

## John Gardner 1974–1977

### democratic Organizing

When my oldest son David was 11, he wrote a school report about the United Farm Workers. He said that he had heard his mother and me talking about the UFW the way his friends' parents referred to experience from colleges or hometowns. For my wife, Julie Kerksick, and me, and some of our friends, the union carries the autobiographical resonance of college, hometown, and more than a little of family, community, work, and faith.

We rummaged through our box of ancient photographs and came up with images that became part of our lives: Cesar, after a late afternoon shower, triumphantly eating a watermelon; Eliseo Medina in front of an *aguilita* banner at a Fresno convention; a Salinas rally during the 1975 ALRB election campaign. But the one that shocked and overwhelmed him was a Polaroid of Cesar between Maria Sanchez, a ranch committee member at Hiji Brothers Tomatoes in Oxnard, and a tall, skinny young *gevachito*, his father. He showed it off at school like a religious relic and family heirloom. Later I asked him who in, say, my parents' generation would be comparably impressive. He thought it over and said Churchill and Gandhi. If you had to choose, which one? Both, he said.

I worked for the union from 1974 until 1977, three years with more memories than a comparable number of decades. Irish nuns picketing grocery and liquor stores in Sunset Park, Brooklyn; chatting affably with old Jewish CIO organizers about the movie *Salt of the Earth* and the Irish bakers' strike and boycott in the early 1950s; the night we won Donlon Ranches in Oxnard and Maggio-Tostado in Coachella; the lonely lights of packing sheds shining on the anxious, expectant expressions of Mexicans for whom the election results meant the difference between humiliation and dignity; Oscar Mondragon and Eduardo Callacas, seated on the Coachella field office floor, beaming at one another about the news of victory at Bruce Church down in Calexico like new fathers; the phone call to the St. Louis boycott house with the news of the disastrous loss of the California referendum, from which the union never really recovered.

The words live as persistently as the images. *Dichos* from Cesar, Fred, Eliseo and who can even distinguish whom all else? "Win the people." "Recruit one at a time." "Make the growers do your work; don't do theirs for them." "Don't talk: listen." "Poor people have time like rich people have money." "Reminding is the essence of organizing." "There's always more time than money." "Take the blame, but get it right." "Keep it light." And always, always, "*Si se puede.*"

In my own retrospective synthesis, the UFW contributed even more than becoming the world's first successful agricultural union; even more than representing Americans of Mexican descent the way the civil rights movement inspired and energized peoples of African descent throughout the world. We created a new kind of organizing. It took many

names, but my favorite remains democratic organizing, with an insistently lower-case “d.” It is the labor, community, cooperative, service, political, electoral, community development, and public interest organizing everyone the UFW was always doing all the time, no matter what anyone called it or us.

democratic organizing is recruiting, strategizing, managing, and instituting. Its theory is faith, analysis, goals, and methods. Its discipline is finding family, creating community, waging work, and sustaining spirit. We learned it consciously from Fred Ross, Sr. and his acolytes, but learned it most by living through it, absorbing the ethos of ethics, commitments, and examples of the leaders, trainers, and most impressively, we learned it from the diligent, disciplined, endlessly hospitable and hopeful farmworkers.

Where, people ask me, did you learn it?

The UFW.

To this day, even here in Wisconsin, everyone knows who that is and what that means.