

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

HOW TO FORTIFY DEMOCRACY IN 2024: A CITIZEN'S GUIDE BY SAM DALEY-HARRIS

LAURA FLANDERS: A little less than a year before the next presidential election, a study from the research and polling group, Pew reports that nearly two thirds of Americans say they always or often feel exhausted when thinking about politics. More than half say they feel angry. Just 10% say they always or often feel hopeful. And 4%, just 4% report feeling any semblance of excited. All of which seems to me to be a problem, especially in an important election year like this one. So what could turn some of that enthusiasm around? Today's guest says we need more civic courage, not less of it, and more organizations, training people to do effective, bold things. Things that might leave volunteers and advocates feeling empowered and even transformed. Sam Daley-Harris founded the Anti-Poverty Lobby results back in 1980 and Civic Courage in 2012. Jimmy Carter called the first edition of his book, "A roadmap for global involvement in planning a better future." The newly updated 2024 edition, "Reclaiming Our Democracy - Every Citizen's Guide to Transformational Advocacy" just came out this January. Kirkus Reviews, has called this book a, "Handbook for aspiring activists" that readers will find to be both inspiring and practical. So I had a chance to talk with Sam Daley-Harris about what his findings might say about election year doldrums. And here is that conversation recorded in the studios of CUNY TV. When we come back, a few thoughts from me at the end about citizenship and spaceships. But first, my conversation with Sam Daley-Harris. I started by asking him about what inspired him to update his book for this year. Sam Daley-Harris, it is great to talk with you. Thank you so much for coming into the studios here. You talk about laser talks in your book. If you were to give us your laser talk on why this book now, why did you feel the urgency to completely revise and update 30 years after the first edition? What was it?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, I think people see that the volume on the discouragement is turned up. The cynicism is turned up. And there's one particular message in the book that I think people need to hear, and it's about a kind of advocacy few know about, I call it transformational advocacy. People know transactional, sign the petition, transaction complete. But with transformational advocacy, people are trained, encouraged and succeed at doing things as advocates they never thought they could do. Meet with a member of Congress and bring them on board to your issue. Write a letter to the editor on something you care about and get it published.

And when you do that, you see yourself in a new light. You see new possibilities rather than, I can't fight city hall, I can't make a difference. No, you see yourself as a community leader.

LAURA FLANDERS: So not just transforming ideally the world or your community or your town, but transforming yourself.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, yeah, I think I think it would be true to say that people have very little confidence in their ability to make change. And so if my letters published, my confidence is increased. If that meeting I'm nervous about, we don't make fools of ourselves and in fact make a little progress, my confidence increase.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, one of the chilling things that you say in the book is that our biggest and best and most well-funded nonprofit advocacy organizations are also lacking confidence.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, yeah, so there's two studies. There's one from the independent sector last year that found that 31% of nonprofit surveyed were doing advocacy, which was less than half than 20 years ago, but it gets worse actually. The Congressional Management Foundation asked advocacy professionals what their main mode of advocacy was, and 79% sent an email sign-on letter, like a petition. And only 3% of congressional staff said that was really effective.

LAURA FLANDERS: We need to hear the story of you, your expertise, you're an expert in telling the story of you. You call on people to learn the story of you. What's the story of you?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, one of the themes in the book is you need to know your why and share it. And it's come from Marshall Ganz who developed this story of self, what happened in your life and what decisions did you make that got you to this commitment? Here's a shortened version of mine. I have a bachelor's in Master's in Music and play percussion in the Miami Philharmonic Orchestra for 12 years. And then 44 years ago, I founded an anti-poverty lobby. And it's like, "What was the connection there?" And when I look back, there's certain experiences that start pointing me in a different direction. The death of a friend around high school graduation in '64, the assassination of Robert Kennedy around college graduation in '68 got me to ask the questions of why. Why am I here? What am I here to do? What's my purpose? Nine years later, I go to a presentation on Any World Hunger thinking, "Well, hunger's

inevitable, what do I know, I'm a musician?" But I realized there's no mystery to growing food or clean water. I'm not hopeless about the perceived lack of solutions. I'm hopeless about human nature, people. But just never get around to what we could do. There's one human nature I have some control over my own and my questions, why am I here? What am I here to do? I get involved in a big way. This is the end of the story. In '78 and '79, I speak to 7,000 students classroom by classroom and read quotes from Jimmy Carter's Commission on World Hunger and others calling for the political will to end hunger. So I asked 7,000 students, what's the name of your member of Congress? I don't want to know if you wrote them. I don't want to know if you met just the name. 200, fewer than 3% could tell me. 6,800 could not tell me. And results grew out of this gap.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you think this is intentional? A lot of people talk about the sort of stripping away of civics lessons and education in our education system.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Even civics education, I would critique it with, you can't just learn it, you have to do it. So you have to find some way to use it, not memorize it, forget it, and move on kind of thing. Alex Stefan said, "Optimism is a political act." Those who benefit from the status quo are perfectly happy with a large population who thinks nothing will get any better. And I just want to say this last phrase. In fact, these days cynicism is obedience. And yeah, if I'm cynical, I'm basically being obedient to the way things are rather than getting involved.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's a speech that I'm reminded of that Dr. King gave in 1967 to the National Bar Association where he talks about the kind of uninevitability of progressive change. And he spoke about the importance of individual effort and dedicated citizens. Here's that speech or a portion of it.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: And I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the extreme righteous in our nation, have often used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time." Somewhere, we must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wills of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals. And without this

hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must help time and we must realize that the time is always right to do right.

LAURA FLANDERS: At that time, people were being inspired by speakers like King. There were massive movements. A lot of people today think that's what organizing looks like. That's their model of organizing.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, we certainly would want that to be, but we don't need that in order to engage ourselves.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talking about mass rallies.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And we should not do a mass rally, but we need to keep going and not just rally and then take a nap. And so my inspiration comes from watching these volunteers do these transformational things that they never thought they could do that inspires me.

LAURA FLANDERS: To sort of prove your credentials here, you start this anti-poverty organization. A lot of people can say, "Well, poverty's still with us."

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yep.

LAURA FLANDERS: It was called Results. How do you assess the results of Results?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, let me give you one example. We lobbied starting in 1984 every year on a thing called Child Survival now it's referred to as Maternal and Child Health. UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund was reporting 40,000 child deaths a day from preventable things like measles coupled with malnutrition. The latest numbers are 13,800, a 66% decline in global child deaths. And the head of UNICEF wrote, this is years ago. "I thank you in my mind at least weekly for what you and your colleagues are accomplishing. But I thought I should do it at least once this year in writing," because he saw grassroots action with editorial writers, with members of Congress.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that was my next question. So just sticking with Results for a second, if you were to summarize what you did that's different. I mean, you started it with, you know, as a Timpani player with no money, no staff, no experience. So what did you have and what did you do?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, let me say, I tell people what to look for for an organization that's committed to transformational advocacy. And this is what Results did. It's an organization that's committed to recruitment and building community, bringing new people and not building an e-blast list, but real people talking to real people and forming them into chapters that's the recruitment. And then building community a monthly all of organization webinar, not just the leaders, if they're 10 or 15 in your chapter, all 15, guest speaker, Q&A, inspiration. So that's number one. Number two, training. The organization trains you to be more effective. How do you get the meeting? How do you write a letter? That kind of thing. Number three, the organization encourages you to move out of your comfort zone. There's a drawing the book, small circle your comfort zone. Next to it, a much larger circle where the magic happens. Find an organization that recruits and builds community, trains and encourages you to move out of your comfort zone. And that's what Results did.

LAURA FLANDERS: So give us an example, you have a lot of them in the book, but is there one that stands out to you as like this was the model in effect, in action?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, there are many that stand out. I'm going to tell you one story about an extraordinary woman, but we're all extraordinary if we get the right training. Maxine Thomas, someone with a lived experience of poverty. She joined a group called Circles for people motivated to move out of poverty. They realize they have a voice. And so she finds Results and gets a scholarship to go to a Results conference in DC. And she learns that the earned income tax credit, which is for working low income families, is going to expire. She has her first lobby day meeting with Senator Dan Coats and she says, "He was there for the whole meeting. It was like an out of body experience. I was like blown away being there." It's this amazing statement that she makes and it's an example of the joy that can come.

LAURA FLANDERS: So let's move to right now, because you also co-founded an organization called Civic Courage and never, it seems to me, have we needed more civic courage than we do right now. You talked about discouragement, cynicism, what about just plain old fear of getting

involved in politics? As, you know, we're talking about partisan politics right now because it's an election year. The fear that people have is what they see on television. I don't want to get involved in that.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah, well I think it's important that people work with others. So if I want to do something and I'm experience that fear, I've got two or three or more friends who also want to do something. So work with them for starters, and then of course find an organization that's, maybe it's registering young people to vote and helping get them to the polls. Maybe it's working at the precincts, maybe it's doing voter registration at any other level. So find an organization that's helping you engage and stay engaged.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah. And we should say, I mean, I was going to leave this to the end, but I think we should say it's not like your book is about elections.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: No.

LAURA FLANDERS: And in fact, the argument that you make very strongly is elections aren't the most important thing. But how do you apply this work to an election season that'll, I wouldn't be the first one to say this, the most important election in our lifetime.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah, and I agree. And let me just say, so your viewers and listeners kind of know this, when Donald Trump was elected, a hundred million Americans did not vote. And when Joe Biden was elected, 80 million did not vote. And in the last election, it was the second most turnout by young people, but it was like 35% turnout. So, who are the young people in your life? You know, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, neighbors, whatever, have conversations with them about how important it is to vote and voting is critical, but so is the time between elections.

VOLUNTEER: Learning a lot about issues affecting our country and the world. My initial instinct was to repost on social media to share that tweet or send that message to my friends. But I really had a strong urge to take my advocacy offline. There's definitely a passion for and interest in learning more and in fighting really important causes like domestic poverty and global health issues. But I want to find a way to do that in a concrete way. It's been a super rewarding experience to do more as a constituent besides

just voicing opinions online. It's cool to have that one extra step to like actually be here and like the room where it happens per se, and actually be able to advocate in the offices we'd be heard and most of the time our message was really, really well received by people. It really, really did show the impact of everyday people doing important work.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talking at this moment to an organizer, somebody who's perhaps beginning to pull together a team to work on a campaign. What's your sort of number one lesson to them?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: I think number one is back to the story of self, what's your why? What happened in your life and what decisions did you make that got you to that commitment? And know it, write it if you haven't, and then share it. And so when you're working with 2 or 22 volunteers or 200, share your story and encourage them to think about and develop their own story of self so that we're grounded in purpose rather than fear and upset only.

LAURA FLANDERS: You talked about email earlier, is social media and all the new tools we have for reaching people a help or a hindrance to the kind of transformational advocacy?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, I wouldn't say don't do that, but don't make that the last stop, make that an entry point.

LAURA FLANDERS: Translating that to a campaign. I mean, I know my stomach turns at how much email I get from candidates, most of it with a headline that's a lie because it starts with personal. It's not personal. Or it's a survey. And I know they don't really care what I think. They just want to send me to the donate page. This feels like...

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: So get past that.

LAURA FLANDERS: — It cultivates cynicism.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: And get past the e-blast to the face-to-face. Whether it's face-to-face with an organization, again, doing the registering of voters or whether it's a campaign that's trying to get someone you trust elected or whatever it is. Get past the electronic and to the human and see where you can go with that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alright, so then you're on the doorstep, you've perhaps knocked on a door. Maybe you had the you confidence to know that that's maybe a, you know, on the fence kind of voter. Do you want to role play? Shall I play an on the fence voter?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Okay, well, you know, let me just say this because campaign organizing isn't my expertise. But if you were...

LAURA FLANDERS: But the skills that you...

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Absolutely, let me share one.

LAURA FLANDERS: Account in the book do seem totally applicable.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: That could be transferable. So for example, if you were meeting with a member of Congress who was opposed to a bill, I would have you ask these three questions, which you might do at the doorstep. Two, we know you don't support this bill, what would it take to change your mind? So if you don't support the candidate, what would it take to change your mind? Can you say more about that? Three, why do you think that is? Where you're actually giving a person a chance to speak and you're listening carefully to what they have to say. Sure, you want to let them know about your own candidate, but you want to, an opening.

LAURA FLANDERS: Where does the conversation go next? And if you have 10 more doors to knock on.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah, well hopefully after I've listened to them and their kind of confusion or discouragement or misinformation, whatever it is that they've expressed, hopefully I then have a message about why this candidate is bringing a new vision to this issue or this campaign or this election. But, when they've been able to say what they need to say, there's an openness to hear what I have to say rather than hiding behind the door.

LAURA FLANDERS: I was just in Idaho. And the organizers there, very strong, wonderful folks was saying, in order for us to build relationships, it takes years, this is going to take years.

And yet the funding goes like this, goes like this, like this and wants results. Whether it's at the level of advocacy or on an issue or whether it's at the level of election.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah. So again, if I'm that organizer, can I link with an organization between elections, right in that community, right in that state to continue the kind of work that needs to be continued so that we can go deeper in our conversation rather than the shallowness that we're accosted with so often. I think that's one of the pieces that people need.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you see people doing that?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, I do. You know, one of the pieces that's in this puzzle is why are the nonprofits not doing this deeper work? Fear of making big asks of volunteers.

LAURA FLANDERS: That's interesting.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: If you're a volunteer and I'm on staff and I'm thinking, "Well, she's not going to agree to a four part new group training to begin with." So I lighten it, I water it down, I don't ask, so I make these puny little asks that bring puny results kind of thing. And I think we have to help nonprofits get over that fear of making big asks so bigger things can happen.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you have good examples of that?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Well, I was coaching a guy two years ago. He was a leader for a group that's focused on removing carbon that's already in the atmosphere. And he said, you know, we chapters two, three months old, we met with four state legislators and one was chair of a committee and he wanted us to brief the committee and the staff because he knew everything about climate, but he'd barely heard of carbon removal. And I said, "Well, wait, had you ever met with an elected?" "No, I'd never." I said, "Had you ever written him..." He said, "I'd never written, called or met with an elected official before these four." I said, "Put that in your talk because if you don't, people will think he's an expert, I'm not an expert, he could do it, I could never do it." And it was because they had a four-part new group training. How do you get the meeting? How do you plan for the meeting? And two or three months later, they'd already had four. So it mattered to make the bigger ask and give that...

LAURA FLANDERS: And the people that were involved felt good about it.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Absolutely.

LAURA FLANDERS: Hence the transformation part.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Yeah, absolutely. One of the stories in the book is that again, another extraordinary volunteer, Jay Butera, who is a lead on creating the House Climate Solutions Caucus. And it took nearly three years of, let's say headbanging to get the the Republican to be the lead with a Democrat on that. But by the end of that first year, this was 2016, there were 10 Republicans, 10 Democrats, Trump was elected, it moved to six and six because some retired or lost by the end of the second year of his term, there were 45 Republicans and 45 Democrats. It's a lot of conversations to get that kind of initial, I don't want to overstate what a climate solutions caucus is, but it's a door opener rather than the door stays shut.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you sound pretty enthusiastic and not discouraged about the state of Congress. Is that just because you're looking back in time?

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: No, no, my focus is the state of the citizens. And, you know, there was a column in "The Atlantic" titled Find the Activism that won't make you miserable. And the writer was saying, plant trees, work in a soup kitchen, don't do political advocacy that will make you miserable. No, not true. I mean it might, but if you don't find the right organization. But you know, I wrote him and he kind of saw the point that transformational advocacy might be a great option. We should plant trees and work in soup kitchens, but we shouldn't shut that other door. And we need to keep bringing more people in.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sam Daley-Harris's book, "Reclaiming Our Democracy," gives you a guide to how you can actually find a group that works for you and the things you can learn to apply to groups that you already work with. Sam, thank you so much.

SAM DALEY-HARRIS: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's been great talking with you.

Sam Daley-Harris, a little later in our conversation quoted the Apollo astronaut who came back to earth saying that we humans aren't passengers on Spaceship Earth, we're crew. And I thought about what that meant. We think of astronauts as crew on spaceships, as busily floating about in outer space, perhaps mending equipment, and in any case, getting busy with science. But what's our image of ourselves as citizens. Given half a chance, it seems people will show up to do what they know to associate with taking responsibility, whether it's protesting in the streets or signing a petition. But what if our image of citizenship was more engaged and perhaps more practical? No one's speaking out here against demonstrations and protests. But what if our picture of the citizen was one of a person who met with their representative on a regular basis, wrote letters to the media, or ran for office themselves? What if our picture of a citizen was that person who runs for local office, town planning council or town board? Our pictures, our mental ideas have to change says Sam. And you can hear my full conversation with him through a subscription to our free podcast. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious for the Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura, thanks for joining us.

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