

The True Believer

“A few days before the summer program came to an end all the volunteers were called to a meeting in the front yard of Harvard House. LeRoy Chatfield spoke at the end of the meeting. He said he knew a lot of us would be leaving soon, heading back to college. “Ask yourselves this question. Can you think of anything more important to do with your lives right now than to help farmworkers build their union?” I did and I couldn’t.” —Chris Schneider, Los Angeles Boycott, 1973

Chris Schneider included this anecdote in his essay written for the farmworker Documentation Project. I don’t remember the date or the setting, but without doubt, those words are mine. I was a true believer in Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement, and 35 years ago I could not believe there was anything more important in life – especially in the life of a college-age student – than the cause of the farmworkers. Do I believe that now, at age 70? No, I don’t, but that is due in large part to the fact that I am no longer a true believer in anyone or in any cause, and never will be again.

When I offer my views about the role of volunteers in the farmworker movement, 1963 – 1973, I am recounting, to the best of my recollection, the reality of that time and place. I am not passing judgment about what should have been done, or what other alternatives there might have been, or whether I – or Cesar – was “right or wrong.” I seek only to describe and explain the world of the movement, as I knew and experienced it. If Marshall Ganz and others remember it differently, then I would be pleased to read their recollections and analyses. Marshall and I go back many years together, even to the years of the pre-strike era, so I do not take offense at his characterization of my views as “disgraceful” and “unworthy,” because Marshall is Marshall. But my first preference is to hear from colleagues who were there with us about whether my recollection and analysis is accurate or not. And if not, why not? The farmworker movement Documentation Project is not about “good or bad,” “right or wrong,” “should have/could have,” but about what WAS.

Those who worked with me, for example, on the Los Angeles Boycott remember that I ran a tight ship. I demanded long hours – if not seven days a week, then at least six. Late into the evening without fail, I called each area coordinator for a complete accounting of what had been accomplished for the

cause that day; not generalizations, mind you, but specifics. How many customers turned away? Why so few? How can you do better? How many community volunteers showed up to help? Can you recruit more? What feedback did you get today from customers or store clerks that shows we are having an impact? If I had personally checked on their parking lot work, I discussed my findings with them. And so forth.

No matter how much I realized that the boycott coordinators hated this daily one-on-one grilling about the accountability of their work and leadership skills – I knew they detested it because I was a keen listener and I kept my ears open – the harder I pressed them. I showed no mercy, accepted no excuse. I was the daily organizing thorn in their lives. They hated it, but they produced, and that was the only thing that counted with me.

When a volunteer dropped out or fell by the wayside, I did not wring my hands and mourn their loss; rather, I redoubled my efforts to replace them with someone as good, and sometimes, as luck would have it, with someone who was twice as good. What happened to the volunteers who dropped out? Sad to report, I had no idea, but since they were no longer part of the movement, or at least my piece of it, I didn't even think about them. They were gone, the struggle of the farmworkers had to go on. I had no time – and made no time – for those who had departed.

Aside from the recruiting efforts of the National Farm Worker Ministry and the staff boycotters themselves, I don't know how or why so many volunteers found the Los Angeles Boycott, but they did. And when they showed up, if they were not hard at work on the boycott within a few hours after their arrival, I felt we were letting the cause of the farmworkers down.

Intense, day after day, months at a time – I don't know how the volunteers did it; I don't understand how I did it. But then victory was in the air, you could feel it, and besides, there was no such thing as a defeat, because the seeds of victory were sown in a temporary setback. Nothing was impossible, everything was possible, and God was on our side.

I don't know how the description of my boycott leadership of the Los Angeles Boycott strikes the reader, but even though I believe it to be accurate and true, I cringe as I write these words 35 years later. Years later, after my

farmworker experience, when I had several opportunities to build other organizations, I studiously avoided many of the “true believer” characteristics I had embraced so easily during my farmworker movement years. I don’t know if it made my later work any better, but I felt better about myself and about the relationships I had with the people with whom I worked. Perhaps I felt more human, I don’t know.

As effective as I might have been on the boycott, and there were many signs of affirmation from Cesar Chavez and the farmworker movement that I was effective, I could not hold a candle compared to the work of Marshall Ganz. In my view, Marshall was the most accomplished and effective organizer in the United Farm Workers. No exceptions. But here is my admission: as a UFW volunteer, I could never have worked for Marshall because he was too tough, too demanding, too detailed, too intolerant of incompetence, too insensitive, and required too many meetings. And while many, many volunteer organizers thrived and prospered under his direction and leadership, I would not have been one of them.