

# Cesar 1968

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## Chapter IV – 1991-1993

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Twenty –eight years ago next month, I traveled from Bakersfield to Boston to attend the National Catholic Social Action Convention and there at one of the sessions I heard a panel speaker Father Phil Berrigan, if I am not mistaken, mentioned the work of Cesar Chavez who was organizing farm workers in Delano, California. I was dumbfounded that I had to travel 3000 miles to learn about something as important as this just 30 miles from where I lived.

When I returned to Bakersfield in September I tried to get in touch with Cesar but he was not listed in the phone book and none of my circle --fellow high school teachers and Bakersfield activists-- had ever heard of him. I finally had to track down the convention panelist and ask him how to get in touch with him. All he could tell me was that he had a brother by the name of Richard whom he thought lived in Delano and maybe that would help me. But he assured me that Cesar was organizing farm workers in the fields around the Delano area. There was a Richard Chavez listed in the Delano telephone directory. I called him and he said he would get a message to Cesar. Several weeks passed but Cesar finally called back. I introduced myself and told him I was interested in his work and that I would like to learn more and could I come and meet him?

Cesar was very soft-spoken and sounded a little cautious and asked me some questions about my interest and how I knew about him, but he did finally invite me to come and gave me directions. That is how I found my way to 102 Albany St., the headquarters of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

It was located, literally, on the last southwest corner of Delano. There were open fields to the west and to the south and very desolate looking fields, as I remember them, with little agricultural value because of the lack of irrigation water on the west side of the valley.

The little office had once been a small church which Cesar had painted and remodeled on the inside so that when you walked into the building, his office was behind a counter to the left and straight ahead was another counter that was made to look a little bit like a bank teller's window. Behind that counter was a sort of all purpose work area and a small closet-like office that a few years later would become the offices of the El Malcriado, Cesar's organizing newspaper, which by the way, I strongly recommend to you. It was

Cesar's pride and joy! There was a toilet at the rear of the building and another store room as I recall. Aside from the building on this very small lot, not a piece of landscaping could be found. It was quite barren. I had never realized how desolate the Central Valley could be until I found the West Side of Highway 99.

Cesar was very friendly and greeted me. We talked for a long time and he told me what he was doing. He had moved to Delano because he had a brother there, a carpenter and his wife, Helen, had a sister and many relatives and friends. This would give them and their eight children the support base they needed. And besides, it was all he could afford. He knew that if he was going to do this kind of work he would earn almost nothing, so at least with so many relatives in the area that he figured they would not starve to death. He was building what he called the National Farm Workers Association. He did not dare call it a union because given the hostility of powerful agricultural interests and their control of the surrounding towns, McFarland, Richgrove, Earlimart, Shafter, Wasco and Corcoran, he'd be run out of the area. His cover was that he was a well-meaning, Mexican-American "do gooder" who was, "helping his own people." (I'm pretty sure that my memory is correct about this: in 1963 we were Mexican-American, it wasn't until a few years later that we became Chicanos and then later still we became Hispanics and now some of us might be Latinos. Though it is possible that at that point in 1963 we were still just Mexicans.)

Who was eligible to join the National Farm Workers Association? The basic requirement was that you had to be a farm worker. This was later amended to include such fellow travelers as myself. And what benefits did farm workers receive as a result of their membership? There were four I think: 1<sup>st</sup>, you received a wallet-sized card that certified that you were a member in good standing. This card had a red band at the top with a thunderbird eagle reversed in white and was signed by Cesar E. Chavez, General Director and Anthony Orendain, Secretary -Treasurer. 2<sup>nd</sup>, you paid monthly dues which I believe were about \$3.50 a month. 3<sup>rd</sup>, you received a small death benefit when you died, perhaps as much as \$500. This would insure that your burial expenses would not be a burden on your family. And 4<sup>th</sup>, and the most important, you invested in the dream that some day, perhaps not in your life time, but in the lifetime of your children, you would belong to a union that would be strong enough to meet with the growers and successfully negotiate better wages, access to bathrooms in the fields, drinking water available on the job, rest breaks, an end to stoop labor with the short handle hoe, medical, pension and unemployment benefits. (You must remember that since the 1930's, farm workers were by law and by name excluded from all labor legislation including coverage under the National Labor Relations Act. The Act that protected all other workers in this country.)

I told Cesar that as a teacher I thought education was the answer to improving the lives of farm workers. He disagreed. He said that he himself had attended 28 elementary schools because he had to work in the fields and follow the harvest of the crops to help support the family. Farm worker families, he said, had to have some stability before their children could take advantage of education. He maintained that a farm workers union was the first step in this process. The fact is, this corresponded with my own teaching experience in San

Francisco where I taught for many years. Most of my students did come from families whose fathers were members of unions, longshoremen, building trades, teamsters, retail clerks and firefighters.

I asked him why he didn't have a telephone in his office. First of all he said, he couldn't afford it and secondly who would call him? Farm workers didn't have telephones either. And if some one else wanted to speak to him, they would find him. After all, hadn't I found him and wasn't I here in his office talking with him.

The scene now changes to October 1965. The Filipino table grape workers, members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, had walked out on strike in late September and a few days later, Cesar announced that his National Farm Workers Association would join their strike. This was the beginning of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement as far as California farm workers were concerned. Cesar called me at U.S.C. where I was studying for my Ph.D. and asked me if I would come to Delano to help raise funds and supplies to support the families on strike. I agreed. I left my chosen career to join the strike.

Over the years, I have asked myself many times why I was so attracted to Cesar and his cause? Why did I drop everything to join this rag-tag farm workers movement? It is hard to know for sure, but here are at least some of my reasons. Cesar was for real. He did not preach one thing and practice another. He lived in voluntary poverty for the sake of trying to help others. He was charismatic and gentle. A very low-key person and not bombastic in speech or a firebrand though he was somewhat more adept at that when he spoke in Spanish to the workers than when he spoke in English.

He was a marvelous organizer. He spent time with each staff person or each volunteer explaining the issues, answering questions, helping each one to feel comfortable with what they being charged to do. There were days and months at a time when I would touch base with Cesar at least half a dozen times a day or more to seek his advice, to give him input, to plot strategy. Never, ever did he manifest impatience. He gave me his full attention as if I was the only person he had to deal with that day. He was a true teacher. This, in turn, put tremendous pressure on all of us who had joined the movement to do our best and to be successful.

He was a doer, not a talker. He always had a plan of action. He was never at a loss for "what to do". He told me that if I ever wanted to know what the next step was, just "go out to the people and listen, they will tell you". Every meeting, and there were enough to fill two life times, was geared to create action.

He was a realist. He often told me that I should not romanticize farm workers just because they were poor. That they were people just like you and me. And told me that if some of the workers were growers, they would be worse than the growers. (I remembered how chagrined he was when he heard that my expensive London Fog trench coat was lifted

from a closet where I was conducting a boycott training meeting with some Delano farm workers in San Francisco).

He was a consummate politician. As frustrated and as tempted as I know he was, he never lashed out against the Churches for their reluctance in supporting the rights of farm workers to organize their own union or their hesitation in supporting the grape boycott. He never publicly criticized those whom he called "our natural friends", the AFL-CIO unions, the ILWU, national church bodies, university student leaders, national liberal democratic leaders, Mexican-American service and political action groups, civil rights organizations, nor would he permit any of us to criticize them.

He had wonderful common sense. Time and time again he told me to follow the Mexican proverb which said, "never ride a horse you don't own". In other words, if you are not in charge of your own turf, your own agenda, your own parade, then don't try to piggy back a ride on that of others, because you will only be "bucked off". You do your thing and let them do theirs; there is enough room for everyone.

And finally, the most compelling reason of all for me was the fact that Cesar practiced and preached non-violence. He practiced and preached and even undertook month long fasts to promote non-violence in the farm workers movement.

I have to stop. History will record that Cesar Chavez is one of the greatest indigenous leaders in the history of this country. This art exhibit here tonight attests to his influence.

Thank you.

April 13, 1993

Vienna 8:51 AM

Last evening I dreamed twice about events - dream events - that involved Cesar Chavez. Isn't that strange? Maybe I really am finally on a vacation. In one event Bonnie and I were moving to Williams, California to buy a ranch-style house with a big back lot and the seller was very mysterious in the manner in which he divulged to us the price. He finally flashed an official looking document with the price of \$234,000 contained in the text of this official looking document. It was quite a spacious house and a good buy for us by selling our Sacramento house but the first night when I went to close the front door, it came right off the hinges. Cesar figured into this dream because somehow my moving to Williams put me into his "territory" or sphere of influence and how would he react to that?

Later in another dream event, I visited Cesar at his palace-like center of operations and there was much speculation by Jerry Cohen about how the visit would go. But Cesar was so gracious and friendly and took time to greet me even though I didn't have an appointment, etc. He asked me to come back and see him the next morning at 8 AM and while I had not planned to stay overnight I agreed to come back. I remember how clean and picked-up everything was. The grounds especially seemed fixed up and in good order. When I came to see him at his office the next morning, there was a High Mass going on and a Bishop with all his red regalia was presiding. I could see that my 8 AM appointment had been replaced by this clerical intervention.

(It is especially poignant, and a little eerie, that I type up these notes on April 24 the day after Cesar died in his sleep at the age of 66 in San Luis, Arizona. I wonder if Cesar was in some way thinking of me on April 12 or 13th?)

April 29, 1993

Eulogy of Cesar E. Chavez  
Given By Fernando Chavez

On behalf of my mother, my brothers and sisters, all the grandchildren, my aunts and uncles and all of our family, I want to say "Thank You" for being here with us today on this very sad occasion.

All of you gathered here know that my dad dedicated his entire life to help farm workers in their struggle for justice, for equality, for dignity. And I am proud to say that my mother and our entire family supported dad's commitment in every way we could and sometimes, as you can imagine, at great personal sacrifice. I hope and pray that we did our best.

My father chose to live a life of voluntary poverty and yet I believe that his legacy will be rich. His legacy to our family, his legacy to all of you here and to the whole country a legacy of non-violence. A legacy in the tradition and spirit of Ghandi, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy.

My dad's life has proven to me that his non-violent struggle for the rights of farm workers was a true manifestation of his faith in God and his practice of the teachings of the Gospel.

Some people might say that my father was "a famous man" or that he was "a VIP". Perhaps he was. But for all of us who knew him, including all of you here, I can attest to the fact that he was never, ever too busy to give his complete and undivided attention and interest to each and every person with whom he spoke. Be that person a field worker, a store clerk, a student, a grieving parent or a complete stranger. He was that kind of man.

My mother and our family understand that dad's life is finished. But we also understand that each one of you must carry on his spirit of non-violence and continue his struggle for justice for farm workers.