

Remarks by NEIU political science M.A. student Jeanette Hernandez upon accepting the Varophas Award for Outstanding Graduate Student in Political Science, April 11, 2008.



Good afternoon.

Just recently, I got into a discussion about power with fellow classmates. We as political scientists study and are fascinated with power, the benign as well as the base, each of which requires power in different forms. As my colleague Ellen Larrimore argued, there had to be more than *power over*, which is all too common in our world. Power over is possibly benign, but can also be oppressive, or even exploitative. I countered there was *power with*, which is among peers or perhaps of the collectivity. After our discussion, however, I remained dissatisfied.

Allow me to go out on a limb and propose a different form of power: *Power for*. This is when you pack someone's parachute, so to speak. More specifically, you give someone what they need to survive in something they have to go alone. This is the journey Janie refers to in the

novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, who writes, “*Nobody can tell you and nobody can show you. You’ve got to do it yourself. You’ve got to go to God* [paraphrased].” Such is the journey of the student.

Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara enacts *power for* in a letter to his children in Cuba when, correctly sensing he would never see them again, urges them to study and to remain engaged in the world. His final commandment is, “*Above all, try always to be able to feel deeply any injustice committed against any person in any part of the world. It is the most beautiful quality of a revolutionary.*” Guevara argued that to feel someone else’s suffering across perhaps time and definitely space is admirable, the prerequisite of converting despair to action, but note that it is neither power with nor power over. Those of you who are parents know this well: when you make your child go to school, it’s power over. When you walk your child to school, it is power with. When you kiss them good bye, that’s *power for*. Unlike power with or power over, then, *power for* bridges the divides of time and space and thus is the only power that endures. To me, this power is all too familiar.

In more ways than I can say, I acquired *power for* from my own father, who encouraged me always to learn as much as I could, see as much of the world as my finances could honestly bear, and to be a good global citizen. I’ll share with you a story about him. I went to visit him in the hospital one day. When I walked in his room, I found him crying, which like most children, I’d only seen him do a handful of times in my life. I had thought he was depressed about his health or about being in a hospital, but there would be none of that. He said to me, “*Ay daughter, read this.*”

The book was called *The History of Mexico City*. The passage he was reading was about some fiscal crises in the city that led to some curious ways to generate revenue, as the city was

becoming an important political center in its own right. One way was to tax properties on how many windows they had. Needless to day, *capitalines*, as the residents are called, began to brick up their windows to avoid a hefty assessment. The bureaucrats crafted another way—and imposed a dog tax. To facilitate the obliteration of unwanted canines, the city held a dog massacre in the central square and people came out in droves to have their most faithful friends executed.

I could see why he was so upset.

“*Papi, those were difficult times,*” I reasoned, but my father was inconsolable.

“*Difficult? Oh please, Mexico has always known difficult times. But this, is barbarism!*” and he started crying again.

At the moment, it had not occurred to me that perhaps his despair over the untold number of slaughtered innocents long ago and far away could be a good thing—or that Che Guevara might have been proud of him. His lesson was clear and no less important. There is a world of difference between difficulty and barbarism. One doesn’t follow from the other and in fact it never should.

I would not likely be standing before you without the *power for* I received from this gentle and peaceful man. As *power for* has the capacity to transcend time and space, it’s a gift I still receive, even though he passed away six years ago *today*. I mention him to elucidate that each and every one of you has given me *power for* at one time or another. Even if we don’t see each other or communicate with each other, you still do.

I hope one day I may do the same for you.

Thank you.