

“Well, What Did You Learn from Cesar?” 1993

During wake for Cesar Chavez, in the tent set up on the Forty Acres that held 10,000 seats, a reporter from the Riverside paper (or was it San Bernardino?) asked me why I had left the union in 1973. There were four reasons, I said: 1) My oldest daughter (of four at that time, now of five) was just getting ready to start first grade and that meant my wife and I needed to decide where to anchor ourselves; 2) My father had died in 1970 and my mother was by herself in Sacramento. I had been away from “home” since I was 15 years old; 3) My wife was from San Francisco and she missed Northern California; and 4) I had been asked by the Gilbert Padilla of the union board if I would stand for the position of an executive board member at the first convention of this newly approved AFL-CIO International Union. This request, while tempting - and should I admit, flattering - helped me realize that it was time to leave because I had come to Delano, at Cesar’s request, only to help out, not to spend the rest of my life there. If I now decided to become an officer, that meant I was making a long-term commitment.

I could tell the reporter was disappointed because he was working on an angle. “Well,” he said, “what did you learn from Cesar?” I answered, “How to organize.” He was blank. I tried to spruce it up for him. “Cesar taught me how to make something out of nothing. He taught me how to take something that does not exist and make it exist.” He wrote it down.