

Jim Holland 1965–1967

Cesar Chavez Was A Great Man

First, a small disclaimer. I really don't consider myself in the same league as most of the other UFW volunteers on this list. I never considered my involvement with Cesar and the farmworker union a total, lifetime commitment. Of course, from the first meeting, I was tremendously impressed with Cesar and I remained tremendously impressed until the day he died. But I never thought of myself as a member of the totally committed fulltime forever cadre. So I was never in the same league as LeRoy Chatfield, Marshall Ganz, Jerry Cohen, Jim Drake, Dave Duran, and others. Of course, there *were* people who felt I was so taken with Cesar and the struggle that I felt he could do no wrong. They were right. Certain doubts came later.

Cesar Chavez was a great man. He was a human being and therefore not perfect, but he was a great man. The only one I ever met.

I have recently, probably instigated by the Documentation Project, wondered why I felt so strongly, so clearly, that Cesar was a great man. There were two reasons. First, his complete commitment. We all know that the struggle was his whole life. Everything. In the years following my full-time employment by the farmworkers' union, I came to know the leaders of a number of low-income groups. Several of them had Saul Alinsky connections. This was during my time spent with Center for Community Change. None of them came close to Cesar in terms of commitment or overall stature. The other truly outstanding characteristic of Cesar was his absolute incorruptibility. Many—not all—of these guys were easily bought off by money, status, or any of the other temptations we all experience. Not Cesar.

The one clear exception to the above is another farmworker leader, Tomas Villanueva. More about him a little later.

Of course, Cesar also had that hard-to-define charisma. That doesn't account for his greatness, but it may affect his standing with a lot of people. That doesn't really matter a hell of a lot. Take away his charisma and there is still plenty of greatness.

I originally thought of writing this essay as a series of illustrative anecdotes. Perhaps one is in order now to illustrate my deep feelings about Cesar.

When we started the actual construction of the gas station—after a long period of trying to get a building permit—Cesar decided that a big cornerstone-laying ceremony should be held. Cesar was a genius at exploiting opportunities like this. All the big shots from New York and Washington would be invited. At the Friday union meeting preceding the Sunday cornerstone event, Cesar announced that a mass would be said at the site first for staff and interested union personnel. I had to go out to the Forty Acres to prepare for laying the

cornerstone—mortar, adobe bricks, etc. I got there just as mass was beginning. This was post-Vatican II, so the altar was a card table set up to face the congregation, which was standing on the concrete slab. The space was defined by the long vertical rebars (steel rods) anchored in the slab. The bars, about nine feet high, waved ever so slightly.

At the kiss of peace, the priest said simply, “At this point in the Mass, the meaning is best understood if we turn to our neighbor and say, ‘We are all one with God.’”

Well! I am a Catholic. I was born into the church, baptized, confirmed, and attended school at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in New York. But I had left the church many years before. Not in anger—I simply drifted away. Those words, in that setting, knocked my socks off! Cesar caused the whole thing. After working for the United Farm Workers, I went back to the church, full bore, becoming a lector and Eucharistic minister in San Francisco.

As I said originally, Cesar had a terrific effect on my life. There is a great deal more I could say about that.

The main reason for taking so long to write this essay was the difficulty I had with the human Cesar. He *was* human, abundantly so, so he was imperfect, as are we all.

I struggled with thoughts like, “Why did so many swell people leave the union?” There were probably many reasons, but to lose people like Tony Orendain, Jerry Cohen, Marshall Ganz, Dave Duran, LeRoy Chatfield, and others like them, was a grievous mistake. A great loss to the union.

I had negative thoughts about the move to La Paz. I believe (I could easily be wrong) that the move was somehow connected to Cesar’s dream of a large corps of people absolutely dedicated to the cause. He did discuss such an idea with me. I remember his idea of a separate union card for members who rendered special services. What happened with that? Was this train of thought somehow related to his association with Chuck Dederich and Synanon? I have only generalized knowledge about Synanon. A few friends of mine in Marin County played the Synanon “Game.” It sounded dreadful.

Perhaps the most disturbing thoughts were caused by a visit Kay and I had with our old friend Tomas Villanueva last summer in Toppenish, Washington. We visited a farmworker clinic there. I had helped it get started years ago when I was with the Center for Community Change. HEW initially funded it. It was a very intense struggle to get it started. Now it is a private, nonprofit, independent facility. It has grown incredibly and provides excellent low-cost health care to many in the Yakima Valley. Very impressive.

Tomas is a helluva guy. He organized the United Farm Workers Co-Op, which was a very significant, very successful effort. He has always had a deep, very deep, admiration for

Cesar. He even organized one of the farms in the Yakima Valley and negotiated a contract with UFW—without pay and with only grudging support from Cesar.

Now, Cesar did not think highly of Tomas, feeling Tomas was too devoted to his family. He certainly is. He currently works for a Washington state agency doing the kind of service work he has always done, but is now getting paid for it.

Our visit to the Yakima Valley was made not long after a quick stop in Delano on the way home from a track meet in Los Angeles. So we saw the deserted buildings, and while we knew the gas station and clinic were not functioning, we couldn't help feeling a little sad.

So as I pondered whether or not to write this, I thought about the clinic in Delano and the clinic in Toppenish. Of course I can easily think about the why's and wherefore's. Nonetheless, one is a roaring success and the other is deserted. Why?

So here I am. My admiration for Cesar is not even slightly diminished. Cesar Chavez was, is, and always will be a great man.