

Rick Longinotti 1975–1976

Unlearning Alinsky

Inspired by the resemblance of Cesar Chavez's movement to those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, I threw myself into volunteering for the United Farm Workers union during three years of college. After graduation I began to work full time on the UFW boycott, for room and board and \$5 a week. In addition to continuing the legacy of Gandhi and King, Chavez used another thread in America's smorgasbord of social change theories—the Saul Alinsky model. Fred Ross, Sr., who had worked with Alinsky, introduced Chavez to community organizing in the barrio of San Jose. Alinsky's model could be called "pragmatic." Like the labor union organizing that inspired it, it kept its ideology simple. The people with less power needed to *organize* in order to contend with those who had power over them. *Organize* was a word with a reverence attached to it. It was both a method for achieving redress of injustices, and an end in itself, bringing dignity and empowerment to those who took it upon themselves to change their lives.

In spite of the benefits of the Alinsky model, there were two features of the model that I came to question. The first was its effort to find a visible target for the resentment of the afflicted people. You then pressure the target with public actions intended to shame them into better behavior. For Alinsky, focusing on a target was a way to turn the anger of the oppressed into action. This strategy is historically very old, and sometimes considered in disrepute, but Alinsky made it a virtue. In the case of the UFW during my participation in the early 1970s, it was "*Abajo los Growers*" and "*Abajo los Teamsters*." In this aspect it parted company with Gandhi and King, who avoided the temptation to demonize their opposition. They tried to speak to the humanity in their opposition rather than make them look foolish or reprehensible. And they didn't believe that anger was the best way to motivate people to action.

The problem with the populist style of focusing anger on a person or group of persons is that it is politically shortsighted. It tends to harden the hearts of the opponents. It also diverts attention from analyzing the root of the problem. Making certain persons out to be the enemy distracts people from seeing that changes need to be made in the system of economic relations.

The second *organizing* method that I later felt the need to "unlearn" was the way we were encouraged to meet our objectives (numbers of people out picketing, money collected, etc.). Like any aggressive sales team, we were taught to see people as a means to our objectives (think phone solicitors). We would appeal to a variety of motivations in order to get what we wanted. At house meetings, for example, we would ask each person for a commitment of time or money in front of the others. So shame was working in our favor.

Rev. Chris Hartmire used to ask, "What are you doing that could be more important than working for justice for farmworkers?" I carried that question in my head each time I heard

a “no” when asking someone to come out to picket the chain stores. In my youthful judgment there could only be one answer to that question: “Nothing.” I had a lot of empathy for the farmworkers but little for anyone’s excuse for saying no.

If we saw others mainly for their potential for helping the movement, that is how we saw ourselves. *La Causa* was the highest priority—more important than our personal needs. (See my article *Drinking Brown Water for La Causa*.) We didn’t consider the possibility that we could have a movement where we consider our own needs as well as those of others.

During my experience with the UFW the evidence was all around me that people are motivated to act without resorting to anger or shame. The spirit that stirred us middle-class people to action was our awareness of our connectedness to the people who worked the fields. Seeing them as our brothers and sisters, we didn’t want to see them suffer. This spirit was at odds with our internal Alinsky that depended on blaming people, and hence disconnecting from them. If we see the world as a bigger version of our own household, we find that blaming energy doesn’t address the root problem. The nonviolent spirit of seeing our connectedness with the people who oppose us leads to a more peaceful world.

Drinking Brown Water for La Causa

It is difficult for young people today to imagine the sense of purpose that inspired my generation of youth who were involved with the UFW. Our conviction that we were changing the world was exhilarating. That feeling of being a part of making history so filled me up that developing a career seemed irrelevant. The Woody Guthrie refrain, “I’m sticking to the union ... till the day I die,” just about summed up my sentiments.

La Causa was the highest priority—more important than our personal needs. I found this a refreshing alternative to the individualism of our culture—where personal security and comfort seemed to be the highest goal, even if other values were professed. Up until then my main purpose was to prepare for *my* future—to become a self-supporting member of society. With the UFW, my life counted for something beyond myself.

The every-waking-hour dedication of the staff reinforced a belief I had that results come from hard work. My father’s work ethic and my own relentless pursuit of success in the workaholic sport of swimming had contributed to my outlook. This belief provided a way to feel powerful in a world whose scale dwarfed the individual. If the main ingredient of social change was hard work, then *can-do!* While a college student working to defeat the grower-sponsored Proposition 22, I noticed with a judgmental eye that another progressive campaign with lesser work habits went down to defeat, while the UFW won. It was proof, I thought, that dedication pays off.

There was a downside to this devotion to *La Causa*. For along with a belief in hard work went the notion of sacrificing one’s own needs. This ethic was familiar to me as a Catholic.

In parochial school, I learned that “a sacrifice isn’t a sacrifice unless it’s a sacrifice.” In other words, in order to *merit* from making a sacrifice, it has to hurt—no pain, no gain. This belief derived from what I believe is a misunderstanding of the example of the suffering of Jesus: suffering is seen as having a redemptive value in itself. Suffering becomes something sought after, rather than something undesired (“Let this cup pass” was how Jesus felt about it) that occasionally is a consequence for living with integrity. The difference in these views of suffering became clear to our boycott staff in the incident of the brown tap water.

One day at the San Francisco Boycott House, the former St. Paul’s Convent at 29th and Church St., the water from the tap turned brown. The water source was a well (maybe the last well in San Francisco?). As my colleagues and I expressed our disgust, our young supervisor responded, “What are you whining about? The farmworkers have to drink brown water—and worse.” What did he mean? That we should drink the water without complaining? This became our private joke—that we should drink brown water for *La Causa*.

The incident was symbolic of the various ways an ethic of sacrifice was promoted among the staff. We picketed supermarkets long after our legs and backs told us to go home. And if we thought we were hard workers, we had only to visit La Paz, the union headquarters, to see the dark circles under the eyes of the people who never took a day off. I was torn between a belief that it was these extra things that people pushed themselves (and each other) to do that would make a difference, and resistance to the pressure.

The problem with the work/sacrifice ethic is that it doesn’t accomplish what we think it does. There is no precise way to measure what causes social change, but it seems to me that the successes of the UFW had more to do with the strategy of communicating the problems of farmworkers to the public. This connection was weakened by an ethic that caused staff members to deny our own needs. People who suppress their needs are not happy communicators.

The denial of personal needs was promoted through moralizing. When a young campaigner for Proposition 14 asked his superior when he would be able to do his laundry, the response was, “We’re in the middle of a campaign for the life of the union and you’re worried about your laundry.”

The sad irony is that no one needed to rely on moralistic appeals to win our energies and enthusiasm. We had bushels of enthusiasm. The appeals to duty to the farmworkers had the opposite of the intended effect. They may have eked out another hour on the picket line, but they contributed to burnout. Working for the UFW was enjoyable because of the camaraderie and the purposefulness of making a contribution. We were quite willing to work hard and put up with hardships that inevitably arose. When you enjoy what you are doing, “work” is not drudgery. May the next movement avoid the martyr tendency by

realizing that work can be play. The infectious enthusiasm of such a movement will be irresistible.