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Stand Up for Your Rights

Magdaleno Rose-Avila¹

I. STRUGGLING TO STAND UP

There I was on April 5, 1968, giving my first civil rights speech, just a day after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed as he worked to defend the rights of striking garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Like so many others on that day, I was shocked and saddened by the news. It was this event and the prodding by members of Students for a Democratic Society² that prompted some black athletes and me to speak out at the University of Colorado. Our speaking out enabled us to obtain many concessions from the University, including the first programs for minority students. My life changed forever because I was pushed to stand up for my rights.

Throughout the modern civil rights movement, important leaders have emerged because they similarly were inspired to act. For example, Dr. King was a young minister at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, when he was urged to become the voice and leader for the Montgomery bus boycott, which began with Rosa Parks's refusal to go to the back of the bus.³ This launched Dr. King's activism, as well as the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁴ Another example is Cesar Chavez, who was a young man in the barrio Sal Si Puedes (Leave if You Can) in San Jose, California,⁵ when Fred Ross⁶ pushed him out of his house and into history as a community organizer and defender of the rights of farmworkers.⁷ Ross also pushed Dolores Huerta into Chicano and labor organizing history.⁸ Cesar and Dolores went on to organize what would become the United Farm Workers of America.⁹

Parks, King, Chavez, Huerta, Sister Helen Prejean, and others are all my heroes and people whom I greatly admire. They are people who sacrificed

their lives so that others might live. They spoke the truth and they paid the price. All too often we are encouraged to “go with the flow” and told, “Don’t rock the boat!” At the same time we are asked to admire those common individuals who act with uncommon courage. We are asked to admire those who have rocked the boat and have even, on occasion, overturned this boat of ours.

II. THE COST OF STANDING UP

In my study of civil and human rights history, I have found that you must pay the price for telling the truth. Sometimes that price is standing alone when you know that you are right—when you know that you must speak the truth, no matter the price.

Here in the United States, we have grown accustomed to instant results. We want everything now and are not willing to wait or continue the struggle in order to make progress. Those who make change have to work for months or years to create change in the world. Take the work of King, Chavez, and Mandela who sacrificed so much to give us hope. How many years did Nelson Mandela remain strong, even though he was in prison?¹⁰ The world never imagined that he would become president of the very country that imprisoned him. In fact, many U.S. elected officials saw him as a terrorist. I am proud that I was among the many that demonstrated, wrote letters, wrote poetry, and even got arrested in order to voice opposition to the brutal system of Apartheid. Our protests helped keep Mandela alive and put pressure on the government to make it change.

When I was about fourteen years of age my father and I walked off the job in Las Animas, Colorado, and went to work for a grower in another town. We joined others who demanded better wages and were willing to work elsewhere. It was my first agricultural strike. Later, I would become an organizer, alongside Chavez, for the United Farm Workers of America.

In 1974, when I began speaking out in favor of immigrant rights, I found opposition from the religious community, organized labor, Chicanos, and

some nonprofit organizations. But I knew that I was right; I had to stand up for the rights of immigrants and, in so doing, I stood up for my own rights.

You often have to take risks when you stand up for your rights. Many of us who have taken unpopular positions in various communities have been ostracized and, on occasion, not given jobs that we were qualified for because we were willing to be a voice for others. While organizing for the farm workers, we were often evicted from our homes and offices simply because of our politics. For example, community leaders would pressure our landlords to evict us—often this was done quickly—and we would have to scramble to find a new location.

An interesting individual who has worked long and hard to create substantial change is Sister Helen Prejean.¹¹ I met Sister Helen in 1985 when she was just an ordinary nun, working to help the poor. She had recently begun to speak out against the death penalty and invited me to speak to her community group. In 1998, Sister Helen and a small group of us started a new effort within the death penalty movement to abolish capital punishment. We decided that we would introduce the idea of a moratorium into the debate, and we called our new movement Moratorium 2000, hoping that it would reenergize individuals and organizations working to abolish the death penalty.¹²

With the good name of Sister Helen we were able to bring the idea of a moratorium to the forefront of the anti-death penalty movement. Although I must tell you that there was a lot of resistance to the idea and many skeptics. Now a moratorium is an accepted idea in the fight to stop state killings. Governor George Ryan of Illinois contributed to this issue when he imposed a moratorium in his state and later commuted the sentences of those on death row.¹³ However, the governor may not have gotten to that point if we had not taken the risk.

When Sister Helen wrote her first book, *Dead Man Walking*,¹⁴ about her experience as a spiritual advisor to a death row inmate, few people were sold on her vision. Many wanted to hear the opinions of lawyers, not the

opinion of a nun. In 1993, Sister Helen and I did a book tour together for *Dead Man Walking*, driving a van full of her books from San Diego, California, all the way to Seattle, Washington. Think about it for a minute—a nun and me driving a van up the West Coast with her book about the death penalty, sleeping on the floors and couches of friends' homes. We were promoting an idea that we believed in so much that we were willing to take risks and time to promote it. Once in a while you just have to have a little faith and courage.

Since that time a movie has been made by the same name,¹⁵ and Sister Helen's life has never been the same. She is now a celebrity. But prior to the movie, we could not get anywhere near the size of crowds that she now attracts. Her second book, *The Death of Innocents*,¹⁶ has just been released and she is on a national tour where audiences fill halls to hear her speak. She has had to sacrifice much in order to focus her energy on the protection of basic human rights and justice. Every day, Sister Helen reaches new hearts and minds and persuades people to understand the horrors of the death penalty.

We easily forget the sacrifice that others have made in order to protect our rights. Often, those who stand up for civil or human rights must face powerful elements. Some of those who have protested against tyrannical governments have suffered economic humiliation, imprisonment, torture, or death. Even so, this heroic work continues in our own communities and across the world. Take the recent protests that came about in response to the corrupt presidential elections in Ukraine.¹⁷ Viktor Yushenko and his supporters protested in the cold wintry streets of Kiev and brought the government to a halt. New elections were ordered and, in the end, Yushenko won. Ukrainians stood up for their rights and they succeeded in reaching their goals in spite of the enormous challenges that they faced.

Many of us took a stand against the Vietnam War. I performed in a street theater group called Teatro De Ustedes (Your Theater), which did many antiwar pieces. Many in the Chicano community supported the war because

they had children fighting in it. It was not an easy issue to discuss in the early days of the war. One time, in Ault, Colorado, we performed to a packed house, and the audience really appreciated our antiracism pieces. However, there were about six recently returned soldiers in the audience who did not appreciate our antiwar performances, and they stormed the stage and began beating us up. That was the end of our performance that evening. Our message had been heard but not accepted; but, because we advocated nonviolence we did not reciprocate with violence.

Still, the right to protest is one of the most important rights, and we should never allow it to be stifled. In the 1950s, some community activists were thought to be communists or communist sympathizers. The message was hysteria and fear. Today we live under a powerful government that discourages citizens from challenging government policies. People who protest are portrayed as being unpatriotic or, at worst, supportive of terrorism. And this portrayal has silenced voices of protest. There is always a threat that we will be labeled by those in power when we stand up for our rights.

I was a reluctant participant in many of the movements that I now embrace. I was afraid to stand up—afraid that I might not have it all “just right.” I was afraid of what could be done to me by the government and other activists who might not agree with my approach. In the end, in spite of all my fears, I have taken steps to stand up by speaking, writing, and acting out to the best of my abilities. My opinions have changed and evolved over the years, and it has not always been easy. Because we can change, however, it is even more important that there are individuals who can speak out and push us forward with new ideas and information.

III. STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS

In 1988, Amnesty International sponsored a world concert tour for human rights with many notable artists.¹⁸ I worked that tour, which started as a dream and vision of the director, Jack Healey. The tour increased the

membership of Amnesty International worldwide and took the message of human rights to millions of people around the world. Bruce Springsteen, Peter Gabriel, Sting, Tracy Chapman, and Youssou N'Dour were the main artists, and each concert always closed with a lively version of the Bob Marley anthem "Stand Up for Your Rights." But the concert tour initially was opposed by many, and Jack Healey had to take a risk and stand up to the Amnesty board and its members to promote the idea of using music to teach people about human rights.

Nevertheless, many people around the world learned about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because of this tour. Also, in many countries, people who had been tortured, raped, or imprisoned came to this concert to join human rights activists as they stood, shoulder to shoulder, and raised the flag of freedom. In some countries where we performed, people were still being oppressed by their government. We gave them hope and let them know that they were not alone. Being alone, or feeling that you are alone, is the most difficult when you are standing up for your rights and the rights of others.

Successful movements have been led by those who are willing to stand up and even to take the heat for their cause. These voices create space for new voices that come forward to lead us and help us shape our agenda to protect the rights of others. We must do all that we can to support their efforts.

Often, however, we do not do all that we can to protect the rights of others. It is the academics, the researchers, and the reporters who begin to document the truth, and this is important work. But some of them do not go far enough. Often they fail to offer suggestions for changing the problems that they have documented.

Another problem today is that we have half-truths that are represented as absolute truths (some might call this the "gospel truth") by so-called think tanks and some reporters. This truth is splashed across the media until it saturates even the best of our hearts and minds. When a half-truth or bold

lie is repeated often enough in the media, we soon accept it as the gospel truth, even when we are not of that “faith.” For example, we were manipulated into believing that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that there was a connection between Iraq and al Qaeda.¹⁹ The press was an active partner in furthering that lie.

We cannot always count on the media to tell us the truth or to question those in power. And that is because the media is big business and not independent. Of course, big business does not have any interest in representing the truth, because the truth is bad for profits.

Another way that the truth has been manipulated is in the portrayal of immigrants in Arizona, who the media depicted as taking advantage of public services. Proposition 200 was designed to deny public services to immigrants and their families.²⁰ As the movie *A Day Without a Mexican* illustrates, we need immigrant workers as much as they need to live in this country.²¹ No matter what the ethnic group, we cannot do without immigrant workers.

We have also been fed lies about gay marriage. We are told that it will destroy the “institution of marriage.” However, the marriage standards that some members of the religious right are seeking to protect are seemingly being destroyed by straight men and women that cannot manage to stay married. U.S. rates of divorce and extramarital affairs are high, even among evangelicals.²² But we are told to be afraid of gays and lesbians getting married.

When I started working with gangs in El Salvador and Los Angeles, it was a very lonely road that I was traveling. There were not many supporters, not many who could believe in an organization such as Homies Unidos.²³ Gangs, after all, had been demonized in both countries and no one trusted them. I felt, however, that it was a righteous and noble cause and that we could change lives. It was also dangerous work and would cost the lives of many of our young gang leaders who had become members of Homies Unidos and had made major changes in their lives.

We as individuals are the best protectors of the U.S. Constitution and of the legacy of freedom—for our country and for our world. Together, we must be the ones who promote the truth and protect all who dare to act on truth. We often assume that someone else will stand up for our rights. We want others to sacrifice themselves while we jump up and down on the sidelines like cheerleaders. At some point we must take a monumental step: we must choose an issue close to our hearts and participate in a meaningful way.

Today, we are at a crucial crossroads in our history. We must all take a stand. Even if you do not agree with what is being said, you must support the right to stand up and speak. We must protect the voices of everyone, so that freedom can exist. I encourage people to speak up against the established political position of the moment. We must not allow our fear to keep us from telling the truth about the war, about gay marriage, about state killing, and about immigrant rights. In raising our voices, we will all be better protected. I urge all of you, as Bob Marley and the artists of the 1988 Amnesty International tour did, to

Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!

Get up, stand up: don't give up the fight!²⁴

¹ Magdaleno “Leno” Rose-Avila is the executive director of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, a Seattle-based organization that protects the rights of immigrants and their families. He has spent his life working on behalf of civil and human rights.

² The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was founded in 1959. It was a radical, non-violent student movement aimed at transforming American society through a “fully participatory democracy,” which would empower citizens to share in the decisions that directly affected their well-being. New School University Students for a Democratic Society, History of SDS, at <http://www.newschooleds.com/history.html> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

³ See MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *STRIDE TOWARD FREEDOM: THE MONTGOMERY STORY* 45 (1958).

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. and others created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott. SCLC initiated the non-violent civil rights movement of the 1960s. Its influence now extends worldwide. See

SCLC, Our History, at <http://sclcnational.org/net/content/item.aspx?s=25461.0.12.2607> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

⁵ See PETER MATTHIESSEN, *SAL SI PUEDES: CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE NEW AMERICAN REVOLUTION* (1969).

⁶ Fred Ross was a labor organizer and the founder of the Community Services Organization (CSO), which significantly influenced Chavez's model for organizing. Ross was Chavez's mentor and life-long friend. He played a crucial role in shaping Chavez's organizing technique. See SUSAN FERRISS & RICARDO SANDOVAL, *THE FIGHT IN THE FIELDS: CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE FARMWORKERS MOVEMENT* 37–63 (Diana Hembree ed., 1997).

⁷ See JACQUES E. LEVY, *CESAR CHAVEZ: AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LA CAUSA* (1975).

⁸ See RICHARD GRISWOLD DEL CASTILLO & RICHARD A. GARCIA, *CÉSAR CHÁVEZ: A TRIUMPH OF SPIRIT* 59–75 (1995).

⁹ See FERRISS & SANDOVAL, *supra* note 6, at 8–9.

¹⁰ Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress and the first black president of South Africa, was imprisoned for twenty-seven years as a political prisoner and anti-apartheid activist before he was released in 1990. See NELSON MANDELA, *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM* 485 (1993). He also won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts at reconciliation after Apartheid. See *id.* at 532.

¹¹ Sister Helen Prejean is a Catholic nun who travels around the country, giving lectures and speaking out against the death penalty. See HELEN PREJEAN, *THE DEATH OF INNOCENTS: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF WRONGFUL EXECUTIONS* (About the Author) (2005).

¹² The Moratorium Campaign was launched after the release of Sister Helen Prejean's book, *DEAD MAN WALKING: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE UNITED STATES* (1993). The campaign calls for a moratorium on the death penalty and is led by Sister Helen, who travels from state to state, giving talks and encouraging listeners to sign a petition to end the practice of capital punishment. Hundreds of thousands of people have signed this petition, and the movement is growing rapidly. See Helen Prejean, *The Moratorium Campaign*, at <http://www.moratoriumcampaign.org/> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

¹³ In 2000, the potential execution of an innocent man in Illinois led then-governor George Ryan to declare a moratorium on the death penalty in the state. He declared the system broken and cleared death row of all inmates in line for capital punishment. See Monica Davey, *Illinois Governor in the Middle of New Death Penalty Debate*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 15, 2004, at A1.

¹⁴ *DEAD MAN WALKING*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁵ *DEAD MAN WALKING* (Polygram Filmed Entertainment 1996).

¹⁶ *DEATH OF INNOCENTS*, *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ See C. J. Chivers, *It Was Dec. 3, but in Kiev, New Year Began Yesterday*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 4, 2004, at A5.

¹⁸ This concert toured around the world, visiting Asia, Africa, Greece, South America, and the United States. Its aim was to raise awareness about oppression and political persecution, as well as to promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. John Parales, *Raising Consciousness, Not Money*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 21, 1988, at C17.

¹⁹ See Walter Pincus & Dana Milbank, *Al Qaeda-Hussein Link is Dismissed*, WASH. POST, Jun. 17, 2004, at A1, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47812-2004Jun16.html> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

²⁰ See *Immigration Debate Rages in AZ*, CBSNEWS.COM, Dec. 22, 2004, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/12/22/eveningnews/main662587.shtml#top> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

²¹ The film, *A Day Without a Mexican*, is a satire that depicts what life would be like if there were no Mexicans. The film examines many aspects of daily life that depend upon the labor of Mexican workers. *A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN* (Televisa Cine 2004).

²² The National Center for Health Statistics released a report which found that 43 percent of first marriages end in separation or divorce. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, NUMBER, TIMING, AND DURATION OF MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES: 1996, Feb. 2002, at 17 n.17 (2002), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p70-80.pdf> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

²³ Homies Unidos is a non-profit gang violence prevention and intervention organization with projects in San Salvador, El Salvador, and Los Angeles, California. The organization was founded in 1996 in San Salvador and formally began organizing in the United States in 1997. Homies Unidos, Mission and Vision, at <http://www.homiesunidos.org/about/aboutus.htm> (last visited Feb. 25, 2005).

²⁴ BOB MARLEY, *Get Up Stand Up*, on LEGEND (Island Records 2002).