

Leroy Chatfield

Tape 88

CR 128, SR 61

21:06:39 We'll hop and skip on chronology but I guess I'd like to start first with you talking a little about how a, how a principal of a Catholic high school in.....became a union activist. How, how, what did that transition mean, how did you do it? Why did you do it?

06:59 Well as the principal of a Catholic high school uh, in Bakersfield uh, I was keenly aware of farmworkers um, and the lack of farmworkers in a Catholic school setting. Um, didn't, knew nothing about Cesar or what he was doing or who he was. I went to the National Catholic Social Action in 1963 in Boston. And heard um, a lecture about social justice. And a man by the name of Cesar who was organizing farmworkers in Delano and I practically fell out of my chair because I'd come three thousand miles to hear about a person who was thirty miles away from me who was doing something that I was interested in. So when I got back to Bakersfield I tried to find Cesar. Uh, he didn't have a telephone. So I finally found a Richard Chavez in Delano uh, who turned out to be Cesar's brother and he put me in contact with Cesar. And Cesar and I became friends and he used to come to uh, Garces High School in Bakersfield. Speak to my classes and uh, we became uh, good friends. And when the strike broke out in uh, 1965 it seemed somewhat of a natural thing for me to leave what I was doing and join Cesar in organizing farmworkers.

08:29 When, when the strike broke out you'd actually made a decision to go back to graduate school, you were telling me that you'd already gone to school when you got a call from Cesar.

08:37 Well yes. The strike broke in September, middle of September of 1965. Um, I had enrolled in graduate school at USC and had moved to Los Angeles. And uh, Cesar called me one evening and asked me if I would be able to come to Delano and work with him um, and give him a hand. And so I thought about it and decided that I should do that and so I've never regretted it.

09:07 Um, there was one thing I don't know if it's stuck in my mind but when you told me that story you said that, that when Cesar was trying to convince you he said something about he wanted you to come work with him but it wasn't going to be like working in a union. It was gonna be something else. How did that go?

09:22 Well I think Cesar made it clear uh, very early even early when I met him in the early 60's that uh, his intention was not to build a union in the traditional sense but he wanted a union um, that had credit unions and cooperatives and uh, medical plans that were uh, that would empower the workers. Uh, he, he, it was more I think of a social association and social organization. Um, it certainly had to do with wages and working conditions but Cesar always made it clear that it had a lot more to do with life and living and family.

10:12 And was that an issue when he asked you to come work for him?

10:17 Well uh, actually what he reminded, what he asked me to do was, strange as it might sound he asked me to work on the farmworker's co-op. Which was to

develop a cooperative for farmworkers. And so here uh, the strike was waging and all hell was breaking loose and Cesar's asking me to come and not to work on the picket line and not to work in the strike setting but to work organizing a cooperative for farmworkers. So actions speak louder than words.

10:51 And it was, it was even at the beginning that he had a long range agenda that was bigger than just the Salinas strike.

10:56 Oh yes uh, I don't think Cesar thought that the strike was winnable. Um, or that contracts would be signed in less than twenty years. Uh, at least that's what he told me. Cesar took a very long view of his work and his commitment and he took a long view of people.

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11:19 So let's go back to what you were just saying about he didn't, Cesar didn't think that the strike was winnable.

11:24 Cesar took the long view. And I think when the Delano grape strike um, broke out and he decided to participate with the Filipinos um, I don't think he thought the strike was winnable. I, I, I think as he told me he didn't think that the union would receive contracts or win contracts probably for twenty years. Um, and that was uh, uh, Cesar taking the long view about events and people and life.

11:59 So that sort of implies that if the Filipinos hadn't gone out on strike, if circumstances hadn't overcome the plan that he would wait it out for a long time.

12:07 Oh I don't believe Cesar uh, wanted to go out on a strike. I don't think that he planned to go out on a strike. I just think that events caught up with him and he didn't have a choice.

12:19 And that, and that was something that.....

CUT

12:23 Um, what you're saying about not wanting to go on strike but sort of responding to the moment. That was something that sort of characterized the farmworker experience wasn't it? The ability to respond and, and to rise to challenges?

12:37 The movement that Cesar built uh, was very flexible, very responsive, uh, could change instantly uh, and develop new tactics as the case required. Um, it was impossible to make long range plans or uh, to anticipate uh, what might happen. And so everything was close to the ground and ready to move in a minutes notice.

13:10 And, and that was what sort of gave it it's, it's energy, right? It's vitality.

13:17 Well I guess it's like gorilla organizing. Um, it's here today, gone tomorrow. Show up in Canada. Show up in San Francisco. Disappear. Because the opposition in this case, the, the, the bureaucracy of the, of agriculture was very

uh, ponderance, slow moving, traditional. And it was very difficult for them to get a handle on a movement or the energy that was created by Cesar and the volunteers and the strikers that joined the movement.

13:59 Now one of the, one of the things that happened and seemed the way that it just developed and maybe there was a logic to it was, was, was the kind of organizing and what happened around the fast in 68. That is no one had planned in 67 that Cesar was going to go on a fast the next year. It, it was a response to what was going on too, wasn't it?

14:19 Yes um, I think Cesar was very concerned about the increasing call um, by union supporters and some union members themselves for violence. Cesar was very very committed to nonviolence. Preached nonviolence. Practiced nonviolence. Um, read Ghandi constantly and it, he, he was searching for some personal statement that he could make as the leader of the movement that would reinforce the value of nonviolence at least as he saw it. And uh, I knew ahead of time that he was planning a fast because he told me that he was practicing fasting and he would practice for two or three days at a time. And found it extremely painful and difficult. And told me that he didn't think that he could actually do it or wasn't sure he could do it. But, but he was committed to doing something. Um, now I, I was quite taken aback when he actually announced that he had started his fast and that he was going to withdraw to the forty acres, the union complex and stay there until he completed it. I didn't know the details of what he had planned. But I wasn't surprised at the, the idea of a fast but it was quite a shocking event. First of all within the union it caused a lot of uh, consternation and disarray, uh, bickering, pros and cons. Um, it was a startling event.

16:10 And, and in fact when he made the announcement it provoked this reaction and he left and you went with him, right?

16:17 Well uh, yes, yes it provoked a great reaction. Um, sort of a debate um, broke out in the auditorium after he left. Uh, the first person to leave to follow him was his wife Helen and she said that she was going to leave to go the the forty acres and be with Cesar. And then the debate sort of waged. And um, we all had our say and I had my say I'm sure and said that basically uh, uh, the forty acres uh, was going to be considered uh, holy ground in view of the fact that Cesar had chosen the forty acres to conduct uh, a personal fast and that no cars would be permitted to drive on the forty acres, people would have to walk on and off. And um, that caused a, a lot of flap as I remember but um,...

17:20 And then you left too.

17:22 Left yes. Left to go to the forty acres and in fact the whole, the whole union ultimately relocated to the forty acres because that's where Cesar was and because that was the central event of the movement at that time. And there was really nothing else going on.

17:39 Was there really a debate in the union over, over how much of a religious character there would be and I mean you saying there was this response to saying there was, it was going to be treated like a holy site. Did that bother people because they didn't want it to do with religion?

17:58 It, I would. It bothered some people but I, it didn't bother most people. It certainly didn't bother the farmworkers. Uh, who after all is what the movement

is all about and what the union is all about. Uh, Cesar was a very religious person. Uh, practi, practiced his religion. And so having daily mass, Catholic mass at the forty acres each night of his fast is just a, a, a very natural thing for him, for his family, uh, for the farmworkers, for all of us really. Uh, I don't think there was a lot of dissension about that. Uh, though I think some people were unhappy.

18:52 Now the other thing that happened in 68, happened in the fast in 72 was that while Cesar was making a spiritual personal statement there was a lot of very practical organizing built around it. How do, how do those two things connect?

19:11 Well the irony of the fast was that it turned out to be the greatest organizing tool in the history of the labor movement at least in this country. Um, workers came from every sector of California and Arizona and even further. Uh, to want to meet with Cesar, to talk to him about the problems of their area. Getting his advice about what they could do to help strengthen the union or build the union in their area, in their crops. Um, Cesar had more organizing going on while he was immobilized if you will at the forty acres fasting than had, had ever happened before in the union or has happened since. Thousands of people came constantly. There was a constant stream of people that came to, to seek advice, to bear witness, to pledge themselves, to commit themselves. Um, it was a totally amazing turn of events for the union.

20:18 But I mean what I'm trying to put my finger on is, is that it, it was something that happened on different levels. There was a spiritual level, there was an organizing. And it's, it's so remarkable to see these things.

20:27 Well but, but see I, I don't think the organizing level of it or the organizing part of it was preplanned. Uh, I think that Cesar's personal commitment and his personal statement came first. And the, the other followed. Um, it didn't have to follow inevitably but it, it did follow and it did turn out to be a magnificent organizing tool that maybe Ghandi knew about but, but we didn't know about or people that I associated with didn't know about. It was a marvelous event.

21:14 Um, the other thing that happened at the same time was the union was facing a hearing from Giumarra, some injunctions had been filed. Do you think that entered in to the calculation of the timing of the fast or....

21:29 I uh, yes. I well I think so. I think it was a confluence of events that probably uh, pushed Cesar to undertake something so personal as this. Um, he, he was very concerned about the talk within the union about violence and resorting to violence. He absolutely did not approve of it. Opposed it. Did not believe in it. Felt that it was taking the short view and in the long run it would hurt the union or hurt the idea of the union. And certainly people would be killed. Uh, and it wasn't worth it. He felt the life of a single farmworker in order to build the union was not worth building the union. And that is a very uh, uh, that is a very conservative position I think. Um, that he would be willing to.....

CUT

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30:10 I, I need, when I say ask something you have to sort of incorporate that so we know what you're talking about. What roll did, did the Giumarra court case play in the fast?

30:27 The, the growers, specifically Giumarra Corporation was bringing an injunction against the union uh, based on uh, the accusation that the union was engaging in violent activity and was of, of, of a threat to safety and should be stopped by the courts. Um, now the fast was a way also for Cesar to make a statement about the fact of that, about the fact that the union was committed to nonviolence and that he was willing to put his personal health at stake to maintain that commitment. Uh, and that it wasn't true. Um, however the court had its hearing in Bakersfield....

31:28 You were there you were showing.

31:30 Well yes I was there um, but also uh, four or five thousand farmworkers were there. And we figured out a way to transform the Kern County Courthouse into a church of sorts by um, uh, having farmworkers line all of the corridors, I think it was a five story building in total silence and remaining in the courthouse for several hours. Uh, treating it as if it were the house of worship or as if it were a church. And paying respect to the fact that Cesar was making a personal, religious statement about nonviolence and yet he was being hailed into court to try to answer false charges. Um, and the, the judge uh, I don't think he dismissed the case but in view of the circumstances postponed it or uh, they put it off until another, another day.

32:45 You know the other thing that the fast brings up that I'd like you to talk a little bit about is, is that the farmworkers movement was, was very good at presenting things symbolically, there was a certain symbolism that really spoke to people about things like the fast and those things.

33:03 Well one of the things you learned in working with Cesar in the movement was that you either had time or you had money. And the currency of the movement was time since we didn't have any money. So we had to be more creative and we had to use symbols and we had to prepare things and plan things and plan events and marches for example, vigils for example. Um, standing in silence for example. We had to develop ways for masses of people to make personal statements about the injustices of their situation. Since we couldn't afford uh, T.V. advertisements or radio advertisements or newspaper advertisements or. That was the only way we had to publicize the injustice of the situation in which we found ourselves.

34:08 And in general was it effective?

34:12 I think it was very effective. Um.....

34:16 I'm thinking for example starting the human billboards on route 22.

34:23 Well the, I, I think these kinds of events. These kinds of symbolic events where workers and supporters uh, put their bodies where their beliefs are uh, either on the picket line for example or in the Safeway parking lots working on the boycott or out fundraising. Uh, uh, or out demonstrating in some way or on a march from Delano to Sacramento uh, to confront the governor of the state of California.

Um, all of those kinds of things captured the imagination of, of people everywhere. Um, I mean the boycott, the boycott itself became an international movement. There were more repercussions in the grower community about grapes not being unloaded in Europe for example than there was uh, in California. Uh, it had a, a ripple effect that was like a tidal wave by the time it, it came back to this country. Um, and it put the, the growers in a situation where they were waging battle with variables that they had no knowledge of and couldn't comprehend and couldn't come to grips with and couldn't use money um, to buy their way out of it or to paper it over or to uh, to uh change the agenda. Uh, the pulse of the poor, in this case the farmworkers were able to set the agenda for their movement that was captured by the media and promulgated worldwide and there was no letting go of it.

36:23 A couple, you know there was this period say from 70 to 73 where, where the growers in effect went on the offensive legislatively. That was something they knew how to do. They could promote the laws and initiatives.

36:37 The, the growers had, since they, since the growers had access to money they could hire an initiative to be put on the California ballot to literally make illegal farmworker unions. And this is what they tried to do. Um, they, they paid in the magnitude of four or five hundred thousand dollars to gather signatures uh, to qualify an initiative for the ballot. This was in 1972. Now unfortunately for them um, some of the methods used to gather the signatures were absolutely and totally fraudulent. Unbeknownst to the growers they paid good money uh, to uh, people who scammed them and who gathered signatures by opening telephone books and writing down pages and pages of names and addresses. Um, or circulated petitions in California uh, to lower food prices uh, and then turned those signatures in uh, to qualify the initiative. And when, when the union was able to gather enough data to

bring that evidence to Jerry Brown who was as then Secretary of State and after he made his investigation and turned it over to the Los Angeles District Attorney uh, who because of his investigation in L.A. County uh, three days before the election brought seven indictments against those who qualified the initiative. Uh, believe me it was uh, money poorly spent. And it's another example of since the farmworkers didn't have the money to fight back in the initiative we had to find other ways to fight the initiative and we fought it with uh, people and organizing communities against it. Uncovering people who said that they, their name appeared on the qualifying list for the initiative but the fact is that they had never signed anything. Didn't know anything about it.

39:05 In fact the initiative was defeated.

39:07 The initiative was defeated. Handily defeated, right.

CUT

39:22 Since we've been talking about legislation let's move up to 1975 with the Labor Relations Law and I don't want to talk about setting it up we've been through that with other people but I want to talk about what it felt to be in your position, to be one of the people who was put on the board to administer the law that gave farmworkers a chance to elections for the first time. What was that like for you?

39:44 It was very difficult for me. Uh,

39:47 I need a sentence, being on the board was

39:51 Uh, being named by the governor to the Agriculture Labor Relations board was a very difficult uh, position to put me in. Uh, I felt very uncomfortable. Um, I, I, I felt that I certainly could be fair and would be fair in terms of serving on the board. But um, I in, in the course of, in the course of getting the farm, the Agricultural Labor Relations Act passed um, I took a lot of um, heat and even some abuse if you will from former colleagues. Um, that um, I don't know if it was unfair or not really.

40:43 Well I asked Jerry Cohen you know well look I said what were you and Leroy playing the dog and kodiak or was there some real disagreement about moving forward on the law. He, he felt that, that they had to pressure you. I saw it that you were on the same side. How did you see it?

41:04 Well I saw it differently yet again.

CUT

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41:20 So you were just saying that, that being on the board was, was an impossible no win situation.

41:24 Yes being on the uh, Labor Relations Board for farm workers was a no win situation for me. Regardless of which or what decision I made I would either be considered a sell out to the movement and to the union from whence, from whence I came or I would be attacked by the grower community as being unfair, biased um, and, and not a proper board member. So it was very uncomfortable. Um, I didn't want to be on the board. Um, I was appointed to the board. I was

confirmed to the board by the California Senate. And I served for a period of time. It was uh, it was a very difficult experience for me uh, one time I was personally attacked by mem, members of the teamsters union and a guard had to be posted at my home for several weeks. Uh, but uh,

42:28 I mean all that stemmed from an issue of perception. I mean you were perceived as someone of value....

42:35 Well that's right my uh, I mean it was anticipated and perceived by both sides that either I would be all one way or all the other way and there would be no judgment that I would exercise as Leroy Chatfield. And, and, and it was a totally unfair position and one I was stuck with.

42:55 But yet going back to the union experience you know the Alinsky credo if you will is to polarize the situation. You know you're with us or you're against us these are the...So coming out of that wouldn't, wouldn't that be a legitimate way for people to judge you or not?

43:14 No it is a way for people to judge me but uh, but and, and I anticipated that that is how I would be judged. That is why I did not want to be on the board. But Jerry Brown, the governor at that time felt that it was politically necessary to have a, a, a balance of board members since he was putting someone on the board from the grower community he felt that he should also put someone on the board who was from the farmworker community and he chose me. And it was a five member and so there were one representative from the growers, one representative from the union and three others at large if you will. But um, uh I mean I survived. I made it but I didn't like it.

44:09 Do you think you were able to do anything good in the process. I mean the law really ran into trouble.....

44:19 Well um, the good that I felt that I was able to help with and all the other board members who served um, initially was that in the first two months after the existence of the board more than forty thousand farmworkers participated in secret bound elections. And, and that's for the first time in our country. And just that alone helped to diffuse a very very volatile situation uh, in California between employers and workers at least in the agricultural industry. So from that point of view it was worth the pain, the personal pain if you will of going through that experience. Um, the other reality was that, that the legislature did not appropriate enough money to, to finance the board um, properly. And so when those funds were expended after uh, oh perhaps six or seven months then um, certain legislature, legislators who were beholden to the agricultural industry were able to stop future funding for the board and the board shut down for a period of time. And, and so that was a, we sort of went backward to business as usual in terms of who had the power in California and who didn't.

45:50 Well yeah. It's silly to expect a lot of changes. Let's switch gears a little bit and talk about your own experience, the years you spent with Cesar and what that meant in your life and how it shaped what you went on to do and define who you were as a person.

46:14 Well um, one of the reasons why that I left religious life, Catholic religious life to uh, join the Farmworkers Union was because of Cesar. Um, I felt that here was a man who was totally committed to uh, poor people uh, to people

who had no voice and to people who were treated as pieces of property or as slaves. Um, he was totally committed to this work. Um, he lived in voluntary poverty. Um, he practiced what he preached. And I don't know if it was natural to attract a person like myself but I have to say that, that I felt attracted to this type of person and to this type of cause. I had also very strong beliefs about social justice and the rights of people. And uh which also stemmed from my religious upbringing. Um, it changed my life completely uh, it was through the Farmworkers Union that I met my wife. Uh, we became married during that time. Had five daughters during that time. Um, and uh, it taught me a lot about life, people, organizing. In fact when people ask me well what did you learn from Cesar if you had to boil it all down what did you learn from Cesar? One of the things I think that I learned from Cesar is how to organize. Uh, how to create something that did not exist. How to make something out of nothing. And honestly having learned that has served me very well in a wide variety of careers that I have held since and hope to have more of.

48:38 So it's, it's those experiences and values and skills aren't just peculiar to the farmworkers movement they can have other...

48:51 Many of the things that I learned in the farmworkers movement about how to organize, how to motivate people, how to accomplish something, how not to have to rely on money to get anything done. Uh, are transferable skills to many, many other types of human activity. Hopefully activity on behalf of poor people but not necessarily so.

49:29 One last question. I know I've seen pictures of you....We also saw pictures of you on the march to Sacramento and there instead of a clerical robe you're wearing a leather jacket and you're smoking a cigarette, your hairs getting

longer. What did it personally in terms of your life changing going from St. Francis High School to uh, Albany Street?

49:55 Well (pause) Well you have to it was a complete change of lifestyle because having grown up in a monastery setting and living the regimen of a, of a, of a religious person and having done so for more than fifteen years and then to step into the 1960's uh, in Delano, California in the state of California. Um, free, unfettered, unknowledgeable, um, was um, a startling experience and uh, something that I learned to adjust to over a period of time. But it was different than being in a monastery I'll tell you that.

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