

CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE MEANING OF RESPECT

At the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, America and its allies had recently defeated Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. The U.S. was one of two great superpowers. While it was locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, the U.S. had never been more powerful or more preeminent in the world.

This was a time of great economic expansion in the U.S. Household income increased dramatically from 1940 – 1970 and moderately for the rest of the century.

However, not everyone participated in the new prosperity. Racism, sexism, and homophobia prevented millions from reaching their full potential. In 1950 America was a different place than it is today. Back then, most people accepted the status quo as inevitable and even beneficial. Thus:

- Racist laws targeting African-Americans existed in many states, particularly in the southern U.S.; racist customs and social conventions were adhered to throughout the country;
- Other minorities, including Latinos, Americans of Asian descent, and Jews also suffered from discrimination;
- There was endemic poverty in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas and particularly among migrant farmworkers;
- Women in the workforce were paid less than men for the same work, were denied advancement, and were subject to sexual harassment; the belief at the time was that, “A woman’s place is in the home;”
- Gays and lesbians were given harsh treatment and were often subjected to physical violence; most gays and lesbians hid their sexual orientation;
- Migrant farmworkers (of all races and from many nations, including whites, blacks, Hispanics, Filipinos, Yemenis) toiled in the fields for little pay and in miserable conditions; and
- Children of migrant farmworkers worked in the fields with their parents for much of the year.

Starting with the movement for African-American civil rights in the 1950s, these oppressed groups mounted serious challenges to the way they were treated. Cesar Chavez, along with Dolores Huerta, founded the UFW. Chavez became the most visible leader of the movement to require farm owners to give migrant workers a decent wage and better working conditions.

The Source of Cesar’s Passion: In a speech in 1984, Cesar Chavez described what led him to dedicate his life to those who pick the fruit and vegetables on America’s farms.

I'm not very different from anyone else who has ever tried to accomplish something with his life. My motivation comes from my personal life, from watching what my mother and father went through when I was growing up, from what we experienced as migrant workers in California. That dream, that vision grew from my own experience with racism, with hope, with a desire to be treated fairly, and to see my people treated as human beings and not as chattel. It grew from anger and rage, emotions I felt 40 years ago when people of my color were denied the right to see a movie or eat at a restaurant in many parts of California. It grew from the frustration and humiliation I felt as a boy who couldn't understand how the growers could abuse and exploit farmworkers when there were so many of us and so few of them. (Speech to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, November 9, 1984)

From 1962 until his death in 1993, Chavez organized strikes and boycotts to force the growers to respect their workers by paying higher wages and providing better working conditions. He organized communities to get people to register to vote and then he fought in political campaigns for candidates who respected Latinos and would pass laws to give rights to farmworkers.

Respect for All: Respect is an important value in all cultures and particularly in Hispanic culture — and Cesar Chavez was all about respect. He realized that the farmworkers could not demand respect from their bosses without giving respect to all others. He applied the ethical principle of reciprocity taught by all major religions. In the Judeo/Christian religions it is expressed as the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” and “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Chavez differed from many in that he rigorously applied the ethical principles of the Christian religion in his relations with all types of people and with other sentient beings. This led him to take progressive positions on women in the workplace as well as on gay rights.

Cesar and the Guard Dogs: In perhaps his most controversial ethical insight, Chavez extended “respect” to nonhuman sentient beings. Here is how it happened. For many years, Cesar’s life was under threat because the owners of the farms were angry that their workers were organizing into a union demanding better pay and working conditions. UFW members wanted to hire armed guards to protect Cesar. However, Cesar believed in nonviolence and wouldn’t permit this type of protection. The compromise was that the Union provided Cesar with a specially trained German shepherd. The dog was named “Boycott.” Later they got him a second dog who was named “Huelga” (the word for “strike” in Spanish). The animals would disable anyone pointing anything that resembled a gun at Cesar. The dogs were often at Cesar’s side. Cesar said, “I became a vegetarian after realizing that animals feel afraid, cold, hungry and unhappy like we do. I feel

very deeply about vegetarianism and the animal kingdom. It was my dog Boycott who led me to question the right of humans to eat other sentient beings.”

While Cesar Chavez was primarily a leader of farmworkers, he applied the concept of respect to people of all races and creeds, to women, to gay and lesbian people, and to non-human sentient animals. Chavez provides an example of the positive ethics-based leadership sorely needed by every nation.

Dolores Huerta – Cesar Chavez’ Partner in the UFW

Dolores Huerta was Cesar Chavez’ partner in the founding of the UFW. They worked closely together from 1965 until Chavez’ death in 1993. Huerta was instrumental in setting up an organizational structure for the Union, lobbying politicians, and negotiating with employers. She played a key role in the Grape Boycott and coined the slogan “¡Si se puede!”

Dolores Huerta is one of the leading female social activists of the 20th century. The UFW’s actions taken based on Chavez’ ethical insights, including non-violence and support for women in the workplace, were joint activities of Chavez and Huerta. Huerta and Chavez’ successor as President of the UFW, Arturo Rodriguez, joined Chavez in becoming vegetarian.