

## Janis Peterson 1968–1990

I didn't remember this story until after Cesar had passed away. It's odd, how death makes storytellers of us all. But a person's passing has a way of sifting through our subconscious for something that we can hold onto—a memory or memories—to comfort ourselves with the loss.

After I had stopped working for the UFW, and after Cesar had passed away, this story is what came to symbolize the 22 years that I spent working in the union. It is odd, too, that this story happened not toward the end of my work with the UFW, but at the very beginning. And that's probably why I didn't remember it right away. I couldn't appreciate its value until much, much later. And although this lesson carved its way into my heart and I have held it there for a lifetime, I think that it was much too close to me to even see. Sometimes these memories surface from some deep source inside and then, and only then, they take on a special significance: you finally understand *now*, what was really happening *then*. Your life comes full circle.

I had started working for the UFW in July of 1968. Three days after I joined, we went on a retreat to Santa Barbara, to plan the international grape boycott. A week after that, we were taking cars, and buses and trains to cities all over the country. We had caravanned up the West Coast, cars and people dropping out of the caravan as they reached their individual destinations. Our group was going the farthest north: our destination was Vancouver, Canada. We comprised a farmworker family with two small children, a young couple from the East Coast who had volunteered to join the boycott, and another young woman and I completed the team.

I wish that I could explain to you what it was like at 18 to start working for the UFW—that sheer act of faith that we all engaged in, when we went out with no money or possessions to these faraway cities, even to other countries, to persuade people not to eat grapes.

I remember Jim Drake as the national boycott coordinator coming to visit us in Canada. He took us out to the movies, just so we could have a break! He didn't have too much advice to give us about how to do our job, but just to keep on trying. I remember that we had been told to organize labor, the church, and the consumers. I didn't have really any idea about how to do that, but I assumed that once we got there, we would have to figure it out.

But after a year or so, I guess Cesar had decided it was important to have everyone come back and analyze how effective the boycott was and to make plans for the future. So he called everyone back from the boycott and we met at Three Rivers in the San Joaquin Valley. It must have been in December of 1969, although I can't be sure.

I believe we met in some property owned by the Catholic Church because, frequently, it was the Catholic Church that lent us buildings for our meetings like this. But it was a

medium-sized room, and we had those metal chairs, all in rows. The walls were made of wood, I remember. It was a simple, clean room, as was frequently the case with these meeting places. It must have been wintertime, because I remember that the room was slightly cold. There must have been at least 30 or 40 of us in the room. Cesar was in the front, leading the meeting, at the time.

We were such an odd conglomeration of people. There were novices like me, as well as veterans of the farmworker movement who had already weathered marches and strikes and boycotts in the span of three short years. Jessica Govea came back from Montreal, Mack Lyons from Florida, Eliseo Medina from Chicago, Marshall Ganz from Toronto. I think Jim Drake was still the national boycott coordinator, and he must have been there, in his Pendleton shirts that he was fond of wearing and his minister glasses and his thin, fine hair. And Mack Lyons, with his long legs and his languid smile; his red-haired, wife, Dianna, full of intensity and courage. And LeRoy Chatfield, his Spartan profile chiseled from ascetic Catholic discipline and his slow, measured way of speaking.

I imagine that Fred Ross, Sr. was there, and Pete Velasco and Philip Vera Cruz. By that time Andy Imutan must have already quit and returned to Stockton. Andy Orendain had already moved to Texas, and Luis Valdez had started to build the Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista. But Dolores must have been there, and Richard, and Gilbert and Esther Padilla. Kathy Murguia, with her fine, brown hair and husky voice, and Lupe, her husband, a farmworker from Mexico. And Chris Hartmire, from the National Migrant Ministry, full of optimism and earnestness.

And the farmworkers from Delano, who had started in the beginning, like Esther Uranday and Roy Trevino, and the union accountant, whose name I can't remember.

So here, in a room with some who were seasoned by many battles, and others who were novices like me, we had gathered to plan and strategize.

This was the time of "ins." There were sit-ins, and shop-ins, and filling up your shopping cart and walking around the store for hours and hours so that no one else could, or filling up the parking lot with cars so no one else could park in the lot. We had unleashed all of our fury on these very concrete targets—the supermarkets. We were trying so hard out there in the boycotts to organize picket lines, to get the churches and the labor unions to help, to do whatever we could to persuade people in such faraway places to understand why we were there.

When you're fighting in a movement, you have to measure your victories every day; it's a way of coping with the overwhelming task in front of you that has no clear end in sight. We always had our stories at the end of these very long days. The stories were funny and sad, but they all were really about how—if we couldn't look at the long years of fighting that we faced—we could nonetheless look at the fight that was in front of us, and count how, on that day, we had won.

During one of the breaks, we spent a lot of time bragging about what we were doing. Cesar must have become concerned, listening to us boast about our sit-ins and shop-ins and all of our talk about what we were doing.

After we returned from the break, Cesar told us that he had a question to ask us. He explained that we each had to answer, out loud, one at a time. And that no one was to comment on another person's answer. He explained, too, that you could give only one answer, not two, or three.

Then he asked the question.

“What is the single most important thing that you think we need to win the boycott?”

I remember even then thinking that my answer, and everyone else's, would be important, although I had no idea what Cesar was leading up to with his question.

We started at the beginning of the first row, and one at a time, each person gave his or her answer. I remember that some people said money. Others said unions, or the church, or Democrats. I don't remember any of the other answers, although each person spoke. Some people repeated what another had said because that had been their answer, too.

Finally, after everyone had finished, Cesar spoke, “Only one person had the answer that I was looking for,” he said.

“Lupe, say your answer again,” Cesar commanded. In his soft-spoken English, Lupe repeated his answer. It was hard to hear. Cesar asked him to say it louder, and in his embarrassment, Lupe reverted to Spanish.

“*La gente*,” Lupe said. “People.”

I think that Cesar went on to explain why, out of all of the answers, this was the only one that he felt made any sense. I know that he went on to talk about organizing people and how organizing was the only way to do our work. I don't remember too much more about the rest of the meeting, although I know that it went on for several more days.

But there was something about that moment that has stayed suspended in my mind, in time. Maybe it was the way that we all came together after having been scattered like leaves all throughout the country, struggling, each on our own, in these huge cities, trying to build a nationwide boycott out of nothing.

Maybe it was that clean, Spartan room that held no distractions to cloud our thinking. Maybe it was that collective feeling that we had, that connection that only people who struggle together can feel, that was present in the room. Or the fact that we could gather

together to reflect, to plan, and to evaluate what we were doing. Or maybe it was because out of all of those people in the room, with all of their education and their knowledge, their privilege, or their upbringing, the one right answer came from a farmworker himself.

There were a lot of lessons for me that day.

Cesar was a great leader, but in my mind, he was an even greater teacher. And this was one of the many days that he was teaching something that I never forgot. He loved planning strategy—getting everyone together—and spending time deciding how we would fight our battles and how we would win them.

We were that worst kind of enemy, because we didn't have anything to lose; we had no possessions, no money. We were just tramping all over the country, hitching rides, piling up in one-bed hotel rooms, begging for blankets and food. Cesar would talk about it all of the time, but you know, it was true. When you don't have anything, you have this incredible kind of freedom. It does make you fearless. And it puts your *present*, your life, in your hands in a way that you've never felt before.

And when we had these boycott retreats, it wasn't that we were just planning: it was really about having the *power*, or maybe even better, the *freedom* to create, to build the movement. It wasn't that we could have any control over what would happen. It was that just that, at that moment in time, we could come together, and with our collective energy, plan and strategize for a better future. And then, very simply, go do it.

And although we joked and laughed and had so much bravado about this newfound power, there was an ethic to Cesar's thinking. He was nonviolent. Although he was always angry at the tremendous injustices in the world, he didn't believe in the power of hate. He never felt that you needed money to accomplish anything. And he truly, truly believed in both the power of individual human potential and in the power of collective action. He believed in organizing poor people so that they could have power over their lives. And he wanted to be the incarnation of action—the example of what he was asking you to do. Cesar really, really believed that anyone could do anything.

So there we were, people from those forlorn towns with names like Thermal and Mendota and Arvin, with their, small, one-story buildings that lay huddled together, small recompense next to the massive mountains, the long stretches of land, and the enormous sky. Farmworkers, whose injustice over generations of abuse was buried deep in the California soil, rooted in every plant, tree, and vegetable in those precisely drawn rows, with their perfect precision farming, mechanical farming with no thought of the consequence of human toil.

And I was there, too, a 19-year-old who had left my home, my chances at the university, and my mother and father's crumbling marriage. Like so many of the others, I could only

point to a series of circumstances that could explain why this movement had wrapped its way into the center of my being.

But it had.

And as I look back on this moment, I can see how sweet and simple real truths are. There is no replacement for hard, backbreaking work, or wisdom won from constant struggle. No flowery words or great oratory can replace the simple truths that only a lifetime of living can help us to understand.

People. *La gente*.