

Al Lucero (Mascarenas) 1970–1973

By calling for contributions to this union memories project, the people associated with the United Farm Workers have again helped me to heal my soul and focus on what is important, miraculous, and unpredictable in this world. The union nourished my soul and cracked open my heart.

Ten years ago I drove my then-wife and our four children from the bottom of the Rocky Mountains in northern New Mexico to the expansive corporate farm country of California's agricultural heartland. We traveled there to attend to Cesar's funeral in Delano. I believe we were all aware that we were attending *la última despedida* to a real American hero. My children being related to Cesar through my ex-wife's stepfather, a cousin to Cesar's wife, Helen, compounded this sense of loss. It was a special moment in all our lives. I view Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta as my spiritual parents.

Chicano chic was not in vogue in 1970 when I began working for the union. Back then only middle-class Ozzie-and-Harriet types were fashionable. When I came to the union my 18-year-old life was a mess in a lot of different ways. Most of the what I had heard or read about cultural identity, family relationships, responsibility, and having goals and objectives immediately turned to cotton in my head, muffled and indistinguishable. I come from what today would politely be called a dysfunctional childhood, greatly shaped by poverty, violence, and sexual abuse.

Recently I've gained insight about identity issues I've struggled with over the years. In April of this year I discovered that when I was born at the county hospital in Salinas, California, the hospital sent me home with the wrong family. Would I have bonded so strongly with the union if I had been raised by the family I was supposed to be with? That I have weathered as well as I have this potentially devastating bombshell has helped me appreciate even more the strong foundation in life provided me by my union experience. A sense of family, of belonging, of being with people with whom I had things in common, and of fighting the good fight: these were the things, the intangibles, that the union brought into my life for the first time.

I was raised with English as my first language. My experience was common among offspring of parents who experienced powerful and painful discrimination because of their accents. I remember the Spanish-speaking kids in elementary school being stuck in the back of the room. As long as they remained quiet and didn't cause problems, the teacher didn't bother them. It was only the occasional troublemakers who had not learned these unspoken rules, or who perhaps didn't care for the role they had been assigned, who would feel the wrath of the state filtered through the velvet gloves of the state's educational system.

This was something very different from the typical immigrant experience. Spanish in the Southwest had become the language of powerlessness and servitude, a historical reality with roots in the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny, as well as the military conquest of the Southwest in the 19th century, fulfilling the American dream of one country, extending from sea to shining sea.

The path I traveled was largely laid out by my own internal compass, greatly limited by not having a decent topographical map to help anticipate what lay ahead—the valleys, cliffs, abysses, mountain tops, and patches of quicksand that cumulatively became my life. There were few people in my life who served as positive role models. Of the handful of people whom I came to trust and respect, Cesar Chavez towered above the others. He was a man with whom I never had a one-on-one conversation.

During my time with the union I acquired skills and an outlook on life that have been greatly enriching. I became experienced in community organizing and public speaking. At 18 I had a job that would open other doors to me—congressional campaign organizer, English and history teacher, writer, teachers' union activist, domestic violence classes facilitator, Vietnam veterans' counselor, and race relations instructor. The practical knowledge the union provided me has been invaluable. I can think of no other role where an undisciplined, uncommitted 18-year-old with a major identity crisis could have the chance to challenge and stretch himself in such significant and far-reaching ways.

Four events stand out from my union period 30-plus years ago. One was “organizing” free office space at the Jane Addams' Hull House on North Halsted Street in Chicago, then being run by the YMCA. I learned a lot about that pioneering woman who served the needs of new immigrants to America in the 19th century.

A second event was sitting in while Studs Terkel interviewed fellow boycotter Roberto Acuña, a lettuce striker from Salinas transplanted to Chicago. The interview was included in Terkel's bestseller *Working*, an oral history of American workers. Mostly I was there because we could “organize” a bowl of chili from Mr. Terkel. It was a real treat.

A third experience happened in Chicago's Southside, where Jesse Jackson's organization held a rally in a converted theater, with Dolores Huerta as the guest speaker. I had the opportunity to accompany Ms. Huerta, along with two or three other boycotters. She had just slept in my bed the night before; to this day I take pleasure in saying that. I hasten to add that my accompaniment was limited to Jesse Jackson's stage.

Lastly, I remember working on the boycott in Orange County for a while and getting really pissed over some silly thing or other and violating a union policy. I drove out alone to a Safeway in the city of Orange, the most reactionary community I could think of in the most right-wing county on the planet. I conducted a one-man picket line. I asked shoppers to boycott the store and honor the lettuce workers' strike. I had several loyal Safeway customers throwing grapes and lettuce at me.

I was 18 when I started working for the union. Despite the 12- to 14-hour days, and despite the six or six-and-a-half-day workweeks, I was young, high energy, and testosterone-laden. Working on the boycott put me in touch with lots of women. My union experience also evokes memories of pretty faces and occasionally willing bodies of young women willing to give their all *por La Causa*. Or maybe it was just my natural charm, but I think my opportunities were exceptional for a guy my age in the early 1970s.

Four women in particular come to mind. One was a young Jewish Mensan divorcee in Chicago, whom I first met while she was married and got to know better after her divorce. There was a gorgeous coed volunteer from New England, with whom I got busted one night on Mulholland Drive's Lovers' Lane in L.A. in the backseat of a union car nicknamed "La Bomba," a 1940s or 1950s Pontiac with hydro-drive. There was a radical Trotskyite unionist, a feminist on the front lines of women's struggle for equality. And, just to make sure that I don't come across as a pure hedonist without a religious dimension, there was a student at Chicago's McCormick Seminary with whom I shared some spiritual experiences.

As I recall these teen-aged events 30-plus years later in the Naked Lounge (I'm totally serious here) Coffee Bar in Sacramento on a drizzly December Saturday morning, a smile crosses my lips and warms my heart.

Perhaps I had so great an affinity for the union cause and devoted myself so completely to it, because it filled in me a hole that I didn't even know existed. When I heard that LeRoy Chatfield had put out a call for essays from union volunteers reflecting on their experiences, I was knee-deep writing about my discovery that I had been switched at birth, raised by the wrong family, and in a sense, had lived someone else's life. The timing of the call for essays for this collection could not have been more propitious. The invisible hand of the union has a great reach.

The union became my family. It set the pattern for later periods of my life when I felt most engaged with the world. Fighting the good fight; being of service to others; bringing and gaining insights into the complexities, injustices, and contradictions of the world; and struggling to simultaneously find and create my place in the process. These have been constants in my life. The union brought into my life the concepts of committed spirituality, of love, of sharing, and of caring for more than oneself. Perhaps above all else is my acceptance that there is a basic goodness in each of us. All of these have been sources of strength and stability in my life.

I was intermittently a full-time boycott organizer primarily in Chicago, L.A., Orange County, the San Fernando Valley, and San Francisco from 1970 to 1973. ¡*Que Viva La Huelga!* ¡*Hasta La Victoria Siempre!*

