like a playpen filled with ignorant and insecure children squabbling with each other over nonsense. Even in meetings of caring people who are trying to make the world more cooperative, loving, altruistic, and fair, the same dynamics usually arise: posturing, defensiveness, attacks, ridicule, anger, frustration, disempowerment, and disintegration. It happens so often, it seems as natural and as inevitable as rain. Fortunately, it is not.

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Suddenly Melissa, an assertive young woman new to the group, interrupts the wrangling. Diplomatically she says, "Let me try to summarize what I've heard." She then carefully restates every idea presented — often more clearly, more objectively, and less melodramatically than it was originally presented — and points out where each idea agrees or conflicts with every other. It is evident that by doing so, she is validating every perspective and implicitly validating the people holding that perspective. She is also drawing a clear map of the issues.

"We seem to all agree about this one point, but several people disagree about this other one. Let's explore this disagreement. Why do we hold these different perspectives? What life experience has led you to hold your view?"

She then encourages them all to speak in turn — relating their history and how it has led them to their current outlook. In this context, people's perspectives no longer seem to be incompatible descriptions of reality, but more like an array of flowers — each lovely in its own way, each as valid as the next, and each uniquely valuable.

"There appear to be several ways of looking at this issue. Perhaps every one of them is true. How can we resolve these seeming contradictions? Is there some solution that can encompass them all?"

By now, everyone is feeling much safer and more inclined to be cooperative. They feel considerably more amenable to solving this puzzle together. People begin suggesting possible solutions and exploring whether the solutions would address everyone's concerns. A few solutions emerge that seem to address most of the major concerns. New concerns arise, and people suggest further modifications to the solutions that might resolve these concerns. Rather than impediments to progress, doubts and objections now seem valuable — like warning signs that might prevent the group from swerving into a ditch.

After a while, several solutions evolve into one that seems satisfactory. This solution excites many people and doesn't appear to have any major drawbacks. A few people admit they can accept it even though to do so they must back away from their earlier strong positions. A few others are still reluctant to adopt the solution, but realize it is probably the best one this group could ever come up with. They agree to go along with the decision too.

The meeting progresses well and the group tackles and resolves one issue after another. Melissa's purposeful, yet cheerful demeanor encourages others to act the same way. The frustration and disillusionment that permeated the room just an hour before has now been replaced with eager excitement.

Melissa is clearly leading the process, but no one feels she is manipulative. Rather, they feel she is supporting them all and helping them work together to clear away obstacles.

When someone expresses amazement at her skill, Melissa explains that she attended an educational program — called the Vernal Education Program — where she observed good meetings, learned basic process skills, and was allowed to practice with other students until she could facilitate meetings well. "It's really pretty easy — as easy as learning to drive a car."

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Human interaction is learned behavior. Like growing vegetables, fixing a car, or programming a computer, anyone can learn the basics of these tasks and some people have learned how to do each one well. The more we learn and the more we practice, the better we can perform these tasks.

Yet, our society treats human interaction as if it is mysterious — unknowable and uncontrollable. It is astounding that our society — a melting pot of diverse people and ideas and dedicated to democracy — has done such a poor job of teaching these basic skills of peaceful interaction and democratic process. Our schools spend more time teaching children to obey than they do teaching them how to cooperate. Most books and television shows teach us that conflicts can only be resolved through violence, intimidation, or sexual manipulation, and then bombard us with particularly dreadful examples of these techniques.

Only in the last few decades have schools begun to teach cooperative interaction skills. Unfortunately, most of these classes are oriented toward business and psychology students as if only business leaders and their therapists needed to know these important skills.

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AN EMOTIONAL SNAG

The entire group agrees this is the best meeting they have ever had. Moreover, they admit they are actually having fun. Everything is going along great until Steven makes one careless remark. Unbeknownst to the group, Melissa is extremely sensitive about rape. When Steven offhandedly scoffs at a rape incident reported in the news, Melissa unexpectedly responds with a sharp comment. Then Mark attempts to smooth things out by dismissing the importance of Steven's original remark, but this makes Melissa see red. She turns toward Mark, her rage beginning to leak through her normal calm, and almost makes a nasty retort. She controls herself but clearly is disturbed. A dark cloud hangs over the room. Everyone knows the peace has been broken, and many people begin preparing themselves for another dirty battle. Melissa tries to get things back on track, but she is distracted and upset. The bond of cooperation has been shattered.

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Each of us has been hurt by other people, and many of our old wounds remain unhealed. Whenever someone pokes our open wounds, we are likely to react with irrational fear, grief, anger, or violence. Sometimes we realize our feelings are inappropriate and stop, but often we cannot see it or stop it — especially when we feel isolated or powerless. Then we are likely to lash out at others.

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Lester, a quiet, elderly man also new to the group, stands up, walks over next to Melissa, and addresses the group. “Rape is not a joking matter. It devastates women and dehumanizes us all. I want us all to agree we won’t say things like that — things that hurt other people.” He then turns to Melissa and offers his shoulder. Melissa hugs him and begins crying softly. Lester gently holds her. This makes the other people uneasy, so Lester speaks calmly to them over Melissa’s shoulder. “Don’t worry; it’s OK. People cry sometimes when they’re hurt. Then they stop, and it’s all OK.” Lester continues to hold Melissa. “Melissa knows me and trusts me not to hurt her or make fun of her.”

Then while Melissa softly cries, he continues talking over her shoulder to the group, explaining that when people have been hurt, they need to express all their feelings in a safe environment. “Every week Melissa and I get together and support one another. When I was a child, my father used to criticize me constantly and whip me with his belt whenever he thought I disagreed with him. It made me angry, resentful, and afraid. Melissa has helped me overcome these feelings. I’m no longer afraid to speak out, and I’m no longer so furious or bitter. She reassures me that I didn’t cause my father’s rage, holds me while I cry, and encourages me to step outside of these old hurts and move forward. Then I do the same for her.” As he speaks about his hurt, his voice begins to falter and his lower lip trembles just a bit. He pauses momentarily, looking somewhat uneasy and uncertain. Melissa then hugs him tighter. This seems to refocus his attention and bolster his resolve. He clears his throat and continues in a strong voice. “Like many women, Melissa is very sensitive about rape.”

He then describes how rape affects women — how horrible it is to be terrorized and controlled by a rapist, how long it takes for a woman to feel safe again and to feel comfortable again with her body. As he talks about particularly painful aspects of rape and oppression of women, Melissa sobs deeply and he holds her closer. He continues for several minutes and everyone else sits in stunned silence. Several people have tears in their eyes and Rachel coughs uncomfortably. Melissa stops crying and reassures everyone

she is all right. She is still shaken, but asks the group to continue with the meeting as she sits down.

Lester checks that she is OK and then begins facilitating the meeting right where Melissa had left off. Though not as adept as Melissa, he clearly is also quite skilled. At first, there is some awkwardness in the discussion, but after a few minutes everyone relaxes, especially when Melissa’s clear, calm voice rejoins the discussion.

By the end of the meeting, Melissa is once again cheerful and open. As people begin to leave, she makes an effort to reconnect with both Steven and Mark. They are a bit cautious, expecting her to lash out at them, but clearly, she feels no ill will. They are relieved by her demeanor. Still a bit anxious, they clumsily apologize to her for their statements and Melissa graciously accepts their apologies.

Impressed by what she saw in the meeting, Rachel approaches Lester. She asks him where he learned to facilitate and how he learned to deal with emotional upheavals so well. He says he attended the same Vernal Education Program as Melissa and learned how to support people there. It was also where he first tackled his own deep emotional hurts.

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In difficult times, it helps a great deal to be able to retreat to a safe place with someone to comfort us — while someone else carries our workload. Then, in this safe environment, we can let our emotions out and take some time to understand what inflamed us. Unfortunately, in our current society, when we show fear or grief, we are more often belittled, ridiculed, or even beaten. We quickly learn to hide our feelings and pretend we are not injured, driving the hurt deeper inside. Forced to swallow our hurts, we may decide it is best to avoid any potentially dangerous situation so we will never risk being hurt again. Or we may come to believe we can only be safe if we dominate and control others.

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MELISSA’S REVELATION

As they leave the meeting, Lori tells Melissa how upset she was by Steven’s insensitive comment about rape and by Melissa crying. Melissa reassures Lori that she is OK, but that she is still recovering from a brutal rape. “I’m still emotionally tender,” she says, “but I’m getting better and better at standing up for myself and other women.”

“Yes, we’ve got to stick together,” Lori agrees. “I was raped by my uncle when I was just twelve. That’s when I realized you can never trust men — even if they act like they’re kind. My uncle hurt me horribly. It took me a long time to realize that I wasn’t to blame — he kept telling me

my innocence and beauty made him do it. He made me hate myself for being pretty. But I finally figured out it was his fault — not mine. *He* did it to me.

“Sometimes, I wish I could inflict as much pain on him as he has caused me — I wish I could slowly torture him to death and watch him writhe in pain. It’s time we women stood together and stood up to men. Don’t you think it would be better if we started our own group with just women? Then we wouldn’t have to deal with guys like Steven and Mark and their neanderthal ideas about women.”

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When we are deeply traumatized, we may seek revenge against the people who hurt us. We often blame a particular individual or generalize to a large class of people. At best, this can be divisive. At worst, it can spread the violence and trauma, engulfing others in the same vicious pattern of fear and hatred.

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Melissa is startled by Lori’s forthrightness. She feels she must respond in kind, so she takes Lori’s hand and looks into her eyes. “I certainly understand how much your uncle must have hurt you. After I was raped, I was afraid to be around any men. I felt horrible and dirty. For quite a while I was deeply depressed, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to live in this world. When I finally felt my strength return, I was so angry I wanted to kill every man who looked at me. For months, I stomped around, filled with rage, snarling at everyone until even my friends were afraid of me. I knew my rage was justified and it felt like the more anger I had, the stronger I was. But eventually, I came to realize that I was becoming as full of hatred as that rapist — he was winning because he was turning me into a monster as vile as himself. Just as he hated women and desired to crush my spirit, I was beginning to hate men and wanted to crush them. And I realized I couldn’t go on hating everyone or it would just rot me from the inside out. I knew hating like that would eventually destroy me.

“Finally, I saw that I could only really win if I stood for love and compassion against his hatred. I realized I could only respect myself again if I started acting like a civilized human. And I knew I could only do *that* if I forgave myself for being overcome by hatred. It was then that I realized that the rapist might also have been overcome by hatred that was induced by some traumatic experience, and I did my best to feel compassion for him. I didn’t forgive him for what he did to me, but I tried to understand why he was so full of hatred — what must have happened to him to make him hate women so much that he could methodically rape

and terrorize me. Whatever it was must have been horrible — maybe it was even worse than what he did to me.

“That’s how I came to realize that I had to work against *all* injustice, against *all* hatred, against *all* oppression wherever I find it — in myself or in others. I wasn’t sure exactly how to go about it or where to start. I was still very wary of men.

“But then I attended this wonderful education program — the Vernal Education Program — and met some men like Lester — gentle, loving men who are also completely dedicated to ending the oppression of women. I discovered other people who had also realized that hatred just generates more hatred in a stupid, endless cycle. I found they had a better way to transform society that didn’t rely on hatred. So that’s what I am trying to do now.”

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It is often difficult to see the humanity in those who have hurt us badly. But if we can see the ways we sometimes hurt other people, we can begin to understand the origins of hatred and cruelty. We can begin to recognize the forces that drive us, and we can start to empathize with others, even those who appear completely hardened and depraved. Rather than focusing narrowly on revenge or on defending ourselves, we can broaden our perspective and consider how to transform ourselves and our society so no one is hurt, oppressed, or exploited.

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A BEAUTIFUL VISION

Melissa continued: “I’m working now towards completely eliminating rape. I intend to change the world until rape and all other forms of sexual abuse of women are no longer part of it.”

This statement astounded Lori. “No more rape or sexual abuse? How could you possibly eliminate these things? As long as men are running around loose they’re going to rape women and abuse girls, aren’t they?”

“No, I don’t believe so,” Melissa replied. “Most men don’t abuse women — most men find it abhorrent. If we accept abuse as natural male behavior or inevitable, we are actually providing brutal men with an excuse for their violent acts. By doing so, we make it more likely they’ll be violent. I think we have to emphatically insist that sexual abuse isn’t natural and we won’t tolerate it anymore.

“Also, in looking carefully at this, I realized that some women are much more vulnerable to being abused than others. Some women have been hurt so much, they just expect to get hurt more. And some are so poor or weak they cannot protect themselves. If they were stronger, less vulner-

able to domination and exploitation, and more self-assured, they would be safer.

"I'm working to empower women to stand up to male violence. I think we can force men to stop raping and abusing women. I'm also committed to changing our culture until rape is considered even more detestable than slavery is now viewed. And I intend to find out what it is that makes men rape so we can change things enough that no boy will ever grow up to become a rapist. I know it sounds incredible, but I'm convinced it's possible. Human beings learn how to be cruel and vicious, and they can just as readily learn how to be kind and compassionate. I think we just have to change the conditions that lead men to rape.

"I'm convinced it is possible, and I'm committed to making it happen. I want to live in a world where rape is unthinkable. I want to walk down the street unafraid. I want every woman to be able to walk wherever she wants without fear. And I intend to make it that way."

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Oppression is not inevitable. The idea of hurting another person is a concept that children learn. Motivation for hurting others comes from the anger and fear of unhealed emotional wounds. Opportunity for hurting another arises when people are so poor or beaten down that they cannot defend themselves. Oppression can be ended by teaching children how and why not to hurt others, by healing people's emotional wounds, and by building everyone up so they cannot be easily victimized.

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Lori is completely flabbergasted. Melissa's ideas seem to make sense, but they are so new to her that she can't accept them. "But it just doesn't seem possible. You're saying we could change boys so they never grow up even thinking of raping women. I can't imagine that ever happening."

Melissa tries to convince her. "Just because something exists now doesn't mean it has to always exist. Women were once accused of being witches and burned at the stake. Now they aren't. For centuries, girls were considered the property of their fathers and women were considered the property of their husbands. It was considered acceptable for men to use and abuse women however they wanted. But now this is unacceptable. If people could change those terrible practices, then we can stop other kinds of oppression, too."

"But it just doesn't seem possible," Lori scoffs. "If we could do that, then why don't we end poverty, war, and disease while we're at it? We could just live perfect lives forever."

Melissa responds passionately: "Well, I'm not convinced we can eliminate disease or aging, but I see no reason for poverty or war. Our world is rich enough that there's no good reason for poverty. And war doesn't accomplish any-

thing useful. Why not eliminate them both? I'd like to live in a world where brutality and violence of all kinds are rare oddities — a world where no one fears bodily harm from others. And more than that — where no one lacks food, shelter, medical care, or loving support. I would like everyone in the world to be at least as powerful, as assertive, and as loving as I have learned to be — or rather, even *more* so — as much as I hope to be. I think it is possible, and I'm working toward making it a reality."

"But how could we possibly do this?" Lori asks skeptically.

"I think the first step is just to imagine a better society. We have to envision the kind of world we want to live in. I've been fortunate to hear and read some extraordinary ideas."

When Lori asks Melissa where she heard these ideas, Melissa tells her she learned of them in the same Vernal Education Program.

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Our vision of what could be is often limited to what currently exists. The first step to improvement is to conceive of a better world. If we can imagine it, then there may be a way to create it. A clear image of a positive future can also inspire us to do the hard work required to make it a reality.

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THINGS GO BETTER WITH GOOD SUPPORT

Lori likes hearing Melissa describe her vision, but she is still cynical about the prospects for change.

"Well that sounds great, but it's not so easy to make changes. I once tried to stand up to some men in the plaza who were making sexist remarks and lewd gestures towards the women there. Those jerks just laughed at me, made nasty comments, and then threatened me. As I walked away, one of them followed me for a while, and I was afraid he might hurt me. They harassed me just for challenging their remarks. What would happen if I really stood up to sexual violence? I might get killed."

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When we challenge oppression, we often become a target for that oppression. This can be terrifying — sometimes even deadly.

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"I know," Melissa assured her. "Making significant change can be dangerous. I think the man who raped me may have done it partly to punish me for my efforts to protect women from male violence. Oppression is very powerful, and it is pervasive throughout our society. Especially in the situation you described, you were there by yourself, a single individual trying to stand up to a whole group of men. You were trying to confront not only their ideas, but also the whole culture behind those ideas. It's no wonder that you weren't able to accomplish very much.

"But what if you were there with a hundred other women and you were only confronting a few guys? And what if there were tens of thousands of other women and men all over the country confronting sexism at the very same time — at the very same moment in hundreds of places? In those circumstances, you would be much more likely to have an impact.

"And what if beforehand, you had met with the other hundred women and you had given each other encouragement and support and then practiced techniques to challenge sexist behavior in a powerful way? What if afterwards you all got together and talked about what had happened, how it felt for you, and how you might do better in the future? With that kind of love and support, it would probably be a whole lot easier. That's what I'm trying to do: to set it up so we can be powerful and also reasonably safe as we vigorously challenge oppression.

"Especially since I was raped, it is very difficult for me to stand up to angry men. But I am determined to do it, and with enough good support, I know I can do it. When I know what I am getting into — when I've practiced my response beforehand, and I'm well supported — it is much easier for me to act courageously. And I think that's true for everyone."

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It is always easier to do tasks when you have solid support from others and you have the necessary skills and experience to do a good job. This is especially true of a difficult task like working for comprehensive social change.

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POWERFULLY CHALLENGING OPPRESSION

Melissa paints a pretty picture, but Lori is still skeptical. At the next meeting, Lori has a chance to put Melissa's vision to the test. She describes a recent incident that begs for an immediate response.

The previous Saturday night, a prominent businessman in the community beat his wife nearly to death while they were arguing about their relationship. On Monday, while

she was lying in a coma, the local newspaper ran an opinion column by a senior staff editor that tried to justify his action by arguing that although the beating was deplorable, it was understandable because she had had an affair with another man. Sentiments in town are now split, largely along gender lines. Many men feel that she got what she deserved, and most women are horrified by the violence and worry about the fate of the woman.

"What should we do about this?" Lori asks Melissa, wondering if she could come up with a response as bold and captivating as her vision. "Here's a perfect example of male oppression supported by the good ol' boys at the newspaper. We should do something."

"You're right," Melissa replies without hesitation. When the meeting begins, she raises the issue for the group to discuss. Lori and Melissa relate their direct experience of gender oppression and insist there must be a strong, pointed response by both women and men. Lester vociferously backs their perspective and points out that oppression of any person degrades everyone.

However, some people are afraid to take a public stand. Mark argues that this has little to do with juvenile delinquency and will just divert their attention from their goal. Melissa replies that standing up for what is right directly addresses juvenile delinquency by demonstrating how moral people should act and providing a model of good behavior for teenagers.

Steven then argues that perhaps the newspaper editor knows more about what really happened, and he speculates that the wife may have attacked her husband first. This makes Lori extremely angry. At first, she is filled with bitter disgust. Then, as other men nod agreement, she collapses into disheartened resignation and slumps in her chair. Sensing the group will find it difficult to reach any kind of consensus, Margot tries to end the discussion and have the group move on.

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Many people are afraid to take a stand on contentious issues. They may feel they don't know enough, they may be afraid of making a mistake, or they may fear being hurt. People are especially afraid of divisive issues that fissure along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion since people may find themselves in bitter conflict with their friends.

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Melissa points out that the newspaper article says nothing about the wife attacking the husband. Further, she insists that no matter what happened, there is *never* any justification for hurting another person. She then declares that this is an extremely important example of oppression. "We are here because we care about teenagers and don't

want them to be hurt. Don't we also care about women? Don't we also want *women* not to be hurt? I am opposed to all oppression wherever I see it. This is an outrageous example of oppression, and I feel we must speak out. Standing aside would tacitly endorse domination of women."

Lester then joins her in arguing that everyone must take a principled stand against violence and against the newspaper's attempt to exonerate the husband and his brutality. With both of them advocating the same position, both speaking clearly and eloquently, they are finally able to persuade everyone in the group to act. They are so persuasive that even Steven finally comes around.

The group decides to organize a march of both women and men who oppose domestic violence. The march will begin at noon on Thursday of the following week. They decide to march from the hospital to the front of the newspaper office where they will demand a retraction of the opinion column. They all agree to call everyone they know who might be sympathetic, tell them how important it is to come, and ask them to call their friends. Everyone in the group does this, and it appears that the march will be quite large.

Melissa and Lester show themselves particularly proficient at organizing a political event and ensuring every important preparatory task is accomplished. When Lori asks them where they learned to argue for a position so well and to organize demonstrations, they reply that they learned and practiced these skills in the Vernal Education Program.

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A lone voice can easily be drowned out or ignored, but when several people back each other up, they can have much greater influence. This is especially true when they are knowledgeable and well spoken. People are often willing to join with anyone who can clearly articulate high-minded action. Sometimes, it seems, people are just waiting for the right encouragement — then they will jump in.

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BUILDING A BROAD ALLIANCE

Preparations for the march are going well until the town's police chief threatens to arrest everyone who marches unless they have a parade permit. He also refuses to issue a permit, claiming the event will be disruptive. The newspaper then reports that the mayor and several members of the city council are supportive of the police chief's position.

When it becomes clear this will discourage many people from attending, Lori confesses her frustration to Melissa. "Suddenly everyone I talk to has a prior engagement for Thursday at noon," she moans. "The whole town structure

is circling the wagons to protect this jerk. This morning, the head of the Chamber of Commerce — a woman! — issued a statement commending the generosity of the husband as an employer and benefactor of nonprofit social organizations. She also implied that anyone who wanted to have a job in this town should keep her mouth shut.

"Everyone is now afraid to come to the march. We may end up with just a few people — the same handful of people who always work against oppression of women.

"I am so angry. You know, I wouldn't be unhappy if the windows of the newspaper and all those other businesses downtown were smashed into a thousand pieces. I wouldn't even be sad if some of those guys got hurt when their windows shattered. It would serve them right for acting like such asses!"

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In this country, there has developed a circle of powerful people who control important societal institutions. They are implicitly supported by employees of those institutions. Often, when members of this elite are challenged, they use their positions of power to protect themselves and to crush their opposition. They also regularly use their power to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

When ordinary people see how difficult it is to challenge the power structure, they often give up. Those who are especially frustrated and angry may consider violent responses or misdirect their anger towards less powerful people who can't fight back.

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Melissa takes Lori's hand. "I know how this upsets you. It's so clearly wrong. They know they're wrong, so they use their might to intimidate people and thwart our efforts. Still, I don't want to resort to their tactics. I don't want to brutalize people in the same way they do. And we don't need to do that: I have another plan that should work much better."

She then tells Lori that she has contacted several dozen people of goodwill in neighboring cities and all across the country. "These people are willing to make an issue of our situation in their communities. They are writing letters to the editors of their local newspapers, calling radio and TV stations, leafleting, and planning rallies for the same day. They are trying to focus critical attention on the elite in this town and embarrass them into behaving properly. Their support should also embolden people in this town to take a stand. We need to alert everyone that we have support from across the country."

Melissa, Lori, and Lester then spread the word to their group and throughout their community. When people learn of this support, they feel less isolated and realize they might actually have enough power to win this struggle. Most agree

to defer their other “plans” and come to the march. Members of the city council and the mayor are bombarded with calls and letters from townspeople and from people all over the country condemning their stance and their cowardice. Sensing the changing atmosphere, one of the more progressive members of the city council, who has been silent up to this point, denounces the police chief's action in a radio interview. Melissa, Lori, and Lester quickly spread the word about this interview to everyone they can in town.

By the day of the demonstration, several hundred people are willing to defy the police chief and risk arrest. Just before the march is to begin, the police chief backs down and issues a parade permit. The crowd then marches to the newspaper office and engages in a festive picket at the front doors. Most are wearing yellow sashes — made by women in the garden club — as a symbol of their support for the battered woman. Many people vow to boycott the newspaper unless it changes its position. Melissa and Lester lead the group in singing “We Shall Overcome.” Then Rachel stands up and leads the crowd in a group moan, which grows into a group yell of love and support. People leave feeling energized and excited.

The next day, the newspaper runs an editorial partially apologizing for running the opinion column and pointing out the need for more investigation of the issue. The editor also commissions a female reporter — who had been asking for years to write articles on issues of concern to women — to write an in-depth series of articles on the situation and the larger issue of domestic violence.

At the next meeting, everyone is excited about being part of this successful campaign. They are energized and willing to work even harder on the issue of teenage delinquency.

Lori asks Melissa how she was able to garner so much support so quickly for their cause from all across the country. Melissa tells her that she contacted other people she met at the Vernal Education Program and other graduates of the Vernal network. She said they all had a long-standing agreement to help each other out whenever possible. Many of these activists were already working on the issue of domestic violence so it was easy to mobilize support. Lori then asks Melissa if it might be possible for her to attend the Vernal Education Program.

“Certainly,” she answers. “I can loan you a book that describes it and then you could apply for admission to the local center.”