

Hope and Harm: My UFW Story

Walking Between Worlds

My family lived on Edwards Street in Marysville, California, a small town in the Sacramento Valley. We had the last house on a dead end street, and next to our property there was a field that swept away to a levee protecting Marysville from the flood waters of the Yuba and Feather Rivers.

When we first moved to Edwards Street, my mother allowed us to venture only a little way into the field. Our boundary was a mound of dirt, left by construction crews, that had sprouted tall grass. After school, my siblings and I would run into the field, and climb to the top of the little hill. Then we would throw ourselves into the grass, and roll giggling and screeching down the side. Sometimes I would get up quickly and clamber to the top again. Other times I would lie still at the foot of the hill, hidden in the grass, and look up at the sky. Grasshoppers clicked as they jumped around me. With my fingers I traced jet trails across the sky, left by the planes at Beale Air Force Base. At dusk, Mom would call us in for dinner. There were ten of us; four children sat on either side of the table in assigned places, with mom at one end and dad at the other.

As an adolescent, I liked to take solitary walks through the fields up to the levee. With seven siblings, it was hard to find a quiet corner in our house, but the world became my private room when I walked alone. From the levee, I could turn in a complete circle and see where the sky touched the earth like an overturned bowl. To the south lay the rooftops, streets and steeples of

the town and the vast expanse of valley beyond. To the north, horses grazed near a prune orchard, and rice fields spread out in pleasing geometric patterns toward the pale peaks of the Cascades. To the east, yellow foothills gradually gave way to the snow-covered granite of the Sierra Nevada. To the west a miniature mountain range rose from the valley floor in mysterious completeness, the Sutter Buttes. Beyond the Buttes lay the gentle blue slopes of the coast range.

My favorite time was sunset. The brilliant reds and golds of the western sky would reflect in pale hues on the foothills to the east. As dusk gathered, the Buttes would turn deep purple, and one by one, lights would appear in the houses of the town. I liked to walk between worlds: the levee marked a boundary between city and country, the sunset a boundary between night and day.

Somehow those walks became prayer for me. I never intended to go to the levee to pray. I just knew that I liked to be there. But somehow, as I walked, I began to sense the goodness of creation and the presence of the One who spoke it into being. I felt happy in this in-between place and this in-between age, not quite a child, nor yet a woman, roaming the fields and levees of Marysville alone.

Things started to change when I was about fourteen. The world encroached on my solitude. I remember a busboy at Denny's who stared at me as he talked to my father. A few days later, when I was walking on the levee, a motorcyclist pulled up beside me. It was the busboy. He had a pudgy red face, and a blonde crew cut.

“You really shouldn't be walking out here alone,” he said. “Do you want a ride home?”

“No, I’m fine.” I answered. “I’m close to home.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be walking out here alone,” he warned as he drove off. A week later, I was walking on the levee again, when a car full of men stopped. They smelled of alcohol and the radio blared country western music.

“Hey,” one of them leered, “Wanna go fishing?”

“No,” I answered, edging onto the slope of the levee. I could feel pebbles give way beneath my feet and for an instant I considered sliding down the levee to get out of reach. One of the men laughed, and the driver accelerated. Tires screeched as the car sped away.

It was true. I could no longer walk on the levee alone. But I wasn’t ready to give up. Sometimes I convinced my little sister Florence, or one of my friends, to go out with me. But walking with someone usually meant talking with someone, and I longed for silence.

In the summer, I still ventured out to the levee, but at dawn rather than sunset. I would slip quietly out of the house while everyone slept. The morning air was cool and heavy with the smell of ripe peaches and fresh cut hay. In the west, the sky was dark and stars hung over the Buttes. In the east a gray light slowly infused the horizon. With the gathering dawn, I would find my way on the footpath through the fields and climb the levee. Then I would sit on the cool asphalt roadway facing the Sierras while the earth turned slowly towards the sun. Gradually the sky would brighten, and one by one the stars would disappear, until only the morning star remained. Soon the horizon was tinted with streaks of pink and red. Meadowlarks called to each other as a brilliant rim of gold broke over the top of the mountains.

Awakening to Injustice

Many years later, when I was a middle aged woman organizing parents in Oakland schools, a colleague from the National Equity Project, Victor Cary, asked me what life experiences had shaped my interest in social justice. He reasoned that a passion for social justice is usually born from a personal experience of injustice. As a white, middle-class woman I seemed an unlikely candidate for the vocation of community organizer. Then I told him about my twin sister, a very accomplished woman, who was born with autism before such a diagnosis existed. She also had a learning disability and epilepsy. My love for social justice grew from having a twin sister with disabilities. My health was perfect, and school came easily to me, while my twin sister struggled, and every victory was hard won. Some of our classmates at Notre Dame School were cruel to my sister, and I spent much of my childhood defending her from bullies.

From a young age, I became concerned with the concept of justice. I could find no reasonable explanation for the contradiction that our lives represented. We were twins. We shared the womb. We grew up in the same family. Yet my life was relatively easy, and hers was hard. How could this be explained? It was not my sister's physical condition that I sought to understand, rather the deeper meaning of difference.

My personal experience contradicted the idea of meritocracy. I had evidence that success and failure do not necessarily depend on our own efforts. I became concerned with the question of human worth. What gives a person's life value? Is it our looks, our intelligence, our physical prowess, our popularity? Is it our family? As an adolescent, I became convinced that the ordering

of the world was somehow terribly amiss. It was a time of great social change, so I also hoped that something could be done about it.

One Sunday afternoon my mother read us excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail:"

...I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society...

My mother's concern for social justice crystallized into action when she decided to boycott table grapes in 1967. She explained that by refusing to buy grapes we could help farm workers win a just wage and decent working conditions. In February of 1968, Cesar Chavez began a hunger strike. We prayed for him while he fasted, and waited anxiously as the days without food became weeks, and the weeks edged perilously close to a month. After twenty five days, a seriously weakened Chavez finally broke his fast. We watched the TV coverage as Chavez took communion, with Bobby Kennedy at his side.

Then in April, we watched as the tragic news of Dr. King's assassination was announced on the evening news. The mood in our home was subdued and brooding. Memories of an earlier assassination echoed in our hearts.

The next morning I found a different response to Dr. King's assassination at Notre Dame School. A small group of classmates stood near the front of the room, discussing the assassination. As I approached them, I heard a grower's daughter comment:

"I'm glad they killed that communist King and I hope that Chavez is next." I stopped mid-aisle as the words seared through me. Some of the kids who bullied my twin sister stood in the circle of students, nodding their heads. In that moment my personal concern with how society assigns value to a human life became fused to a larger struggle. I had a flash of insight that just as my success was not "earned," so whole groups of people received benefits they had not earned, while other groups suffered, due to a profoundly unjust social order.

Discerning a Calling to Social Justice

In 1970, when I was a freshman at Notre Dame High School, I discovered the kind of church for which Dr. King longed in his letter from the Birmingham jail. A sister of Notre Dame assigned to Brazil sent a riveting message to the Notre Dame community in Marysville. The tape recording was shared in all of the religion classes at Notre Dame High. She described a church in which catechists, sisters, priests and even bishops daily risked their lives by working with the poor to create social change. Her description of the church of Brazil made my heart "burn within me." I wanted to be like them. I went home and told my mother about this amazing church that sided with the poor, about the clergy and religious who had been imprisoned, even assassinated.

My mother recognized the name of the sister who made the tape:

“She was one of my students at Notre Dame High School in San Jose, and at the end of the year she gave me something.” Mom went to her jewelry box and took out a heart-shaped locket on a gold chain. There were flowers engraved on the left side.

“Here, Elizabeth. You can have this.”

The heart-shaped locket was my mother’s gift to me, and through her example, I began to discern a calling to social justice.

I transferred to Marysville High in the 10th grade when Notre Dame High School closed.

It felt as if the whole world opened up when I moved to Marysville High. The ethnic communities that founded the town during the gold rush were still well represented: Chinese, African American, Irish, French, Mexican and Jewish. Immigrants from Japan and the Punjab arrived in Yuba and Sutter Counties after the gold rush, to farm the land. The dust bowl brought yet another wave of settlers from Oklahoma and Arkansas. The school mascot was an Indian with a feathered head-dress, but the Maidu, the indigenous inhabitants of the land between the Yuba and Feather Rivers, were all but invisible.

My social justice awakening continued at Marysville High. In sophomore English we had to work in pairs and do an oral report on a public figure we admired. I convinced my rather timid partner that Angela Davis was worthy of our admiration, despite *or perhaps because of* being placed on the FBI’s ten most wanted list. I began to volunteer at the County Hospital, the place where indigents gained access to medical services. I joined the Pied Pipers, a club that sought to provide normal social experiences for teens with Down’s syndrome. I got credit in civics’ class

for working on the McGovern Presidential Campaign. During my senior year I also became involved with the American Field Service, an international student exchange program. I won a scholarship to spend the summer abroad after graduating from high school, and lived in Argentina for ten weeks.

When I returned from Argentina in August of 1973, I had learned to speak Spanish. I enrolled at Yuba Community College and took classes in Spanish, Latin American History and Chicano Studies. Through these classes, I became reacquainted with the United Farm Workers (UFW). One of the teachers, Sal Soto, wore a round, tightly woven, straw hat with a brim that curved down instead of up. It was the kind of hat farm workers wore to shield their faces from the sun. His vest was covered with UFW buttons, and one said “Boycott Grapes.” After class, I approached him:

“My family used to boycott grapes, but I thought the boycott was over.”

“No!” Sal responded emphatically, and his eyes widened as he shook his head. “You should come to another class I teach in the evening to learn more about it.”

Joining the Movement

Sal taught an elective course called “Farm Worker Studies.” He organized field trips all over the San Joaquin Valley. I joined the class, and visited the grape strikers in Lamont, the UFW medical clinic in Salinas, the Agbayani Retirement Village in Delano—built for Filipino Farm Workers who had been the victims of anti-Asian miscegenation laws which prevented them from marrying and starting families—and the compound called *La Paz*, that housed the UFW headquarters in the Tehachapi Mountains, East of Bakersfield.

When we traveled with Sal, we would stop and visit his family and friends along the way. In Patterson, Sal's future mother-in-law brewed lemon grass tea using leaves picked from her garden. In Arvin, I shared a double bed with two teenage sisters. The sheets were thin and I shivered all night. The mother came into the room in the morning and laughed when she saw us, then scolded her girls for hogging the blankets. She served us a huge breakfast with eggs, beans and homemade tortillas. In Gilroy we sat outside, under the stars, and roasted ears of corn on an open fire. In the morning we went to a *panadería*, or bakery, and bought sweet bread shaped like seashells and hot chocolate flavored with cinnamon. In the background the radio played *rancheras*.

When we spent the night at La Paz, we all slept in the same big room, barracks style. There was a skinny kid from Yuba City named Victor, with long hair, a wispy mustache and a slow smile. He had a crush on me. As we sat talking, a scorpion skittered across the floor, and he killed it. Everyone jumped up to look. Then we shook out the sheets and looked under the beds to make sure there weren't any other scorpions lurking nearby.

I remember having an intense discussion with Sal and the other Chicano students that night. I asked them to stop referring to me as *Anglo*, or *Gabacha*. I felt that the words were mildly derogatory and did not accurately represent my identity.

“I’m not *Anglo*, I’m *Irish*.” I insisted. “My family speaks English because Ireland was colonized by England. The Irish language was outlawed. My family was forced to leave Ireland due to famine...*one million people starved to death*. The Irish came to America in typhus ridden ships. Thousands died during the crossing and their bodies were thrown into the

sea. The Irish landed in this new world with only the belongings they could carry in their arms.” While it was true that my ancestors had been victims of oppression, it was also true that I was now part of the dominant culture in the United States. I did not fully appreciate the complex dynamics of race. I abhorred racism, yet I benefited from it every day, simply by virtue of having white skin.

The term *Anglo* grated on my nerves nonetheless. Whether real or perceived, my father believed that Protestants discriminated against him in the workplace...that being Irish Catholic had placed him at a disadvantage all his life. I also remembered the stories that Grandma and Aunt Gertrude told about their great grandmother...how she learned to speak “the Gaelic” in secret, in a hedgerow school taught by the parish priest. It felt absurd that Sal and the other students should refer to me as *Anglo*. Nor was I *Gabacha*, a term derived from the French who invaded México in the 19th Century. Finally they agreed to stop using *Anglo*, but continued to call me *Gabacha*, insisting that it was not derogatory, it simply meant I *wasn't* Chicana. I accepted this.

Sometimes Sal would invite a former UFW organizer named Pancho Botello to class as a guest speaker. Botello was handsome and tough, with bright eyes that crinkled when he smiled.

Although Botello no longer worked for the UFW, he was widely recognized among local farm workers as a leader, and a person to go to for help. Whether the situation involved unpaid wages, or a workers' compensation claim, Botello knew people's rights and was fearless in defending them.

Pancho lived simply. He owned a small mobile home located in the Richland Housing Center in Yuba City. Most of the residents of Richland were farm workers, and a large migrant camp was housed there in the summer. Botello loved the union, but he did not agree with the philosophy of nonviolence that Chavez espoused. Although Botello lived in Yuba City, he had organized for the union in other parts of the state. There was no active UFW presence in the Marysville/Yuba City area.

Whenever Botello came to class, I would ask different versions of the same question:

“Why isn’t the UFW organizing in Marysville and Yuba City?” One day Pancho had an answer:

“There is going to be a UFW office in Marysville, and you’re going to open it.”

I was surprised and intrigued by Botello’s proposal. I talked the idea over with Sal and his wife, María; I also consulted my mother, my siblings and my closest friends. In the fall of 1974, after much thought and prayer, I developed a plan to take a year off from college and work for the farm workers.

I was able to secure a donation of \$1500 for the UFW office from the Volunteer Organization at Yuba County Hospital, and I got a donation of office furniture from the Bogue Women’s Club. While \$1500 doesn’t seem like much now, in 1974 it was enough to pay a year’s rent on a small, store front office. Botello selected a location that had been home to the UFW once before, during the DiGiorgio strike. The office was on the first floor of the Olympic Hotel, between the Fifth Street Bridge and the Rideout Medical Center in Marysville. When I called the union

office in La Paz to tell them about the donation of money and furniture, I realized something was wrong. No one knew what I was talking about... the union had no plans to open an office in Marysville.

Meeting Cesar Chavez

Confused, I went to Sal, who then called Botello. Pancho admitted that he had no authority to hire me. Sal asked him to set up a meeting with Cesar to see what could be done, since I had already taken a leave of absence from Yuba College and had secured donations for the office. Botello agreed.

One week later five of us got into Sal's car and headed down the San Joaquin Valley to the Tehachapi Mountains. Botello was hung over and we had to stop when he got sick. When we arrived at the union headquarters, we checked-in at the guard's gate. No one knew we were coming. Botello had not made an appointment with Cesar and we had traveled six hours to get to La Paz. The guard called Cesar's administrative assistant to see what could be done. Cesar agreed to see us.

We sat on a wooden bench in the hallway outside Cesar's office and waited. The union headquarters occupied a former tuberculosis hospital. At the entrance there was a receptionist sitting in a small room with a sliding glass window. She looked like Lily Tomlin's character "Ernestine," managing an old switchboard with a tangle of cords. Small offices opened onto a long hallway with a scuffed, brown floor. The walls were decorated with vivid posters from *El Taller Gráfico*, the UFW print shop. The pictures included a fierce Aztec Warrior crushing blood

stained grapes in his hands; Pancho Villa sitting tall on a horse, with a rifle strapped to his back; Emiliano Zapata, looking sternly at the camera from behind a thick mustache, his chest criss-crossed with bullet clips, and next to Zapata, there was a portrait of Cesar Chavez with a quote about nonviolence.

Finally Cesar came out to greet us. He invited us into his office. I remember his eyes...they were different, dark, yet luminous...and they drew me in. His voice was soft, and he spoke with the rhythmic cadence of the California Barrio. There was the hint of a smile near his lips. His hair was straight and dark, tinged with gray. He was almost the same height as me.

Cesar asked us to sit down. He chatted with Botello, whom he hadn't seen for more than a year. Then he listened as Pancho told our story. Finally Cesar turned to me and asked why I wanted to work for the UFW.

"Organizing is not a nine-to-five job," he warned. "Don't do this because you want to be thanked. No one is going to thank you. You have to look inside yourself and find your own reason for doing this work...a reason strong enough to sustain you."

"I want to do this work because of my faith," I answered without hesitation. "I feel called to work for social justice." Cesar was quiet and thought for a moment. Then he said,

"I need somebody in Santa María. If you really want to work for the UFW, I can put you there."

"No!" I objected. "The whole reason I'm here is for the farm worker movement to reach Marysville and Yuba City. If money is an issue, we can pay for the office ourselves...I can live at

home, and volunteer my time.” Sal, María, Victor and Botello then assured Cesar that they were committed to making the Marysville UFW office a success. Cesar was quiet again. He sat back in his chair and thought. Finally he said,

“Ok. I’ll open a service center in Marysville.” Smiles broke out around the room. María gleamed at me quietly. Then Cesar began a crash course on how to run a service center. The UFW service centers helped farm workers navigate government programs created to assist the working poor, such as workers’ compensation, food stamps, medi-cal, social security and public housing. Service centers also helped workers to file income tax returns and to find trustworthy immigration attorneys. Cesar advised me never to make referrals to government offices, rather to personally accompany the workers, so that I could act as their advocate.

As the service center built a solid reputation in the community, trust of the UFW would grow. The UFW didn’t accept money for the services, but each person was invited to participate in union activities. The workers were asked to host meetings in their homes and to invite family, friends and co-workers to learn about the UFW. Gradually a network of relationships was built up through the service center. Cesar asked me to come back to La Paz in January for a training session with Fred Ross, Sr.

Building Relationships Through Service

Our visit ended and we stepped outside. It was twilight and the mountain air was cold. We got back into Sal’s car for the long ride home. As we drove down the mountain, I felt the weight of the world descend on my shoulders. I was nineteen years old, and about to open a UFW service

center for farm workers in Yuba and Sutter Counties. As the enormity of what had happened broke through, I started to pray silently...

“Jesus, please help me. I can’t do this without you.”

I returned to La Paz in January of 1975. There was a dusting of snow on the rugged peaks surrounding the union headquarters. The heater didn’t work in the main building, so people wore thick sweaters. Space heaters hummed in a couple of rooms, their glowing coils casting about as much heat as Bob Cratchit’s single lump of coal. The training took place in a bare room with windows that looked out at the mountains. We sat on folding chairs gathered in a semi-circle.

Fred Ross Sr. was a tall, thin man with weathered skin and white hair. He began the training session by telling us how he met Cesar. Fred was a community organizer working in a rough San Jose neighborhood called *Sal Si Puedes*...get out if you can! As Fred met people in the neighborhood, many suggested he should talk to Cesar Chavez. Cesar was reluctant to meet with Fred, however, thinking he might be a researcher from the university who had come “...to count how many beans the Mexican’s eat.” Cesar needed to test Fred, before deeming him trustworthy. He finally met with Fred, and agreed to hold a house meeting, but secretly arranged for his cousin Manuel to disrupt the gathering and teach the outsider a lesson. Half way through the house meeting, however, Cesar had become intrigued with the idea of community organizing. When Manuel began to disrupt the meeting, Cesar had to get him to stop.

Cesar became an organizer with the Community Service Organization (CSO), an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, headed by Saul Alinsky. In 1962, Cesar broke away from CSO because he wanted to organize farm workers.

The first grape strike started in Delano in 1965. Filipino crews who belonged to another labor organization called the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee walked out of the vineyards, then called for a strike. They asked Cesar's fledgling group, the National Farm Workers Association, to join them. Cesar hadn't planned to act so soon and did not feel ready for such a large undertaking. After two weeks of deliberation, however, Cesar and his leaders decided to join the strike.

The two organizations merged the following year, and the UFW was born. The union signed the first contracts with grape growers in 1969. The agreements were won through a consumer boycott. Farm workers fanned out from the San Joaquin Valley across the nation, into every major urban market, telling their story in front of supermarkets, in people's living rooms, and in church halls. The UFW won many allies among people like my mother, who were far removed from the struggle. The economic power of the boycott finally forced the growers to negotiate.

When it was time for the UFW to renew its contracts in 1973, the grape growers followed the example of lettuce growers in Salinas. They enlisted the aid of the Teamsters Union, and signed "sweetheart" deals instead. The UFW called a strike which turned tragically violent. The growers brought in armed security guards to intimidate workers on the picket line. Two workers were murdered, and the UFW launched another grape boycott.

After describing the history of the union, Fred taught us about organizing. House meetings were a major strategy used by the UFW. First the organizer would conduct personal visits, and get to know the workers...to understand their stories and concerns. Then the organizer tested people's leadership by asking them to hold a meeting in their home and to invite family, friends and co-workers to attend.

The meeting would begin with people introducing themselves and sharing their experiences. Stories of abuse were distressingly common, from being cheated out of wages, to exposure to pesticides, to not having drinking water or toilets in the field. Then the organizer told Cesar's story, connecting it to the pain the workers had expressed, but with a twist...Cesar made the decision to organize and change unjust working conditions. He formed the United Farm Workers Union.

The goal of the house meeting was to weave the individual stories of the workers into a collective story of struggle and transformation. The house meeting was a call to conversion, an invitation for people to voice their pain, and then to move beyond pain into action. It was hoped that workers would identify with Cesar's decision to organize...that each person in the room would make their own personal decision to organize as well...to join together in a nonviolent struggle for social justice. Each person in the house meeting was invited to identify a next step, one by one, in front of the others. Perhaps they might host their own house meeting, or become a member of the union, or make a financial contribution to the UFW.

Fred video-taped us as we role-played personal visits and house-meetings. He critiqued and encouraged us. Towards the end of the week, Cesar came to talk with us. The second boycott was in full swing, and it covered multiple products...table grapes, lettuce and Gallo Wine...yet victory seemed illusive. Although the circumstances were bleak, Cesar did not give up. Rather he mused about forming a union not just for farm workers, but for all poor people in the United States. He encouraged us to reach out to anyone who was suffering in poverty.

When I returned to Marysville, I learned that the office space Botello had selected would not be ready for occupancy for several weeks. Father Bishop, from St. Isidor's Church in Yuba City, gave us temporary space at the Centro San Felipe, a Catholic community center located near the Richland Housing Project. Fr. Bishop introduced me at the Spanish masses in Marysville and Yuba City. Meanwhile Sal arranged for the Internal Revenue Service to train a group of volunteers, so we could run tax clinics for farm workers in the evenings. After a few weeks, the UFW service center opened in its own space and gradually the word began to spread.

The first few workers who came in had been injured on the job and needed help filing workers' compensation claims. I remember a young man who was exposed to pesticide. He had been sent to work in a field that had just been sprayed. There was a painful rash on his forearms and the palms of his hands were stained yellow. I helped him fill out the initial paperwork for a claim. The workers compensation system was difficult to navigate, but eventually I was able to connect with a bilingual attorney from Dixon. He called himself "Crusader Rabbit" and would come to Marysville on Saturday mornings to do workers' comp clinics.

Activity picked up dramatically over the course of the spring because of legislation the UFW had pushed, giving farm workers the right to unemployment insurance. As word of the new program spread, the State Employment Office was flooded with applicants, most of whom did not speak English. The State needed help handling the caseload, so they arranged for the UFW to do a pre-screening of applicants.

I was trained by the local employment office to help farm workers fill out the application and gather the necessary documents before their appointment. Remembering Cesar's advice not to do referrals, I accompanied workers to the interviews at the employment office to be sure they were treated fairly. Later, I followed up with personal visits, and asked people to host meetings in their homes. Most agreed.

Sometimes I would travel to outlying towns such as Live Oak or Rio Oso to meet with workers' and their families. Some workers lived on the growers' property, in houses tucked amid the peach orchards, at the end of gravel roads. The houses on tomato ranches were like little specks, lost in the vast expanse of fields extending out to distant levees. Many workers lived in town, and I became familiar with the enclaves of farm workers in Marysville, Yuba City, Linda and Olivehurst...the cottages hidden behind the front house, on the streets without sidewalks.

The families were warm and gracious, quick to offer food and drink. I felt honored that they allowed me into their lives. There was a richness of culture, family and faith in even the humblest dwellings ...pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe adorned the walls, sometimes with a rosary draped over the frame and a votive candle flickering underneath...there were babies

wrapped in soft, hand crocheted blankets and wide-eyed children peering shyly from behind their mothers' skirts... there were white table cloths, cross-stitched with colorful flowers and protected by clear plastic covers...and there were gardens...incredible gardens with medicinal herbs, tomatoes, chile, and tall rows of corn. There may have been bottles of liquor in the kitchen, but I was always offered Nescafe and *galletas*, cookies...I was treated with respect because I represented Cesar Chavez and the UFW...I represented hope.

During the spring I was able to conduct dozens of meetings across Yuba and Sutter Counties, getting to know hundreds of workers and the local agricultural industry in the process. I kept careful records of the house meetings, with sign-in sheets and contact information. The level of activity increased yet again when Cesar convinced the newly elected Governor, Jerry Brown, to mediate negotiations between the UFW and Growers. The outcome was the first law in the nation to protect the right of farm workers to organize: the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The UFW mobilized workers, students and allies from the faith community to participate in a massive rally in Livingston, near the Gallo Vineyards, in support of the legislation. The Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed and signed into law by the Governor.

An Historic Moment: Elections in the Fields

Due to the seasonal nature of farm work, the law took effect immediately, in the summer of 1975. Cesar decided to walk from San Diego to Sacramento, to promote representational elections and create enthusiasm for organizing. In order for an election to be conducted on a particular ranch, the workers needed to sign union authorization cards. When a majority of workers had signed the cards, then the union could ask for an election. Marysville and Yuba City

were not on the map for Cesar's walk and it seemed there were no plans to hold elections north of Sacramento. I called La Paz to find out how we could be included. I was told that service centers could not legally collect authorization cards, only field offices. After conferring with Botello and Sal, I decided to catch up with Cesar on the march and ask that the status of our office be changed from a service center to a field office.

When the Marysville contingent joined the march, I worked my way up to the front, past the bodyguards, to have a conversation with Cesar. As we walked, he queried me about the number of house meetings I had conducted and how many workers had been involved. When I told him the number, he seemed incredulous. So I reached into my backpack and pulled out the sign-in sheets. Cesar flipped through them, and shook his head in disbelief.

“Ok. I'm going to change your status to a field office,” he said. Once again we returned home jubilant.

It was late June and the migrant workers began arriving for the summer harvests. The government camp at the Richland Housing Center was teeming with new people, many with Texas license plates. Every available apartment, cabin and shabby hotel room in Marysville and Yuba City was occupied by families and single men who hoped to work in the peach and tomato harvests. Over the winter and spring, we had established a firm base of support among local workers, now we needed to do intensive organizing among the migrants.

I was given a budget and hired four farm workers and a Mecha student from Yuba College as organizers. A UFW lawyer was assigned to handle the legal aspects of union representation

elections overseen by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). His name was Peter Haberfeld, and he had worked in Marysville before, with California Rural Legal Assistance. Peter became my life long friend. We would work together again many years later in Oakland schools. Peter and I had friends in common in Marysville, including the Harris family. Kwasi Harris, a young Black scholar and activist, joined us for two weeks to help with the election campaign. Botello now employed a staff of his own in the Concilio in Yuba City, having received a federal grant. He could not directly organize, but he leveraged his relationships on behalf of the union.

The UFW made a decision to focus on the tomato industry statewide, and so we also focused our local efforts on the tomato ranches in Yuba, Sutter and Colusa counties. The tomato crews worked on harvesting machines around the clock. We had access to the workers before and after their shifts, and during the lunch break. The workers would call to give us the location of the crew, which changed daily as the harvest moved from field to field. We went out at dawn, noon, dusk and even midnight to talk to workers. We asked for their contact information, and then followed-up with visits to their homes.

The migrants who lived in the government camp had access to free medical care and child care. Among the migrants who lived outside the camp, health was a major concern. I remember one young couple who lived in a shack on the edge of a peach orchard. They got their water from an outside spigot, and used a discarded pesticide container to wash their dishes. The children in another family seemed to be malnourished, perhaps suffering from parasites. The children were extremely small for their ages and had dark shadows under their eyes. The parents were

overweight and their skin was flaccid and pale. Generally speaking, it was not difficult to interest the migrant workers in the UFW and they quickly joined the local people in signing authorization cards.

The first election victory at Herota Brothers ranch was followed by more victories at Carter Farms, Halsey Ranch, and Pacific Farms. We lost a couple of elections as well. At one ranch we started organizing too late, when there were only two weeks remaining for the season. The year round workers were solid Chavistas, but the harvest crews were undocumented men from México who later proved vulnerable to intimidation. We won the Sutter County ranch of a statewide corporation called Anderson Farms, but unfortunately the election was lost in other counties to the south.

When the tomato harvest ended, Cesar asked me to go to Napa and help with elections among the vintners. The UFW had two long standing contracts in the Napa Valley, but no field office. Local union members had devised their own method of organizing at the non-union vineyards. Their approach was secretive and occurred mostly at night. They would slip into the labor camps and talk to the workers when the foremen were far away in the comfort of their homes. The local leaders didn't want or need access during the day, because they feared reprisal against union sympathizers.

The workers were happy to have a staff person assigned to the Napa Valley, but they didn't want me directly involved in collecting the authorization cards. Instead, they wanted me to open an office in St. Helena, and provide a public face to the union presence in the valley. The UFW

won several representational elections in the Napa Valley that fall. While I admired the workers' self-sufficiency, I also felt a little like window dressing. When the harvest season ended in late November, I asked Cesar to send me back to Marysville.

I attended regular meetings in La Paz for field office directors. Frequently the whole UFW board would attend these meetings and debate strategy and next steps in front of the directors. I felt so incredibly lucky, as a 20 year old, to witness history unfold in front of me.

During one of these meetings in La Paz, a couple of volunteers got married, and there was a huge party. Liquor flowed freely, and I imbibed, even though I wasn't yet 21. Everyone was dancing, including me. To my surprise, Cesar asked me to dance. How thrilling! Of course I said "yes." But when the song ended, Cesar didn't leave, rather he wanted to keep dancing with me. Several more songs played. At a certain point, a couple started to dance near us. When Cesar's back was turned to the woman, she made a dramatic gesture to me, slashing her hand across her throat, and mouthing something I could not understand. Alarmed, when the music stopped, I told Cesar I needed to go to the bathroom. I ducked outside, and a friend who was an attorney in the legal department, Mary Mocine, followed me. Soon the woman who had gestured joined us. She explained that Cesar's wife, Helen, was getting jealous because he was dancing with me. She said that I was being very disrespectful to Helen. I was mortified. I thanked her for telling me. Mary asked me if I was ok. She suggested that maybe it was time to go back to my room and call it a night. But the night felt young to me. I didn't want to go back to my room. I promised not to dance with Cesar, and I went back inside. A farmworker was standing near the door as I entered and he immediately invited me to dance. He was a young chicano, near my age, and I was happy

to once again be enjoying myself. We had only danced a couple of songs, when Cesar tapped in. “I was so jealous watching you dance with that boy,” he whispered in my ear. Then I understood why Mary wanted me to leave the party. I needed to get out of there. I left as soon as the song ended. This time I felt dizzy, and Mary was once again at my side. She walked with me back to my room to be sure that I made it ok.

The next day the UFW Board and the Field Office Directors continued to meet. At one point, during an afternoon break, Cesar came over to talk.

“You are a *femme fatale*,” he said. I didn’t know how to respond. I was kind of pretty, in a plain sort of way, nothing like the glamorous image I associated with a *femme fatale*. I occupied that peculiar territory to which boys assign girls who are smart. I wasn’t a virgin, nor was I promiscuous. Before I started working for the UFW, Botello told me that as a union organizer, I wasn’t going to have time for boyfriends. This caused me to have second thoughts about the whole thing. I went to talk to Sal, and he laughed.

“Liz,” he reassured me, “if you are a *good* organizer, I am sure you will be able to organize time to go out on dates.” Perhaps the reason that I took Botello’s admonition so seriously is that the sisters of Notre Dame were actively trying to recruit me into their community during this time, and I was giving the matter some thought. The sisters came with me to UFW marches, and I went to the convent to pray with them on Wednesday evenings. I was 20, and there were a lot of things I was trying to figure out.

A few weeks later, something odd happened. Cesar called and told me he was going to send a package for the daughter of Jose Luis, a colleague of Botello’s who was a big time UFW

supporter. Cesar said that when the package arrived, he wanted me to personally deliver it to the girl. He did not want me to give it to anyone else to take to her, I had to deliver it personally. I agreed to do so, although the request felt strange. The package came, and I called Jose Luis and told him that Cesar had sent something for his daughter and wanted me to hand deliver it to her. We agreed on a time for me to come over to his house. When I arrived, Jose Luis and his wife, Guadalupe, were waiting with excitement. They called their daughter out of her room, and we all sat down in the living room. Their daughter was a high school student. She was beautiful, with thick black hair that hung down her back. She opened the package while her parents and I watched. She pulled out an autographed picture of Cesar, in which he looked like a movie star.

“Oh mija, this is such an honor,” Guadalupe said. I stayed a bit longer, making small talk, but the situation felt awkward. Then I remembered what Cesar had said to me at the dance: that he felt “jealous” when I was dancing with the boy. For a split second, I wondered if Cesar was trying to make *me* jealous, but I quickly dismissed this thought as being utterly ridiculous. As time went by, I developed an explanation for this odd event that went something like “fame has gone to Cesar’s head.” Back in the 70’s no one talked about “grooming,” and it never occurred to me that this girl might be in danger. Now, 51 years later, thanks to the New York Times, I know better.

The UFW’s success in winning representational elections across the state sent a shock wave through California agribusiness. Growers lobbied the state legislature to block new funding for the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). Without the funds, there was no way to implement the law. For most of 1976, the farm workers’ right to organize was placed on hold. The UFW fought back by qualifying an initiative for the ballot. Proposition 14 would have

placed funding for the ARLB into the state constitution, beyond the reach of Agribusiness' influence. Unfortunately, despite the best organizing efforts of the UFW, Proposition 14 went down to defeat. Cesar was bitterly disappointed. Shortly after this, the tone of communication between La Paz and the field offices began to change.

Early Warning Signs

I remember participating in a strange conference call for Field Office Directors. Cesar described his vision of the union as a new form of community, where everything would be mutually shared and all communication would be transparent. Cesar went on to say that soon the field offices would be connected by technology, and that he would be able to monitor conversations happening anywhere in the state, simply by flipping a switch. This was decades before cell phones and the internet. The comment felt a little ominous, like Big Brother spying on people, and it also felt farfetched. I dismissed the remark as one of Cesar's utopian musings. Like the poor people's union, it would never come to pass.

But in the next few weeks, I started hearing rumors about something else...the Synanon Game. Cesar wanted all UFW staff to participate at some point in the game, in order to build a sense of collective identity as described in the phone conference. Reports about the game from the first participants were disturbing. Individuals were put on the "hot seat" in a circle of eight or ten people, and then verbally attacked. No one could speak in their defense. The accusations made

against the person did not have to be true. Lies were an integral part of the game. The only people at La Paz who were spared from this bizarre exercise were a handful of nuns.

An almost palpable feeling of suspicion and mistrust began to grow in the UFW. I heard one plausible theory for the shift in organizational culture. Cesar believed that the Proposition 14 campaign had been sabotaged by communist infiltrators. He was using the Synanon Game as a tool for surfacing and purging disloyal staff.

It was during this time of internal discord that the legislature voted to restore funds to the ARLB, and the union decided to focus its organizing efforts on the table grape industry. In early December of 1976, the Marysville office was closed and I was transferred to Coachella to organize under Eliseo Medina. The UFW wanted to hold elections on ranches they had lost to the teamsters in sweetheart deals. The UFW organizing campaign would force the Teamsters either to work authentically with farm workers, or to abandon the fields altogether.

A New Terrain

Coachella was a very different organizing environment from the Marysville - Yuba City area, and from the Napa Valley as well. The major obstacle to farm worker organizing in Northern California was grower intimidation. Workers were afraid of being fired. In Coachella there was an additional obstacle: disillusionment with the UFW. The union had stumbled in managing the first contracts. Coachella farm workers had many complaints, or *quejas*, about favoritism in the operation of the UFW hiring hall. They also complained about denial of benefits under the UFW health plan. The operation of hiring halls had proven so problematic that the union decided to

discard the concept. In response to the second *queja*, the union set up a system for evaluating and redressing workers' complaints about denial of coverage under the health plan.

I was assigned to organize two table grape ranches. The assignments were written on chart paper and posted in the front of the office. As I found my assignments and wrote down the names of my ranches—Carian and KK Larsen—two male organizers began to ridicule my assignment. I turned and confronted them.

“Why are you laughing at my ranches?” I asked.

“You got KK Larsen,” they answered. “That’s a joke. No one can organize there.” I later learned that during the first grape boycott, KK Larsen paid a group of his farm workers to follow UFW members across the country and tell an anti-union story. The grower was obsessively opposed to the UFW, and at least one big family who worked for him was anti-UFW as well.

But I also learned that for Eliseo Medina, there were no “joke” assignments. I was expected to organize at KK Larsen with the same amount of effort as any other ranch in the valley. I was placed on an organizing team led by David Martinez. I knew David because he had conducted contract negotiations with the growers in Marysville and Yuba City. On my first day in Coachella, I joined an afternoon staff meeting and listened to organizers talk about workers they had met during the lunch time access period. I recognized the name of a migrant family from Yuba City...the Becerras. They were working on a citrus ranch and the father had signed an authorization card that day. Eliseo put the authorization card into my hand and said,

“Let’s visit them. I’ll go with you.” I knew that Eliseo was testing me and I felt nervous. I hoped this was the same Graciano Becerra that I knew, and not a cold call. Eliseo helped me find the worker’s home in a group of low, shed-like buildings on the outskirts of town. I knocked, and a woman answered without opening the door.

“Who is it?” She yelled.

“It’s Liz Sullivan from the farm workers’ union in Yuba City.” I shouted through the door.

“*Who?*” She asked again.

“It’s *Liz* from Yuba City. I work for the UFW.” The door cracked open and the woman peered out at me:

“*Liz?*” she said in surprise. Then she turned and called to her husband, “*Viejo*, look! It’s *la campesina* from Yuba City!” She laughed and opened the door wide, inviting us in. The whole family gathered around in amazement. Eliseo chuckled about the nickname they had given me, *la campesina*, the farm worker. They served us *café con canela*, coffee with cinnamon, and told us about the ranch where they were working.

“I don’t have to worry about you, Liz.” Eliseo said as we left. “You’re going to do just fine.”

I made a new friend on the Coachella staff, Meta Mendel, a petite young woman from San Francisco. Meta lived with her boyfriend, a Filipino farm worker named Rudy Reyes, who had been one of the original Delano strikers in 1965. They invited me to dinner at their house shortly after I arrived in Coachella. Rudy literally lived in a shack on the edge of a ranch. He had decorated the space fancifully using discarded odds and ends...found objects put to practical and

artistic purpose...it was a whimsical sanctuary, a world that could not be imagined from the outside. Rudy cooked us dinner and I tasted *lumpia*, Filipino egg rolls, for the first time.

Meta and I were the only women assigned to organize ranches for the Coachella election campaign. There were many women on the Coachella staff, but they were not organizers. Some worked in the service center, others in the clinic, and others for the legal department. Some women held administrative support positions in the field office. Ruth Shy was a former nun who had been the field office director before Eliseo arrived, and now she supervised a team of organizers.

Meta and I would often go out to the fields together to support each other. Meta had been assigned a large citrus ranch. I liked to accompany her to the citrus groves in the morning. We would get up before dawn and drive out into the valley, to the place where the crew was gathering. The workers couldn't start picking until a certain air temperature had been reached, or else the fruit would taste sour. Workers would light fires to warm their hands, and tell stories while they waited. We watched the sun rise over the mountains to the east, a crest of gold glimmering amid streaks of pink cloud.

The soil in the citrus groves and the vineyards was sandy. When I scooped it up and let it fall through my fingers, tiny bits of shell would appear. People said that the word "Coachella" was derived from the Spanish word *conchilla*, which means "little shell." It was difficult to drive on the sandy ranch roads because sometimes the car's wheels would lose traction and spin. I

learned to get the car moving again by putting cardboard under the tires, but I needed help pushing the car forward.

The desert was strange and beautiful. Towering date palm groves formed a canopy that cast deep, cool shade and absorbed sound. Voices and footsteps traveled a short distance then fell silently to the earth. The date palm workers were young, athletic and unafraid of heights. With the help of a harness, they scaled two or three stories up the trunk of a tree, to pick the heavy clusters of dates at the top. Date milkshakes were a favorite treat among UFW organizers. We argued about whether Hadley's or Laflin's made the best date shakes...the Hadley shakes were thick and had chunks of date, but I preferred the smooth nutmeg flavor of Laflin shakes.

Occasional wind storms covered the streets and sidewalks of Coachella with drifts of sand. The visibility on the highway would decline to zero, and the air turned brown. Sand entered houses through the cracks under doors and around windows. We covered our faces to avoid breathing in the tiny granules, and a gritty dust settled in our scalps and shoes and the folds of our clothes.

When it rained, everything flooded. After one storm passed, we ventured out into the desert, to see a rare flowering cactus. We came across boulders strewn in a dry creek bed. There was a danger sign that warned of flash floods. The land seemed so barren, without even a trickle of water. How could a dangerous flood suddenly appear out of nowhere? Where did the water come from? Yet local people assured me that water could rage through the desert, catching people off guard and sweeping them away. I puzzled over how one could drown in the desert. In Marysville, we knew the source of the danger, and built levees to protect ourselves.

Pete Velasco, the Secretary-Treasurer of the UFW, and another of the original Filipino strikers from Delano, came to Coachella to do an inspection of union cars. The UFW fleet consisted mostly of Plymouth Valiants and Dodge Darts. My car was an exception, a Chevy Malibu. It had been donated to the union by a young couple from UC Davis who spent the summer working with me in Marysville. They named the car “Crisco” because it was big and white, like a glob of shortening about to melt in the pan. When Pete Velasco got to the Chevy, he scowled and shouted:

“These tires are completely bald!” He turned and looked at me sternly, shaking his head. “The tires must be replaced immediately.” Then his expression softened. “It’s not the car I care about, but the person inside of it. You are not safe driving like this!” He turned back and moved on to inspect the next car.

For Christmas of 1976, Eliseo gave us two days off, not enough time to return to Marysville. So I drove the Chevy with new tires to my Uncle Chuck’s house in Los Angeles and celebrated Christmas with his family. Uncle Chuck was my Godfather and the surprise visit delighted him. His daughter Katie had worked with me during the summer, and she told him what I needed for Christmas: a watch.

Vulnerability and Risk

I returned to Coachella and continued making inroads with the workers from the ranches I had been assigned. The KK Larsen ranch was a truly difficult organizing environment. During one access period as I walked down the rows of vines talking to workers, people began signaling me with their eyes in strange ways that I couldn’t understand. Then the next worker in the row

turned around, and it was KK Larsen himself—a tall, older, well-built white man wearing stereotypical Mexican clothes—a sombrero and serape. I don't remember the exchange between us, but his message didn't need words.

After several visits to the Larsen ranch, I met a young couple from Mexico who wanted to learn more about the union. They had the practice of parking their car at the end of the long row where they were working, and moving the car periodically as they changed rows, because their toddler child was inside the car. They had rigged blankets up to block the sun, and kept the windows partially open for air flow. But this was the desert, and I felt immediate concern for the child. I visited the couple at home in the evening, and they explained that Mr. Larsen held regular meetings with the workers, and that he had promised to build them houses. He cast a vision of a collective village where everyone would have what they need. Cesar's vision of the UFW as a new kind of community echoed oddly for me. I asked them if they believed that the grower was going to build them a home. They laughed and admitted that it was unlikely. Then I broached the subject of their son being left in the car. I offered to do some research and see if I could find a daycare center for them. They seemed as skeptical about the possibility of a child care center as they were about the grower's houses. I knew there was a free day care center for migrant farm workers in Yuba City, so I hoped there was something similar in Coachella. But when I went to the UFW Service Center and described the situation, the director told me that the public day care center in the Coachella Valley had a long waiting list. The couple could fill out an application for a spot, but there would be no immediate solution to their problem.

In comparison to KK Larsen, Carian Ranch was a more straightforward organizing environment. Most of the workers were men who lived in labor camps located on ranch property. The ranch had four camps, but only two were open during the winter pruning season: a “Filipino Camp” on the east side of town, and a “Mexican Camp” on the west. The Filipino workers were mostly older men. One of the workers was named Pancho. He played the guitar, and liked to sing Freddie Fender songs.

I visited the Filipino camp on a Sunday afternoon, and found the workers gathered outside in a circle, yelling and gesturing. When I got closer, I was surprised to see a cock fight in progress. The birds had razors strapped to their legs. The workers invited me to stay, but I found an excuse to leave. The Mexican Camp was located on a road that connected Coachella to the neighboring town of Indio. The workers’ barracks were located at the center of a vineyard, next to the grower’s home. The tone of the Mexican Camp was subdued, and alcohol flowed freely...the grower provided the kegs of beer.

A Chavista from Salinas named Lupe Iñiguez, lived in the Mexican Camp. He traveled to Coachella for the winter pruning season, and then returned to the lettuce fields in late spring. He warned me that during the peak harvest season in June, the foreman planned to bring his entire family up from Jalisco to pick grapes. Lupe thought it would be impossible to win a representational election, with so many workers related to the foreman. I shared this information with David and Eliseo, but they seemed unconcerned and told me to continue organizing.

There was an ex-Chavista from Mexicali working at the ranch with his son. Under the first UFW contracts, his wife had become seriously ill, and she was denied health benefits. She died. There was something about the old man that I liked. He was quiet, hard-working and dignified...a person of integrity. He always spoke with me respectfully despite the pain and betrayal he felt regarding the union's failure to cover his wife's illness. I carefully took down his information and forwarded the case to La Paz for review. A few weeks later, La Paz responded that nothing could be done for him.

In early February 1977, after the organizers had spent several weeks conducting personal visits and house meetings at their assigned ranches, Eliseo decided it was time to hold the first general membership meeting. The plan was to fill the local elementary school auditorium with enthusiastic Chavistas, and build momentum for the election campaign.

On the afternoon of the big meeting, David Martinez convened the organizers on his team. We sat around a long table and reported how many people were coming from the different ranches. There was a friendly spirit of competition among the organizers to see who could bring more workers to the meeting. David got us pumped up to make one last push.

Meta and I talked briefly before we left for our respective ranches. I decided to go to the Mexican camp because there were more people there, but workers from both camps had committed to come. I drove my car on the sandy road through the vineyard, and then walked down the long rows of barracks handing out fliers for the meeting. Two young men took fliers

and said they needed a ride. Their interest surprised me. I had a list of people I thought would come, based on conversations during the past week. These young men were not on my list.

One was the son of the ex-Chavista whose wife had been denied medical benefits. I was acquainted with him on a superficial level, just enough to say hello. The other young man was the foreman's son. I never talked to him, because I felt it would be a waste of time. I was suspicious of his interest in the meeting and thought he might be coming to spy. I paused for a moment, before answering their question about a ride. There wasn't time to do a personal visit to really understand the motivations of the two young men. I wanted to be near the top when organizers tallied their turn-out numbers the next morning, so I made a snap decision to accept the young men's interest at face value, and I agreed to give them a ride to the meeting.

The event was a success. A huge crowd spilled out the doors of the school auditorium. Eliseo Medina stood at the front and spoke. I don't remember much about what happened except that the two workers I had given a ride to disappeared. They went outside during the middle of the meeting and never returned. When the meeting ended, Eliseo left for the airport. He was flying to the Midwest to calm some trouble among boycott staffers.

Carol, a ruddy blonde from Minnesota who worked as an administrative assistant for Eliseo, approached me as the crowd dispersed and invited me to a party at the Grace Street house in Coachella. At first I said "yes," but then the two workers reappeared. "I'll try to make it, but I have to give them a ride home," I told Carol.

Violence in the Vineyard

As we drove back to the ranch, the young men started asking me personal questions...where did I live? Where was my family from? How had I gotten involved with the UFW? As we got closer to the turn-off for the camp, they asked if they could come over to my house. The request was unusual, and I hesitated for a moment.

The goal of organizing is to empower those who have been cast to the margins of society, rendered invisible, yet there is an initial imbalance of power between the organizer and the workers. Part of the discipline of any union or community organization is to manage that imbalance so that the organizer fades into the background as people begin to exercise their own power and are accountable to each other.

Organizers spend a lot of time in people's homes, and enter deeply into their lives. We learn their stories. We meet their families. We understand their fears, their hopes, and their dreams.

Transformative relationships are reciprocal, and a good organizer shares something of himself or herself, yet also maintains a professional distance. The relationships we are building are public, not private. But in the most idealistic and egalitarian of worlds, shouldn't a worker be as welcome in an organizer's home as the organizer is welcome in the worker's home? As a twenty-one year old, I struggled with these sorts of questions.

We approached the turn-off for the camp, and I decided to take a chance and let the workers see the apartment I shared with other UFW staff in Indio. I tried to create a public frame for the purpose of the visit, however, by offering to show them a recently published book about Cesar.

When we got to the JJJ apartments, they came in and sat down on the sofa. They were surprised when David Martinez walked out of the kitchen with a plate of food in his hands. I attempted to explain the communal living arrangements of the UFW staff, but their baffled expressions revealed a cultural gap. There was no way that an unmarried man and an unmarried woman who were not in a sexual relationship and were not blood relatives should be living in the same house. I showed them the book about Cesar and they flipped through the pages for a few moments. Then they lost interest and asked to go back to the camp.

Again, as we approached the turn-off, they asked me to take them somewhere else...a liquor store a couple of miles away. I felt irritated by the request, but I drove them to the liquor store anyway. As I sat in the parking lot, I considered simply leaving them there and going home. I decided against it, however, because if I stranded workers a couple of miles from the camp it might create hard feelings that would make organizing more difficult.

They came out with beer and offered me one. I told them I didn't want to drink because I had to get up early the next morning and go with Meta to the citrus groves. We returned to the ranch, and I turned onto an access road, driving past long rows of vines in the direction of the camp. We were in the middle of the vineyard when the tires got stuck in the sand. Rotating sprinklers showered the vines from above, and water intermittently hit the roof of the car.

"We have to get out and push," I told them, hoping we wouldn't get completely soaked by the sprinkler. They were drinking and didn't move to get out of the car, then one of them said:

"We want to have sex with you." A sick feeling shot through me as I realized for the first time that I was in danger. I knew I needed to get out of the car and get away from them.

“I don’t want to have sex,” I said. I opened the door and got out of the Chevy. I started to walk away. They got out of the car and followed me. I began to run and they chased me. They overtook me and knocked me to the ground. I fought to get away from them, but they grabbed my legs and dragged me through the wet sand back to the car. They lifted me up and pushed me into the back seat. The ex-Chavista’s son got into the back with me, while the foreman’s son got into the front.

I kicked and punched him, yelling “No! Leave me alone.” He pulled my jeans and under pants down and then ripped open my blouse. I kept pushing him away. He pulled up my bra and lay on top of me, putting his hands on my breasts. I continued to punch and kick him, trying to get him off. Then he clasped his hand tightly over my nose and mouth and threatened to suffocate me unless I quit struggling. Panic shot through me when I couldn’t breathe, and I was afraid he might kill me. I went limp and then he penetrated me. I remember leaving my body as he entered it, going to a place I had not known existed, a place he couldn’t touch, somewhere near the roof of the car.

“This fool is raping me,” I thought. “I wonder how long this is going to take.” I could hear water from the sprinkler hitting the roof. I lost all sense of the passage of time as I occupied this strange new refuge.

I didn’t come back into myself until he rolled off me, then I was aware of the shame of being naked. I could feel the rapist’s body beside me, and smell his beer breath. His friend was in the front seat, drinking. I wanted to get up, but I was afraid to move, completely paralyzed with fear. I wondered what would happen next...if it was over, or if the other one would rape me too. Then

they changed places and the foreman's son got on top of me. Again I became detached and waited for it to end. When he finished, he rolled to the side. The car reeked of beer and semen, and they both fell asleep.

I wanted to move, but I could not. I waited and tried to gather my courage...I don't know how much time passed. My heart was pounding when I finally moved my arms. I reached my hands down to my ankles and pulled up my panties and jeans. Then I pulled down my bra. The buttons on my shirt were ripped off. I sat up slowly, making it safely into the upright position. Then I carefully reached over and opened the car door. As I put my feet on the ground and stood up, they began to rouse. One of them said,

“Where are you going?” I didn't answer, but started to walk down the wet, sandy road, praying that they wouldn't follow me.

“Hey, are you going to leave your car?” The other one yelled.

I kept walking away steadily and calmly, and when I got far enough from the car, I broke into a sprint. I ran through the dark vineyard, hoping to find the way out. Finally I emerged onto a paved highway and tried to get my bearings. I realized that this road would take me to Meta and Rudy's house. It would be a long walk, but it was the only place I could think of to go.

I started walking on the side of the road, holding my blouse together with my hands. A car passed, and panic shot through me. What if it was them, looking for me? Or what if it was some other man with evil intentions? Suddenly I felt so vulnerable. I got off the paved shoulder of the road and walked further back among the shadows of trees along the edges of citrus groves and

date groves...trying to stay hidden. Finally I arrived at Meta and Rudy's house. There was a garden in front, and the green leaves of vegetables gleamed in the moonlight. I knocked on the door, waited a couple of minutes, and then knocked again.

"Who is it?" Meta asked.

"It's Liz. I'm in trouble. I need help." Meta opened the door.

"What happened?"

"I was raped." She let me in and I told them the story. I was a mess, covered with beer and sand and semen.

"Do you want to take a shower?" Meta offered.

"Yes!" I replied, wanting to scrub the smell of them off of me.

The shower was one of Rudy's improvisations, located outside, in the garden. I pulled the curtain shut, took off my clothes and turned on the water. Meta sat next to the shower, while Rudy waited in the house. The stream of water was soothing and the morning air felt cool on my skin. Grey light crept into the eastern sky as I covered myself with soap and let the water wash over me. Meta handed me a towel and some clean clothes, but she was petite and her clothes didn't fit. So she brought out some of Rudy's things for me to wear.

"Do you want to wash your clothes?" Meta asked.

"Yeah," I said. We drove to a Laundromat and drank coffee while the clothes churned in the wash and tumbled in the dryer. We talked about what I should do next. I didn't want to report the rape to the police, because the political environment in the Coachella Valley was charged and the police were not exactly our friends. I was afraid the case wouldn't be about me

and the two men, rather it would be about the UFW and the growers. I also feared becoming the focus of a media event. I decided that I should tell David, since he was my direct supervisor, and Ruth Shy, because she was in charge of the office while Eliseo was gone. We drove to the union office and I told David and Ruth everything that had happened.

Survival and Silence

Ruth brought over a nurse from the clinic who gave me some valium. The nurse said if my period didn't come, they would do a pregnancy test. Then Ruth told me to go home and rest. Meta dropped me off at the apartment in Indio. I lay down on my cot in the empty house in the middle of the morning. I was in shock and still felt a little outside of myself. I remember thinking, "I can't believe this has happened, and I am here...still alive...in my room...in the middle of the morning. Everything is the same, but nothing will ever be the same again."

I took the valium and slept until Ruth came in the afternoon.

"We have to go to the ranch and get the union car. I need you to show me where it's at." Ruth said.

"I don't want to go back there," I said. "But I can tell you where to go." I tried to explain how to find the camp, but Ruth insisted that I accompany her and drive one of the cars back. So I went with Ruth to the ranch to retrieve the union car. The Chevy had been moved and was parked near the long, low slung barracks where the workers slept. Ruth got out and walked over to the car. The ex-Chavista was sitting nearby, almost as if he were guarding it. He was hunched over, looking at the ground. As Ruth approached he looked up. I didn't hear the

exchange between them, but I saw the pain in his eyes. Ruth opened the door and then jerked her head back and grimaced from the smell. Ruth drove the Chevy home, and I drove her car.

The next day I went into the office, and Ruth and David asked me what I wanted to do. I said that I wanted to continue organizing...I didn't want to be defeated by this attack, to give up something that I loved. They accepted my decision, but assigned me a bodyguard. They asked me to team with Maurilio, and told me never to go to Carian Ranch without him. Maurilio was tall, with long black hair and a mustache. There was an air of danger about him...a certain unpredictability. He smoked a lot of weed, but it didn't seem to have any effect on him.

I asked to be moved from the Indio apartment to the Grace Street house because some of my friends lived there and there was more of a sense of community. The Grace Street house was full, but they allowed me to put a sleeping bag on the floor of the living room. I got into the habit of taking valium and drinking beer before going to sleep each night. Sometimes I would go home in the middle of the day and take valium as well.

When Eliseo returned, he didn't ask to see me and I didn't try to see him. We never talked about what happened. My period came. A couple of weeks following the attack, I traveled to Marysville to testify in an ARLB hearing. It would have been easy to stay at home instead of returning to Coachella and to quietly disappear from the UFW. I made the decision to return because quitting the union would have meant losing another part of myself. I didn't want rape to cripple my life. I loved the union, the workers, and my colleagues in Coachella. I loved the beauty of the desert—but more than this—I loved to organize, and I felt called to the cause of

social justice. I could not allow the trajectory of my life to be altered by the violent stupidity of two men.

I traveled back to Coachella through the San Joaquin Valley on a Greyhound bus. It was night, and I looked out at the moonlit vineyards, whizzing past the window in long straight rows. I wondered if my decision to return to Coachella was the right choice. I closed my eyes and an image of the cross appeared in my mind. In that moment, I felt connected to a multitude of others throughout history who had suffered from violence. I was not different and I was not alone. Jesus felt incredibly near, and peace washed over me, carried by the moonlight across the vineyards, entering into my mind and heart...consoling and beckoning. I had entered deeply into the mystery of the cross, and I knew that somehow, in some way I did not yet understand, *it was going to be alright*.

The pruning season was winding down when I returned to Coachella. One day someone told me that a worker in the parking lot was asking to see me. I walked outside and found Lupe Yñiguez from Carian Ranch. He was leaving Coachella to return to Salinas, where the lettuce season was just beginning.

“Liz, I couldn’t leave without talking to you. I just wanted to tell you...*te aprecio*...I appreciate you.” I didn’t decide to work for the UFW because I wanted someone to thank me, yet Lupe’s heartfelt “*te aprecio*” are words that I will never forget.

For a while my life had the appearance of normalcy. Yet something unseen had shifted, like the current of a river when the winter snow melts. The meaning of things needed to be renegotiated. I felt a heightened awareness of danger. Nothing seemed completely safe.

The annual date festival was celebrated at the fairgrounds in Indio, and a group of organizers decided to go. The date festival had an Arabian Nights theme. There was music, food, art, lots of dates and date products, and carnival rides. Maurilio dared an organizer named Bobby de la Cruz to make one of the carnival rides truly thrilling, by disabling the safety restraint and standing up as the ride plummeted. Others egged them on and took bets about who would chicken out. As the two postured, I drifted away and started to walk alone down the brightly lit midway.

The garish harem décor of the festival bore little resemblance to the dignified modesty of the Arab world. I mused about the dusty little town called “Mecca” just a few miles south of Coachella. Who had named it? How had the identification with Arabia grown so strong in this part of California? There were Yemeni farm workers in Marysville, but I had yet to meet anyone of Arab descent in the Coachella Valley.

These thoughts were interrupted by a young man, a farm worker from Carian Ranch. We chatted for a few moments, and I told him I had come with friends, but they were on the rides. There was a photo booth nearby, and he asked if I would take a picture with him. The request made me feel sad. It is the kind of thing a boyfriend and girlfriend do together. I felt wary, but I didn’t

want to live my life afraid. We took pictures and divided the curly strips of black and white photos between us, then continued on our separate ways.

My twin sister came to visit during the spring break at UC Berkeley, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her what had happened. I didn't want to talk about rape for a variety of reasons. I felt shame. I held the misguided belief that through the sheer force of will I could get on with my life. The circumstances of the attack brought up complicated issues regarding race, gender and social class. I didn't want to be in the position of defending my commitment to the UFW to my family. I had crossed over into another world, and they were doing their best to understand and support me. But this would be a bridge too far, and they would pressure me to come home. Put simply, not talking about rape was a whole lot easier than talking about it, at least in the short term.

One morning I woke up and struggled to get my bearings. The Grace Street House was quiet. I looked at the clock, and realized I was going to be late for a staff meeting. How was it possible that I had not heard everyone else getting up and moving about? I dressed quickly, jumped in the Chevy and rushed to the office. Luckily, there was an empty parking space right across the street from the union office, in front of the bank. But I pulled into the space too sharply, and hit a pillar that was flush with the curb with surprising force. The whole UFW staff was seated in the front of the office, near the plate glass window that faced the street. They could see and hear the accident when it happened. I got out of the car feeling embarrassed. Not only was I late, but now I had damaged my car while parking. I felt like a complete idiot. I quietly took an empty

seat and people acted as if nothing had happened. Eliseo continued addressing the staff, and no one spoke to me.

In a little while one of the nurses approached and asked if I wanted an ice pack.

“No. I’m ok,” I answered.

“Your lip is swelling,” she whispered. Apparently I had hit my head on the steering wheel, and my lip was getting bigger and bigger as the meeting progressed. She slipped over to the clinic and returned with an ice pack. When the meeting ended, Eliseo left the room, and then a cry went up. All of the men ran outside to look at the car, and all of the women circled around me to ask if I was hurt. At last there was a normal human response.

Eliseo was furious. He summoned me into his office and accused me of crashing the car on purpose, of failing to properly steward farm worker property. Eliseo ordered me to repair the car with my own hands. He assigned a farm worker to help me, but said I had to do everything myself: go to the junkyard, find the parts, take off the damaged bumper and replace it. The farm worker was a quiet, middle aged man with salt and pepper hair. He seemed embarrassed by Eliseo’s tirade. Over the next few days we fixed the Chevy together.

Spring was the season for thinning grapes. To thin the perlette variety, workers slipped a round rubber brush onto their hands and scrubbed the tiny clusters, knocking off excess fruit so that the remaining grapes would grow large and plump. During the thinning season, Cesar led a massive march through the valley from Mecca to Coachella. The march ended with a rally and barbeque in the park. Lots of workers from Carian ranch joined the march, including one of the

supervisors. The Filipino crew participated in a particularly visible way, helping to do radio announcements and then carrying the flag of the Philippines at the front of the march, near Cesar.

The next day, the crew from the Filipino Camp was fired. The grower said they worked too slowly, but it is highly unusual to fire an entire crew for lack of productivity, including the camp cook! The workers felt it was retribution for participating in the union march, so we filed an unfair labor practice with the ARLB.

On Easter Sunday 1977, I drove to a Catholic church in Indio and parked my car. Mass had already begun, and the doors of the church were closed. I paused on the sun drenched steps and placed my hand flat on the warm wooden door. Then slowly I turned away and walked back to the car. There was no resurrection in my heart, only the cross.

In a couple of weeks, more workers were dismissed from the Mexican Camps. Most had been active with the union, but not all. One of the workers complained to the foreman that he had been promised steady work through the end of the harvest season. The foreman laughed and suggested that he ask Liz Sullivan for a job. As Lupe Yñiguez had predicted, the foreman's relatives began to arrive in the camps. It seemed as if an entire village from the highlands of Jalisco had been emptied. The foreman's mother was among the new workers, a beautiful older woman with eyes of steel. Her name was Zoila.

We filed an unfair labor practice for the workers who were fired from the Mexican Camps, and I set about getting to know the newcomers. Most families have a few free spirits, and I was

determined to find the independent thinkers in the foreman's clan. As I started to untangle the web of relationships, I made a family tree with Zoila's name at the top, and put a check by people's names when they signed authorization cards.

Betrayal Within

As the peak harvest season approached, Marshall Ganz and Jim Drake were sent by Cesar to help Eliseo lead the final push for elections in the Coachella Valley. Organizers from El Centro and Calexico followed Marshall up to Coachella and our ranks doubled overnight. For months, Meta and I had been the only women organizers working in Coachella. Now there were several women organizers, and I saw them doing things I knew were dangerous, like going to the camps alone. I started speaking to women individually, cautioning them to be careful. One of the new organizers, Phyllis, noticed my concern.

“You talk a lot about safety. Maybe we should have a women's meeting to discuss strategies for staying safe.”

She surprised me with this suggestion, but I agreed. Phyllis began to organize a women's safety meeting. Only a handful of women came, and most worked in support positions rather than direct organizing. A couple of the women wanted to talk about issues other than safety, such as the status of women in the UFW in general. I tried to keep the focus on safety, and shared my ideas about how to stay out of dangerous situations.

One of the women who attended the meeting reported back to Eliseo that we were trying to “counter organize.” This was a serious charge at a time when suspected communists were being

purged from the UFW's ranks. A couple of days later, Jim Drake met with me individually to ask why I had participated in the meeting.

"I'm concerned about the safety of the women who recently arrived in Coachella," I explained. "I see them doing dangerous things, like going to the camps alone."

"If you have concerns for women's safety, wouldn't it be better to bring those concerns to Eliseo and have it addressed in a whole staff meeting rather than to hold your own meeting on the side?" he asked.

Of course, how perfectly logical! That *is* what any reasonable person would do, yet it felt impossible to me. I didn't know Jim Drake very well, so I didn't tell him that I had been raped, that I had spoken with my direct supervisors when the attack occurred, and that they had assigned a bodyguard to accompany me to the camps. I didn't tell him that the Coachella management team understood very well the danger women faced, yet had failed to caution or protect new organizers from El Centro and Calexico. I didn't say any of these things. Instead, I simply stated that I saw nothing wrong with women conducting a meeting on their own to share ideas about safety.

A few days later we were all called to a special morning staff meeting. We had outgrown the store front space, so we met in a warehouse around the corner. When everyone had gathered, Eliseo announced that some women had been accused of counter organizing and they needed to give an accounting of themselves to the group. What ensued was a twisted version of the Synanon Game, a drug therapy technique used to break down addicts who habitually lie. One by one every woman who had come to the safety meeting was put on the "hot seat," and anyone in

the room could say anything they wanted about her. It didn't have to be true, and no one could come to her defense. Each woman had to defend herself against whatever accusations or insults were thrown at her.

I watched this spectacle unfold with horror. The women I wanted to protect were subjected to vicious verbal and emotional attacks. It was my concern for safety that had precipitated the game and now I was powerless to stop it...all I could do was watch. This felt like a second violation, a betrayal that wounded me as deeply as rape itself. Until that moment, I had been hopeful despite the experience of sexual assault. I had taken comfort from the knowledge that I was part of a nonviolent struggle for social justice. I felt consoled by the belief that organizing could transform society, bringing more compassion and justice into the world. Now the UFW was unraveling before my eyes into something I no longer recognized.

Before my turn to be "gamed" had come, a young female attorney named Ellen entered the room looking for me. She needed my testimony for an unfair labor practice hearing at the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. At first Eliseo wouldn't let her take me. He said I had to stay until my turn came to be on the "hot seat." But the lawyer was fierce. She said she needed me *now* and she was going to take me out of that room whether he liked it or not. She walked over and took me by the hand. I left with her.

When I got to the ALRB office, the attorneys from the state were waiting to prepare me to testify. I was crying uncontrollably, however, and could not compose myself. The lawyers left and came back several times, only to find me sobbing. I tried to will myself to calm down, but

the tears kept coming in a flash flood of emotion. The lawyers scrapped my testimony. Meanwhile, the Synanon Game continued, and apparently Eliseo tried to put me on the “hotseat” in absentia. Ruth stopped him. This former nun from Missouri was soft spoken, but stubborn. She declared that no one could say anything about me in my absence, she would not permit it! I will always cherish that Ruth stood up for me, and her moral authority was accepted. Unfortunately, Phyllis was blamed for organizing the women’s safety meeting and fired.

The grape elections occurred in late June 1977, and Cesar did a “Hail Mary” run to the ranches, personally thanking workers who had signed authorization cards. I sat in the car with Cesar before he headed out to Carian ranch.

“So how’s Marysville and Yuba City?” he asked. There was an air of unreality about the question, as we sat in the mid-day heat of the Coachella Valley in June, in the middle of a pitched battle to represent grape workers. My hometown felt so distant; it seemed to belong to another lifetime.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I’ve been working in Coachella.”

When we got to the ranch, the organizers walked down the rows identifying where the Chavistas were located so Cesar could personally thank them. In the middle of one row, I found the Ex-Chavista. I explained what I was doing, and he shook his head.

“Cesar isn’t going to come down this row,” he said. I continued walking and emerged at the access road, where Cesar was waiting, flanked by his bodyguards. I described who was in the row, including the old man.

“I’m not doing that one,” Cesar said, and he walked on to the next organizer.

I stayed with the UFW for a couple of weeks after the election at Carian ranch. The outcome of the vote could not be determined because so many ballots were challenged by both sides. The grower's son went berserk in the final days. He got into a fist fight with Fred Ross Jr. and pushed David Martinez's car across the road with a tractor. He called one of the women organizers from Calexico a prostitute, and handed out a flier depicting a female UFW organizer trading sex for votes. Because of the misconduct, the ARLB eventually ordered the grower to bargain with the UFW despite the disputed election, but the order was ignored.

Leaving the Union

The grape harvest ended. The UFW lost most of the elections in the vineyards of the Coachella Valley, and the organizing staff scattered. It was mid-July 1977 when I decided to leave the union. I met with Eliseo to turn in my resignation. It was odd that Eliseo had never talked to me about the rape, and that he flew into a rage when I crashed the Chevy into the bank pillar. His callousness during the Synanon Game was incomprehensible to me. I couldn't leave the union without having at least one direct conversation with him about rape. I steeled myself to push through the shame and fear.

Eliseo seemed unhappy when I told him I wanted to resign. It left a hole in his organizing staff, which was now focused on electing delegates from each ranch for the UFW Convention in August. When I handed Eliseo the letter of resignation, he refused to take it.

“Don't give it to me. Give it to Cesar. He's the one who hired you.”

“Ok,” I answered, somewhat puzzled. He clearly didn't want me to leave, yet he distanced himself from me with a cold disdain.

“Eliseo, did you know that I was raped in February when I gave two workers a ride home from a meeting?” I asked.

“Well, farm workers are not perfect,” he answered, as if I had made an accusation against the entire class of people to which he belonged. I realized in that moment how much Eliseo saw me as *other*. A gulf stretched between us which I did not have the language, the tools or the will to bridge.

I took the letter of resignation from Eliseo’s desk, put it in an envelope and mailed it to La Paz. I got on a greyhound bus and went to visit my Godfather in Los Angeles. Uncle Chuck treated me to lunch in an elegant Mexican Restaurant with faux adobe walls. On the menu cover there was a photograph of an indigenous woman wearing a colorful serape, balancing a basket on her head. After lunch, my uncle and cousin invited me to go swimming, but I didn’t have a suit. They took me to a mall, and I noticed that all the women in the shops had the same fluffy, layered haircut. Farrah Fawcett had ascended to the heights of popular culture when I had been conducting house meetings and collecting authorization cards. It was as if I were returning from a long stay in foreign country, yet there was a chasm between me and the society to which I had been consigned by Eliseo. Later in the day I went for a walk with my uncle. He could tell that something was wrong.

“Why do you look at the ground when we walk?” he asked. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

I searched in vain for words to describe my feelings. Everything had shifted since our Christmas visit six months before. I was trying to find firm footing, a place to stand between two different worlds, but the earth kept giving way beneath me. I returned to Marysville and

tried to figure out the next move in my life. I didn't want to go back to school, rather I wanted to work. I had a vague idea about moving to San Francisco. I got a job on a tomato harvester with some farm worker friends, to make a little money. It was there that I met my future husband, Hector.

Post-script: Being Accountable to One Another

Eventually, as a middle aged woman, after much therapy, spiritual work, a failed marriage, and after the death of Cesar, I attempted to hold the UFW to account for what happened to me, especially the twisted version of the Synanon Game in Coachella where the women who attended the safety meeting were put on the "hot seat" and verbally attacked.

In January of 1996, I wrote to David Martinez, and he called me immediately. He acknowledged how bad the situation had been, and said he was deeply sorry for his role in it. He was very supportive. I made some suggestions for how the UFW could take a new path, shift its culture, now that Cesar had passed. David liked my ideas, but felt that he had little power to bring about such change. He said he needed time, at least 6 months.

As luck would have it, I saw Dolores Huerta at a Diocese of Oakland ministerial conference in September of 1996. She was a guest speaker. I told her about my conversation with David, and asked her if she had seen my letter. She told me that David left the union in April of 1996, and she asked me to send her a copy of the letter, in an envelope marked "confidential." I did as she instructed, and waited for 10 months. Exasperated, I decided to write to Art Rodriguez, Cesar's son-in-law, and the new president of the UFW. I told him about my letter to David, my encounter with Dolores, and the total lack of response. I threatened to go public and start talking about what had happened to me. I requested a formal apology from the UFW for the Synanon Game held in Coachella in response to the women's safety meeting.

Art did not respond to me directly, but he sent Dolores Huerta to talk with me. In September of 1997, she came to my home in Oakland. The meeting did not go well. Dolores started by telling me that the UFW had no reason to offer me an apology. She said that “rape is just something men do to women,” and that my rapes had nothing to do with the union. I told her that rape is a crime of power, not lust, and if she thought that my rapes in the middle of the Carian vineyard during an organizing drive, were unrelated to the union, she was mistaken. I saw the attack as an effort to silence me, to render me ineffective as an organizer.

But ok, let’s say that the rapes were not connected in anyway to the context of the UFW organizing drive in Coachella—just something that men do to women—the Synanon Game was a horse of a different color, something for which the union was totally responsible.

Again, Dolores dismissed me. She said that the Synanon Game was an innocent team building exercise, the kind of thing that corporations do with their people. She denied that a Synanon Game had ever happened in Coachella, and she said that the meeting I described was bizarre and unrelated to any decision that Cesar and the board had made about the Synanon Game. I reminded her that two UFW board members participated in the meeting, Eliseo Medina and Marshall Ganz.

Then she demanded to know why I had not reached out to her when all of this happened. Why hadn’t I told her? Before I could respond, she answered for me: “You probably thought that I didn’t have any power, you thought I couldn’t do anything.” She looked stricken. And suddenly the conversation had become about her.

It was obvious this meeting was going nowhere, and I was ready for her to leave my house. But in a final breath-taking move, Dolores declared: “I know this was all David Martinez’s fault. He is behind this!” “I highly doubt that,” I answered. “Eliseo was in charge of the Coachella office.”

Since UFW staff couldn’t even replace a tire on a car without Cesar’s permission, it seemed likely to me that Cesar himself had ordered the meeting, regardless of whether it was a Synanon Game or not. Dolores agreed to investigate who was responsible for calling the meeting in Coachella and to get back to me with the information. I never heard from her again.

I eventually reached out to Eliseo Medina and to Marshall Ganz. Eliseo did not respond. Marshall talked with me, and was very kind. He acknowledged how bad the situation had been, and he apologized.

As a middle aged woman, when I began to speak openly about rape with my family, my younger sister, Florence revealed something disturbing. In November of 1976 she went with me to Sacramento on the eve of the election, to do get-out-the-vote work for the UFW’s Proposition 14. We spent the night in a gymnasium with dozens of others. We slept in sleeping bags on the floor. I stepped away from Florence for a short time, maybe 20 minutes. During this time, a man groped her. Florence was in the 8th grade. I was the adult responsible for my sister’s safety, and I completely failed her. This is something I will always regret.