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Can We Find Common Ground?

I recently spoke to

On February 8, 1992, some 60 rural community activists representing organizations from across the U.S. gathered in San Francisco to celebrate completion of an intensive three-day computer training course. Included in the training was an introduction to HandsNet, an electronic mail system that will enable these isolated groups to quickly exchange ideas and information. The following is based on an after-dinner speech by Don Villarejo to the group.

I want to thank Julie Marx of Rural Economic Policy Program of The Aspen Institute for her kind words of introduction. Julie and I actually met for the first time, by pre-arrangement, at a rest stop along Highway 5 on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley and proceeded to discuss water policy and farm labor issues as we drove south to Huron, California. Her recollections about the impressive character of our discussions were no doubt influenced by the fact that we were in rather close quarters for more than seven hours. It is not often that I get a chance to speak with someone at such great length about subjects of such intense interest to me.

First, I want to congratulate all of you for the work that each you do in your communities. Without that work and the contribution that each of you makes there would be very much less progress in the world. I was reminded of that

When I come over to San Francisco from the rural part of California, which, in this region of the state, is everything more than fifty miles inland, I feel like I'm coming to another planet. This other planet is one that has a lot of bright lights, a lot of glitter, a lot of bustle and activity, and what appears to me to be a preoccupation with consumption, with material values and with things that, in the long run, may not really matter very much.

This past week I spent a day meeting with a group Oaxacan Indians. Alejandro had earned fifteen dollars that day doing seven and one-half work of pruning preach trees. Two of the other fellows in the room were trying to decide whether to go to Pennsylvania where they understood that there was year-round work in the mushrooms. Or instead to go to North Carolina where they had heard that there was steady work in a vibrant poultry industry. And I thought, here were two men who were trying to figure out how to go yet another three thousand miles from what little they knew of the United States.

(paycheck very little wages)

In the world that I'm normally in, the unemployment rate is officially around seventeen per cent. In San Benito County, where the official unemployment rate is eighteen per cent, Tri-Valley Growers just announced, this past Friday, that they're closing their tomato cannery near Hollister, and another 650 jobs will be gone. The world that I live in is one where one and a quarter million people do hired farm work, that's just in the state of California, and their dependents are another three million people. And their annual earnings average $6,000 per year. The average level of schooling is about six years. The world that I live in is one where communities wonder whether they have a future. In Tehama County, in the far northern part of our state, a County Supervisor

told me that their only real export now is their children.

And so as I come to you tonight what I am thinking about is how we, together, are beginning to build contact, communication, a network through HandsNet, and also, in meeting each other, we are sharing experiences and ideas.

I started doing political work in 1955. At that time many organizations had a very broad vision of what they thought the future could look like. And over the ensuing twenty-five years an interesting thing occurred. Because of the success of the movement to end the U.S. intervention in Indochina, of the women's movement, of the civil rights movement, of the farm worker rights movement, separate organizations got built, each focussing on a single issue and a very narrow conception of what kind of work could be successful. And as that work succeeded in greater or lesser degrees I think that we became separate from one another, especially in thinking about whether or not our work may be related.

One of the most hopeful meetings that I went to recently was in Tampa, where people protesting the locating of toxic waste dumps, gathered to discuss their work. There are now 5,000 such local community groups across the U.S. fighting against toxic waste dumps, principally in rural, low-income or minority communities. Through the hard work of their discussions they began to realize that there is something much deeper than the problem they were initially fighting. Underneath that fight to keep toxic waste dumps out of their communities there is a much more important concern. That concern has to do with the kind of economy we have and the treatment of different racial and ethnic groups in our society. In that discussion they discovered a commonality: their humanity.

At the Tampa meeting Pat Bryant, of the Gulf Coast Tenants organization, pointed out that how much of the toxics waste of this country is being dumped in minority communities. And while driving over here this evening I hears a news report that the EPA has just issued a new report that shows that toxic waste dumps are mainly being located in rural, low-income and ethnic minority communities. But the EPA report evidently did not include the other part of the story that Pat Bryan talked about: of how major environmental organizations have largely ignored the communities where toxics are being dumped. He helped to initiate a summit of both national environmental groups and local organizations to address environmental racism, to begin to break through some of the divisions that have already separated us.

And so we came out of the meeting in Tampa very hopeful in realizing that, whether it was Lois Gibbs from the Love Canal fight, people in New Jersey, or others, that we had a lot more in common than just toxic wastes. We discovered that we have common concerns about many more issues.

One concern that we just really began to discuss was the following. During the decade of the 1980s the Gross National Product of this country increased by 1/3, and that's after taking inflation into account. The pie got one-third bigger. But for folks like us, blue-collar, pink-collar, teachers, the share got smaller. That means that someone else got away with the biggest

part of the pie. At the Tampa meeting we decided that we needed to get together again to discuss how the economy is really working, and who its working for.

One of the other things we discussed was capacity-building, how the work that we are doing is not going to be done in a year, two years, five years or ten. I remember discussions in S.D.S. where people would say, "Five years tops, total revolution." Not a whole lot of those folks are still at it. But I think that we now all recognize that the skill level that we need and that we're building are the kinds of skills that you have been learning in the past few days. But I think that capacity-building has to go beyond that. It has to go on at the level of organization-building.

Just how vital organization-building actually is was clear to me in another recent discussion. A person I spoke with a few days ago works in the State Capitol, in Sacramento. She was proud of how she had built a dispute mediation mechanism, to bring key players to the table. She was using the North Coast of California, and the problems faced by the lumber industry. How national and state environmental groups and lumber industry officials were sitting down and negotiating with each other. And I listened very patiently for a while. I learned that the environmental groups are all located in the San Francisco Bay area and the lumber industry officials are either based in San Francisco, Portland or Japan. So I asked: Why aren't there any people from Eureka, Fort Bragg, Scotia or the other lumber towns at the table? That's the capacity-building question. The response was: Who would represent them?

At another meeting this week I heard a proposal that a group of eighteen state government officials be put together to discuss the adequacy of services for hired farm workers in this state. And I asked them if any among them had ever done any hired farm work. And the answer was no, they had not. So the obvious suggestion was that they needed some help from someone who had.

Wherever we go in rural California we find very little in the way of existing organization. For us, this means starting over. Building something where nothing exists. And it is that capacity-building, including learning the technologies that you have mastered in the past few days. What we find is that there are people out there who want to build organizations. In our small way we have helped about a dozen small groups in agricultural communities of California move forward a little bit of the way.

I want to conclude with an observation that we need to cut across the single-issue lines that appear to divide us. Just as Lois Gibbs has observed that there are concerns deeper that fighting a toxic dump site, issues such as the economy and racism, so too we must begin to listen to each other's concerns and find a way to communicate. You initiative in telecommunication and electronic mail is, in my mind, a metaphor for deepening our discussion.