

CELEBRATING CÉSAR CHÁVEZ HISTORIC FARMWORKER LEADER

March 31, 2007—April 23, 1993



Lent 2007

**NFWM activists reflect on César's life
and the farm worker movement
from their experiences as a
farmworker,
an environmentalist,
a Christian,
a follower of nonviolence,
a woman
& a labor leader.**

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***The National Farm Worker Ministry thanks
all the contributors
to this 2007 Lenten Series
for their insightful reflections.***

LENT IS A TIME TO STIR THE MEMORY
by Genevieve Cassani, SSND

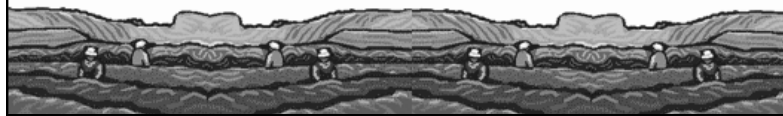
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Layout by Susan Alan



LENT IS A TIME TO STIR THE MEMORY

by Genevieve Cassani, SSND

As a Christian who is relearning her place in the universe I have always found these words of César Chávez a challenge and a blessing.

"Every time we sit at a table at night or in the morning to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from our good Earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and children who have been exploited for generations . . ."

Lent is a time to stir the memory. And César's words do just that for me.



"Remember," he says, every meal is an opportunity to understand daily and deeply the interrelationships between the abundance of our good Earth, the impoverishment of those who harvest it and we who enjoy what has been harvested. His words strike me as gentle. He thinks we knew and just forgot; when in fact there are many like the poet Alison Luterman who admits she did not know and wonders why no one ever even told her about such essential and interconnected relationships.

She writes:

"Strawberries are too delicate to be picked by machine. The perfectly ripe ones even bruise at too heavy a human touch. It hit her then that every strawberry she had ever eaten --- every piece of fruit --- had been picked by calloused human hands. . . . someone with a bandanna on her wrist to wipe away the sweat. Why had no one told her about this before?"

Lent is a time to stir the memory and the simple ashen cross is no faint reminder of where we all come from --- the dust which is Earth; who we are now --- dust which is Earth; and where we all are going, back to dust which is Earth. We sing that we are "earthen vessels." We are not just connected to Earth, we ARE of Earth. I am reminded that both the farm worker and Earth's land in their intimate relationship are often treated disrespectfully, poisoned by the same toxic pesticides, dominated and exploited and deemed expendable by the same powers that dominate. The way we treat the natural world is reflected in the way we treat human beings and vice versa.



Lent is a time to stir the memory to not retreat from the disturbing challenges we face. When it is too unbearable I want to forget. The challenge for me is *to remember* the injustices and suffering endured by farm workers and the broken body of Earth in the simple act of eating. If I fail to do this, I am in danger of forgetting what the relationships mean and *the blessing* that is there for me.

The blessing is that out of that memory I am able to express sorrow for my part in the sin of injustice and continue to challenge the sinful structures that perpetuate the cycle of domination and exploitation of my sisters and brothers, the farm workers, and of my sister, blessed Earth.

Gen Cassani, SSND, is an educator and designer living and working in St Louis, MO. She served for many years on the NFWM Board representing the School Sisters of Notre Dame.





CÉSAR CHÁVEZ & NONVIOLENCE

by Sr. Jeanne Wingenter, SSND

As protests against the war in Iraq grow across the nation, it is not uncommon for leaders to invoke the name of César Chávez, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as one of our nation's most outstanding leaders for peace, justice and nonviolence. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and the Southern civil rights movement, César maintained his commitment to non-violence even in the face of violent attacks from landowners and growers.

He endured a 25-day fast to send a message to some farm workers who began to speak of responding in kind to the violent assaults against them by growers. His message was clear.

"Violence just hurts those who are already hurt...Instead of exposing the brutality of the oppressor, it justifies it....We can turn the world if we can do it nonviolently."

But Chávez did not view nonviolence as passivity or weakness.

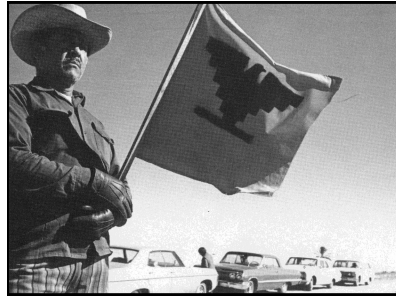
"Nonviolence is not inaction. It is not discussion. It is not for the timid or weak...Nonviolence is hard work. It is the willingness to sacrifice. It is the patience to win."

"I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice....Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful,



and they have many allies in high places...But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons."

I believe that César Chávez modeled the deeper meaning of nonviolence, not just as a way of acting but as a basic life



principle. He recognized the need to be the peace and nonviolent presence that he sought and he realized that, in order to change the world, one has to be willing to start with self.

Our world today puts so much emphasis on self-preservation and on retaliation as the primary response to attack or affront. As I learn more about the National Farm Worker Ministry, I see Chávez's spirit of community and his passion in action. I see a group of people and an organization that lives out César's words,

"When you have people together who believe in something very strongly – whether it's religion or politics or unions, things happen....We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own."

Those words both inspire and challenge me, and they make me proud to be part of the National Farm Worker Movement.

(Many of these quotes are excerpted from an article by Evelina Alarcon in *People's Weekly World Newspaper*, 3/29/03.)

Jeanne Wingenter, SSND, Shalom - Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation, School Sisters of Notre Dame - Central Pacific Province, is an NFWM Board Member.





THE VALIANT WOMEN OF THE FARM WORKER MOVEMENT

By Mary Jean Friel

Who shall find a valiant woman...has found a great treasure.
Proverbs 31:10

Reflecting on what César Chávez and the farmworker movement meant to me as a woman has been a surprising blessing. Memories and stories of so many great farm worker women come to mind. I will share the stories of two such valiant women.

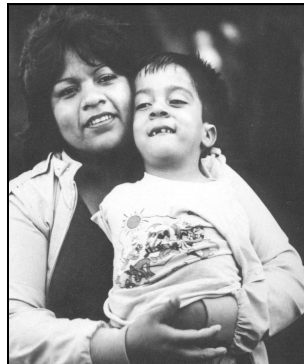
Juanita Herrera, her husband Lupe and four children came to Denver, Colorado from Delano during the first Grape Boycott in the 1960's. César gave her the confidence to accept the challenge to go and spread the word of the farm worker struggle in the fields of California to the people of Colorado. She was encouraged to jump in and organize. César had said "the union is not just for men, all are included — women, men, children, young and old." He also practiced what he preached; women directed boycotts, ran field offices and organized in the fields.

Lydia, a 17 year old farm worker, was arrested and put in jail in the 1973 Arvin strike. In jail, Lydia told of her family's struggle in the fields and the hope that they had received from César. They joined the union, went out on strike to improve their own lives and to help other farm workers. In the cell, it was Lydia who inspired her cellmates to create a 'racket', saying "if we don't, we will be here forever."



This turmoil helped force the jailers to free everyone. Lydia's wisdom and acts of courage remind me of César's belief that "ordinary people can do extraordinary things." Lydia is truly a "valiant woman".

In reflecting on these stories of valiant women and my own personal experiences with César, I realize I owe a great deal to the farmworker movement. César always said that only by persevering in doing the mundane do we achieve justice and this is where we find the sacred and the holy.



César and the farm workers challenged many of us -- many who never worked in the fields -- to change, to be a bit uncomfortable, to sacrifice for others and to work for justice. Juanita and Lydia are just two of many women who validated César's belief in women and inspired me.

Mary Jean Friel worked for the United Farm Workers for nearly 20 years and for part of that time worked as an assistant to César Chávez. She has represented the Loretto Community on the NFWM Board and continues to be active with NFWM.

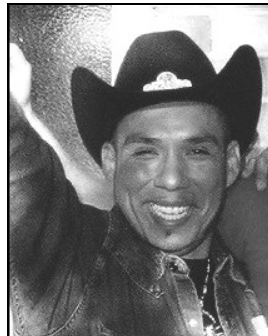




HE LED US ON THIS JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE

by Arturo Sepulveda, with Felix Garza

Being a member of an organization that supports workers and calls for justice has been the best experience of my life. When we are able to see the benefits of working together, we cannot turn back. We can only move forward. Injustice hurts everyone because we are all members of the same human family: Europeans, Africans, Latinos, Asians; and we struggle for the same dreams. We must give a hand to each other, and together we can change the world.



Arturo Sepulveda

César Chávez was a great human being and a very beloved and important person to the lives of my people. He led us on this journey for justice, and we must continue. The movement is now part of me. I can never let go. To be able to serve my brothers and sisters is something so wonderful. I owe so much to the union for showing me the possibilities. People come to me asking for help. They search for me, and they bring me their troubles.

Today, we leave behind our families in search for a better life. Once here in the U.S., many workers are having some very difficult and humiliating experiences on the job. People are getting seriously hurt, and many are afraid to speak up. It is important that we come together to support and defend one another. I personally have suffered humiliation, discrimination, but it does not stop me.

We cannot stop working for justice. I want to help my people. I do this work with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my strength. I go out in the rain, or at all hours of the night to where ever I am needed. The dream of César Chávez was that people stand up and defend themselves, and today, farmworkers need us to stand with them.

My Dream

That we may be respected like human beings and treated with dignity and may our people not be discriminated because of our language, color of skin, religion, or nationality.

That our children will not know suffering and may they have opportunities. May education not be denied and by becoming educated they may become professionals that will strengthen this country with their knowledge and ideas.

May we soon have immigration reform that benefits all our people who work so hard in our country.

That we may lend a hand to each other as brothers and sisters, and may we struggle together for the rights of our people.



Arturo Sepulveda worked at Threemile Canyon Farms where he was one of the leaders of a one day strike. After a four year struggle, the workers negotiated their first union contract with Threemile Canyon in 2007.

Felix Garza is immediate past President of the NFWM Board, representing the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, KY. He grew up in a farm worker family. This reflection is based on his conversations with Arturo.





FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

by Suzanne Darweesh

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Mt. 23:23

Most of us, when confronted by a another's specific physical need, whether it be for food, clothing, or shelter, are quick to respond. It's only when the need becomes more complicated that we hesitate. What to do about AIDS in Africa, killings in Darfur, torture in hidden CIA prisons? It overwhelms us! In his book, Beyond Guilt, A Christian Response to Suffering, George Johnson writes that often we feel guilty, hopeless, afraid, and/or apathetic.

How can we respond when Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers, tells us that while the short-handle hoe has been outlawed, now workers are being asked to use a knife? It seems we eradicate back-breaking stoop labor in one fashion only to see it return in another form.

The recent freezes in California, while not to be compared with cold in the rest of the country, have nevertheless decimated citrus crops and tens of thousands of farm workers are without jobs. Does un-employment insurance kick in for farm workers? How about medical care, overtime time, pensions and other job benefits which most of us take for granted? These are almost never available to farm workers – even those who are US citizens or residents. Federal emergency aid programs, and many state



programs as well, exclude undocumented immigrants. What can one person do in the face of such wrongs?

When Arturo Rodriguez spoke recently with our Orange County Interfaith Committee to Aid Farmworkers, he said, "We are giving food boxes to all unemployed farm workers regardless of whether they are undocumented or not." We must consider all men and women part of the human family, regardless of ethnicity and place of birth. Indifference to suffering is a crime. Churches must not be so wrapped up in their own agendas that they become insensitive to the plight of the poor.

Almost 50 years ago, when Doug Still and Chris Hartmire headed the California Migrant Ministry, the staff was given training in community development by Fred Ross and César Chávez. In those days, churches were very generous with food baskets and clothing, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. This enabled us to feel good about ourselves for awhile and ignore the living conditions of farm workers. Working for low cost housing, medical care, better education -- whatever was the priority of the farm workers rather than what we thought they needed -- was a new concept at that time. It meant searching together for long term solutions to poverty. Have we learned this yet in the churches today?

The Bible speaks often of the poor and oppressed. If we are truly concerned about suffering and injustice, then we must study the issues, learn to speak out and give voice to the voiceless and powerless. Our charity must learn to take on advocacy. We must intervene in the political/economic processes and question systems that ignore the poor.

Give us wisdom, O God, and the will to stand with the poor and the oppressed. Amen.

Suzanne Darweesh is a graduate of the College of Wooster and Union Theological Seminary. She worked for the California Migrant Ministry from 1959-1962 and received training from César Chávez during that period. She is a NFWM Board member representing the Orange County Interfaith Committee to Aid Farmworkers.





FLOC celebrates the end of the Mt. Olive Pickle boycott.



¡SI SE PUEDE! COMMUNITIES

by Leticia Zavala

"...what really counts is labor! The human beings who torture their bodies, sacrifice their youth and numb their spirits to produce this great agricultural wealth, a wealth so vast that it feeds all of America and much of the world." César Chávez

César Chávez was an inspiration to all. Not just labor, not just farm workers, not just Mexican Americans, and not just families in the struggle. The way that César Chávez inspires me is that he broke the ties. He set the precedent of, "¡Si se puede!" -- It can be done! So many of us workers live in fear of organizing because we do not have the "si se puede" attitude that César and Dolores expressed and put into practice. As the International Vice-president of FLOC I understand that this is the only attitude that gets workers to fight for their own representation and improvement of their own situation on the job.

César Chávez put into perspective that against all odds --

without any laws protecting farm workers, without any resources to put in place for an organizing campaign -- it can be done.

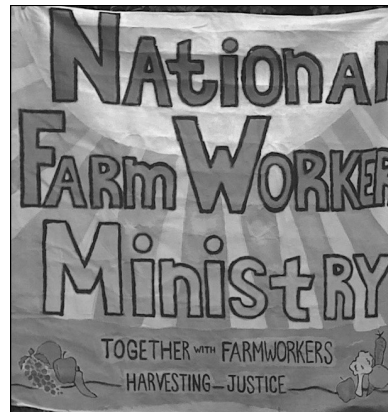
A struggle can be fought and developed through the support of the communities that the struggle affects. For farmworkers, that community is consumers. The UFW's victories were based on getting consumers and communities involved through a boycott. The boycott helped with everything else. The boycott provides protection and leverage that counter the lack of laws; it brings resources through supporters, volunteers, and donors who support the campaign; and finally, it brings the workers into new communities which overcomes some of the other obstacles, including isolation.



César Chávez and his legacy helped develop the structure and the vision of the organization which I work for. The victories that FLOC has had are based on his framework. We have been able to take the process one step farther and win three party agreements between workers, growers and the purchasing corporations who set prices.

Leticia Zavala was born Michuoacan, Mexico. By the age of 7 she was a working member of the family as they migrated between Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida picking hand-harvested fruits and vegetables. She earned a BA in Business Administration and Sociology from Florida Southern College and in 2002 began working as an organizer for FLOC and became FLOC's International Vice-President. Zavala is currently working with El Centro Internacional De Asesoría Y Movimiento Migrante in Tamazunchale, Mexico





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