

Conversations with Maria

A few years ago, when I registered for a writing workshop, the facilitator asked if I would offer someone named Maria a ride. I agreed. I knocked at the door the day of the workshop and a petite, grey-haired woman with smiling eyes greeted me. She was excited about the writing workshop, as she had a project to finish--an essay about her years volunteering for Cesar Chavez. On the day we met, she was only weeks away from her 96th birthday.

Then without warning, she said to me, "I'm 96. I live alone. I've always been alone. I'm very, very happy. I know that everything I need is in here (pointing to her heart.)" And that was the beginning of my friendship with a remarkable woman, Maria Rifo.

In our writing workshop together, she had decided she wanted to write the essay about Cesar Chavez in English, although this was not her first language. She read a portion out loud during one of the sessions and I was very moved by what she wrote. However, it was slow for her, as she had to handwrite each page. So I offered my help, inviting her to speak her recollections of her work in the Union, while I typed it into my computer. I was mesmerized by what she shared. When we completed the essay that LeRoy Chatfield had requested, I realized there was still so much more to be said, so I asked if I could meet with her again. I felt that what she had to say needed to be captured before it was too late.

At our next meeting, she talked about how much she wanted children to understand their own dignity. This was something she had never received from her parents as a child, and had only learned it from her work in the Union. Thus our first book together was born.

She wanted to convey to children her conviction and experience that they had all the strength they needed. She certainly carried that conviction, leaving her home country of Chile at age 55, knowing no one, coming to the USA and finding herself working first for Vista then for Cesar Chavez.

As she said once while we worked on the book: "No one can see what I am. There's so much inside me and no one can see it all. When I was working for

La Causa (the Cause), it wasn't that I felt "I" was so great. But when I was younger, and parents would say I didn't know anything, inside I would know I was greater than they knew. That was the only time I would think I was great... when someone tried to imply I wasn't." This sense of her own greatness was actually what allowed her to be humble and respect everyone. This sense was what she so sincerely wanted children to have.

You Can Do It

One of Maria's major themes was "you can do it." (Tu tambien puedes.) She said once, "I worked with Cesar (Chavez) for 12 years. I learned everything from him. He changed my life. I never knew I could do so much. I learned that from him. I never think about anything negative. I just remember all the good things. I am grateful for the rest of my life."

Humility

Maria had an immense sense of humility. She would often say, "God provides me with everything I need. Whatever I seem to need just comes to me." When she talked about her time with the Union, she expressed a similar sentiment: "While I worked with Cesar, I never felt like I was doing anything. I felt I was offering so little. I never felt "I" was doing anything for him either. It was just working for the cause. (La Causa). It is like the little ants. They just move on a little bit at a time. At the end, they have made a huge ant pile. I felt like that. I just did my little piece. Later people said how much it was worth to them, but at the time, I never felt I was doing anything."

Just Say Yes

Maria's philosophy in life was one of openness and innocence, like that of a child. She told me once, "I've learned to say 'Yes' to whatever comes. I don't think about it too much. If I think, 'maybe, or this, or that,' then I miss the chance. You never know when you get another chance, so I always say 'yes' to everything. Sometimes things don't turn out the way I expect, but then, they are always better. Something always better comes, so I just say yes and see what happens."

Values to Live By

I often wondered how Maria had been able to lead such a life of service for so long. One day, as I was leaving her apartment, I noticed something pasted to the wall, where she would see it every day. It was the values from Cesar

Chavez's work. I copied them down, as a gift from Cesar through Maria to me, and to the world. These values express it all:

Ten Values of Cesar Chavez and his work

1. Service to others through empowerment not charity
2. Sacrifice through placing others before yourself
3. Preference by helping those with the most need
4. Determination to never give up: "Si Se Puede"
5. Non-violence through promoting a bold pro-active way to change the world
6. Tolerance by showing respect for differing beliefs
7. Respect for life by appreciation of the environment and all living creatures
8. Knowledge and its attainment by way of life-long learning process
9. Innovation through originality, creativity and imagination
10. Celebrating community by working together.

A Graceful Ending

In February, 2006, two weeks before the party she had planned for her 99th birthday, Maria peacefully left this world. Only a week before, I had visited with her, and taught her some meditation techniques I knew. She died very quietly and without pain. Perhaps she was focusing on her own great inner being all the while.

As she said in the conclusion of her essay that is on this Website:

"I can say without any disillusion or remorse, that I received so much from César's teachings and the time he spent telling me his ideals about the movement. I was able to recognize the entire range of what I am capable of doing. Nothing can darken that feeling. To me, it is the treasure of my whole life. Because of that treasure, I am happy, and I enjoy the inner happiness that the time there left me."

A Legacy

One of the many things she left behind is the bi-lingual children's book we wrote together. She always wanted children to know that they could do anything. In her memory, here is a version of that book. Feel free to print it and pass it along to a child you know. In exchange, you might also want to

make a donation in Maria's memory, either to this Farmworker Documentation Project website, or to the scholarship in her name at Santa Rosa Junior college. (Please note that the book is 8mb, and downloading requires a high-speed connection.)

(Link to the PDF version of You Can Do It too.)

About the author:

Laura Duggan lives in Sebastopol California, where she works as a freelance editor, writer, poet and meditation teacher. Formerly director of a non-profit Sanskrit research organization and teaching staff member for an international not-for-profit educational organization, Ms. Duggan's main interest is in applying philosophical and spiritual wisdom to daily life. Ms. Duggan is at home in a variety of cultures, having traveled, lectured and lived on all six continents. Her work can be found at <http://www.inquiringlife.com>