

Social Movements and Most People

At the close of 2004, Marshall Ganz, a colleague and friend from the farmworker movement years in the 1960's and 1970's, and now an academic at Harvard, wrote to me:

“For most people, social movements are just that – movements – movements from one situation to another, from a segregated America to a desegregated America, from life without a union to life with a union – they are transitions, transformations, and they don't last forever, nor should they. The mistake may have been in trying to make it last forever, an abnormality when it comes to social movements.”

I agree.

Most people cannot live in a movement for an indefinite period of time, let alone for a lifetime. At some point, “most people” must return to a more normal way of life, or in the alternative, the movement must make adjustments to permit them to live a more normal way of life.

For my part, I would have preferred that some of the requirements of the farmworker movement – for example, living and working in voluntary poverty, sublimation of all personal/family needs to the immediate demands of the cause, the concept of servanthood to farmworkers, the emphasis on community living, etc. – could have been relaxed for the sake of meeting the needs of “most people,” many of whom sought to make the social justice struggle of farmworkers their life's work and career. Presumably, the first step to modify some of these movement ideals of Cesar Chavez could have taken place in 1977, when some of the executive board members of the United Farm Workers proposed that the union pay its volunteers a modest salary instead of survival stipends, which generally covered room and board and the weekly \$10 spending money.

Such a proposal could not stand. Chavez was adamant; he felt it would undercut the necessary personal sacrifice he believed was required to further the movement, and while he permitted a vote to be taken, he made it clear that he would resign if the proposal passed. Bluff or no bluff, the motion was defeated, but not by much.

The issue, I believe, is that the norms that apply to “most people” by definition do not apply to a Cesar Chavez, the founder of a movement, and his original, close-knit band of true believers. A founder must see it differently: the ideals on which the movement was founded are sacrosanct, and any proposal that waters them down for the sake of accommodating “most people” is untenable. Such backsliding cannot be tolerated because the movement itself, the founder believes, will begin to unravel, not all at once, but little by little. There is no room to compromise; you are with me or against me, take your pick. Because the vast majority of farmworker volunteers – all dedicated, hardworking, and seasoned – of necessity fell into the category of “most people,” their only personal option was to withdraw. They felt compelled to return to a more normal way of life, and they began to do so. Those volunteers who remained and those newly arrived were formed into an increasingly close-knit and insular community.

This desire of a founder to preserve his/her movement is not a question of the correct way versus the wrong way; I daresay it is the only way. It is not a difference between right or wrong; rather, it seems the most sensible decision to make. After all, it was the vision, the commitment, and the personal sacrifice of the founder (and the original disciples) that brought the cause to the current point of successful development. Why run the risk of losing what has been accomplished or, worse yet, what could be accomplished in the future if we press on? If any one of “most of us” were in the founder’s role, I doubt we could make a different decision.

That is the final and unexplainable paradox: carrying the movement to the human breaking point for “most of us” dramatically diminishes the capacity of the movement to live beyond the death or deposition of the founder; but compromising the idealistic principles on which the movement was built to accommodate “most of us” defeats the goals, the aspirations, and yes, even the vision, of the founder.

