

## Rosemary Matson 1966–1977

### The Reverend Howard G. Matson 1907-1993

The Reverend Howard Matson, upon completing 50 years of parish ministry, dedicated a full decade of volunteer support to the farmworker movement. He was a founding member and board member of the National Farm Worker Ministry, an interfaith group of major denominations. He also created the Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministry, working to organize church support of boycotting and picketing and raise funds for UFW. He used this platform and pulpit to promote the farmworker cause and was a clergy presence on picket lines in cities and in the fields. He lobbied in Sacramento and other state legislatures, debated growers, was arrested testing an ALRB ruling, and turned his summer home over to Cesar and UFW leaders during the lettuce strike. The following reflections are taken from his journal, *A Walk to the Village*, published in 1988 by Nybro Press.

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The United Farm Workers were marching from Delano to Sacramento (the state capital) to dramatize their plight. The Virgin of Guadalupe was up front, followed by farmworkers carrying colorful red flags. We joined the ranks. It was very hot. When we reached Lodi in the early evening, I fell exhausted on the grass of the public park. Suddenly Cesar Chavez appeared.

“Campesinos,” he said. “We have just signed a collective bargaining agreement with Schenley!”

A great cheer went up. We had been lucky enough to be present at the real beginning of the United Farm Workers union.

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A year before I retired from my San Francisco church, I was in my summer home in the Carmel Valley. A lettuce strike was going on in the Salinas Valley. Chavez was residing at a nearby mission but was being harassed. My friend wondered whether I knew of a place where Chavez might reside incognito. My wife and I looked at each other.

“Why not our house?” I asked. “After all, we do have our permanent home in San Francisco.”

The offer was accepted. Chavez loved the place. We had trouble with only one neighbor who phoned to San Francisco inquiring whether we knew Chicanos were living in our house. We said they were friends of ours. He didn’t realize Chavez himself was staying there.

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For the last seven years I have been minister for migrant farmworkers for the Unitarian Universalist Association. I was in the hurly-burly of things, including those dangerous confrontations between Teamsters and the United Farm Workers. The clergy were present to help cool the violence. It was difficult to cool ourselves in the 120 degree heat of the Coachella Valley.

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There were two calls this morning. Chris Hartmire of the National Farm Worker Ministry canceled the meeting coming up in Chicago because of the killing of Rufino Contreras-Mijangoes on the picket line in Imperial Valley. Rufino's father and brother were on the picket line with him when the event happened. His mother is in Mexico and yet to be reached. The second call came from Sue Miner. The funeral is set for 7 a.m. tomorrow with a farmworker procession following. This evening a rosary will be said for the dead striker. Three men have been booked for investigation of murder. I cannot help but think of the murder of Juan de la Cruz in Kern County in 1973, and the killing of the Arab worker, Nagi Daifullah, a few days earlier.

In the years I was minister for migrant farmworkers it was clear to me that the mere presence of a caring person in a crisis situation is the most important contribution one could make. Migrants are so alone as they wander from field to field in search of work. Even when families are together, it is a lonely life. To live in a labor camp and to work fields close to where people live in real houses is a depressing experience.

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Cesar Chavez remarks at the memorial service for Rufino Contreras who was murdered near El Centro, California, on February 10 began thus...

"It was a day without hope. It was a day without joy. The sun didn't sing. The rain didn't fall. Why was this such a day of evil? Because on this day greed and injustice struck down our brother Rufino Contreras.

"What is the worth of a man? What is the worth of a farmworker? Together, Rufino, his father, and brother gave the company 20 years of their labor. They were faithful workers who helped build up the wealth of their boss, helped build up the wealth of his ranch.

"What was their reward for their service and the sacrifice? When they petitioned for a more just share of what they themselves produce, when they spoke out against injustice they endured, the company answered them with bullets; the company sent hired guns to quiet Rufino Contreras."

Near the end of his eulogy Cesar added, "If Rufino were alive today, what would he tell us? He would tell us don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged. He would tell us don't cry for me, organize!"

This is the fourth person serving the UFW who has been killed during a strike. Nan Freeman, a young Jewish girl from Massachusetts, was crushed to death by a grower's truck on a picket line at a sugar cane company in Florida. In the summer of 1973 a young Arab immigrant from Yemen, Nagi Daifullah, and an older union member, Juan de la Cruz, were killed in separate incidents a few days apart. This occurred in Kern County during grape strikes. I was present when many strikers and some clergy were injured.

I have strong feelings about the right of workers to organize. I am persuaded the weakening of the trade union movement would bring unparalleled exploitation to workers.

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In the early days of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, there was considerable confusion among sheriffs about whether to follow the rulings of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which stipulated that union organizers have access to ranch fields to talk to workers about their rights. Some sheriffs enforced the rulings of the board while others arrested such organizers for trespass. It was important the law be tested. (Later the courts ruled in favor of the board.) Three clergy volunteered to stand with those arrested: a Catholic nun, a United Church of Christ clergyman, and I. We went to one of the ranches in California where organizers were denied access and were arrested for trespass. We were taken to the county jail some 15 miles away.

As clergy we were offered release without bail. We refused. Many hours passed while police tried to persuade us to accept this arrangement. We kept refusing. Finally, the assistant sheriff of the county arrived and continued the conversation.

The outcome of all this was that we were given unconditional release. The next day union organizers were allowed on the ranch. It was the first ranch to hold an election under the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act and the first ranch to establish a contract with the United Farm Workers certified by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board.

It is not often that ministerial action has such direct result.

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On Sunday we went to Aromas and performed the wedding. We distributed wildflower seeds to scatter into the ground as part of the ceremony. I must return again to see how they are doing.

The reception following the Aromas wedding was in nearby San Juan Bautista. It was in a restaurant garden next door to the mission. A few blocks away is the home of the Teatro Campesino (the farmworkers' theater). The Teatro (under its director Luis Valdez) has converted an old warehouse into a practice theater and offices. San Benito County (where San Juan Bautista is located) has more Mexican-Americans than Anglos. It is a good base for the Teatro, whose productions combine Chicano humor and tragedy.

The Teatro Campesino got its start in the early farmworker strikes under Cesar Chavez. After a day's picketing or marching, the Teatro put together an impromptu outdoor performance for the strikers. It was mostly satire about the day's events and proved a terrific morale booster for the strikers. I remember one production called "Mexican for Sale," which was one of the funniest skits I have seen.

Luis Valdez was recently appointed a member of the California Arts Council by the governor of California. It is testimony to the importance of Chicano theater in a state with a booming Chicano population.

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I recall a rally held in the public park in Coachella in 1973. It was a time of confrontation with the Teamsters. It had been an ugly day on the picket line. People had been beaten up, cars fired upon, organizers knocked unconscious. One young man had his neck cut by an ice pick. It looked as though the next day would be worse.

At the rally in the public park, a weary group of strikers assembled. Half of them were women as half the workers are women. The tension of the day could be felt. The unasked question was what would happen the next day. Speaker after speaker recounted the terrible events that had just happened and explained the issues of the strike.

It was Chavez who closed the meeting. He looked clean and rested as though he had spent a leisurely day at home instead of a grueling one in the fields at 110 degree heat, subject to personal abuse and physical danger. At the end of his talk he asked a question.

"Will you return to your picket lines tomorrow?"

"Yes!" everyone shouted.

Cesar continued.

"And you are not afraid?"

"No!" everyone cried.

"Not even a little?"

The tension broke. Everyone laughed. Of course they were afraid. Who would not be? When morning came, all were at their stations including Cesar Chavez.

There will be no humor in the Imperial Valley this morning. Nor will the killing of Rufino stop this movement for social justice. The time has come for unionization of migrant farmworkers. The time has really come.

ROSEMARY MATSON  
Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministry

My own support of the farmworker movement began with Howard's. In the early 1960s, Howard was serving as associate minister in the San Francisco Unitarian Church and I was on the staff of the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley.

With our different skills and abilities, Howard and I worked well as a team. We walked hand-in-hand making our Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministry a productive activity. While Howard was publicly out front, speaking, debating, meeting, lobbying, using his clergy presence in ways to gain support for the farmworkers, I, with my organizational and administrative skills, created informational materials, newsletters, flyers, announcements, and mailings, whatever was needed. Howard said his last ministry, serving as minister to migrant farmworkers, was his most satisfying. Before he died on August 17, 1993, I promised him I would carry on our support of the farmworker movement. That I have.

There are many defining moments that are etched in my memory. I share some of them with you.

***I remember...***being moved by Chris Hartmire's passionate talk to a group in Marin County about the farmworker movement and arranging a brief meeting with him at the San Francisco airport to let him know that Howard and I wanted to become involved with this movement in a substantial way. He invited Howard to join the ecumenical National Farm Worker Ministry.

***I remember...***my unexpectedly providing lunch for Cesar and 15 of his delegation at our home in Berkeley. They were between meetings in Oakland. A trip to the deli for pans of lasagna sufficed for all except Cesar who I found out was a vegetarian, drank carrot juice, and needed a nap.

***I remember...***responding when we heard that Cesar and his leadership needed safe housing not too far from the Salinas headquarters of UFW during the lettuce strike. We turned our summer home in Carmel Valley over to them. It was a time when Chicanos were not welcome in Carmel Valley Village except as menial laborers. The only problem we experienced during the nine months we housed the UFW leaders was with our nearest neighbor, a prominent grower. He phoned us in San Francisco to object to our house being used by Chicanos. He did not know that Cesar was there. I happened to answer the phone. When Howard heard who was calling, he got on the other phone to listen. It was a strenuous conversation that lasted almost an hour. Our neighbor became quite threatening. "The good people of Carmel Valley will not let you get away with this." Uncertain what to do, I called LeRoy Chatfield. LeRoy talked to Cesar and reported back to us that Cesar said as long as we didn't particularly want to be friends with our neighbor, he wanted to stay on.

He liked the place, and lived with his life being threatened most of the time anyway. We held our ground.

***I remember...***our first visit to Delano and La Paz inadvertently coinciding with Helen's birthday. Cesar asked us to have lunch with them. We felt honored. It was moving to see their unpretentious and simple lifestyle.

***I remember...***our staying overnight with LeRoy and Bonnie Chatfield in Delano. LeRoy took us to a large UFW meeting that evening, introducing us as friends who had turned our house over to Cesar when he needed a place during the lettuce strike. We were overwhelmed with the gratitude union members expressed to us for "taking care of Cesar."

***I remember...***being in Phoenix, Arizona, at the time Cesar ended his long fast. We were staying with the Reverend Ray Manker and his wife, Gretchen. Ray had been one of the clergy working with Howard in his migrant ministry. We were in awe of the very large numbers of public figures who had come to Phoenix to be with the farmworkers in witnessing this sacred act and praying for Cesar's life.

***I remember...***in April 1993, at the time of Cesar's death and memorial service, the thoughtfulness of LeRoy Chatfield and Chris Hartmire. Howard was by then ailing and in the last months of his life, too fragile to travel to Delano for the service. Both LeRoy and Chris sent Howard detailed accounts of the service so that he could feel that he had been there. One of Howard's last acts was to write a letter to the editor of our local paper expressing his sadness at Cesar's death at 66 when there was so much left to do. Howard wrote in part: "It was my privilege to have known and worked with this servant of the people for almost two decades. I admired and respected the man and his mission. He sought justice for the lowest paid workers in our nation. That the very people who work to put food on our tables would themselves live in poverty is a gross injustice. That today their wages are higher, their working conditions improved, their dignity restored, is a tribute to Chavez. Alas, the task is far from complete and he is gone. Who will lead La Causa now?"

The work goes on.