

## Cesar Chavez

Apostle of Non-Violence ...Excerpted from an interview by  
Gerald Barr (Observer, May 1970)

Observer: ...*Why do you insist on non-violent means in this struggle?*

Chavez: Our conviction is that human life and limb are a very special possession given by God to man and that no one has the right to take that away, in any cause, however just.

We also find that violence is contagious; it is uncontrollable. If we use it, then the opposition is going to respond in kind and it is going to be escalated.

Also we are convinced that non-violence is more powerful than violence. We are convinced that non-violence supports you if you have a just and moral cause. Non-violence gives the opportunity to stay on the offensive, which is of vital importance to win any contest. Suppose we are striking and the opponent appears to be getting the best of us and we resort to violence. Then he will bring in other forces and one of two things happens: violence has to be escalated, or there is total demoralization of the workers. Non-violence works in exactly the opposite manner: when for every violent action committed against us, we respond with non-violence, we tend to attract people's support; we have a chance of attracting other people who are not involved because they are workers, but are involved because they have a conscience and because they would rather see a non-violent solution to things.

Obs: *So it is a good strategy.*

Chavez: Yes, but that alone is not reason enough. If you have no basis for non-violence other than a strategy, a tactic, then when it fails your only alternative is completely the reverse and that's violence. So you have to balance the strategy with a clear understanding of what you are doing. However important the struggle is and however much misery and poverty and degradation exist, we know that it cannot be more important than one human life. That's basic. Second, we operate on the theory that men who are involved and truly concerned about people are not by nature violent. If they were violent they couldn't have that love and that concern for people. That sort of man becomes violent when that deep concern he has for people is frustrated, when he's faced with overwhelming odds against what he is trying to do. Then sometimes he feels that violence is really a short-cut or a sort of miracle to end everything and being about a solution. We don't want to get into that trap.

Obs: *What if violence is a short-cut?*

Chavez: It isn't. It has never been proved in the history of mankind that is a short-cut.

Obs: *You're using a very broad perspective.*

Chavez: Well, let me tell you – if I were to tell the workers: “All right, we’re going to be violent, we’re going to burn the sheds and we’re going to dynamite the growers’ homes and we’re going to burn the vineyards,” provided we could get away with it, the growers would sign a contract. But you see that that victory came at the expense of violence; it came at the expense of injuring. I think that once that happens it would have a tremendous impact on us. We would lose our perspective and we would lose the regard we have for human beings – and then the struggle would become a mechanical thing.

Obs: *If you lose a sense of justice in your cause, you lose a lot of strength....*

Chavez: Nothing can replace that strength. And the victory is not total. If you use violence, you have to sell part of yourself for that violence, either because of your own self-guilt or because you have to incorporate people who are extremists and violent or whatever it might be. Then you are no longer the master of your own struggle, and the important thing is that for poor people to be able to get a clean victory is something you don’t often see. If we get it through violence, then the employers will just wait long enough until they can get even with you – and then the workers will respond, and the....

Obs: *So a violent resolution to a problem is never a resolution, just a cessation?*

Chavez: Let me give you an example: the armed revolutions we have. What happens? Once you set up an army or militia to gain independence you have to maintain that army. You know against whom? Against your own people.

Obs: *All violence is necessarily an oppression then?*

Chavez: That’s right. If we were to become violent and we won the strike as an example, then what would prevent us from turning violence against opponents in the movement who wanted to displace us? Say they felt they had more leadership and they wanted to be the leaders. What would prevent us from turning violence against them? Nothing. Because we had already experienced that violence awarded us victory. If we are concerned about human beings and if we are concerned about respecting man, then we have to be concerned about the consequences.

Another thing is that people think non-violence is really weak and non-militant. These are misconceptions that people have because they don’t understand what non-violence means. Non-violence takes more guts, if I can put it bluntly, than violence. Most violent acts are accomplished by getting the opponent off guard, and it doesn’t take that much character, I think, if one wants to do it. I am confronted frequently by people who say, “So-and-so tried non-violence and it didn’t work”. That’s not really so. Non-violence is very weak in the theoretical sense; it cannot defend itself. But it is most powerful in the action situation where people are using non-violence because they want desperately to bring about some change. Non-violence in action is a very potent force and it can’t be stopped. The people who are struggling have the complete say-so. No man-made law, no human ruler, no army can destroy this. There is no way it can be destroyed, except by

those within the non-violent struggle. And so, if we have the capacity to endure, if we have the patience, things will change.

Obs: *What do you say to the honest activist who feels that so many of the channels to change in his society are closed that he has no choice but to take up arms? I'm thinking of people like Camillo Torres in Columbia.*

Chavez: There is no question that they have tremendous love for people and they want to bring about change. In the case of Torres, we see very clearly how he went from a life of priesthood to the extreme of using violence. And I'm sure he felt he had no other way of doing it. But I'm sure that if we examine the development of this man, and if we examine the reasons for which he worked, we would find that he probably was a failure as an organizer, as an organizer of masses of people.....

Obs: *Then for you non-violence is a universal approach regardless of the degree of oppression?*

Chavez: The greater the oppression, the more leverage you have. What I'm trying to say is – violence didn't work and its not going to work, and if it works it replaces, as in Latin America, one violent government with another that is more violent. People are abused with violence. In Latin America, who gets killed in case of a revolution? the poor people, the workers. Who gets nothing but crumbs when another force comes into power? Take the Mexican revolution, take any revolution – the people of the land are the ones who give their bodies, who get killed and they really don't gain that much from it. I think it's too big a price to pay for not getting anything. They are being exploited as much by the ones who "help" them as by the others. To call men to arms with a lot of promises and to ask them to give their lives for a cause, and then not produce for them afterward is the most vicious sort of oppression. And we've seen it happen.

Obs: *Has Christianity affected your philosophy of non-violence?*

Chavez: Very definitely. Christianity is not the only religion, but it is the one that I am a believer in. It has taught us the message of Christ with regard to loving our neighbor and with regard to respecting one another and exhorting us to be able to forgive. Now these are very difficult things and, of course, we are not even approaching that. But we have seen very little action in a dramatic form by Christians in our world. There is a lot of good will, and they talk a lot about that – but people sacrificing themselves — very little.

Gandhi is an example. He was not a Christian but in my estimation he probably personifies a Christian more than most men. He showed us not by talking, not by what he wrote as much as by his actions, his own willingness to live by truth and by respect for mankind and accepting the sacrifices. You see non-violence exacts a very high price from one who practices it. But once you are able to meet that demand then you can do most things, provided you have the time. Gandhi showed how a whole nation could be liberated without an army. This is the first time in the history of the world when a huge nation,

occupied for over a century, achieved independence by non-violence. It was a long struggle and it takes time.

Obs: *You speak of patience and determination as a necessary part of non-violent politics. The grape workers' strike is one of the longest in American history. What keeps you going?*

Chavez: I think that it is a conviction in what we are doing – that we are involved in a just cause. We know that most likely we are not going to do anything else in the rest of our life except this. We know that if we weren't doing this we wouldn't be doing anything we would like to do more than this. We know really there is nowhere else to go and although we would like to see victory come soon we are willing to wait. Non-violence calls for hardnosed organizing, for a minimum of dramatics and a great deal of understanding of what the situation is—being able to assess the opposition, being able to win by winning small victories constantly, and by not letting yourself be locked into a position where you can't move because you're cornered.

Obs: *Do you see your struggle as having historical significance?*

Chavez: All successful struggles tend to set precedents, but I think more important than that, perhaps for the first time in the history of the richest nation in the world, it would give those people who work at producing food some food for themselves..... And also it would point out very concretely that this came about because of the determination of the people in the struggle, and more important because of the way the people conducted themselves through the struggle.