

## “INTERVIEW WITH CESAR CHAVEZ”

*Catherine Ingram*

*When Cesar Chavez was thirteen years old, he participated in his first field strike near El Centro, California. His father, Librado, had organized the hundred men who would also participate. They had made their demands to the farm manager clear: they wanted a minimum wage of fifty cents per hour, overtime pay after eight hours of work, no child labor, and separate toilets for men and women. They also wanted free drinking water while picking in the fields, instead of being charged a nickel per ladle. It was dangerous to even approach the farm manager with such demands, and when they did, the manager accused Librado Chavez of being a communist. He also warned the men that the company had ways of dealing with troublemakers.*

*The grapes hung full on the vines, beckoning to be picked immediately or they would rot. The strikers formed a picket line in front of the vineyard's main gate. On the other side of the entry way, state troopers, labor contractors, and farm supervisors waited forebodingly, periodically glancing down the road.*

*Suddenly roaring trucks descended on the vineyard amidst clouds of dust. More than a hundred braceros, Mexican peasants, arrived to work the fields. They and the families they had left behind in Mexico were desperately poor and hungry. The braceros were willing to do the lowliest jobs for long hours with little pay. Librado Chavez pleaded with them in Spanish not to cross the picket lines, but although the braceros understood the plight of the grape-pickers, their own needs came first and they sadly crossed the lines.*

*The following day, it was the striker families' turn to face hunger. Labor contractors refused to hire anyone who had participated in the strike, and the Chavez family was forced to move on—to another field in another town, to another shack that would become home for a picking season.*

*In that time, there were few precedents for a successful strike by farmworkers. The National Labor Relations Act which Congress had passed in 1935 insured the right to organize of almost every labor group in the country, and it required that industry bargain with organized labor “in good faith.” Agriculture was an exception. No protection under the law existed at that time for farm workers; a union was unthinkable. Many years and a “mighty hard road”*

---

Reprinted from *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists*, by Catherine Ingram (1990), Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA.

later, Cesar Chavez would become the first man in the history of the United States to organize a successful union for farmworkers.

## INTERVIEW WITH CESAR CHAVEZ APRIL 22, 1989 KEENE, CALIFORNIA

**Catherine Ingram:** Do you see any similarities between the civil rights struggle in India and the struggle of the farmworkers? For instance, Gandhi struggled to eliminate the caste system, and, in a way, we experience a modern caste system here with the poor minorities of color.

**Cesar Chavez:** Oh, there are a lot of similarities. Gandhi was dealing with the powerless and the poor and the ones who were discriminated against, and we have that now—the poor, and the people who are discriminated against. We have classism, racism. Gandhi was also working against a foreign domination, and this is similar to our situation in that agribusiness is really like a foreign domination. They don't live here.

**CI:** They don't?

**CC:** The multi-nationals, more and more, are being controlled by foreigners—Japanese, Germans. People don't realize what Japan owns here—they own subsidiaries of subsidiaries, a lot of California. They own a great deal of the wine country.

The other similarity is that people Gandhi dealt with tended to be religious, and the people we deal with tend to be religious as well.

**CI:** What aspects of Catholicism inspire you in your work, and what aspects have inspired the people you work with? Are there particular teachings that you focus on?

**CC:** Well, Christ's teachings. The Sermon on the Mount is the most inspiring, and that was one of Gandhi's inspirations also. The message of Christ is all about love, all about loving—not only God, but also one another. I think that's the point.

**CI:** The teachings of love.

**CC:** Yes, but what love is, that is to be interpreted. In our work, you know, love is really sacrifice. It's actually not vocal. Although it can be enunciated, it has to be practiced. You need both.

I think part of Gandhi's greatness was that he didn't want to be a servant, he wanted to be of service. It's very easy to be a servant, but very difficult to be of service. When you are of service, you're there whether you like it or not, whether it's Sunday, Monday, or a holiday. You're there whenever you are needed.

**CI:** I know that a lot of your current work has to do with raising people's awareness about the use of chemicals and pesticides on our food. What is happening to the farm workers who are exposed to these chemicals, and what is happening to the people who are eating the food on which they are sprayed?

CC: Our struggle with pesticides goes back more than thirty years. We raised this issue a long time ago, because we were the victims. In fact, right after the Second World War, I was a victim of pesticide poisoning. I knew very little about it at the time and it took me a few years to learn more. But when most of the people were worried about how thick the eggshells were on the birds, we were talking about human beings—about workers and then about consumers. For many years people would laugh at us, or they would ignore us, or they would just stare at us as if we were crazy. But today, everybody knows about pesticides.

We've been raising this issue a long time. In fact, we were successful in banning the use of DDT about nineteen years ago. We got it banned on grapes, but they came back with other poisons. Those were the ones that Rachel Carson wrote about in *Silent Spring*.

You know, either we ban these poisons and get rid of them, or they will get rid of us. These are deadly, deadly agents. They are organophosphates, nerve gas poisons. That's how they kill the insects; they affect their nervous systems. And so, too, they affect our nervous systems. Pesticides have killed a great number of workers and incapacitated many others; they have wrecked the health of the workers, their families, their children. See, now these pesticides are everywhere—in the water, in the soil, in the atmosphere, every place. And what we've learned is that body weight is a kind of buffer, and the more weight you have the more you can buffer; the less you weigh, the more you are at risk. So it is children who are suffering the cancers and the birth defects. The number of miscarriages of women working with grapes is very high. We now see lots of cancer and lots of birth defects—terrible, terrible examples of birth defects—children born without arms or legs.<sup>1</sup> Oh, it's just horrible. We did a video about this, "The Wrath of Grapes."<sup>2</sup> It is just incredible what is happening. We've been campaigning to the point where we now have our workers pretty aware of it, and I think we've played a major role in the awareness of the issue all over the country, all over the world.

CI: I think your fast of last year raised awareness on this issue.<sup>3</sup>

CC: It did a lot. The fast is a great communicator. Like Gandhi, because we don't have the economic or political force, we have to appeal to the moral force, and the boycott is the best instrument. Gandhi said that boycotts were the most near-perfect instrument for social change.

CI: People's pocketbooks often awaken their conscience.

CC: And beyond that, it really is a moral force. Gandhi worked this out for all of us, because it's the moral force that compels, and then it translates into economic pressure. It starts from a moral stance, but it takes time.

CI: When you do these fasts, what gives you inner strength?

CC: That's a good question. I really don't know. Sometimes I fast for only one or two or three days and have a difficult time. In fact, I tried to fast two days ago and I couldn't do it. I'm trying again today, and it's very difficult. Then at other times, it just happens.

CI: Do you think it has to do with the issue you're fasting for or the amount of support you have around you?

CC: I don't know. I've never been able to tell except that, well, Gandhi spoke about the door, or the window, the light. I can't really talk about those things, but sometimes it is *comparatively* easier than at other times. There is . . . there is a force there. I don't quite know what it is.

CI: For a long time your family has had to sacrifice with you for the cause. They've had to watch you go without food, they've seen you be put in prison. There were times when you were so poor you couldn't buy food for them. And when your children were growing up there were many times when you had to leave at crucial moments. I read in your book *La Causa* that even on the day of your daughter's wedding, you had to leave after just one dance with the bride in order to negotiate a contract. This is similar to Gandhi's situation as well. A lot of times his own family had to be relegated to a lesser priority.

CC: Oh, with him it was pretty bad. But I've been very lucky in that I've been able to keep the support of my family. You don't have to be present to spend time with them when you engage in the same struggle, because you are together when you engage in the same project. I think the strength in our family comes because it's always been directed away from ourselves.

When I was growing up, my dad and my mother instilled in us a really strong awareness of doing something for other people. It was preached, and it was practiced by them. We grew up in that way. We thought nothing of doing for other people, and we also saw the great advantages of doing things for others. The great payback comes in feeling good about helping people, and we understood that from the time we were very small. I don't think I have done this as much as my mother did, and I don't think I preached it as much. I think I acted on it quite a bit though, and so my kids—most of them—picked it up, the idea of helping, putting others first. If you do for somebody else, it's really doing for yourself. You can't explain it, but you understand it through doing it and once we experience it, it becomes a lot easier. I think this is what has happened in my home.

Now, with my mother it was planned. For instance, when we were growing up we were very poor, and yet my mother would send my brother and me—we were just small boys—to look for hobos or for people who were hungry and bring them home to eat with us, even though we had barely enough food for our own family. Those are very strong impressions, lasting impressions, to see people willing to do that. I often think that the reason that I discovered and became interested in Gandhi was because of my mother. I was predisposed because of the training at home. Anyway, my kids, most of them, have picked up some of this. Some of them are working with us here, but even those who are not working with us are committed to the ideals of being of service and helping people.

CI: It's been passed down in your family.

CC: Yes, even to the grandchildren. What happens is that they see it in the home. It's like anything else; if they see dope or drink at home, they do that. If they see making money, they do that.

CI: What changes have you seen for the farm workers in all these years?

CC: [Laughing] Our work is like two steps forward, and one and nine-tenths back. We've been able to accomplish quite a bit in terms of increasing society's awareness. We made the plight of the farmworkers a household word throughout North America. We have developed a broad understanding of the problem and a network of support. Some polls show that as much as eighty percent of the public know about the work we do. That's the biggest thing we have accomplished. And as a result of that, a limited number of workers now have traditional union benefits—better wages and so forth—but not a lot of the workers. We still face a day to day battle.

It has taken most unions between thirty and fifty years to get established. We're pioneers in this field, so it's going to be awhile before we really get established. Once we break that barrier, I think it will go very fast. But it's been back and forth and up and down—a long, long struggle.

We've been subjected to so much hardship, legal maneuvering, you name it.

CI: Yes, there's that 1987 lawsuit of \$1.7 million, in which a vegetable grower claims that a farmworker strike cost him the loss of a harvest. I don't understand how you can be sued for that. Isn't potential loss the leverage for any strike?

CC: Yes. The claim against us is illegal. That law is unconstitutional. We continually have to challenge the unconstitutionality of such claims. That was the reason for my second major fast back in 1972, a twenty-five day fast, and that was a hard one. I ended it and they took me to the hospital; my vital signs were down. I was in bad shape. Only twenty-five days, but it was hard. We saw even back then that we couldn't get the legislation we needed on this.

Now with the most recent case, it has gone back to the state courts from the Supreme Court to see how they would interpret it. Unlucky for us, it was interpreted with a \$5.6 million judgment against us.

Well, the bond itself is \$5.6 million to appeal. We don't have \$5.6 million. You've got to put up at least the exact amount of money that the judgment is for. So we recently went to court and got a judge in Yuma, Arizona, to set the bond at \$250,000, and then the growers appealed too. Oh they drain you. They use the courts.

CI: In other words, even though the growers know that eventually they may lose the case, they can just wipe you out in the meantime with expensive legal tactics.

CC: Yes. Our system is not as democratic as people think. It's not as free as people think. We're quick to make judgments about other countries, but we're pretty bad ourselves. For

eight years under Reagan, we were harassed with federal investigations here. It was so bad that we even assigned a room for the investigators. In fact, the last group that was here said, "We've looked at these books three times!" And they left.

See, if they find that I've taken one penny, I can be thrown out of the union. And they've done that to a lot of union leaders. They can't believe that I don't take pay, or that I don't have an expense account. I have to sit here and tell them how I live. If I go somewhere, I don't stay in hotels, I don't buy my food. People give it to me. That's how I do it, so what do I need money for? The investigators at first didn't want to believe that, but finally we convinced them. Well, they laid off of that, but it's always something else. We've been harassed up and down by the authorities.

Our power is with the people. That's where our power is. People—all shapes, all colors, all sizes, all religions. We have people who are very conservative who support what we do, people who are even anti-union. See, everybody interprets our work in a different way. Some people interpret us as a union, some people interpret our work as an ethnic issue, some people interpret our work as peace, some people see it as a religious movement. So we can appeal to broad sectors because of these different interpretations.

CI: How do you organize nonviolently around the issue of pesticides? It's an unseen enemy. I suppose you can say that the effects are seen, but the actual substance is unseen.

CC: It is immediately unseen, though in the long term, it is seen. But it's a lot harder to make people aware, because for the consumer, if you eat this grape, it won't harm you now, but it may harm you ten, fifteen years down the line. But you take the same grapes that may harm you in five, ten, or fifteen years, and you see that they are harming people instantly—you see what the pesticides are doing to the workforce and their children. You carry the message by showing the impact on the people in the front lines.

CI: So the workers are the front lines, and in their exposure and subsequent harm from the pesticides, they represent what is to come for the consumers down the line.

CC: Right, the workers get it instantly, but the consumer is going to be affected later on, because it's cumulative. Now people know this, but for years and years we were just the laughingstock when we spoke of this. Or we would hear things like, "Without pesticides, we'd starve." Well, they didn't have pesticides many years ago, and if people starved, they starved for other reasons. The thing is that about twenty years ago, about twenty percent of the crops of the world were lost to pests and today it's twenty-seven percent with jillions of more pesticides.

CI: The pests get more immune.<sup>4</sup>

CC: Yes. And then they need to use much more poison to kill them. Take, for example, the deadly nerve gas, parathion. Twenty years ago they were using about two pounds per acre. Today they are using up to six pounds per acre.

CI: I have a feeling that we are going to see a lot more immune-deficiency problems in our lives because we're being saturated with these poisons. What must the soil be like after all this spraying?

CC: The soil is becoming like a piece of plastic; you just stick plants there and you grow them artificially.

CI: Who or what would you say is the biggest enemy of the farmworkers?

CC: The biggest enemy is the system. Agriculture has changed from the time that our founding fathers laid out the foundation for our country. But the perception about ownership of land hasn't changed. There is something peculiar the world over about owning land. Land gives you power beyond its wealth, beyond liquid cash. Land has a powerful, powerful influence on people. You're dealing with landowners who literally own where you live, where you walk, and where you breathe. That power is awesome. And power tends to corrupt, and the system gets corrupted.

Agribusiness in California has developed on cheap labor—and not by accident; it's been planned. To maintain cheap labor the growers have worked out a horrible system of surplus labor—a surplus labor pool that they are experts at maintaining. Experts! See, agribusiness controls immigration policy, and it has for years. So much so that not long ago the Immigration and Naturalization Service was part of the Department of Agriculture. They control it.

CI: Do they turn a blind eye and let people get in illegally?

CC: That too. But they also set the immigration policy and control how it will be carried out and how it will be interpreted. They have tremendous influence.

CI: How does that work to benefit the growers?

CC: Let me give you an example. The beginning of agribusiness, the way we know it now, started back in the late 1800s. Curiously enough, unlike most systems, the workers were here before the jobs were. See, all the railroads, like the one running right by here, were built by the Chinese. And after the railroads were built, there were thousands of Chinese without work. So the early entrepreneurs, that's what they were in agriculture, came and saw this tremendous amount of labor, and that's why they developed labor-intensive crops in California, unlike in the Midwest and other places. It was because the labor was here. Other places had the climate and the water, but here they had a tremendous surplus of labor. So that was the beginning. It was in that system the labor contractor system started. And as in all systems, they polished it, they honed it, and now it's . . .

CI: . . . big business. I never realized that California produced so much of our food because of the surplus labor rather than the actual soil, climate, and water.

CC: Oh yes. There are other parts of the world that have the same or an even better climate than we have, although California has about fourteen climatic regions.

Then, too, everything is interwoven with agribusiness, so when you take on the growers you're also taking on the large insurance companies who also happen to be owners of land, and you're taking on the large banks, and the railroads, and the pesticide and fertilizer companies. Talk about a power base against you. That's why legislatively and politically there's no way we can do anything. They've got it clamped.

That's what Gandhi realized and why he went over to the boycott.

CI: I still don't understand exactly what agribusiness does in manipulating immigration policy to create a surplus labor pool.

CC: Well, what agribusiness does is often outside the law. They would recruit in, say China, and then they'd send recruitment teams into Japan (the Japanese didn't last too long, they had different ideas and they came with their families—the only other immigrants who came with families were the Mexicans). Then after that they sent recruits to India, and then they tried the Philippines. After the revolution in Mexico, people came. And then during the Dust Bowl, they went to Mexico and recruited for the Dust Bowl and then there was the Brassario program during World War II.<sup>5</sup> Now they're recruiting in Mexico, Asia, Africa, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala. This is all recruitment for agribusiness, and that's how they do it.

CI: So they bring in all of these foreigners and it's to their advantage that the people remain illegal.

CC: Oh yes, because they exploit them and the illegals can do nothing about it. They cannot make a move. They have to accept whatever they are given. It's terrible.

CI: In your life, in your work, and in all that you have struggled for, is there something you could say about how life is?

CC: Well, not really. Life is so many things. But we're here playing the record every night and finding out every day whether we did what we're supposed to do. The message was clear from Christ, Gandhi, all the good people who said exactly what has to be done. So every night you've got to think, "What did I do today?"

Life is very complicated. But we try to keep it simple. Get the work done. We're essentially activists. We have our precepts and our principles, and then we act.

I was never for writing on nonviolence. What can you add? It's all been written. In the very early days, we gave the impression that nonviolence was sort of saintly, like saints who go around lightly stepping on eggshells. But now over the years we see nonviolence is not that. It is not that.

So we don't write about nonviolence, we don't preach it. We never talk about nonviolence to the workers unless there's a need to talk about nonviolence. In other words, if we're negotiating a contract, I'm not going to talk about nonviolence, but if we're in a picket line I'm going to talk about nonviolence. Because if you talk too much about it, it becomes . . .



CI: . . . less authentic.

CC: Yes, exactly. And we were very worried about that. Now we have legions of people who are nonviolent out there, the workers. But in the early days it was very hard. Now people know how to act, what to do. And not because we have said to do this. We haven't had one hour of teaching; it's all been by example.

We want to be men and women of the world. We want to work. We just want to do things nonviolently.

CI: How did you first come into contact with Gandhi's ideas?

CC: Oh, it was very interesting. As I recall, I was eleven or twelve years old, and I went to a movie. In those days, in between movies they had newsreels, and in one of the newsreels there was a report on Gandhi. It said that this half-naked man without a gun had conquered the might of the British empire, or something to that effect. It really impressed me because I couldn't conceive of how that had happened without guns. Even though I had never heard the name of Gandhi before, the next day I went to my teacher and asked her if she knew anything about him. She said, "No, but I have a friend who knows quite a bit about him." Then she gave me the name of her friend, a construction worker who was studying Gandhi. He gave me a little book on Gandhi. As I grew up, I started learning more, and ever since then, I have made a life project of reading about Gandhi and his message.

CI: What about Gandhi's life and message has most influenced you?

CC: His activism. He was a saint *of the world*. He did things, he accomplished things. Many of us can be so holy, you know, but we don't get very much done except satisfying our own personal needs. But Gandhi did what he did for the whole world. Not only did he talk about nonviolence, he showed how nonviolence works for justice and liberation.

CI: In your own life and work, have you experienced any new thoughts or new ways of seeing how nonviolent strategy works?

CC: No. It was all done by Christ and Gandhi and St. Francis of Assisi and Dr. King. They did it all. We don't have to think about new ideas; we just have to implement what they said, just get the work done. Gandhi offered everything there is in his message.

As I said, what I like about Gandhi is that he was a doer. He did things. He had thoughts *and* actions. Also he did a lot that he is not recognized for but which also has a lot of meaning. You know, he organized quite a few unions—there's nothing much written about this—but even today those unions are active. My biggest disappointment with the movie *Gandhi* was that it mentioned nothing whatsoever about the unions that he built. He organized the clothing workers, as you know, in Ahmedabad. In fact, I had a chance to meet one of the people from that union.

Gandhi was also a fantastic fundraiser. He raised millions of rupees, and he had a huge network of social services. He had probably the largest circulation of any newspaper in the history of the world. Even though there were only one or two thousand copies printed in

the original, everybody reprinted it. So the message for me is that of his nonviolence and the fact that he was a doer. He made things happen.

CI: Does the fact that he was successful influence you in your appreciation of him? A lot of people attempt to do similar things, but for whatever reasons—their time in history, or circumstances beyond their control—they're not successful.

CC: No, what influences me is not whether or not they're successful, it's that they don't give up. I lose faith in someone who doesn't continue a project, who starts something and then leaves it. The world is full of us quitters. Even if Gandhi had not liberated India, he stayed with the project all his life. And that is my great attraction. He just didn't give up.

## NOTES

1. For example, in the town of McFarland in the California Central Valley which is a crop-growing area regularly sprayed with pesticides, childhood cancers are eight times the normal level. Dr. Marion Moses, a leading medical researcher among farmworkers, cites cancer cases as the "hardest data," and she says that she has "soft data" on stillbirths and miscarriages. However, Dr. Moses suggests caution in concluding culpability and feels that lengthier studies are needed. She also adds that while body fat can more safely harbor chemicals than lean tissue, weight loss or expended energy poses a danger as the chemicals are released.
2. According to the United Farm Workers Union, fifty-four percent of table grapes tested by the government contain pesticide residues, but the government does not test for forty-four percent of the poisons used on grapes.
3. In 1987 Cesar Chavez fasted for thirty-six days on water only to "identify himself with the many farmworker families who suffer from the scourge of pesticide poisonings."
4. According to Professor George Georgehiou of the Department of Entomology, University of California, the number of species of insects resistant to pesticides increased from 224 in 1970 to 447 in 1984.
5. The program was implemented to recruit Mexican farmworkers who, after working the fields, were then sent back to Mexico.