

Juanita Brown

TAPE 99 CR 150, SR 71 TC 02:30

02:30:05 Juanita we were actually just talking about the sixties a moment ago and about how people look back at that period. We talked a lot about the idealists of the sixties. Would you look back and call yourself one of those sixties idealists?

30:18 Well I guess I'm reminded actually of a story when you say that, in terms of Ghandi who was asked one time uh, did he attribute his success to being a visionary and he was, got very irritated and he said I am not a visionary. He said I am a practical idealist. And I guess that's how I think of myself both then and today. You know I just feel like that was a period in which um, an awakening began, a questioning about....

Ok stop CUT

30:52 So when you look back at the sixties what, what was that blend of practicalism and idealism for you?

30:55 Well you know I think the sixties was a time where pe, where there was a really big awakening, where people were starting to ask very fundamental questions about equity, about justice. They're questions of course that were in all of history but in our country they were being raised in a special kind of way. And I think in a sense the real legacy of the sixties will be seen in the nineties. I think it's taken the last thirty years actually for

the ideals and the values that were born on a mass scale in the sixties among those of us who participated in those activities to actually mature and flower um, in to their adulthood as we all have.

31:41 Well let's stay back in the sixties as opposed to the nineties. What was it that drew you to what you heard or learned about the farmworkers? What was that attraction?

31:50 Well I was um, let me think about that for a moment. What drew me to the farmworkers was really was that at the time uh, my husband and myself were on our way to Bolivia to do graduate work in the tin mines with the Bolivian tin miners. My husband was an anthropologist and we actually went to the farmworkers because a colleague of ours her father was education director of the C, AFL-CIO. And she came to visit us at Thanksgiving and she said, "Why are you going to Bolivia? Don't you know the farmworkers are making an effort for better life and better wages in California? Both of you are fluent in Spanish, go to California."

32:34 And you came to California and I presume you went to Delano and what did you see? What struck you the most?

32:42 Well actually it was the summer of 1966 when we went to Delano so it was right after the early period uh, that the farmworkers began the strike there and we saw huh, let's see how could I say? We saw energy. I guess that's what I could say I saw first. In the pink house in Delano which was the farmworker headquarters people were streaming in and out. Anglo volunteers, farmworkers, farmworker family members and everybody was

there to contribute. And I guess the thing that impressed me most about what I saw was the kind of vitality and hope and spirit that was alive in that place and in that orientation uh, to the work. And I was very impressed with that, very moved by it.

33:35 Well I had a question for you in the context of the boycott but it works just as well in Delano. Um, these are really people from different worlds meeting each other, what, what was that experience like when, when middle class anglos meet working class Mexicans?

33:49 I actually think that was a very learning filled....

33:55 You can't say that. When you answer me you say I think the experience of people coming together then we have the context.

34:01 Ok. I think the experience of people of different cultural backgrounds coming together in the service of something that they believed in in common was a very powerful bridge for people being in a conversation that they had never been in before; a multicultural conversation, a conversation about our common future. The dialogues that happened at the house meetings between the Anglo volunteers and the farmworkers for example and then the processing after the meetings about what had happened in those house meetings as we sat with Fred Ross on those patterned couches in the pink house I think were an opportunity for people to look deeply at their own cultural values. And I think that encounter between Mexican American culture, Anglo American culture, the religious

orientation of the farmworkers and how it was manifested, I think that was a very powerful learning experience for all of us who participated in that.

35:01 Um, you make it sound positive but sometimes, or frequently when cultures clash there's tension, there's misunderstanding. Was it difficult?

35:08 There were times I think it was difficult. I because I was bicultural myself and had lived in Mexico and lived in the States did not experience personally that level of um, what I would call dissonance that many experienced. I think that the whole Latin Anglo cultural thing was difficult for many of the Anglo volunteers. Um, I think the question of male/female relationships um, and the difference in family norms you know were issues. I think the class question so we were not only talking about cultural questions between ethnicities, the Filipinos, the Mexi, the Mexicans and the Anglos but also the class differences between the volunteers who came and the farmworkers. So the kind of uh, largesse or paternalistic helping style that many of the Anglos came with in those days I think was very irritating to many of the Mexicans um, the Latinos who were there.

And 36:10 I think there was a learning both ways about that you know about what's the essence of good will even though it may be manifested in culturally inappropriate ways or ways that might be seen as culturally inappropriate. Um, and I think that that's what shown through in the end you know was the good will and the fact that people were working toward something they believed in common and that tended to uh, allow people to struggle through the differences in, in ways that you know were more productive than might occur under other circumstances.

36:45 Let's, let's a little bit about the boycott. In general um, what do you think when, when we talk about the process it's calculated, what do you think it was about the boycott that, that in the end made it work? What was, what was the, the glue that held the boycott together and that convinced Americans?

37:00 Oh I think there were multiple threads of that I mean I really think of the boycott as a tapestry in a way. It was a tapestry that connected a larger social good that Americans who have a sense of fairness basically were able in a large scale to get a sense of. So that when you saw pictures on T.V. of migrant children we don't feel proud of that as Americans even though we know it exists. And so to do a small thing that could help a large number of people make a difference in their lives I think was one thread. You know there is a value in America around equity and justice whether we practice it fully or not there is that in the social conscience of Americans. I think also the fact of relationships that I think the boycott world wide was built on personal relationships. It was not only built on abstract ideals and Cesar used to tell us that people do not join a cause only for an ideal, they join a cause because there is a human relationship that's involved. And I think that the farmworkers were and the volunteers and then all of the ripples outward were built on that web of mutuality and personal relationships. House meeting by house meeting, church meeting by church meeting, um, with businesses etcetra that then expanded outward on a very large scale. I think that's the essence of large scale change in any kind of setting. Um, yeah.

38:37 Did you think when, when the national boycott first started, did it seem an impossible goal? Did, did you think oh, sure we'll just work hard and it'll happen or how did you look at it?

38:46 Well I mean at the time I would say we had kind of a uh, Don Quixote you know attitude toward it. I still have actually....

What's that mean though?

38:56 Well, I would say, I want to reflect on one dimension of that prior to answering that question, is that we, I to this day have in my office a small um, like a statuette that you wind up and it has "*to dream the impossible dream*" (she sings that line) and I think that in that way there was something about realizing that it was an impossible dream and choosing to act as if it could be done and I think that the farmworkers saying as their primary almost theme song, *Si Se Puede*, yes it can be done you know helped to create a rhythm of hope even in the face of apparently impossible odds. You know so I don't think it was a Quixotic impulse but it was a joining impulse in the face of very difficult, a very difficult set of circumstances.

CUT

40:10 Ok Juanita you were going to tell me one of, one of your vividist memories of the movement.

40:14 Well I would say there are two stories. One which was prior to my time in Canada, what happened with uh, Marshall Ganz who was previous to me there and this relates to a what I thought was one of the most creative activities that I had ever imagined seeing or imagining happening on the boycott. The growers kept shipping. The supermarkets would not take off the grapes and it seemed like a totally intractable situation. And evidently what occurred there was that on the first week of this particular creative action there were carloads or van loads **CAMERA ROLL-OFF** of people who went into the stores with balloons which of course said don't buy grapes and they went into the stores and let the balloons up so that they were at the tops.....

CUT

CR 151, SR 70

SOUND BAD??

Ok Juanita let's talk about the story about the balloons again.

41:20 Ok. This is a uh, really interesting story I think. It was in one of our large cities and in the first week at a time when the boycott was in a particularly intractable stage and there was no way that the local supermarkets were going to take off the grapes. The boycotters went into first one of the large chains and it was the most intractable of the chains went into the chain in many stores at a common time and took balloons with don't buy grapes and let the balloons up into the stores so that they floated all through the stores. That was fine because that week they went with the gro, the uh, store owners went with little picks and popped the balloons.

However the second week that the boycotters went the balloons were filled with confetti and as they went to pop the balloons the confetti tended to fall in all places all over the store and there was this huge ad the next day in the newspaper with the executive of the supermarket chain saying that there had been coercive tactics and all of this and it was for that reason that they were going to be taking the grapes off. The most famous local columnist of that city wrote a poem the very next day saying, "if all union goons used toy balloons and filled them with spaghetti there would be no more war and guns would shoot spaghetti." You know so it was a wonderful example I thought of creative, non-violent compassionate action but which was a direct message on behalf of what the farmworkers had hoped to achieve. So I thought that was kind of a, a very creative uh, moment in the boycott.

43:25 Now, we've talked about why people would support the boycott but what do you, what do you think motivated all, all the volunteers who came to support it, each one of these things? How did they get involved in it? Why did they get involved in it?

43:33 Yeah. You know I, I actually became aware of that at, at a very fundamental level when I was at Cesar's funeral. At that funeral were gathered whatever it was thirty or forty thousand people and there were not only farmworkers there. There were Anglos there, there were business people there, there were housewives there, there were people from all walks of life and as I was at that funeral I realized that what really was the draw if we would call that to the farmworkers movement was not only people's belief in that which was larger than themselves the farmworkers movement but it was something decent about themselves that had been called on in that

process. Something that was to be honored in themselves. And I felt that those thirty-five or forty thousand people came not just to honor Cesar Chavez in that moment but to honor the best that was in themselves. And um, I think actually if I were to say what was the real draw of the farmworkers it was the combination of something larger than self and something very deep within the self that was joined for those **SOUND RETURNS TO NORMAL ******* people who chose to make a big commitment to that effort. So that was how I...

45:04 Um, tell me a little bit about that trip that you and Cesar took in 1968 to visit all the boycott cities. What, what memories do you have from that trip?

45:13 Well I have wonderful memories of that trip. Um, I have wonderful memories because it was a time of real conversation with Cesar. We traveled in a bus you know for whatever it was, months it seemed like on end and at night Cesar would be so exhausted from you know the constant interviews and the, the efforts of the trip that if we would be staying outside of the bus you know in someone's home or whatever he had brought with him a whole suitcase full of books about Ghandi but he was too tired to read because he read slowly. Um, and at night I would read to him from these books of Ghandi and it was a time of real conversation both between us and in terms of my own learning about what was the spiritual base of Cesar's activism and I think that's something that has been a bridge between this, the work of Cesar in the sixties and the potential for a transformative change at this time in our history is that even then I think his work was, his political work was sourced from a deep spiritual foundation. And those uh,

weeks on the road helped me to really anchor in that part of myself as well as in the conversations with him about the ideas that were in that work.

46:48 And of course the issue of him going to the boycott cities when, when he would come to a city it would give a certain energy that really, something would happen.

46:58 multiple sectors coming together on behalf of his work.

47:05 Well I'm specifically talking on a personal level about Cesar's personality and how it really effected people, how people responded....

47:14 Yeah I think people often talk about Cesar as a charismatic leader but I didn't think about Cesar in that way. I thought about Cesar as a, what I would call an integral leader or a holistic leader in the sense that he, his style evoked the decency in other people. It was not about what he said or even how he said it. It was more about who he was in his presence with people that I think evoked that kind of energy.

47:48 Do think that was calculated or was that just his natural affect?

47:52 Well you know you can never tell about the deep inner world of another person. Um, it felt to me like he was a very deeply committed person and in that sense um, deeply committed people and all people have a whole range that they draw from in their work so....

48:13 I want to go back to where we started with sixties idealism. Do you think what happened then could only have happened because of the sixties? Is it, is it really an artifact of the sixties or is there something there that people can build on and do something with now?

48:28 Oh I don't think it was an artifact of the sixties. I think it's particular form and style might have been an artifact of that historical moment but the impulse that bred the sixties I think is still very much alive and well in the environmental movement, in um, local initiatives that are taking place more and more as our institutions begin to demonstrate that they are not as adept as people had hoped they would be, not just the economic institutions but our political institutions and even the social service institutions, our education, where people are beginning to organize at the local level not against but now they're organizing for in a certain way. And I think that the evolution of our awareness of the environment and of what provides fundamental nourishment for life in a certain way really connects not just the sixties but the essence of the farmworkers movement and what it was about in terms of the fundamentals of what provides nourishment for life, food for life um, is actually coming into this period in our history as well but in a deepened form in a way. It may be a quieter form, not as raucous a form as it was then but I think it is just as deep and will become as these next period as the millenium approaches as some would say um, a very profound and deep reorientation of how we all live our lives and I think we began that in the sixties.

CUT

50:17 Juanita tell me this idea about the boycott.

50:18 Well you know often times people said that the farmworkers movement and that the boycott in particular was part of some kind of a protest or the radical movements of the sixties but I never really saw it like that. I actually saw that the boycott was the exercise of people's democratic right not to buy. Just like people have a democratic right to buy. Um, and I felt that this was really work on behalf of the fundamental democratic principles upon which this country was born. So it seemed to me that what I was really doing was returning to our roots. If you think that radical, the word radical means returning to the roots than that it is what I felt my work was in the farmworkers-- was actually learning how to become an American, a true American in the sense of the ideals on which this country was founded and at the boycott and the opportunity for people to exercise that democratic right was fundamental to our American way of life.

51:22 Well of course when you were out there now and I'll remind you what the growers always said was we're being blackmailed, the workers don't want us, you're forced to sign contracts how did you answer to that?

51:31 Well they were not watching the workers in the fields, they were not in the house meetings where people were together really looking at in real dialogue about what they wanted for themselves and their children as their common future. And I think that had they been able to be, to enter as human beings into that quality of conversation they would've seen that the workers were no different than them in a certain way and that just like they wanted a decent future for themselves and their families and their children their workers were seeking the same fundamental, basic American life that they enjoyed as well. So I don't really think of this as blackmail in any way

but really as an invitation to the growers to join in the common community of what a decent life is for all of us.