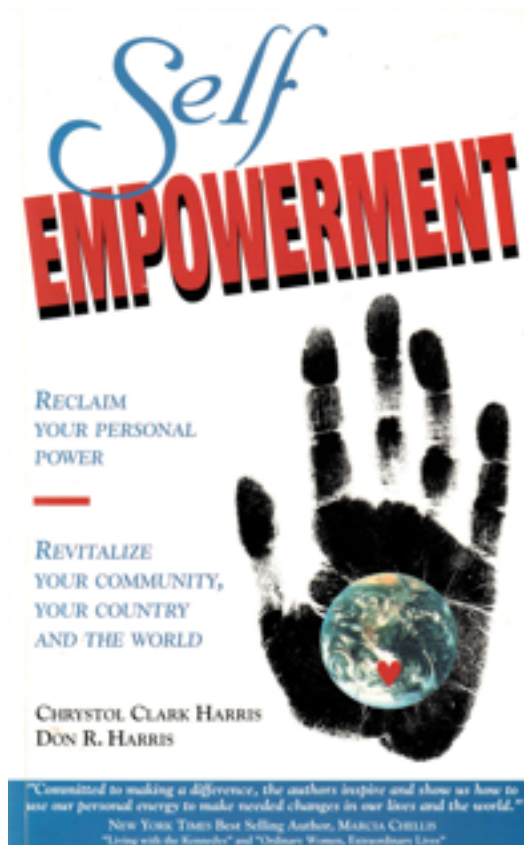


Excerpt from 1993:



Chapter 3: We Do Have Heroes

We need to provide every opportunity for all people to live up to their potential, especially minorities who have more difficulty getting comparable rewards and compensation than white males in our country. Woman and racial minorities lag far behind in these areas. Every one of us deserve the opportunity to be our own heroes. We all deserve an opportunity for equal compensation and recognition.

An example of an unsung hero is Dr. Mimi Silbert who founded Delancey Street in San Francisco. She helped more than 10,000 men and women who have spent time in prison reconstruct their lives and become positive contributors to society. Silbert was among six recipients for the second annual America's Awards, sponsored by the Positive Thinking Foundation, of which Dr. Norman Vincent Peale is co-founder. "These unsung heroes personify the American Spirit," Dr. Peale says. "They are extraordinary examples of values that make our country great."

"We're coming together to make things happen," Silbert says, "not just with good results but also with a good process. Because life itself is a process. If you fall apart, it doesn't have to end there. Hitting bottom can be the beginning. And I think, right now, that America itself has the same problems that bring people to Delancey Street."

“At one time we all believed we were going up as a country but now we’ve started to feel like losers. There’s a sense of being powerless and an attitude of fear and distrust. We’re on the way down. Maybe we have to hit bottom before we can wake up the spirit of hope in America.”

But there’s tremendous good in being able to get excited, to believe that rebuilding is possible. Once we know it’s possible, we can take the risk of starting again. The best part of life is the struggle,” Silbert concludes.

Chapter 7: A Vision of the World We Want

Communities That Work

In Chapter 2 we commented on types of communities that don’t work. Here, we are introduced to some communities that do work, and one of the best examples as we mentioned in chapter 3, is the Delancey Street Foundation of San Francisco.

Delancey Street, a residence program for mostly ex-convicts is almost entirely self-supporting. It trains each member in four different trades and operates profit-making businesses which utilize their skills.

Robert Rocha is an example of one individual’s experience with Delancey Street. He had no father and his mother had been in and out of prison all during his childhood. Robert had been in foster homes since he was eight years old. In his teens he carries a gun, sold drugs and stole whatever he could lay his hands on. Finally, he was arrested and convicted of twenty-seven armed robberies. Robert spent two years in San Quentin. After he was released, in 1987, he was convicted again of selling heroin to and undercover cop.

Like other newcomers to Delancey Street, Robert started out filled with bitterness. He didn’t give a damn about anyone else and tried to keep away from all other residents. Gradually, he made a few friends. One day, after he had been in the program for about eight months, one of his friends decided to drop out and go back to the street. Before he realized what he was doing, Robert found himself pleading with the other man to stay, not to give up this chance to get it right. “Don’t ruin it man. Hang in! Don’t go back to that life!”

Before that day, Robert had never [pleaded with anyone for anything. Now he suddenly found that he cared—he actually cared for someone. When he realized that, he burst out crying and years of bitterness and despair drained out of him.

Today, four years after going on parole, Robert is twenty-six and has learned eight construction trades. He is taking college level courses in criminology and

he helps other ex-cons earn their high school diplomas. He has become a stable, productive, eminently decent member of society, and at Delancey Street he is not an exception.

Mimi Silbert came from an immigrant neighborhood in Boston, where her father ran the corner drugstore. “Delancey Street functions in the way my own family did,” she says.

Delancey Street has strict rules – no alcohol, drugs, threats or violence, to name a few. In order to be accepted for residency, newcomers must ask to be admitted—in writing—and must promise to remain for at least two years. Eighty percent of the residents keep that promise. Graduates include successful lawyers, businessmen, technicians and construction workers.

At the heart of this unique “extended family” is the spirit and unswerving resolve of Dr. Mimi Silbert, 49, a criminologist. Since 1972, she has dedicated her life to keeping Delancey Street open and growing. An elfin woman weighing less than 100 pounds, she stands toe-to-toe with the meanest, toughest ex-felons until the shouting turns into laughter, tears and hard work. Here deep wounds have an opportunity to gradually heal.

“You want to quit?” she challenged Robert Rocha and other Delancey Street residents while they were building their new San Francisco complex on the waterfront. “Well,” Silbert told them, “that’s what you’ve always done—given up every time it has gotten difficult! I know you’re hammering away thinking that this isn’t worth it but you’re hammering away on your own lives.”

“You’re building your own foundation. If you make a mistake with that wall, tear it down and rebuild it! That’s what we’re doing at Delancey Street, for ourselves—tearing down bad things and making good things to replace ‘em. And if you’re too guilty and angry and hopeless to fight for yourself, then do it for the next guy. Because he’s counting on you. Meanwhile, you’re learning new skills. You’re getting something that no one can take away from you. You’re building your lives.”

There are 500 current residents in the San Francisco complex which opened in 1990. About 500 others are going through this same rigorous program in Brewster, N.Y.; in Greensboro, N.C.; and in San Juan Pueblo, N.M. With neither funding nor a permanent staff other than Silbert herself, Delancey Street is almost entirely self-supporting. Its business enterprises, run by residents, net \$3 million a year.

“We’re trying to prove that the ‘losers’ in our society can, in fact, be helped,” Silbert says, “and also that they, in turn, can help. Essentially they make up an underclass. A third of our population was homeless. The average resident is four

or five generations into prison. They've been hard-core dope fiends. They've had horrible violence done to them and they've been violent.”

Today the Delancey Street program is being studied by groups all over the United States, in hopes of duplicating this successful community on a larger scale.

Communities, with the right ingredients, can and do work. They empower the people within them and they empower themselves.