

Cesar Chavez's wisdom: Remembering how to be human

John Dear | Oct. 12, 2010 On the Road to Peace

I remember the moment in 1982. I was standing in front of the bulletin board at the Jesuit novitiate, reading a quote which someone had posted. The quote was from Cesar Chavez, the founder of the United Farm Workers.

At the end of his fast in 1968 he said these words: "I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be human is to suffer for others. God help us to be human."

I thought it was one of the most remarkable statements I ever heard. I still do.

Are we meant to give our lives for others in a nonviolent struggle for justice, even to the point of suffering and death? Is this what it means to be human?

Certainly it seems to be the lesson of Jesus and the way of the cross. Yes, we are all summoned to join the nonviolent struggle for justice and disarmament and along the way we discover and reclaim our humanity.

Ten years after first reading his quote, I spent an evening interviewing Cesar Chavez for Pax Christi USA. And I took the opportunity to press him: Do you really believe that? Do you still believe it?

"I still think the same," Cesar returned with a smile. He continued:

We work so hard at not being human, so hard at being something other than ourselves. The whole idea is that you have to be what you are and let other people be who they are. We don't have to change people to change the world. Because there are enough of us; we don't need a whole majority to do it. We have to find people and help them to act. Without action, you're kidding yourself.

It all came flooding back to me several weeks ago while driving across the southwest on my way to a retreat in northern California. For the first time, I stopped by the central mountainside village of Keene to pray at Chavez's grave. Keene is where Chavez worked and lived. His office is now a museum.

The beauty of the garden where Chavez is buried overwhelmed me and I knelt before his cross in prayers of thanksgiving. And there was his quote, engraved on a stone wall. Cesar's courage to struggle in steadfast nonviolence filled me with gratitude and inspiration.

Three brown hills stood in the background. There, he once told me, he went to mediate at sunrise every day he was home. It occurred to me as I sat by his grave that his was a fully human life. He fulfilled the human vocation and powerfully showed the rest of us the way. His words at the end of the 1968 fast came true for him.

I toured the little museum and found the exhibits informative and moving. Curators had filled the place with photos of his fasts, marches and rallies. One of the most moving was of Chavez during a march. In the photo a doctor examined the massive blisters on his feet.

Moving from the hall of photos, one can look through a large glass window into Chavez's office, filled with awards and countless books on nonviolence and community organizing.

People think of Chavez chiefly as a labor organizer. On behalf of day laborers, he prayed, fasted, marched, picketed and boycotted. But he did more than that -- he espoused a strict nonviolence in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. King. His was "a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."

Born into a family of farm workers on March 31, 1927, Chavez grew up in the Southwest, moving from Arizona to California as an itinerant farmer. In the 1950s, he studied the Catholic church's social teachings on the rights of workers, and became a community organizer. In 1962, he founded the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta. And in 1965, they began a five-year boycott against grape growers that rallied millions of supporters to the UFW.

Chavez undertook a 25-day fast in 1968 to reaffirm the UFW's commitment to nonviolence, drawing the support of Robert F. Kennedy.

"For us," Cesar said, "nonviolence is more than academic theory; it is the very lifeblood of our movement."

In the 1970s Cesar led the largest, most successful farm strike in U.S. history, calling for a grape, lettuce and Gallo wine boycott that drew the support of over 17 million Americans. Eventually, the UFW moved their headquarters to Keene. He renamed their compound *La Paz*, Spanish for "peace."

Pledged to voluntary poverty, Cesar never earned more than \$5,000 a year.

In 1984 Cesar called for another grape boycott to protest the use of cancer-causing pesticides which put farm workers and their children at risk. The boycott gained new national recognition in July, 1988 when Cesar fasted for 36 days "as an act of penance for those who know they could or should do more."

It was right after that, at a rally at Safeway's national headquarters in Oakland, when I got to meet Cesar. He delivered a stirring speech urging the large gathering to boycott Safeway. Then he sent us forth help organize. A Jesuit friend and I knocked on doors in a hilly San Francisco neighborhood telling folks about the risk of the pesticides for farm workers' families. Later at an evening social we visited with Cesar. His optimism and passion were contagious.

I saw him a few more times before his unexpected death in Arizona on April 22, 1993. He always spoke optimistically about the boycott and he was convinced it would succeed -- and that carcinogens would be banned.

"I'm always hopeful," he told me during my interview. He continued:

I know it doesn't take everybody in the world to get things done. It takes a few and those few are there. So it's not a question of converting anyone or getting people to make a new commitment. The commitments are there. We just have to find them. That's a hard thing. Getting the word out, communicating, giving people some action they can take. Together, there will be a great impact.

We have a rule not to write or to preach about nonviolence. I've never written a word about nonviolence. There are people like you who have written all about nonviolence. We don't have to write about it, interpret it, or dissect it. It's very simple for us. We just do it. Nonviolence has to go beyond the rhetoric. There's no real trick to being nonviolent if you're in your room praying the rosary. Anybody can do that. But how about being nonviolent in the face of violence? That's where it really happens.

In the early days of the struggle, I talked a lot about nonviolence, more than I should have. And so, we had many people running around like saints with their hands folded together, looking like angels. So I said, "No, you don't have to go around like you're in another world to be nonviolent. That's not the idea. Be yourselves and do things, but just don't use violence."

Nonviolence is not passivity. It requires real action. You have to get beyond the talking, writing and planning stage and get into real action if you want to change anything. Things change when you actually confront people, as in our case, the grape industry. So it is very important to concentrate on public action for justice and peace. Without action, things are not going to change. But with action, things happen. That's my recommendation: Get involved with public action for justice and peace.

As we concluded the interview, I asked Cesar about his accomplishments, and his response, I think, sums up his life: "There's a difference between being of service and being a servant," he observed.

If you are of service, you serve at your convenience. You will say, "Oh, I can't do this today at 5:00 or on Sunday, but perhaps I can next week." If you are a servant, you are at their convenience. You are at their service all the time. You are there to serve people. That's faith and commitment.

"I don't know how much I've accomplished," he told me at the end of our conversation, "but I know I've been there for people. That's what counts."

Cesar Chavez models true selfless service, active nonviolence, advocacy for the poor, and a living commitment to social and economic justice. But more than that, he shows us how to be human.

It was a blessing for me to make a pilgrimage to his grave, to recall his wisdom and there renew my commitment to the nonviolent struggle for justice. As we hear the cry of the poor and do what we can for justice and peace, we pray with Cesar, "God help us to be human."

Next week, John will speak in Portland and Sacramento. John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John's recent book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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