

Los Angeles Times

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At UCLA, the Power of the Individual : Chicano studies: The hunger strike was a morally justifiable, politically reasonable use of the tactic.

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June 11, 1993 12 AM PT

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When on the misty morning of Tuesday, May 25, a group of students and I began a hunger strike in front of Murphy Hall at UCLA, we announced that ours was not a symbolic act. We knew that we would either succeed or we would die. We did not die, and now people feel free to criticize us.

Our action has been characterized in many ways, from inspiring to irresponsible, from courageous to suicidal, but to us, it was above all an act of faith and an assumption of responsibility.

We had faith in the substance and moral force of our argument. An interdepartmental program in Chicano studies, taught by professors from traditional departments as “community service” could not fill what has become an urgent necessity in light of the racial strife tearing our society apart.

The hunger strike was decided on and led by a large, multiracial group of students; some participated in it, others organized its logistics and support activities, and others who represented us in negotiations. In a city where so many adults focus on the infantile pursuit of “fun,” these young people displayed the highest sign of maturity: the willingness to assume responsibility for the solution of our social and educational problems. The young people who led me into that tent displayed more maturity than many of my elders, and I was willing to follow their lead.

In spite of our success, we have been criticized for our use of “too heavy a tactic,” the use of maximal action for an issue of smaller magnitude that “was solvable by other means.” This reveals a complete ignorance of history and political strategy. Gandhi used the same tactic, but he did not gain India’s independence through a hunger strike. He used the tactic at specific moments within the struggle, in a given context and to achieve defined, measurable goals.

Our hunger strike had a successful outcome because we used it in support of a morally sustainable cause, at the crest of a movement and to focus other ongoing efforts, when other methods had been exhausted. Most important, we applied it in the pursuit of an objective achievable within the time frame of the limits for human survival. Ours was a morally justifiable, politically reasonable, intelligent use of the tactic.

It is ironic that our action was compared to “putting a gun to someone’s head.” At a time when guns are continuously pointed at heads and triggers pulled in the streets of our cities because of lack of understanding between people of different backgrounds, we resorted to a nonviolent approach.

Our efforts were aimed at enriching the academic curriculum for all UCLA students, regardless of their major. Upon graduation, they must not only have technical expertise in their chosen fields; they also must understand the realities of the world in which they will work.

Our society is being torn apart by tension, confrontation and violence because of the pursuit of the politics of self-interest. Our message was that we must embrace a different approach, and be willing to give of ourselves, whatever is necessary--our lives if need be--for the collective interest, for the common good. We must pursue life, liberty and happiness for all of us, not for some of us at the expense of others. We must leave behind the “trickle down” approach to empowerment, the belief that all will benefit in a given community if an individual representative climbs the ladders of economic and political hierarchies. We must give democracy its true meaning and all become participants in the steering of our common economic and political destiny.

The most powerful message of our hunger strike is the illustration of the power of the individual: A small group of individuals with no political power, wealth or influence was able to play a significant role in influencing the course of events. All it takes is clarity of mind, strength of convictions and determination.

We may have made many mistakes, and will probably make more. But as Edward R. Murrow once said, “No one makes a bigger mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little.” Each of us can do more than we realize. Each of us alone, can only do a little. Together, we can make history.