Ahimsa Center K-12 Lesson

**Title of Lesson:** Cesar Chavez: Nonviolence and Mexican Culture

*Suggested as an October lesson in preparation for honoring Day of the Dead*

**Lesson By:** Nancy Johnson, Hoover High School, San Diego, CA

**Grade Level/Subject Area:** High School: Advanced 10th Grade English; Visual & Performing Arts Academy Students

**Duration of Lesson:** 55-minute class periods for 1 week

**California State Language Arts Content Standards:**

*Reading Comprehension 2.5:* Generate relevant questions; analyze and evaluate.

*Writing Strategies & Application 2.1:* Write narratives; relate a sequence of events and communicate the significance of the events.

*Listening & Speaking 2.1:* Deliver narrative presentation.

**Lesson Abstract:** Students will use the study of Chavez’ philosophies of pilgrimage and penitence, as well as Mexican folklore and story telling to have a greater understanding of how we use our culture to inform our compassion, truth, and love, specifically within the tradition of *Dia de Los Muertos* and the stories with which we honor our ancestors.

**Guiding Questions:**

- How do oral stories, folk tales, and religious traditions inform our decisions?
- What values of his parents and mentors influenced Chavez?
- What are the fundamental properties of Chavez’ nonviolent protest?

**Content Essay:**

Cesar Chavez is known primarily as an activist for the rights of farm workers. He is that and so much more. He, like Gandhi, has transformed the lives of so many by his example and his insistence on nonviolent measures to create change. Also, like Gandhi, Chavez was a human living a human experience. What he did to change the world came later…and the impact will be ongoing for generations.

Cesar’s story begins at about 13 when he participated in his first field strike with his father, who had organized a hundred farm workers to demand higher pay, overtime pay, no child labor, free drinking water while picking in the fields (instead of being charged five cents per glass) and separate toilets for men and women. This first protest was not successful because the owner broke the strike by bringing in more than a hundred braceros (undocumented Mexican workers brought in legally to work, then returned to their homes) to do the work Cesar’s father and the other workers would not do. Cesar’s family was forced to move to another field to another shack to another poor working condition.

Chavez’ family originally owned a 160-acre ranch in Yuma, Arizona, but lost it when his father could not pay back taxes. Chavez did not have a privileged school experience like
Gandhi. Child labor was illegal but standard in the fields. In the book, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, Catherine Ingram says, “Cesar’s most vivid memories of his youth are not of school days but of crawling under twisted, scratchy vines for hard-to-reach bunches of grapes, choking on chemical sprays used on the fruit, breathing the hot dust of the fields as sweat poured into his eyes, and spending much of his day in a back-breaking stooped position” (98).

In a lecture on July 29, 2011, Dr. José Calderón related how Chavez and his family were often harassed by the Border Patrol and discriminated against by landowners. Migrants were blamed by some for the Great Depression, and thousands were deported. They were sprayed daily with DDT, which once ingested can be passed on for generations. Chavez, like Gandhi, became vegan and remained so for 25 years. He led nonviolent protests and boycotts, taught other farmworkers English, fasted several times…once for 36 days. He fought for clinics, bathrooms, and higher pay for farm workers. He fought against child labor and spraying DDT and other poisons on the crops and the workers (Calderón Lecture).

Cesar Chavez only finished a seventh grade education, but one of his earliest memories was when he was eleven or twelve years old, and he saw a newsreel of Gandhi between movies at a theater. In the interview with Ingram he said that the report talked of this “half-naked man without a gun [who] had conquered the might of the British Empire.” Chavez told her, “It really impressed me because I couldn’t conceive of how that had happened without guns” (114). The next day he asked his teacher about Gandhi and she connected him with a friend of hers that gave Chavez a small book on Gandhi.

Even though Chavez had only a limited formal education, like Gandhi he was influenced by many books, and he reread many of them at different times throughout his life. He studied and read such works as *The Grapes of Wrath*, Jack London’s *People of the Abyss*, the poetry of Walt Whitman, and “The Sermon on the Mount.” The most influential book of his life was Gandhi’s autobiography, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (Ingram 100). Professor Calderón told us of books in Chavez’ home library on St. Francis of Assisi, extensive books on labor organization and every book ever written by or about Gandhi (Calderón Lecture).

Chavez believed that love is sacrifice. He learned from his parents a strong awareness of doing for others. He said, in his interview with Ingram, “If you do for somebody else, it’s really doing for yourself” (107). He sees that the philosophies of his parents are what led to his interest in Gandhi’s philosophies. According to José Orosco in his lecture at Cal Poly Pomona on July 31st, 2011, “Chavez’ formative understanding of nonviolence was from three sources: Mexican-American folklore, his mother and her religious beliefs, and Mexican folk sayings about conflict resolution” (Orosco Lecture).

In *Cesar Chavez and the Commonsense of Nonviolence*, Orosco tells us, “Chavez made it clear that La Causa drew its moral foundations from Mexican cultural and religious traditions. While Chavez was inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, he credits “Mexican folk traditions, particularly those that he learned from his mother” as being especially important to his understanding of nonviolence (24). “Juana Estrada Chavez
instructed him in nonviolence through the use of dichos, or Mexican folk sayings, that encapsulate wisdom concerning conflict resolution” (Orosco 24).

Chavez’ mother also taught her children to serve their community by sacrificing their time. Orosco says, “Her dedication to serving the needs of others stemmed from her personal devotion to St. Eduvigis, a patroness of charity” (24). Once a year, her mother would lead her children in “seeking out the needy and offering assistance to the poor, carrying out a tradition of religion casera, ‘the homespun Catholic religious devotion at the heart of the lives of so many of the faithful of Mexican descent.’” In summary, Orosco says that Chavez’ childhood was “suffused with Mexican cultural and spiritual ideals that careful consideration, reason, and dialogue are alternatives to violence and that a good life is one devoted to serving the needs of the poor and unfortunate” (Orosco 25).

It was a natural transition for Chavez to draw on the lessons of his own childhood, religion, and culture in establishing what he thought would create a successful “cause” made up of mostly Mexican-American people who shared the same experiences. In his eyes, “these Mexican cultural values were to be institutionalized as essential parts of La Causa’s nonviolent direction action practices” (Orosco 25). Chavez set out logical steps in his “Sacramento March Letter.” Chavez believed that a successful march must be fashioned after what Mexican-American farmworkers already knew from their own religious and cultural practices. If he had been influenced by the religious practices and service of his mother, countless others had also been influenced.

According to Orosco, for Chavez the logic of nonviolence was rooted in three Mexican cultural norms: Pilgrimage, penitence, and revolution. Even though the marches Chavez led appeared from the outside to be modeled after Martin Luther King’s Freedom March and Gandhi’s Salt March, he saw these protests more as religious pilgrimages which defined the experience of the farm workers and supporters of La Causa. “A pilgrimage, Chavez explains, is ‘a trip made with sacrifice and hardship as an expression of penance and of commitment – and often involving a petition to the patron of the pilgrimage for some sincerely sought benefit of body and soul’” (Orosco 25). Chavez counted on the fact that for generations Mexican culture has flocked “to major shrines in Mexico, especially the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, sometimes on their hands and knees, looking for assistance and intercession from saints and the Virgin Mary” (25). Because so many of the protestors already had this history, it made perfect sense for Chavez to call on them for a similar, although more political, journey.

In the evenings of the pilgrimage, protestors would perform skits, also common to their previous religious pilgrimage experience. Chavez used this familiar routine of evening camaraderie to educate farmworkers on the injustices of La Causa and teach them to be democratic agents, thereby enticing participants through familiarity. The walks included suffering, the personal act of penance, and sacrifice. All of these strategies were common to Mexican American religious traditions. And later, when the Delano Grape Strike had been going on for years, with no end in sight, Chavez was able to explain to the farmworkers the importance of staying nonviolent through his own fasting, which was yet another act of penance and suffering. Again, Chavez drew on the traditions of the Mexican-American culture to persuade farmworkers to be persistent yet nonviolent.
While more radical than pilgrimage and penitence, Chavez saw revolution as another avenue common to Mexican American traditions. Orosco said, “A Mexican-American is a child of revolution” (Orosco Lecture). For generations Mexicans had been fighting for their rights, their land, and their food. In the evenings of the Sacramento March, Louis Valdez and Chavez would read “El Plan de Delano,” a manifesto which reminded farmworkers that La Causa was “a continuation of the ideals of the 1910 Mexican Revolution” (Orosco 29). They were involved in militant nonviolence for the abolishment of indentured workers. Chavez knew that Mexican-Americans understood that revolution was required to “put an end to an ‘unjust system’…that subjected farmworkers to ‘starvation wages, contractors, day hauls, forced migration, sickness, illiteracy, camps and sub-human living conditions’” (Orosco 29). He knew this because Mexican-Americans had been oppressed and marginalized for centuries. Chavez knew when to draw on the common experiences of his people.

In Chavez’ own words to Catherine Ingram, “Life is so many things. But we’re here playing the record every night and finding out every day whether we did what we’re supposed to do. The message was clear from Christ, Gandhi, all the good people who said exactly what has to be done. So every night you’ve got to think, ‘What did I do today?’ Life is very complicated. But we try to keep it simple. Get the work done. We’re essentially activists. We have our precepts and our principles, and then we act” (Ingram 113).

In thinking of Cesar’s experiences as a young man, I can’t help but wonder how much the experiences of my own Mexican-American students mirror his life. Students often have to miss school because they have to help their parents or go to Mexico to take care of a relative. Students are overwhelmed with the hardships at home, the barriers of language, and the poverty that often awaits them at the end of the day. As they get ready to celebrate Dia de los Muertos, I am hopeful that students will arrive at a new place of appreciation for Mexican-American traditions, folklore, religion, and their own families. Seeing that Chavez found a way to nonviolently respond to injustice and be a leader, while respecting his culture and religion, I think will inspire the folktales, poems, and letters they develop to honor their ancestors and elders. Cesar Chavez is an important role model, who struggled with inhumanity and yet embraced nonviolence and a life of service.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities:

1. **Into**: Students will be put in several groups and each will be given a folk tale from a different culture. They will read the folktale and create a skit of the tale to perform in front of the class.

2. Students will write a folktale narrative from their culture. They can interview a family member, research a tale, or tell one from memory.

3. Read pages 22-32 of *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence* by José-Antonio Orosco, annotating for influences of folklore, religious traditions, and values and lessons given to him by his mother.

4. Options for activities with the Orosco text could include taking Cornell notes; creating story boards, participating in jig saw groups, creating posters of important influences.

5. Vocabulary enrichment: Spanish words, pilgrimage, penitence, revolution as they apply to Chavez, nonviolence, and words unknown to students. Activities could include vocab journal, graphic organizers, skits, four-square graphic organizers.

6. Students will participate in a Socratic seminar to show their understanding of Chavez’ beliefs about nonviolence and civil disobedience for social justice in relation to the Mexican culture norms of pilgrimage, penitence, and revolution.

7. Students will write a letter to an ancestor or elder in their family honoring them and informing them of what Cesar Chavez has done for Mexican Americans.

Materials:
- Copies of folktales from different cultures
- Copies of Orosco text, pgs. 22-32
- Poster paper and/or journals
- Socratic Seminar study guide.