

100 (Short) Essays

December 2016

In the 1960s, Cesar Chavez had a saying I have used many times since: “If you do not know what to do, go out to the people, they will tell you!”

When I retired as Executive Director from Loaves & Fishes in 2000, I did not know what I wanted to do so I walked 450 miles of the pilgrimage route called Camino de Santiago and gradually it came to me: as a former friend and associate, I felt called to document the 31-one year history (1962-1993) of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

Ten years later I had assembled a digital archive that filled 7 DVD discs – photographs; oral histories; videos; personal essay accounts; out-of-print books; artwork; original documents; exhibits; commentaries; online discussion accounts; historical timelines; personnel rosters; etc. – all immediately available 24/7 from anywhere in the world with Internet access. This “Farmworker Movement Documentation Project” is now housed online at the University of California San Diego. (farmworkermovement.org) This Farmworker Movement Documentation Project will never be finished, but I was finished! Now what? I was ready for something new! I remembered some personal unfinished business dating back to 1958 that I thought should be completed.

As a newly minted high school English teacher in San Francisco, I decided to publish a literary journal, which I would call Syndic. Open only to high school students, I gathered their submission of stories, poetry, artwork and essays and published 6 issues, the last one in 1960. I was young, inexperienced and insecure and while the students who participated seemed pleased and even thrilled to see their work published, many senior faculty members objected: Students shouldn’t be reading this “stuff” let alone writing it! Too dark, they said; Not morally healthy, said others. This beat continued unabated. No one ordered me to stop publishing Syndic; I simply stopped. Nothing happened. No one said a word; it was as if Syndic had never existed.

Now 50 years later, I wanted Syndic to exist again, or better said, re-exist. Bolstered by what I had learned from a decade of working on the Documentation Project about online publishing, I laid out my ideas about the presentation design to Jennifer, my whiz tech and asked her to choose a digital platform, create a template and teach me how to publish a new online version of Syndic.

I published the first issue of the resurrected Syndic in August 2010. Fourteen issues later, March 2016, at the age of 81-years, I published what might have been the final issue of Syndic. Final because when one of my projects begins to feel more like work than a labor of love, I lose interest and my commitment wanes.

Fourteen issues, 535 chapters, thousands of pieces of literary work – artwork; poetry; stories; essays; music; photography; filmmaking; performance – all written, created, and recorded by authors/artists of every stripe whom I met online and then worked with to organize the submission of their work for publication. Taken together, Syndic has become an incredible archive of literary work. syndicjournal.us

Time for something new! I felt house bound, hemmed in, out-of-touch with reality and aching for something new to tackle, something that would be personally meaningful. But what? I had no idea.

I tried to explain some of these feelings to the executive director of Loaves & Fishes but before I could finish, she said: would you consider volunteering to work for a year on my idea of creating a daily healthy breakfast for homeless people who come to Friendship Park? For years we have only been able to provide them with coffee and a day-old pastry. Essentially, we are feeding them sugar cake. We should do better than that! We need to give them with a healthy breakfast ever day of the week. Given my own state of mind, I could not have selected a better project! OK! I said, I will give you a year to see what I can do.

I finished my volunteer year last month but barely made it to the finish line. I felt my age. I was tired and worn down, I was pushing myself . . . I needed a break! The fact that Becky, my homeless breakfast project partner and I had organized 19 volunteer groups during the course of the year to commit to provide a monthly

breakfast to the 250 homeless people who came to Friendship Park every morning was gratifying and personally rewarding, but I knew I had overreached my capacity. I was finished! For the fourth time in 29 years, I retired from Loaves & Fishes.

Now what?

My final homeless breakfast for 2016 was scheduled for Halloween. As planned, my volunteer group – 40 in number – would bring their food donations to my home the day before the scheduled breakfast so the food could be sorted, organized and made ready to be transported to Friendship Park at 6:00 AM on Halloween morning. The day was especially hectic with volunteers coming and going and I trying to keep track of everything – it takes 20 large plastic storage bins of food to feed 300 hungry and homeless people, so you can imagine my home turned into a staging area. One of my volunteers, a recently retired high school teacher, said in passing: are you still writing? I hesitated, not sure what he meant. Oh, you mean Syndic, my literary journal? Yes, I am still publishing it. He too hesitated, then said: I really enjoy reading your essays. I like what you write about. Thanks, I said. He was out the door.

Then I realized what he meant! He was not referring to Syndic, he was talking about a series of very short essays I had written a decade ago and published on my personal Website (leroychatfield.us). I called them Easy Essays. Imagine that! He liked them!

This short essay marks the beginning of my new project, which I have named: 100 (Very Short) Essays.

Thank you for telling me what to do.

