



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Cesar Chavez & Why David Sometimes Wins

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14 September 2014

frederickuu.org

For seven years, I had the privilege each summer of being a counselor at a two-week Summer Institute for incoming college freshmen. The title of the program was “You Bet Your Life: Theological Explorations of Vocation,” and our goal was to equip these young people with tools, frameworks, and experiences to begin discerning both their gifts and how they might best be able to change the world for the better. (We are “betting our life” with each choice that we make on how to spend our time and talent.)

One classic definition of vocation is that you are called to that place “**where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.**” Each year, one of the most powerful ways that we invited these young people to encounter the world’s deep hunger was through a “poverty tour” of the city we were in of Greenville, South Carolina. Up to this point, most of the campers had experienced Greenville as a beautiful city in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains with a revitalized and flourishing downtown.

A different view would emerge as we loaded the campers onto a bus driven by the director of a local nonprofit who had been working for decades to understand and address poverty issues in the region. He would drive us down a major thoroughfare with wide, smooth roads and landscaped sidewalks. Then, he would turn just one block off that major street, where no one would have any reason to go if they didn’t live in the neighborhood. **Suddenly the sidewalks disappear, the road narrows in many places to one lane, and dilapidated buildings hidden from most citizens’s view come) into focus.** He would also show us the clear

evidence of where the homeless individuals had slept the night before under bridges and in bamboo fields just on the periphery of the bustling and revitalized downtown.

The summer of 2001 was the first year of this camp on “You Bet Your Life,” and we were figuring out many of details as we went along. As the Poverty Tour was ending, we realized we had failed to anticipated the level of devastation some of the campers experienced on the tour.

Learning about the city’s barely hidden poverty hit them both emotionally and viscerally.

Before returning to campus, we gathered them in the parking lot to debrief. The real breakthrough moment came when one of the counselors stepped forward and shared about his experience. He had volunteered the previous two years at this nonprofit, and in the face of so many individuals and families with overwhelming needs, he had found some reassurance in reminding himself periodically of this story:

A child is walking along the ocean and sees a beach on which thousands and thousands of starfish have washed ashore. Further along she sees a woman, walking slowly and stooping often, picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean. “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” she asks. “Because the sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don’t throw them further in they will die.” “But, the child says, there are so many starfish! You can barely make a difference.” The woman listened calmly and then bent down to pick up another starfish and threw it into the sea. **“It made a difference to that one.”**

My friend found comfort in that story. When he was overwhelmed with the immensity of poverty as an issue, he would spend some time making a concrete difference for at least one person: getting at least one person enough food for the next month, getting the water turned back on at one person’s house, giving his full attention to one person who is feeling lost, getting one person clothes for their first job interview, getting a desperately-needed prescription filled for one person, or visiting one person who is in prison.

There’s a lot of wisdom in the starfish story. But here’s another story that has also become a touchstone for me as I’ve continued to reflect on large-scale social problems:

Imagine a large river with a high waterfall. At the bottom of this waterfall, hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save those who have fallen into the river and have fallen down the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many as possible one individual looks up and sees a seemingly never-ending stream of people falling down the waterfall and begins to run upstream. One of other rescuers hollers, “Where are you going? There are so many people that need help here.” To which the man replied, **“I’m going upstream to find out why so many people are falling into the river.”**

The starfish story reminds us that we can make real immediate differences in people’s lives through simple acts of loving kindness. But the river story reminds us that it’s not enough simply to throw back individual starfish. We may need to start there. But in addition to working on a one-to-one level, we also need to consider working to “change corrupt institutions and unjust systems. We need to “become the change we want to see in the world”—at both levels of involvement.

However, moving from the individual level to the systemic is significantly more difficult. In the words of a Catholic liberation theologian and former archbishop of Brazil, **“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why so many people are poor, they call me a communist.”** To give a concrete example, I am grateful and proud of this congregation and many others in our community for coming together to form the Family Emergency Shelter. We are right to begin with providing shelter for the families with children in our community who are homeless right now. But we also need to take the insights we learn from that experience upstream, to advocate for systemic changes in the lack of affordable housing and for jobs that pay a living wage, to stem the flow of beached starfish and human flotsam sweeping over the waterfall.

Along these lines, at this past year’s UU General Assembly, I was challenged in particular by two speakers. The first was Dr. Marshall Ganz, who is the Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard University’s Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Ganz’s father was a rabbi and his mother a teacher. As Ganz describes in his book Why David Sometimes Wins:

Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement, he grew up in the San Joaquin Valley of California, the end point of the “‘dustbowl’ migration memorialized by John Steinbeck in his novel *Grapes of Wrath*” (vii). Ganz graduated “from high school in 1960, the year John F. Kennedy was elected president.” In those heady times, Ganz dropped out of Harvard as an undergraduate after his junior year to join the Civil Rights Movement as an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Then, following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, he returned to his home state in the fall of 1965 and “joined Cesar Chavez in his effort to unionize California farm workers.” And after 16 years with the United Farm Workers, Ganz felt the need to “deepen his intellectual understanding” to supplement and extend his on-the-ground experience organizing. After a 28-year ‘leave of absence,’ Ganz returned to Harvard, “completed his undergraduate degree in history and government...a Masters in Public Administration...and [a] Ph.D. in sociology in 2000.” He jokes that he is part of **Harvard’s “class of 1964/1992.”**

More recently, Ganz famously consulted with the Obama campaign in late spring 2007 to help then-candidate Obama better tell his story and to learn from Ganz’s experience in order to set-up “intensive community organizing–style training camps in which young people would be taught to tell Obama’s story, to spread a message and generate the enthusiasm of a true grassroots movement.” The rest, of course, is history. Also worth noting is that President Obama’s famous slogan “Yes We Can!” is a direct translation of César Chávez’s United Farm Workers rallying cry in the face of adversity that dates back to 1972. **Before “Yes, We Can!” there was “¡Si se puede!”**

And Dr. Ganz, in reflecting on his decades of organizing experience through his doctoral work and teaching at Harvard, has written a book titled *Why David Sometimes Wins*, referring to that ancient biblical tale he likely first heard from his father the rabbi, of David and Goliath. In that classic story, the Philistine champion and giant, Goliath has been taunting the Israelites for forty days. Finally, David, a young shepherd, courageously offers to confront Goliath. At first, the soldiers try to equip David with the king’s own armor, but the small boy was so weighed down by the helmet, coat of mail, and sword that he couldn’t even walk. He realizes that he can’t take on the giant on Goliath’s own terms. Looking around, he sees “five smooth stones” from a

nearby riverbed, and defeats Goliath by surprising him with a rock to the forehead care of a young shepherd boy's slingshot.

Prior to Chavez's work in California, there had been "Three waves of farm-labor organizing...since 1900" (23). But, Ganz reflects that, like David, Chavez succeeded where others had failed because he "thinks about it differently," was "more motivated," and applied the resources at hand in "novel" ways (13). Cesar Chavez used to say, "**Power makes you stupid.**" In Ganz's words, **the Goliaths of this world arrogantly "come to rely on an overwhelming resources advantage, which is exactly what creates opportunity for the Davids of the world"** (Gladwell 253)

So what does that mean for us? Well, as with the starfish story, we know that we can and should begin with doing what we can for the individuals and families right in front of us, as we are doing in multiple ways, including the Family Emergency Shelter. But what if, as in the river story, we find ourselves also wanting to go upstream to find out why so many people are falling into the river in the first place — to *both* give food to the poor *and* ask why so many people are poor in the first place.

What, then, are some approaches we might learn from the archetypal David — and from Chavez, Ganz, Obama, and others — if in our own eras we find the boldness and courage to take on some large, systemic Goliath of a social problem? Looking to our own UU tradition, James Luther Adams (often referred to affectionately by UUs as "JLA") was the most influential Unitarian Universalist theologian of the twentieth century. He offers us one framework for "thinking differently" and applying resources in "novel" way using what he called the "Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism," an explicit allusion to the "five smooth stones" David fished from the riverbed to defeat Goliath. Those five stones are:

1. "**Revelation' is continuous**": as a liberal religious tradition, we are not locked into traditions from the past, making us particularly David-like in our openness to creative innovations.
2. "**Mutual, free consent...not coercion**": Goliath-models rely on a top-down hierarchy, but our Fifth Principle commitment to the democratic process keeps us open to all voices,

including those small David-like voices from the margins who can point toward previously-unforeseen ways forward.

3. **“Moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community”**: The Goliaths of this world insist that the way things are — which unduly favor Goliaths — are the way things have always been. But you may recall Ganz’s point that the successful Davids of this world commit to changing the world for the better and persist until they shift the system closer to a realization of the Beloved Community.
4. **“[W]e deny the immaculate conception of virtue”** In other words, the world does not magically “bend toward justice”; only through collective human effort does positive social change happen.
5. **“Optimism”**: we persist in the hope that is the possibility of moving incrementally toward a more peaceful and just world.

To briefly name what such a process might look like on the ground here in Frederick, I mentioned earlier that there were two speakers at this past year’s UU General Assembly who particularly challenged me. The first was Dr. Ganz. The second was the Sunday sermon by my colleague The Rev. Mark Stringer, who spoke movingly about what he has learned through reaching across cultural and theological lines to work with a network of diverse congregations in Des Moines, Iowa using a Congregational-Based Organizing model similar to that recommended by Ganz and others. Closer to home, similar coalitions have been built in Montgomery County, Baltimore County, and D.C. And I’m interested in exploring how our current partnerships for the Family Emergency Shelter might potentially expand into a more robust, broad-based organizing network to advocate for greater social, economic, and environmental justice in our community. As we explored some last week, our greatest hope for change comes not from independence, but from freely-chosen interdependence. We need one another in all our diversity, and we are stronger together.

In that spirit, for now, I leave you with these words adapted from the **“Franciscan Blessing,”** from the tradition of Francis of Assisi, who was know for his work for peace and with the poor:

May you be blessed with **discomfort** at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, that you may live deep within your heart.

May you be blessed with **anger** at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, that you may work for justice for all people.

May you be blessed with **tears** to shed for those who suffer from pain, hunger, homelessness and rejection, that your may reach out your hand to comfort them.

And may you be blessed with enough **foolishness** to believe that you can make a difference in the world so that together we can do what others claim cannot be done.