

# **Cesar Chavez, Religious Educator: *How identity and vision release people***

Ted Newell

*Crandall University, Moncton, Canada*

**Abstract.** *Freedom movements historically have demonstrated power to transform persons' identity. Movements like Cesar Chavez's National Farm Workers Association of the 1960's offer their distinctive reading of history that refocuses individual and collective memory around a cause. Accepting the truth of a movement's story implies and generates change in who one believes oneself to be. A movement may reorient the understanding of one's own life story. A vision of transformed human living will give hope and purpose. Absorbing the narrative of a movement can lead to something not unlike conversion. The presentation takes movement holistic education as a lens to show that church education should be understood as comprehensive storytelling.*

## **Living a Compelling Counter-Story**

An insider from the early days of the 1960s California Mexican farm workers movement has given what will become the benchmark account of Cesar Chavez's pioneering leadership. Marshall Ganz tells how the National Farm Workers Association's (NFWA) insider knowledge of their people, its ability to motivate leaders, its flexibility, and Chavez's sheer story-weaving resourcefulness made the NFWA effective (Marshall Ganz, 2009).

Chavez the storyteller impresses one who reads with religious education eyes. His storytelling *nous* is not only evident in his speeches, but in every act. To illustrate:

- The September 1962 “constitutional convention” of the NFWA adopted the motto of “Viva La Causa” echoing the cause of Mexican peasant crusader Emiliano Zapata.
- The preamble of the constitution quoted Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. “Rich men and masters should remember this, that to exercise pressure for the sake of gain upon the indigent and destitute, and to make one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine.”
- The meeting was held in a Roman Catholic church hall.
- The red, white and black flag with its “farm worker eagle” echoed the Mexican national eagle.

- The constitutional convention featured an original ballad in the Mexican heroic tradition.
- Masses became routine in the 1965 strike against grape growers.
- Strike lines featured placards of Our Lady of Guadalupe, asserting the compassion of heaven for the workers.
- The farmworkers' 1966 town-to-town protest march to the state capital was a tactic from Zapata. But it coincided with Lent, a “time for reflection, for penance, for asking forgiveness.” So Chavez urged that the procession not be called a revolutionary- or military-sounding “march,” but a pilgrimage. It would arrive on Easter Sunday (M. Ganz, 2001).

On one hand, none of these items seems remarkable. Why would one expect other than Mexican and Catholic symbolism to mobilize Mexicans? But at very this point Chavez is remarkable. Better financed and more experienced labor organizers had attempted for decades to unionize California farmworkers. Ganz shows that the NFWA’s greater strategic capacity came from cultural savvy (Ganz, 2009, ch 3). From their own tradition, Chavez empowered a minority which was at racial, religious, and economic disadvantage. By that reliance on tradition the NFWA avoided deadly plausibility traps such as accusations of Communism.

On the other hand, one might observe that Mexican Catholic themes give the movement an exotic or esoteric air. Would such unfamiliar symbols change American local and state politics, or the white grower community? Could Protestant Americans warm to Our Lady of Guadalupe? The answer is that, like the flag that rallies an army to battle, the symbols and practices that I mention above are not for the benefit of the opposition but for those being organized. The use of their own tradition drew farmworkers together in a righteous cause. From the list it is apparent that every action virtually enacted their cultural Story. The son of farmworkers himself, Chavez possessed a natural born sensitivity, grasping ways to draw together a people. The virtual appeal to Our Lady of Guadalupe reflects the Mexican Catholic understanding of heaven's care for sufferers; Pope Leo’s words assured them that hard treatment at the hand of employers is not to be endured but resisted. In their own worldview workers gained sight to perceive injustice. Chavez brought a lens to bear that enabled recognition of grower oppression as simply wrong, an affront to human dignity. Chavez took a cultural-narrative hermeneutic approach that left organizers who relied on mere economic motivation in the dust. Workers became willing to sacrifice and risk for a vision of social justice and a future for their children.

## Folding stories into the movement Story

While Ganz's main interest is the Chavez approach to community organizing, he pays close attention to storytelling as a tool. Telling credible stories about a particular group in relation to society or the world generates a strengthened sense of identity in the hearers and also the moral resources to act on injustices (Taylor, 1989). Chavez's animation of a movement commenced in a six-month house meeting drive among San Joaquin Valley farm workers. In the spring of 1962, Chavez and his collaborators solicited hundreds of stories of injustice. Individual's stories were woven into the history of economic, racial and political injustice of Mexican farm workers in the US (2001, p. 4). Farmworkers's stories come into focus as they were interpreted not in a utilitarian American capitalist framework but in religious perspective, in light of the inherent dignity due to human beings (Ezzy, 1998, pp. 242–43; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Chavez's story-sharing process may remind Christian religious educators of Thomas Groome's shared praxis method where subjects recount a small-s personal story on a topic (Groome, 1980). Then an account of the Christian tradition is supplied -- the big-S story. The subjects go on to relate their own hopes around the topic, as individual visions are related to the big-V vision of the faith. What were Chavez and fellow organizers doing other than making sense of farmworker's small-s stories in the light of a Mexican and Catholic big-S? Through the Christian and national Stories and Vision the farmworkers original small-v's were challenged, and the result was determined action.

Groome's approach can be helpfully expanded. For a decade Harry Fernhout served as president of the graduate Institute for Christian Studies, an intellectual hub for Dutch Reformed day schools in Ontario and Michigan. School sponsors broadly hope for graduates as Christian agents who live out their faith in wider society. However, the Calvinist emphasis on right knowledge leads schools toward intellectualism or cognitivism. Students tend to gain right beliefs but generally fail to live counter-culturally. Calvinistic philosophers like Fernhout or Nicholas Wolterstorff strove for decades to understand education in ways that would sponsor responsible discipleship.

Fernhout appreciates Groome's shared praxis as a way past intellectualism into lived Christian faith (Fernhout, 1997). However, his reading of communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas leads him to divide Groome's capital-s-Story into distinct aspects (Hauerwas, 1991; MacIntyre, 1981). Fernhout sees both an ideal account or myth, and also a tradition -- a living history that must be refreshed from the Story by each generation. The metanarrative is the source of a dynamic reworking of their history that informs a people's constantly renewed identity. In the present example, alien farmworkers in America understood themselves differently after Chavez and colleagues recalled them to the tradition that they knew from their earliest formation.

A counterpart to Fernhout's living history, called capital-m "Memory," is Big-v Vision. For Fernhout and Groome, as for New Testament theologian N. T. Wright (Wright, 1992), a society's myth or metanarrative informs its vision of the future. The farmworkers gained a new vision of their future in America after Chavez and colleagues brought the Catholic Mexican worldview into active collision with farmworkers's current reality in capitalist America. If present conditions were grossly unfair, still, a future of justice and righteousness was possible with God on their side. Worldview adherents live in a dynamic tension between Memory and Vision, between past identity and future possibility. It is between Memory and Vision that the imperative for social action can be generated.

Fernhout's model emphasizes that humans live out a metanarrative less by conscious thought or any reflection on ideology than by immersion in symbols and rituals. As Clifford Geertz notes in *Interpretation of Cultures*, a society reminds members of its sacred metanarrative habitually and repeatedly but tacitly – for example in the medieval Christian chiming of the hours (Geertz, 1973, p. 93). Memory and Vision become material through symbols, rituals and practices. Thus Chavez's speeches – like sermons -- were embodied in visuals and practices. Farmworkers were able to live their situation in their new/old Story. Our Lady of Guadalupe did not have to be explained. The eagle on a red flag did not have to be explained. The use of the papal encyclical did not have its place in the constitution justified. A pilgrimage to Sacramento did not have to be explained. And "Viva Chavez" appeared as graffiti as spontaneously as "Viva Zapata" had appeared in an earlier generation. It should be carefully noted that organizers spent days aligning their plan with the worldview of the workers. From inside the movement, no aspect of the farmworker organizing strategy looked foreign or ideological; none of it looked like a mere pursuit of economic advantage, nor did it appear leftist. The result of Chavez's careful and deliberate contextualization was a movement which led to a recognized place for Mexican-Americans within American society.

Fernhout's four elements, Memory, Vision, Symbols, and Ethos, each express the metanarrative in their own way. For Fernhout, the matrix in which social life is lived out expressively is a capital-s Story. In this interpretation, Chavez exposed the contradiction of farmworkers's inherent human dignity drawn from Memory, and the paltry current Vision. He thus engaged his people from identity to wholehearted commitment. Between Memory and Vision lies the vocation of persons who may give their lives to a cause they believe to be right and true.

For Chavez and the farmworkers, the Catholic and Mexican Story provided a way to read their situation -- a hermeneutic. Application of their native-born grid made the Mexican farmworker situation in America obvious. Identity had been disoriented by the experience of oppression in a powerful culture, but was latent, only needing to be

asserted. Their symbols, rituals, and practices listed above expressed their Memory and their Vision. In effect, farmworkers were converted to a new way of seeing; they were awakened.

### **Implications for church educators**

Yale theologian George Lindbeck says that the search of our age is the search for a habitable text (Lindbeck, 1988). By this assertion he means that people in our society are in pursuit of a story that is capacious enough to allow a meaningful life. The old frameworks have broken down. New stories or new expressions of old stories are needed. It is notable that renewal of Christianity has often come from holistic story-weavers— one need only mention Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Wesleyan movements, each inaugurated by a symbolic storyteller. Indeed, it was the apostle Paul's storytelling movement that launched Christianity beyond Israel (Jenson, 1993). In the former mission fields Christianity retains has the character of a movement, as detailed by Philip Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006). The Story is bound to challenge present church culture and so bring renewal. In Christianity the biblical story has repeatedly been the source of reform.

One might object that comparing Chavez's advocacy to religious education is overdrawn. Religious educating cannot be like political organizing unless you are talking about the Christian right or a similarly ideological group. Seeing religious education like political organizing might even risk ideological closure of the kind that worldview scholar Brian Walsh calls domination (Walsh, 2000). A similar objection might be that though movements can have real value, they tend to hamper individual identity. Conformity is not usually a good thing (Fromm, 1994). One reply is that all depends on the character of the movement. Human beings necessarily make sense of life in narratives because we are beings in time (P. Ricoeur, 1991a, 1991b; 1990). Movements tell a story that accounts for some issue within a larger story. Usually the problem – in the farmworkers's case, economic and racial oppression -- is not the only thing that is going on with an individual. Particular farmworkers might have seen their whole salvation in the farmworkers's movement but most likely had other dimensions in their lives. Like all of us they lived with multiple roles or identities (Somers, 1994, p. 605). In the same way that individual identity is conflictual and dissonant, the wider culture includes conflicting or dissonant stories. Most of the time, a single story is not able to explain away all alternative accounts. People in any culture accept multiple stories (Smith, 2003, p. 72). A movement may well become a dominant source of an identity, but not usually the only source. Though, yes, there are single-minded cadres, for most people joining a movement does not erase all sub-identities (McAdams, 2003, pp. 199–200; Raggatt, 2006).

If one accepts that shared tacit narratives direct us from earliest awareness onward, and that a society's tacit narrative makes us (particular kinds of) human, then we begin to see that Chavez's movement is only a particularly focused form of the storytelling that makes us Americans or Dutch or English, possibly Canadian, capitalist or socialist, Catholic or Protestant Christian, Shia or Sunni Muslim, arguably even Theravada Buddhist or nondualist advaita Hindu. Chavez was a holistic educator. His approach enabled formal and informal – cognitive, affective, and behavioral -- aspects of education to be held together. In the movement, thought was united with action, with art, with journalism, with ritual, all part of the recounting and growth of the Story which was a movement. Memory and Vision's identity and purpose enabled a creative response to oppression.

However, the objection that a movement mentality narrows social identity is well taken. It has to be admitted that movements are not necessarily just, right, and true as the farmworkers's movement transparently was. Similar refocusing of social identity around a problem or issue has driven a range of movements in modernity and earlier. A similar basis in justice and human dignity drove the civil rights movement, reasserting the dignity of minority blacks in a supposedly egalitarian majority white society. Not positively, the Nazi movement asserted a narrowed conception of German racial identity against the oppression of the Versailles Treaty, focused through a theory of conspiracy by the Jewish component of German society. In a society demoralized and disoriented by its losses in the war and the end of the German monarchy, the Nazi message offered renewed identity with terrible consequences (Hesse, 1995; Lease, 1995). The Jonestown Peoples Church disaster was another utopian movement gone horribly astray. Observing the power of movement to animate a people, as I have done, does not speak to the truth or justice or otherwise of any movement. It is understandable that after Auschwitz there would be skepticism about any and every metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984). Yet the question remains whether human society could continue without Memory, without Vision. The two express a persuasive and livable account of reality. One thinks of the witness of Dr. Viktor Frankl of the necessity of a vision for surviving the hopelessness of the death camps (Frankl, 1984).

The most basic issue for movement-aware education is not educational technique but the vitality of the narrative. In narrative perspective, the linkage of education for Christian faith to the theological and cultural studies of academicians and others is plain. Without a persuasive story to tell, few will be motivated to invest themselves in the movement. To counter dominant voices of postmodern media culture comprehensiveness is needed. As Christians consume majority media, they must also live in a rival counter-culture. It is not enough to see Christian traces in the storytelling of the major film studios and record producers. Rather, an attractive livable alternative must be presented and of use (Crouch, 2008; Gallagher, 1998).

A minority that wishes to avoid assimilation must continue telling its story in order to hold onto its identity. This truth is apparent from the first Jewish exile and its development of symbols, rituals, and practices such as the synagogue, new festivals, and even a revised history by the Chronicler alongside the longstanding Sabbath observances and food regulations. The symbolic fluency of Chavez and the NFWA was already second nature to the earliest Christian movement. In the conflict with the state religion and other religions in its first three centuries, that movement told its Story in various ways. Twenty-first century Western Christians may be disoriented by the end of Christendom, not yet conscious of themselves as resident aliens. Christians of many kinds may need to recapture the sense of the movement, and see the work as worldview work (Jenson, 1993, pp. 22–24).

In narrative perspective, seers and visionaries are irreplaceable. Any pastor or denominational leader should know himself or herself at the same time to be educator. Because leadership of a movement is educational leadership, complete delegation to a staff person cannot be accepted. Any movement leader must be -- like Chavez -- continually saying why what is being done is being done.

In movement narrative perspective, the truly multi-dimensional way of education in Christian faith is not for the individual's knowledge in a classroom but in the sociological expression of Christianity -- that is, the church. Its understanding of its own mission -- local and worldwide relocates education within the historical people of God. Individualistic understandings of religion, not to be dismissed, are recognized as for observers. Education for Christian faith must be sociologically holistic (Michael Warren, 1999; Westerhoff, 2000). Not only must the Story be told verbally toward the regeneration of a living movement, but the Story's expression in Symbols and Ethos must also tell the same story. Educators need to be recounting the story in every single way. Such an engaged stance moves educators toward a model like Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual, to a spiritual director, possibly in the direction of some contemporary youth workers. To take one example of the direction needed, Lutherans recently published research on the absence of young men in their congregations. They call for an ambitious program including gender-distinct events and gendered mentoring (Anderson, Hill, & Martinson, 2006). In a narrative perspective educators must become practical theologians who orchestrate the telling of the faith story in the widest range of ways. Gardner's multiple intelligences speak to the range of learnings needed if we are to take seriously the symbolic, ritual and practical tellings of the Story. Education has to be translated to church practices and vice versa. As culture is not just cognitive, so education is not only cognitive.

One way for this alternative culture to develop is to seek expression of the practical mission. For example, Michael Warren says that a prerequisite to effective youth

ministry is good pastoral practice. It is a hard sell to have youth join an old people's club, as Warren observes (2006). Some local churches bring the faith to bear on the culture. In the midst of lived faith, invitations to join become attractive. It is a hard sell to have youth join an old people's club, as Warren observes (2006).

Chavez and colleagues came to the Mexican farmworkers as community organizers, not obviously as religious educators. Yet their organizing involved a form of religious or worldview education. With Chavez, animation was education and education was animation. May it be so with Christian religious educators.

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