

Marco E. Lopez 1970, 1973–1974, 1977–1981

“Reasons to March”

I first became aware of the United Farm Workers’ organizing efforts in the late 1960s as a student at Garces Memorial High School in Bakersfield, California. The old geometric-shaped school sat atop a beautifully landscaped hill in what was then the most affluent residential area of the city. It was quite a contrast to the barrios of East Bakersfield, “La Loma” and “El Okie,” which, in turn, compared to the poorest black neighborhood surrounding Cottonwood Road.

Aside from the regular tuition paid by parents, I suspect the school was funded in larger part by the local growers—Banducci, Bidart, Giumarra, Kovacevich, Icardo, Perelli-Minetti, etc.—whose kids had attended the school. My estimate is that the makeup of Garces, in the four years I attended, was about 93% percent Anglo, 6% Mexican-American, and 1% black. The students were well taught and disciplined by the school’s dedicated religious and lay instructors, who were mostly Catholic and faithful Ram fans. The Anchordoquy’s ancient ram was our school mascot. Though very old, he looked quite robust when he wore our colors of green and white at the football games.

Among the school’s mandatory classes was religion: Religion I, II, III, and IV, freshman through senior years. While the emphasis of these classes concerned the teaching of church dogma and the study of scripture, the better part of it, for me, was studying the practical applications of these principles. For open-minded, progressive Catholics, these were exciting times, given the changes brought on by Pope John XXIII and Vatican Council II. For those Latin stalwarts who clung to the old ways, it was as if the Antichrist had just arrived and been hidden somewhere in St. Peter’s. Regardless of one’s persuasion, Bob Dylan aptly put it when he sang that the answers were “blowin’ in the wind.”

In our classes, we kept abreast of the civil rights movement, nascent efforts to reunify the fractured Christian community, the struggle for equal rights within the church, world peace, and other such noble causes. All were worthy, I felt, but far removed from the citadel of Garces High, Bakersfield’s bastion of Christian education.

The valuable instruction I received at home and at school had equipped me with a solid intellectual understanding of social consciousness. As virtuous as that foundation may have been, however, it remained dormant and inactive, much like the life-sized statue of the Franciscan missionary, Padre Garces, whose somber expression greeted all who came on our campus. After the hot valley summer of 1966, this dormancy received a rude awakening when, in our first class one Monday morning, we boys were informed by our Christian Brother instructor that during the weekend someone had spray-painted a red swastika on Temple Bethel, the synagogue across the street. There were unconfirmed

rumors that the culprits had been a few Rams who had probably wandered out drunk from the citadel the night before. For most of the class, the news registered a .9 on the social-conscience Richter scale.

The Friday after the swastika appeared, I decided to worship God the Father in the temple across the street, rather than in my parish church. There were a couple of reasons for doing so. First, I had long since stopped believing it was a mortal sin to miss mass on Sunday, and second, I was rather intrigued and disturbed that a swastika would appear anywhere Bob Dylan might have worshipped. Too often, I had been sent to Brother Gilbert's detention classroom for insisting on violating the dress code by wearing, like Bob, wrinkled work shirts and "longish" hair. To be truthful, I felt I owed it to him to attend the temple service.

I don't recall much of it, but what still remains with me is the mournful voice of the congregation singing the Kaddish. Despite my inability to understand Hebrew, I was struck by what I felt to be a plaintive cry to God above, from those below. I was impressed also by the lack of icons like those I had knelt before throughout my entire childhood.

After the service, Rabbi Kolasch greeted me at the door. He kindly asked me who I was. I told him I was a junior at Garces, come to visit. We discussed the swastika incident of the weekend before only briefly. Then he asked if I had heard of Friendship House out on Cottonwood Road. As he explained their tutoring program for young black kids, I thought to myself that it would have been difficult for me to notice the place on those nights when Dave Romero, Tim Conley (our quarterback), and I drove down to the area to get folks to buy us booze. That had been friendship enough for us at the time. After this brief reminiscing, I shook his hand and quite impulsively told him that I would make it a point to get out to the Friendship House. He smiled archaically.

From the time the swastika had reared its ugly head, my world view began to change. I was now aware that life was more complex than I had ever imagined. It was as if reality had been exposed to me. All of a sudden, I began to recall incidents in my life and examined them in a different light. In the second grade in El Paso, Texas, I was forced to stare at the outside wall of my school because I had spoken Spanish. In Bakersfield, John Shipman, a local realtor, had refused to sell my mom a new home. When she asked him point blank if it was because we were Mexican, he had sheepishly said, "Yes." I remembered how she had instigated an investigation of the Kern County Fair for putting on display a young, mentally challenged Mexican man as "the last of the Aztecs!" It turned out the carnies had literally bought him in Mexico to exhibit in county fairs throughout the country. There were other incidents that, although disturbing, had seemed rather commonplace up to then, mere abnormalities of life no different from irregularities in a fruit or unexpected bumps on a road.

Then, the summer between my junior and senior years, I was able to see firsthand the dire conditions of the workers living in the labor camps. My mother owned a Mexican food

business, and I volunteered to help my cousin Edmundo deliver our products to the rural towns of Lamont, Arvin, Mettler, Delano, McFarland, and others. It was hot in the panel truck, but I thought how much hotter it was for those working in the fields with the angry sun beating down relentlessly.

The only day I ever worked in the fields was when I was 14. I had persuaded my mom to allow me to tip grapes. I wanted to earn my own money independently from our family business. The day came, and it did not go well. By midmorning, I had fallen way behind the crew and was quite convinced that I simply did not know how to tip, despite the quick instructions barked out to me by the *contratista*. To this day, I can't explain what I should have been doing, so I won't attempt it here. Back then, though, I thought I'd bluff it until, as if in a very bad dream, I heard someone yell out from somewhere behind me, "Who's working this row?" I looked behind my shoulder, and between the rows I saw a man in khakis walking quickly toward me. Little surprise, it was my row he was shouting about. His obscure image undulated like a mirage due to the fierce, rising heat. As he came nearer, I whispered, "Oh shit!" under my breath and in sustained fashion. I stood up and faced him as he asked me whether I had ever tipped before. I thought the answer was obvious. He asked if I was in school, and I told him I was a classmate of his daughter Dede. At that point, he appeared to soften and, surprisingly, escorted me out of the *surcos* to an easier job. At the end of the long day, I went home dead tired. I never told Dede, and that was the last time I ever worked in the fields.

Now, having reminisced about these past experiences, I decided to go back to Cottonwood Road a few months after attending service at Temple Bethel, only this time I went on a Saturday, during the day and alone. I took my Super-8 movie camera as I wanted to document the condition of Bakersfield's poor minorities. To me, that was sort of a higher notch in the social consciousness hierarchy. I assured myself that it certainly beat just making beer runs. I had decided to seek out those ugly things that before I had accepted as part of a normal nightmare. I had become a stalker, of sorts, much like a young Yaqui warrior fearlessly tracking dangerous game.

That cold winter day, I filmed seven elderly black men sitting on crates and old chairs around a warm bonfire. The damp tule fog enclosed them within the open field in which they held counsel. After exchanging smiles with me, they seemed undisturbed when I penetrated their open lodge and began filming. No questions were posed, and the friendly banter between them continued unabated. Though outside their inner circle, I felt welcomed, as among friends.

The following Monday I shared my experience with my beautiful redheaded friend, Jean Brooks. She was also a senior at Garces, a fantastic artist and poet, and she drove a dark blue Volkswagen bug. Jean and I shared much. We both felt out of place at school, having decided by our junior year that we were merely serving time, imprisoned in the citadel. That same day I revealed to her that for two years I'd had an incredible crush on Dede

Giumarra. She teased me. Understandable I thought, coming from the only person at school brave enough to wear UFWOC buttons.

It was Jean who first told me about the UFW activities going on in Delano. Her older sister Marcia, who was three years older, was a full-time volunteer with the union. She told me about Chris Sanchez, a great photographer she'd met through Marcia, and of other exciting and interesting people, such as LeRoy Chatfield—Brother Gilbert in his former life—who had been our laconic vice principal. Jean went on, “You’ve got to meet Cesar! His hands are so small!” She emphasized with her long delicate thumb and forefinger by holding them up to her bright brown eyes, peering through her red mane. Her excited but hushed tone sounded conspiratorial, uttered as it was in the confines of a school well attended by the growers’ progeny. It was Jean’s melodic words that put flesh and breathed essence into the newspaper and magazine articles I had read about Cesar Chavez and the workers he led. I knew then I had to meet the man.

By my last year at Garces, Dede had become one of “them,” a grower’s kid, and not to be consorted with. The lines had been drawn, the playing field well-defined. I’m sure the same held true for her as well, for I was now a known UFW sympathizer. This was not a mere rift, you see, but rather a wide chasm, across which even the innocent flirtations and fond feelings of old could not reach. One lesson I learned was that blood runs as thick for Italian growers as it does for Mexican laborers and sympathizers—Christians both, perhaps, but worshipping at different altars.

My civics teacher that year was Brother Kenneth. I decided that my last term project for his class would be about Cesar’s fast and the farmworker movement. I heard from Jean that Cesar had gone on the fast as a means of affirming his principles of nonviolence, and that there was a daily mass offered in the co-op building at the union’s Forty Acres near Delano on Garces Highway. By the time I got word, Cesar was about halfway through his 25-day fast. The following Saturday, I drove to Delano to attend mass and witness firsthand the farmworkers’ movement.

When I arrived, the co-op was already jam-packed. The simple altar in the adobe-block, rectangular room was set up near the north wall. The priests were ready and waiting for Cesar, who had not yet entered the large room from the smaller one in the back where he was temporarily living during his fast. Years later, Cesar told me it was into that small room that a Salinas contingency of farmworkers had barged. In good faith, they’d come to force him to break his fast with chorizo burritos! A “burrito posse,” is how he humorously described those devoted followers to me, smiling incredulously.

This first time that I saw Cesar there at the co-op, he looked not at all how I had imagined him to be. It was obvious the fast was taking a toll. This was his 16th day. He walked slowly, and at times had to be assisted as he made his way through his followers to the front of the humble but brightly decorated altar. The scent of humanity and burning candles reminded me of my altar boy days. However, I was keenly aware that here I was

witnessing something very different. This mass was, in a strange, inexplicable way, more powerful a ritual than I had ever experienced before. The power of it, I believe, was due to its dual purpose—spiritual and political. Now that was magic! Cesar stood in the middle of this powerful yet quiet storm. He was the brave warrior fighting the injustices, not only in the fields, but in every state, city, and town where our people were scourged by prejudice and discrimination. He was the leader to follow. On my return trip to Bakersfield, the images of that morning went with me and remain with me to this day.

Before the end of the school year, and about a month after Cesar ended his fast, I decided to return to Forty Acres. This time I wanted to meet Doug Adair and his staff at *El Malcriado*, the union's underground, in-your-face newspaper. I'd picked up a couple of issues, and Jean had told me all about Adair, their artist Andy Zermeno, and the whole crazy staff. I thought, "Man, were these guys cooking!" They were telling the truth about the farmworkers' exploitation, working long hours as volunteers, and having fun doing it. It all seemed like a separate reality from the one I was living in. So I went once again, though this time as a chronicler.

I arrived at Forty Acres somewhere around 6 p.m. I noticed there were hardly any cars anywhere on the property and thought, "A wasted trip!" I parked at the south end of the co-op building where Cesar had stayed during his fast. It was quiet, but I thought I'd give it a try anyway, so I left the car and walked over to the first door and knocked. There was no answer from within, but something caught my attention on my left, and as I turned, I saw Cesar walking towards me. He said hello and softly asked what I needed. I told him I was looking for anyone on the *El Malcriado* staff. "They're all gone now, but if you come back Monday you'll catch them all here." I said OK, thanked him, and returned to my car. Little did I realize that 25 years later, almost to the day, I would be at that very same place waiting for Cesar's funeral procession.

On Friday, April 30, 1993, seven days after Cesar Chavez's death, I found myself standing near that same door of what had once been the co-op building. A terribly swollen knee had kept me from marching this one last time with Cesar. I was now 43 years old. As I stood there alone, waiting for his coffin that hot spring day, many memories fell on me like a light rain. I thought about all he had meant to me and to so many other people, both in and out of the movement.

After the day that I had first spoken with him, I had been a precinct walker for Bobby Kennedy, a grape boycotter in Los Angeles, and had graduated from college and law school. In 1993, it had been 12 years since I had left the union. I recalled how, as general counsel in late 1979, during a one-on-one meeting with Cesar at the union headquarters, I had reluctantly asked for time-off days for my beleaguered staff. It wasn't easy to ask for, as we were in the midst of a department transition and in the middle of a general strike. Cesar looked at me and said, "Marco, someday we'll all rest." Now I knew what he meant. Tears filled my eyes, and time stood still.

