

***COMMENTARY: The History of Barrios Unidos, Healing Community Violence***

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The central role that spirituality and non-violence has played in the civil rights movement is something that needs to be passed on and understood by students of history and the leaders of today. The farm worker movement could never have been built without its spiritual base. The hardships and sacrifice of the people from the very beginning of the movement took a lot of faith both in God and in the cause itself. César Chávez and the early organizers of the union took a lot of ridicule and scorn, not only from those that opposed the union's goals, but from our own families and people we grew up with in the community.

As the real organizing began, the strike drew a lot of anger, intimidation and violent tactics from the opposition to break our resolve both to building the union, as well as our commitment to use non-violent principles and tactics to achieve its goals. The resolve to stick to non-violence was seriously tested in the early days, as people were getting brutally beaten and attacked by strikebreakers and opposition forces. César and I believed that the only way to create a mass movement for farm worker justice and equality was through the moral power of non-violence. We also understood that non-violence does not work without faith: without a spiritual base we knew that the sustained individual and collective determination needed to endure the hardships and win the difficult battles ahead would crumble.

**Non-Violence and Social Change**

Ours was truly a spiritually-based vow to non-violence values and non-violent social change. However, for us to be truly successful it would be critical to communicate and teach the values and principles of non-violence across the rank and file, the workers and organizers of the union. César and I drew heavily not just from Mahatma Gandhi's teachings on non-violence, but on the brilliant tactics and strategies that he used as an organizer. There was a moral authority and power that flowed from Gandhi's liberation movement in India that greatly influence the civil rights struggle here in America. César read all he could get his hands on regarding Gandhi's work, philosophy, strategies and tactics. I also studied his works and was greatly influenced by his revolutionary organizing tactics and how others like Dr. Martin Luther King were applying these principles.

César also drew from his personal experience and background having grown up exposed to community violence. His mother, Juana Estrada tried to protect him and teach him the value of life, to survive with integrity against the adversities of poverty, and to dedicate whatever he did to honor and preserve humanity. César's political and social philosophies were built from the personal value system developed in his mother's home but also that flowed from his understanding of cultura and history. Both César and I understood that choosing non-violence went against the traditions of the proud revolutionary history of our people to achieve liberation. Our embrace of non-violence also went against the grain at a time when so many in the Chicano movement and other sectors of the civil rights struggle saw the use of violence to overcome injustice and oppression as legitimate.

In the mid-1960s, there were very influential groups and leaders within the Chicano movement condoning, if not advocating, violence as a tactic both to protect ourselves and to achieve social change. Certain leaders in the Brown Berets and powerful voices of the time, such as Corky Gonzales and Reies López Tijerina, did not discount violence as a legitimate response to injustice and oppression. César and I realized that we were going against the grain of a more historical revolutionary mind-set and the customary reliance on violence that was really dominant among the leadership of the time. People within the Chicano and the broader civil rights movements made fun of Dr. King, the SCLC, NAACP, and César for promoting non-violence, calling them a bunch of wimps and vendidos (sell outs). Critics charged that we were being ineffectual through non-violence and would end up selling out the movement. Although the criticism was hard to take at times and placed a lot of pressure on us to show success, we believed that history would prove non-violence to be the right way to achieve victory.

César and I always felt responsible for teaching and leading by example, especially in the realm of living and working by non-violent principles. We knew that it took a great deal of sacrifice and discipline to practice non-violence; but we also trusted that non-violence had the greatest potential for transforming people and society. At the same time, we had the tremendous challenge of communicating these values and organizing principles to workers who knew very little if anything of Gandhi and his victories or of the organizing philosophies of Dr. King. César and our lead organizers regularly taught and talked about non-violence principles and tactics in the course of organizing and recruiting workers to the UFW movement. We also tried to infuse these values into the culture of the union. It didn't take very long before our success in infusing non-violence principles into the union would be put to the test.

### **Spiritual and Cultural Center of the Movement**

Cultural and spiritual symbolism was at the very core of the UFW movement and provided a powerful imagery to all who participated in and supported the movement. Most of us really drew on spirituality for strength and to help keep us focused. It became a part of the UFW culture that before every march or large organizing activity we held a mass or prayer service. There were non-believers within the ranks of the union that did not agree with the "religious" orientation of the movement. But the reality was that spirituality was a fundamental part of life for much of the leadership and the vast majority of the members. On the march to Sacramento for example, the image and statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe served as a focal point of cultural unity and strength. The issue was discussed at a planning retreat of the UFW leadership where it was decided that she was part of the spiritual dimension of the movement and an important cultural symbol from which many poor Latinos took inspiration and found common purpose.

During this period there was a fatigue factor setting in among organizers and outside support was waning. The march on Sacramento was intended to refocus our attention and to gain newfound support for the strike. The march route purposefully went through farming towns with large Latino campesino populations where we could educate, recruit and garner new supporters. César wanted the theme of the march to be penitencia (penitence) and forgiveness. His focus was to bring healing within the union and to reaffirm our higher purpose. The Virgen was a guardian of the poor and a powerful symbol of this calling. Another important intent of the march was to achieve a spiritual cleansing of the movement, and to lift our organizers and leaders to a higher moral plane.

César and I both believed that the righteousness of the movement required that the marchers and strikers walk by the highest possible principles in relation to the cause. There were a lot of internal tensions, ego trips and petty disputes emerging over things like resources and titles that were poisoning morale, damaging relationships and hurting the union's working environment. These problems were surfaced in a healthy way by creating a spiritual setting where in a mass open confessional and reconciliation between members people cried, prayed and forgave. César's hope for a cleansing, refocusing and reinvigoration through this important spiritual process came to be as members vowed to move forward and walk together guided by a higher authority and purpose. Manuel Vásquez, who understood the important symbolism of the Virgen and the spiritual dimensions of the movement, became the captain who helped to lead the Sacramento march.

An important aspect of the UFW experience was building community solidarity by providing creative outlets and avenues for cultural and human expression. In this regard, the contributions of Luís Valdez and Teatro Campesino—by providing the steady presence of theatre, music and song—were immeasurable. Songs and corridos are an important tradition that helped our people to express what they were feeling. They captured the pain, the hope, and the vision of what we were trying to achieve and create. The Actos (skits or plays) developed and performed by Teatro were so critical to organizer morale. They inspired purpose and the ongoing dynamic of education within the ranks of the movement among both new and old members alike.

The Actos educated and motivated, reinforced the focus of the union and humanized the cause. Their themes articulated our common values, principles and purpose while rejuvenating our spirit—all of which was needed in the daily toil of the struggle. It is important for aspiring leaders and the young ones coming up to appreciate the sacrifice required of them to bring about social change. For those of us in the UFW, organizing work was arduous as days went from four in the morning to eleven at night, seven days a week, with campaigns lasting months and even years. We greeted workers in the mornings and were there when they got off work, visiting the strike-breakers in their encampments at night to educate and organize. The demands of organizing a social movement are continual, extreme and intensive. This is the price of success. I say this not to put our sacrifices over the sacrifices of others, but to reinforce the fact that change requires deep commitment; hence, the great need for the constant presence of spirituality and expressions of cultura—to encourage healing, release, the sense of our humanity, and the inspiration to face each new day.

### **Important Lessons, Accomplishments and Unfinished Business**

There are many important lessons, milestones and accomplishments that occurred as the result of organizing and protest by the largely-poor Mexican American and immigrant communities of California that are buried in mainstream accounts of history. An important example is the case of *Méndez v. Westminster*, which foreshadowed the landmark case of *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*. This case arose from the fruit groves and urban communities of Orange County where in 1944, Gonzalo and Felicitas Méndez fought against the racial segregation of their daughter in a local public school.<sup>1</sup> On February 18, 1946, a federal district court in California ruled that “the general and continuous segregation in separate schools of

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<sup>1</sup> “Ahead of the Curve on Integration,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, May 16, 2004.

children of Mexican ancestry as unlawful.” The historical contributions of farm worker and other Latino organizers in building foundations and creating footholds across the various stages of the movement are too often overlooked when recording the advancement and progress of civil rights.

The stories of the thousands of women who contributed to both the UFW and the broader civil rights struggle need to be captured and told as well. The reality is that there were many women playing important leadership roles across the rank and file of the movement that just aren't told and recognized, even in our own peoples' telling of history. The women were there! All anyone needs to do is look at photos of the Chicano Moratorium organizing actions or UFW picket lines, marches, and organizing meetings: women were usually front and center. Within the UFW and among its supporters various women played key roles, including Helen Chávez, María Magaña, Antonia Saludado, Josephine Soto, Sister Huranal, Zacarina García, Jan Peterson, Alegría de la Cruz, Vivian Levine, and Barbara Macry—I could go on and on. There are so many women who contributed, all of whom deserve being mentioned, acknowledged and remembered. Young men and women today should know these names so they can learn from their lives and follow their example.

The civil rights accomplishments of the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for much social, economic and political advancement among Latinos, Blacks, Asian Pacific Americans, and others. It gave birth or new momentum to various fronts of the civil and human rights struggle, such as the environmental justice movement and the women's movement. But despite the end of legal segregation and exclusion, gains in voting rights and some economic advancement for poor people of color, none of the major goals of civil rights have yet been achieved. The struggle is a work in progress with too many poor people still being left behind. For instance, education for our people is surely better now than it was in times past, at least in important respects due to the Méndez and Brown decisions; yet our schools continue to fail the vast majority of poor Latinos and African Americans today.

There have been inroads into higher education and we have more educated Latinos than ever before; but claiming anything resembling equity would be false. The dismal failure of contemporary schools in preparing young Latinos to pursue or succeed in higher education says we are failing as a country to live up to the intent of the Méndez and Brown court decisions. Beyond the legal responsibility is the moral responsibility to educate all people. Education is the great equalizer. It is virtually impossible for the majority of people to step out of poverty without this stepping-stone. The achievement of educational equity and reform is perhaps the most critical area of unfinished social business for the movement today. But the next real battlefield of civil rights in America will revolve around economic rights. In the years to come, the broad agenda of economic rights, and especially ending poverty, will be a catalyst to bring all of the nation's progressive splinter movements together again.