

César E. Chávez – The Man and the Servant-Leader

Essay by Maria D. Ortiz, Ph.D.

Introduction: Who is César E. Chávez?

"One saw in him what one wanted to see. For religious clergy it was a Christian movement; for youth, it was a communal mystical movement; for political radicals, it was a labor-class struggle; for liberal intellectuals and politicians, it was a movement of hope and the American essence; and for others, Chávez was another Gandhi." ¹

Many people ask, who is César E. Chávez? To answer that question, some of us go to the Internet to find out. But, when I type his name in Google, Yahoo, Lycos, or another search engine, after the first page of information on César E. Chávez, I begin to get a lot more information on Julio César Chávez, the boxer. This has improved a little, but even last year, I was still getting much more information on the boxer, Julio, than on César Chávez, the man called "servant" and "leader" of the United Farm Workers.

César E. Chávez was a leader and a servant of the people who needed him the most. He triumphed as a leader among those who followed him because he knew how to be a servant first. This essay highlights the connection between Chávez's life and work, as well as the idea of "servant leadership." To do this, I pay close attention to the recollections of the people he seemed to have served well, the farm workers. Chávez helped them to see the way to a better life by improving their working conditions and by showing them how to do it for themselves, working together as a Union.

The people in this essay followed his leadership and example, and they were able to change many of the inhumane working conditions in the agricultural fields of California.

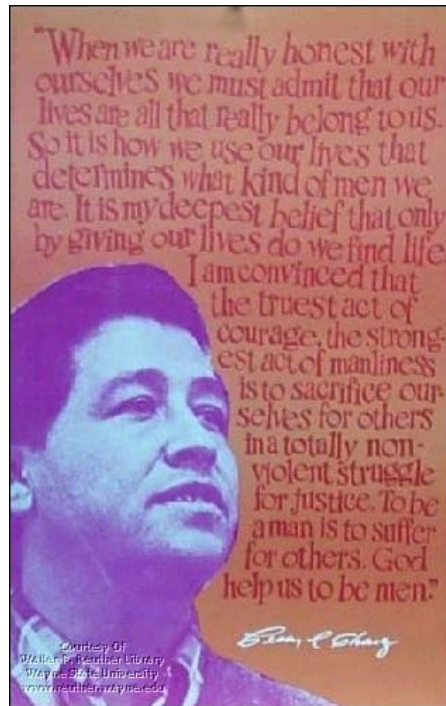
Their memories of him underscore a passion for service and work for a better life. César E. Chávez's leadership had a purpose – to serve and create a community of service that would enhance the lives of all those who saw his example. He was a humble man, but his words were more powerful because he supported them with actions, and people understood.

The Servant-Leader According to the World of Business Organizations

The idea of "servant-leader" was developed by Mr. Robert K. Greenleaf in 1968. In a 1970 essay entitled "The Servant as Leader"², he recounts the way in which he thought of the term "Servant-Leadership." Mr. Greenleaf recalls reading the novel *Journey to the East* by Herman Hess. In this fictional account, Leo, the servant of a group of men in a mythical journey, is the central figure performing menial tasks while sustaining the group with his spiritual presence. Greenleaf's interpretation leads to the conclusion that "a great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness."³

This idea is now guiding the efforts of many people working with business and international organizations to see that they serve societies of the world, and not just their own financial or political interests. The work of Mr. Greenleaf was very important to business organizations because it gave them guidance on how to be more humane while conducting their business. However, the idea of "Servant-Leadership" was not new. Many people have lived their lives as servants to others before they were leaders to them. The life of César E. Chávez is a good example of that idea.

How was Chávez a Servant?



Poster courtesy of United Farm Workers

(This statement by César Chávez was read to nearly 8,000 farm workers gathered in Delano on Sunday, March 10, 1968 to break bread with their leader after a 25-day fast for nonviolence).

I read his words and I am reminded that there are still many people who lived near him and worked with him on this struggle for justice. Some of these people, many of whom were farm workers themselves, knew him and remember him well. Mr. Paulino Pacheco, for example, was one who knew and worked with Chávez since 1969. He remembers him this way:

"He came from a peasant family. His grandfather was a peasant; came from Mexico when he was two years old. His father was also a peasant. So, he knew the life of a peasant. He knew what it is like. He knew the suffering and enslavement of peasantry. When we were struggling, his message was 'We fight

together. We fight for a cause and we do not use violence.' And so we stay together and fight for our cause, for our race, and for our rights. We stick together for justice.”⁴

César E. Chávez began his work in his childhood, with the people he encountered as they toiled side by side in the fields of California. He knew from personal experience what it meant to be a servant and what a servant needed to do for those he would serve. More importantly, he knew what he did *not* need, in a material sense, to lead a decent life while in the service of others. One of his bodyguards, Alfred Athie, remembers when asked if he thought César had a lot of power:

"I don't think it was power. He didn't like power. I don't think he ever used power. For that reason, we sought him. He searched for something that occupied him. What we felt, all the people felt ... helping people, seeking justice.”⁵

Then, Athie adds, when asked, "What was César Chávez searching for?"

"... He never looked for anything for himself. He could see he had been a part of this class of people. He had grown up in the fields; and how many things and how many provisions had been in the life of his parents, his brothers, and family. I think this is what made him see, with compassion, the necessities. He wasn't searching for power, but for solutions; seeking a way of living with people, with the worker, with the owners of the lands.”⁶

César devoted his life to carving out justice for farm workers out of long and grueling negotiations with growers. One of the important things that Chávez tried to change was the use of pesticides. He alerted the public to the dangers of pesticides. He and Dolores Huerta spoke early and without compromise about the dangers of pesticides in the fields and in our food.⁷ Those who have recorded the history of these negotiations

tell us that, because toxic pesticide use was always a major concern of Chávez, the first union contracts with Delano-area table grape growers contained strong pesticide protections for farm workers. These early contracts included a prohibition on the use of DDT, Aldrin, Dieldrin, and Parathion on union ranches.⁸

César saw the need to change as the UFW grew. In his own words, he describes this experience to Professor Richard Griswold Del Castillo: "The world was really changing. Now we had to start planning. We had to talk about restructuring the union. We had to look at what we were doing."⁹

Those who worked with him tell us that one of the things they learned from him was how to serve others. The people that worked with him were volunteers. They also learned how to be organizers and union leaders. However, becoming organizers and leaders was secondary to being servants. For example, Mr. Raúl Ceja, a Labor Leader and Organizer with the United Farm Workers, states:

" ... And when I say, strive to help people, he educated us in the sense that you don't do it for profit, you don't do it for self gain, you do it because there's a need to do it. And people need to have somebody there to help them ... you know 'walk that walk.' He never got money, he never got riches or anything like that, and most of us do the same thing now, following through with his legacy doing what he did, without pay. I do it today."¹⁰

César E. Chávez, as man of peace, was also a mediating force between opposing groups: those who led peaceful demonstrations, and those who believed it was necessary to show force in the struggle to overcome political and economic injustice. Even when it was necessary for him to have personal protection because of serious threats to his life, he did so in ways that would prevent violence. He requested, for example, that his bodyguards carry no guns. He studied Eastern philosophies, read about Gandhi and his accomplishments in India; he learned about economics, political

strategies, and management. But, without his direct experience in the fields as a servant to others, he could not have understood the practical implications of leading others in the creation of social change.



Photograph courtesy of United Farm Workers

How was César E. Chávez a Leader?

"Leadership was bestowed on a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was a servant first." ¹¹

The passage above suggests that leadership is something the leader receives from the people that can be taken away. People follow the one they call leader because of

the service nature of this leader. There are two concepts in connection with the main concept of "Servant-Leader." One is the **"visionary"** part, and the second is an **"implementation"** part. The first has to do with determining, or knowing, *what* to do in a given situation. In other words, "doing the right thing." The second is about "doing things right." The success of a leader depends on the ability to understand how these two concepts interconnect with the lives of the people the leader wants to serve. For example, what are the things the leader has to do for the people because they really need it, and how can these things be done in a way that works well.

If we look at these two aspects of his life and work, it seems that César E. Chávez knew well **what** the right thing was to do and **how** to do it well, even in the most unusual of circumstances. For example, the following passage illustrates how he responded to situations that were abundant in tragedy, and complicated with the undertones of a political struggle.

"I called César and told him one of our members had died. César asked how old he was, because the death benefit depended upon his age. I told him he was thirty-years-old. César said his benefit would be \$1000. César asked where his family lived and I told him he had only his mother. César said to bring his mother and we would have a fiesta to raise money to help her out with the funeral expenses. César said to call the newspapers, make up a HUGE check and hold it up in front of the television. We had the fiesta and gave his mother the check so she could return home. We had a lawyer there to make sure it was all in proper order. It was all taken care of. Two weeks later, he called me and asked how things were going. I told him that there was a long line of people waiting to join and César said, didn't I tell you that there would be a miracle. People were joining the union." ¹²

This passage shows how Chávez recognized three clear needs in the situation. Each one of these needs required a different response. First, at the human level, there

was tragedy, sorrow, and financial hardship. Second, at the community level, the Union was in need to come together to strengthen each other in cooperation and celebration. Finally, at the political level, there was a need to advance the goal of increasing the Union's membership. César knew the people in this area did not know of the benefits of becoming a member of the Union. His response to this situation addressed each one of these needs.

The deceased, in this example, was a single young man killed in a car accident. He was a farm worker and a member of the Union, in a location where efforts to gain new members had been exhausting. The local union organizer and recruiter was demoralized and in need of direction following the death. César's response acknowledges the relationship between the individual and the institution. César provides the direction for specific appropriate action. Thus, knowing **what to do**, and **doing it right**.

Ms. Maria Baca was one who followed César's leadership. As a farm worker, mother, and a housewife, she knew and worked with him. She reflects on his leadership:

"We are trying to teach our children and grandchildren that this man was a leader. He will continue to be a leader even after he is gone. His name will continue to be a leader. No one else will be put in his place, because that is what he was. César was a leader. He was for education and for the poor. He would suffer. I saw that man cry when he could not help these people. I saw everything. I had compassion for that man, because he was not doing it for himself, he was doing it for his people. For the children of today and tomorrow and the years to come; that was his purpose." ¹³

Mr. Greenleaf writes that the "best test, and the most difficult to administer" rests on a few questions:

- "Do those served grow as persons?"
- Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?
- What is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?"

These same questions we ask of managers and leaders of large business organizations and international corporations. Many of these business organizations measure success by the amount of their profits. Today, it is very important that we consistently ask these questions of business organizations. It is also important that we ask these questions as a test for the servant-leader concept in the work of César E. Chávez. Once again, we learn the answer from the memories of the people he sought to serve. Ms. Maria Baca tells us:

" So, we went to a meeting in Santa Maria and César was there. He said, "Don't worry, I'll get you a lawyer, but you have to fight for an education for your children. Fight now!" When he said, 'Fight now,' it was so important for us. We had never done that; our parents had never fought for us and it was important for us to fight for our children. We are still fighting for a better education for our children. I have got grandchildren now – tomorrow I might have great-grandchildren – and I want it to be better for them. I want something better. César gave us that...Thank God, he gave us that! He gave us a good education. The whole thing was not only to be a farm worker, but also to get a good education. He brought us that education, and what we are learning now."¹⁴

Because of the experiences many farm workers gained as organizers and members of the UFW, their children had been influenced to see beyond the limitations of migrant and farm work labor; and they joined a new struggle – to obtain an education and a

different economic future. César E. Chávez gave them evidence with his actions that "Yes, it is possible" (Sí se puede) to change their working conditions.



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During the many battles and power struggles between the growers, the Teamsters, and the Farm Workers Union, César was often considered stubborn. It was in the best interests of the growers to control this man, and to do it by changing the balance of power. They thought that by doing so, he would be forced to define himself differently. Professor Jenkins, in 1985, notes that Mr. Herbert Fleming, President of the Western Growers Association, said, "If we could get the Teamster contract from Chávez, then maybe in the long run Chávez would have to shape up and act like a businessman and it would work out." But they underestimated Chávez. Obviously, he was not going to think "like a businessman". From his point of reference, he would think like the people he chose to serve. More importantly, he would think about what would meet their most essential needs as they performed their daily work.



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An example of this comes in the words of Mr. Paulino Pacheco:

"That was the 14th of June 1969. César came to Santa Maria to visit us. Before that time, he had only been with us once before. He asked what is going on in Santa Maria and we told him "not much." He told us he wanted us to put toilets in the fields and have fresh water available, so the workers could rest and take a break. So we went to Santa Maria and started talking about the toilets and the people asked what we meant by "toilets." Never before have there been toilets in the fields, not even my grandfather had toilets. We worked real hard; we called it the "Toilet Revolution." We did things peacefully, so we were able to put the toilets up without much resistance. We were able to win that concession. Then the farmers put up more toilets in the fields and gave the workers fresh water. Before this, the women had to dig round holes in the ground to take care of their needs." ¹⁵

César E. Chávez was a practical and ethical man. He understood the ethical implications and the consequences for himself if he were to switch his "way of thinking" to be more like a businessman, as the growers would have preferred it. But, as the leader and manager of the United Farm Workers and a man who had principles, he followed his principles for the benefit of the organization.

There seemed to have been a major misconception about him as a servant-leader. Some people confused humility of heart with ignorance. Although in his humble appearance he might have been perceived solely as a servant, his skills as a leader and the manager of a cause gave him the advantage over his adversaries. He acquired these skills through many years of defiance against the forces of oppression that sought to destroy his true spirit and nature.

The legacy of César E. Chávez teaches us about the challenges of service and leadership. It also teaches us that, while it is hard to be an effective servant-leader because we are human with many frailties, we are still capable of serving people. We can be honest with ourselves about our limitations as human beings, and we are still capable of serving and leading people with a good example.

Conclusion

"The worst thing that I see is guys who say, 'man, they don't have any Chicanos up there [in places of power], and they're not in there working to make sure that it happens. We [as Chicanos] criticize and separate ourselves from the process of change. We've got to jump in there with both feet to change conditions.'" (Dolores Huerta) ¹⁶

The life of César E. Chávez, among other things, is a guide on how to live and practice leadership for the service of those ignored by political and economic structures. Even when criticism arose among some Chicano activists, his influence was

underscored by the unconventionality of his actions while in pursuit of social justice.¹⁷ His life was political because he spoke the unspoken; he defended the humble and the poor, the left out. He confronted the powerful and the politically untouchable; and he did it while asserting: "Nonviolence is our strength". Professor Richard Griswold del Castillo wrote the following about him:

"Before Jesse Jackson said, 'Keep hope alive,' Chávez had urged it. Before Jackson called for a Rainbow Coalition, Chávez had formed one. Before the Kennedys discovered the liberal mystique of the poor and poverty, Chávez had lived it and embraced it."

Likewise, César E. Chávez had been practicing as a Servant-Leader before the term became known in business practice. In his own words he reminds us:

"I think most of us in the Union ... , we've been able to let people understand that leadership comes in our union not because you're blonde or brown or black or white or in between. It comes if you can cut it, if you can do it, we do not care what color it is. I guess you've seen the union. The best kind of Chicanismo we can have is the kind that reaches out and embraces mankind."



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He lived within the paradox of being born a Mexican man within what some writers have described as a "very traditional" culture. But César E. Chávez conducted his life as a human being keenly aware of his connection to all humans regardless of background, creed, personal preferences, or opinions. He lived in the paradox of the "Borderlands," so aptly described by Gloria Anzaldúa when discussing the challenge faced by those that have more than one cultural tradition. Family heritage and cultural history allows many of us to speak another language besides English, and to be comfortable with various customs and traditions. It gives us a unique perspective on the world. César could have lived up to the typical stereotypes attributed to Mexican males, but he did not. His example teaches us differently. He might have been "surrounded" by stereotypes, and could have succumbed to their trappings. *"Or perhaps ...,"* as Anzaldúa comments, he could have *"decided to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or, he could have gone "another route."* But not César. He knew *"... the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react."*¹⁸ César E. Chávez chose to act.

His joys were the simple pleasures derived from being with his children, his family, his impromptu hikes with his grandchildren in the hills near La Paz. César, the man, was humble and simple in the meaningful ways his loved ones understood. He was guided by powerful forces. The forces that, according to Dr. Margaret Wheatley, are *"the imperative to create one's self as an exploration of newness and the need to reach for relationships with others to create systems."*¹⁹ In his life and work, he was ahead of his time and part of a new story for the generations of this century searching out for meaning.

César E. Chávez's life work teaches us about our responsibility as individuals to act and create the world of justice we dream of having. In our efforts to understand the man and his life, we must stop to reflect upon our own questions and ask:

- What motivates us to want to know about the man and his life?

- What is our responsibility as individuals in the world we have created?
- How can we continue the legacy to create a just society for everyone?

Our questions about him might teach us more about what we do not know about ourselves. It may be possible that the questions we have and our interest in the study of César E. Chávez, his life and work as "servant-leader," can help us to focus on the principle of citizenship. Learning from César E. Chávez' example, we can answer: Yes, it is possible (Sí se puede!). It is possible to create and articulate a vision; to be accountable for the well-being of the whole; to set and pursue goals that sustain our institutions; our families and communities; to establish boundaries and set limits; to create structure and order that suits our purposes and well being; and to become role models. As we move on to assert our "servant-leader" role, we can begin teaching others as Mr. Athie, advises us:

"It is necessary that the students know that this story was real. In this country, so powerful, so full of beauty, so large, there are also many injustices. We need a Chávez, many Chávезes, so that we can continue doing good for others." ²⁰

References

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- ² Blachard, Ken. "Servant-Leadership Revisited", in L. C. Spears In Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership. (pp. 21-28) John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998 © by the Greenleaf Center.
- ³ Robert K. Greenleaf began his career at AT&T where he worked for 40 years. After his retirement as director of management research in 1964, he began a second career as an author, teacher, and consultant to business organizations that lasted another 25 years. He founded The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. He published numerous books and essays on the theme of Servant- Leadership. After his dead in 1990, his work now continues through The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, a not-for-profit institution located in Indianapolis, Indiana.
- ⁴ Interview with Paulino Pacheco by Ruben Zepeda , August, 2001, Santa Maria, CA. California Department of Education César E. Chávez Web site.
- ⁵ Interview with Paulino Pacheco by Ruben Zepeda , August, 2001, Santa Maria, CA. California Department of Education César E. Chávez Web site.
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- ¹¹ Greenleaf, Robert K. "Servant-Leadership". Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership (pg. 16). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998 © by the Greenleaf Center.
- ¹² Paulino Pacheco, Farm worker and Labor Organizer. Excerpt from oral interview, Santa Maria, CA. August 2001. California Department of Education César E. Chávez Web site.
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- ¹⁴ Maria Baca. Excerpt from Interview in Spanish. August, 2001, Santa Maria, CA. California Department of Education César E. Chávez Web site.
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- ¹⁶ Dolores Huerta, quoted in Griswold, Del Castillo, R. & Garcia, Richard A.. César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit. (pg. 73) University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.

¹⁷ "Yet, the powerful reputation that Chávez acquired during two decades of organizing migrant fieldworkers is still strong. He is still a figure of moral authority, particularly in the Hispanic and labor communities, and over the years he has burnished that image by frequent exposure. He has marched with casino workers on Las Vegas picket lines, spoken on behalf of gay rights activists at Hollywood dance spots, and he has been arrested in anti-apartheid demonstrations on campuses". Maclean's, September 9, 1985. "César Chávez Fights Again", Los Angeles Times, pg. T2 by Pam Morrison in Los Angeles.

¹⁸ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (pg. 79). Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

¹⁹ Wheatley, Margaret. "What is Our Work" " *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (pg. 348). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998 © by the Greenleaf Center.

²⁰ Alfred Athie, One of César Chávez' body guards. Excerpt from oral interview, August 2001. California Department of Education César E. Chávez Web site.