

Susan Samuels Drake 1962–1973

In Palo Alto, California, where I grew up in the 1940s, apricots were grown commercially within three miles of my house. But when I met Cesar Chavez in 1963, I had encountered only one other farmworker, a Mexican boy who attended our eighth-grade class for the few months his parents worked at nearby Webb Ranch. I don't recall that I or any of my friends spoke to Joe; I hope that's more memory lapse than fact.

Growing up, I had no clue that I would end up with an exciting life alongside someone like Cesar. Nor that he would help reform the bad image I held about women in our culture. My only ambition had been to be a wife and mother of sons. Daughters would be too much trouble for me, given my lack of respect for females. I'd seen my mother give up her self in order to please my father. Unlike her, I stumble on "Yes, dear." I also knew that I didn't want to join the bridge-playing, tennis-and-cocktail-party set to which my parents belonged. If I could occasionally write for publication, that would be gravy; but family-building came first.

When I married Jim Drake, four days short of my 21st birthday, I had lots to learn about what more the world had to offer, especially to women. Cesar would be among the top five of my outstanding teachers. First I learned that the inhabitants of my corner of society, who assumed we were The Fortunate, weren't necessarily better off than those whose assets weren't immediately, if ever, apparent to the "privileged class" I had been born into.

Following Jim's training at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he was hired by the California Migrant Ministry (CMM) in May 1962. CMM had just made the radical decision to work with Cesar on changing the living standards for farmworkers. Before that, CMM volunteers and staff had taken crafts and snacks into migrant labor camps all over California, led some Bible study, and returned to homes with running water, heat, electricity—and full refrigerators. These were—and are still—unavailable to thousands of tent- and car-dwelling farmworkers. Visits from CMM volunteers and staff may have helped some workers feel better, but their housing, health care and income didn't improve. In 1962, I was a "whither thou goest" wife, never guessing that this would mean going into the heart of California's farmworker communities and around the world on the workers' behalf.

Jim and I met Cesar just six weeks after he'd begun going door to door organizing an association of farmworkers. The former *campesino* came to the CMM retreat neatly dressed, very quiet, a very brown man in the midst of a very white California Migrant Ministry staff. Preoccupied with toddlers, I didn't soak up the electrifying concepts Cesar presented to us. His voice was too quiet, his passion too lidded. It would be years before his courage and genius amazed me.

The more Jim became involved with the farmworkers' movement, the more I offered to help him with chores related to his Delano days—just to be near him. During the first years of our marriage, he was in and out of our house all day, but with the strike, he drove 45 minutes each way between our Porterville home and work. We counted dues money—lots of coins and \$1 bills—for the National Farmworkers Association, the infant organization that one day would become a full-fledged labor union. I typed letters. I helped at the Delano office occasionally. Once the grape strike began, we moved to Delano so Jim, who had become one of Cesar's right-hand men, could get home more often while our children, Tom and Matt, and I were awake.

By 1966, a year into the strike, our kids were in school, so during my free afternoons I volunteered at the Farm Workers Credit Union. The office was in the Service Center, the nonprofit arm of the movement. Farmworkers came by the dozens to the center's dusty Pink House, whose yard was as neglected as the people who filed through the front door. I brushed up on my college Spanish. Although I never became proficient, the men and women of the fields and orchards tolerated my jagged new language and grew to trust me. Finally I saw farmworkers not as "those people" but as individuals, friends, and appreciative coworkers. Having felt like my family's black sheep, the union family helped me feel useful and I couldn't imagine ever leaving it.

Cesar inspired me to use some of my natural talents in the world, not only within the farmworker movement. In 1970, Jim and I represented the nonviolent farmworker leader in several places around the globe: in front of the Hawaiian state legislature, at the centenary celebration of Mahatma Gandhi's life in India, at the World Council of Churches, and in the London grape boycott office. Even though Cesar's back problem kept him from making this trip, his sense of justice came with me and motivated me to lead an antiwar demonstration in New Delhi, India. Jim begged me not to "embarrass" us by setting myself up for failure. Yet with the help of Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn and T.Y. Rogers (who worked with Martin Luther King), 75 committed nonviolent leaders from about 50 countries were joined by Indian pressmen and photographers in a march from the Gandhi Peace Center to the American Embassy one afternoon. We carried this message: "Get the U.S. out of Vietnam so that its citizens can decide their own future." The message was to be relayed to U.S. President Richard Nixon. I never doubted I could pull off organizing and carrying out this demonstration. Even though I didn't know Cesar well yet, his example was that compelling.

Later in 1970, we moved to the East Coast—returning twice to Delano with only a month between trips. Although I occasionally spoke about farmworkers at schools and churches there, I was seriously depressed by the constantly gray days, our living situation (we had taken up residence in the attic of a wealthy couple), and not having friends or husband around. I felt part privileged, part Dickensian. Jim was immersed

in heading the Manhattan grape, then lettuce, boycott efforts, and spent several days of the week away in the city. Our marriage was limping badly.

When we returned to Delano, Jim was still one of “Cesar’s inner circle,” as the ring of five or six advisors was referred to by others. The urgency of daily movement activities distracted us from our inability to communicate effectively. Yet we maintained respect for each other. One day, realizing that I was bored with sorting registration cards in the union’s membership department, Jim asked if I would help in Cesar’s office for a couple of weeks. He wanted to take one of the union president’s two secretaries to the Coachella office for the beginning of the grape harvest. What a break for me!

When I was eight or nine years old, my father used to let me help in his law office. Filing was an honor at that age! I decided that if I ever had to work, I’d like to be a secretary so that I could talk with lots of people like a hostess at an ongoing party, write letters and reports, and keep things organized.

Being the secretary of the man who made the cover of *Time* magazine was what I was born to do. Cesar’s work took him out of the office often. Fortunately, my experience as a secretary-office manager in a variety of venues during high school and college summers, then at the National Council of Churches, made office work a breeze for me, even without much direction. Cesar’s other secretaries never returned, so my “couple of weeks” turned into nearly three years in his office.

Cesar loved to play with words the way I do. Sometimes I’d use his speech patterns and idioms so well that neither of us could remember who wrote the original letter. Depending on the situation, he could be flattered or frightened to know I’d sneaked into his brain.

We weren’t always two spirits working like one. When Cesar taught me about astrology, and I learned that he and my father were both Aries, familiar conflicts made sense. Cesar announced, “Your water is trying to put out my fire.” I’m a Cancer. Instead of boiling over, wouldn’t it have been great if we’d understood that it takes fire and water to cook? I came into this life believing that everyone is equal, so while I can hero-worship as well as the next person, I also don’t think anyone has the right to keep me under his or her thumb. You can understand that a big-time leader might find my egalitarian stance exasperating at times. Astrology just gave me a way to comfort myself when impatience or insults flew around our two-room office like overfed seagulls.

Cesar’s chronic back pain spurred him to walk around the headquarters and to stretch occasionally throughout the day. One afternoon, my eyes were glued to a labor contract scrolling out of the Smith Corona portable typewriter borrowed from another staff member. Cesar strolled to my chair. He stood there long enough that I

began making typos, stopped, and looked up to see what he wanted. Like a child, he asked, “What are you doing?” A “typing, stupid” look crossed my face. Then he asked about my background, and said the Irish and Jews (I’m a little of each) were his best supporters. Then out of the blue, Cesar said, “Gandhi’s secretary said working with him was like living in the mouth of a lion. Do you ever feel that way with me?”

Gulp! By then, two years into the job, the only honest answer was, “Sometimes. Yes.”

He grinned, the gold cap on an upper tooth shining (I missed it after he got a porcelain replacement). The smile slipped away. “Well, you tick me off sometimes. You think you run this office. You don’t. I do.”

“But you could give me lots more to do if you didn’t have to have your fingers in every little thing that goes on in here.” Others had made the same point through the years, so this wasn’t as impudent as it sounds. We were both right, of course. We were two controlling souls with big hearts, able to cut through crises like a Bowie knife but also prone to getting bogged down in petty conflicts like ornery two-year-olds.

Consciously or not, Cesar encouraged coworkers to relate like family. The world’s citizens were his family. Until I met him, I thought I was the only one who felt so sensitively about the world community. And because permanent staff and volunteers sensed a kind of familial tie with Cesar, we stayed loyal and involved through the more-than-12-hour days at the office. To discuss a problem or relish some success, our boss might say something as simple as, “Let’s take a walk. I want to show you something new in the garden.” Incidentally, he introduced me to organic produce because he knew the long-range damage of pesticide usage.

My favorite example of that family feeling—and there were dozens—happened in 1972, during one of the growers’ campaigns to destroy the union through state legislation (Proposition 22). I went on the road in Los Angeles with Cesar to rally students, unionists, and consumers. As avid as an Elvis groupie, I followed the head honcho around so he could say, “Give Susan your name and phone number. I’ll call you.” “My secretary knows all about that; talk with her. I’m needed onstage right now.” “Susanita, what was the name of that organizer in San Francisco?” “Susan, what time do I have to be over at NBC?” “Susanita, ready to go play pool with my brother and me?” “Susanita, let’s dance” and he’d put Edie Gorme and Steve Lawrence on the phonograph. It might be after midnight, long after my 10 o’clock bedtime, and he was still gyrating like a man who didn’t know what back pain was.

I had the time of my life during those four or five days. But to get to L.A., I drove in the foggy dark by myself, over the windy Grapevine onto the L.A. freeways, and

found a place I'd never been before just to help *el jefe*, our chief. Ordinarily I am terrified of all those things. I even told a hitchhiker, "I shouldn't pick you up, but I'm too scared to drive the rest of the way by myself." Had Cesar been less important than my blood relatives, I wouldn't had the courage to confront so many fears simultaneously.

Back to the subject of women. When Cesar called department head meetings, sometimes he'd forget to tell the women. Or he'd leave their names off the minutes when I knew they'd attended the gathering. "How dare he overlook Dolores Huerta, Jessica Govea, and other key staff?" I'd think. These were strong women whose native skills blossomed under his tutelage. He had stepped up to the union's presidency with a history of *machismo*. Whenever the habit got to him, I became more determined to let him know how important our gender is. His male administrative assistants changed with the seasons; I stayed for nearly three years.

Besides the friendships with farmworkers, whose names never make the newspaper until their obituaries, I had some glamorous encounters over the years with Senators Robert Kennedy and Walter Mondale; celebrities Robert Blake, Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, and Anthony Quinn; educators Paolo Freire and Danilo Dolci; news reporters I'd seen on TV; as well as AFL-CIO and UAW staff. They called me by my first name and learned to leave messages with me instead of interrupting Cesar. Before working in his office, I'd only sipped the power that a secretary can have. Even without a college degree, I had become a brick in that movement "building." As it often does, cockiness accompanied such confidence. Even key bricks can be replaced if they start crumbling.

Some of Cesar's former coworkers joke that Chavez belongs in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for firing more people than any other boss. He fired Dolores Huerta more times than she has fingers to count on (she stayed because she took the workers more seriously than she did Cesar). My turn to be fired came in 1973, after I put myself in the role of the child in an *Emperor's New Clothes* situation. I told Cesar that many of his staff and AFL-CIO supporters thought his strategy for renegotiating the second round of contracts with grape growers wasn't the best tactic. Years later he denied firing me and said, "Well, now I know you didn't mean what you said. You were merely a pawn for ..." and he named some of his key staff members. I exploded. "That's simply not true. Those guys couldn't care less what I thought. When I ran my idea past them, some of them told me, 'Don't bother trying to talk to Cesar about this. He won't listen. Even though you're definitely onto something.'" I see now how much he felt betrayed by one of his confidantes, several actually, if you count those I named who shared my opinion. But at the time I hoped our friendship was solid enough that he'd heed my advice.

The year Cesar fired me was the year Jim and I divorced. A "time out" was my best future. After two months in Mexico, I returned to the San Francisco Bay Area to be

near family. When I found a good rental, the landlord said, “Sorry, but your sons will soon be teenagers—noisy, drugs, you know.” After 11 years of working with the farmworkers, I stood up for myself. We got the duplex. Later I bought my own house. From time to time, I gathered other “fire-ees” for reunions. We nursed bruises from having been kicked out of the movement we believed in, but we swore not to say anything that might slow the success of the union.

A couple of years after my firing, I returned to Delano for the dedication of one of the buildings at the earliest movement center, the Forty Acres. The fiesta was in Garces Park, where Cesar had broken his first fast with Bobby Kennedy at his side. When I arrived, Cesar was standing on the empty portable stage, looking into the swarming crowd for someone. Music was playing; voices rose. We hadn’t spoken since he fired me. I leaned close so he could hear me. “Can we make up? I’m so happy to be here.” He wrapped his arms around me. “Welcome back, sister. I’ve been hearing what you’re doing for us up in Palo Alto. Thank you.” I’d raised funds, walked picket lines, and held soup suppers to spread the word among consumers. As secretary for Palo Alto Co-op Markets, I made sure the management didn’t waffle on supporting the UFW’s boycotts.

Once Cesar’s figurative blood runs in your veins, you don’t let go of *La Causa*. Today hundreds of former farmworker movement staff check in with one another occasionally. Most are still working, full- or part-time, for social justice. Over the 30 years since I sat behind a paper-piled desk in the headquarters of the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, people continue to contact me with “By any chance, do you know where so-and-so is?” and “Do you remember that situation where...?” I enjoy maintaining a database of former staff’s e-mail addresses. I am also asked to speak with students about the farmworkers’ struggle then and now. Cesar knew I was writing a book about my experiences and swore he’d write one about me. He passed away before he could write his, thank goodness. But I finished mine, *Fields of Courage: Remembering Cesar Chavez & the People Whose Labor Feeds Us*. In the 15 years between the time I left his office and the final edition of the book, I sorted out my ambivalence about this man who sliced and spliced my sense of self, a woman with sufficient power to raise children alone, and, more important, to help motivate and mobilize others for everything from a luncheon to social justice.

But I’m only one of droves of American women, not only those who work in the fields and orchards, who believe *Si, se puede* (“yes, it’s possible”), because Cesar believed in us, gave us meaningful work to do and appreciation when we did it. Cesar Chavez taught me when to speak, when to listen, when to negotiate—sometimes in cooperation with him, sometimes in opposition to him. This is the man who never failed to ask, “How are your boys?” The man with the easy hug, the gentle smile, a hint of boyish naughtiness, a bushel of curiosity, and a heart so full of justice that I felt the beat in my chest. Farmworkers and Latinos from other walks of life enjoy a

sunnier place in American life because they still feel the beat of this brave, wily, good-humored, persistent man.