

CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE MEANING OF RESPECT

Cesar Chavez (1927 - 1993) is the United States' best-known Latino-American leader. He is remembered as the head of the United Farm Workers ("UFW") which sought higher pay and better working conditions in an industry that traditionally paid less than a living wage and made its employees work long days outside in the heat or cold, without breaks, without adequate water, and with no toilet facilities.

However, Cesar Chavez was not a one-dimensional man. In fact, he was a moral pioneer, adopting progressive positions in the second half of the 20th century long before they became popular. He did this by relentlessly extending the ethical principal of "respect" that he first demanded for farmworkers:

- *To women* -- by supporting them in the workplace; Chavez placed women in positions of leadership throughout the UFW; he also demanded that there be no sexual harassment for female farmworkers; the movement against sexual harassment of women in the workplace only came into national prominence in 2017 with the #metoo movement;
- *To gays and lesbians* -- in the 1970s, Chavez was the first major civil rights leader to support gays and lesbians; at that time, and for many decades, this was not a popular position; it is still controversial in some parts of the country; and
- *To animals* -- becoming a vegetarian and then a vegan, actively promoting respect and compassion for animals back in the 1980s and early 1990s when animal rights and veganism were not part of the national conversation.

In addition, Chavez joined many leaders of the 20th century in promoting a society free from child labor and from discrimination based on race, ethnic background, or religious affiliation. He was against the use of pesticides that were often sprayed on the fields in which farm laborers worked.

Cesar Chavez was a deeply religious Catholic and developed his prescient positions on women, gays, lesbians, and animals by applying the Christian ethic of love and respect for all. He was also a disciple of the Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who was a vegetarian and an advocate of forcing social change through nonviolent direct action.

Historical Background: 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. As of 1950, it was clear that the economic hardships of the Great Depression were finally over.

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 Americans of African descent existed throughout the Southeastern 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; "a woman's place was 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 every race and national origin: white, black, Hispanic, Filipino, Yemeni) 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, and Chavez became the most visible leader of the movement to require farmers 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 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 other disadvantaged groups. He applied the ethical principal 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, as an observant Catholic, applied the ethical principals of the Christian religion in his relations with other groups of people and with other sentient beings. This led him to take his progressive positions on women in the workplace as well as on gay and lesbian rights.

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 allow the UFW to hire armed guards. The compromise was that the Union provided Cesar with a specially trained German shepherd. The dog was named "Boycott." Later they bought him a second dog who was named "Huelga" (the word for "strike" in Spanish). The animals were trained to 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 farm workers, he was a man of many dimensions. His inclusive ethics-based advocacy of respect for people of all races and creeds, for women, for gays and lesbians, and for the animals, can provide an example of the positive leadership that is sorely needed in contemporary American society.