

Che on My Mind by Margaret Randall¹

“So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
The sea’s lamenting in my consciousness,

...
So, through me, freedom and the sea
Will call in answer to the shrouded heart”

Pablo Neruda, *The Poet’s Obligation*

If you only read one book about Che Guevara, this is the book that I strongly recommend. Margaret Randall, one of the most compelling and articulate voices of freedom, feminism, revolution and love begins her book with these lines.

Ernest Che Guevara occupies a place in our emotional iconography unsurpassed by anyone with the exception of Buddha, Mohammed, Marx, Mary or Jesus of Nazareth. Still contemporary – his death at the age of thirty-nine isn’t yet a half century behind us- he is a figure revered in equal measure by both convinced revolutionaries and apolitical youth at the farthest reaches of our planet.

Margaret Randall never met the subject of her book, she arrived in Cuba where she was to live for many years two years after his assassination by the CIA in Bolivia where he had gone after the triumph of the revolution in Cuba to continue the revolution that he felt could happen in many other countries. Margaret Randall might be one of the most prolific witnesses of the revolutionary movements in Latin America beginning in the 1960s. She founded one of the most respected journals of the era in Mexico called the *El Corno Emplumado*, a bi-lingual journal dedicated to the publishing of the poetry, political thoughts, revolutionary visions, and radical imagination of the era. Her journey over these years from Mexico to Cuba to Nicaragua before returning to New Mexico and the country she was born in has been rendered highly visible thanks to her remarkable energy and passion for putting down in poems, essays, photographs and stories. Her work giving visibility especially to the lives and roles of women in countries struggling for revolutionary change is luminous.

Perhaps only a poet could capture the complexities of the life, lives, myth and myths of Che. Ironically, Che the name conjures up for nearly every non Spanish speaker, the image of Ernest Che Guevara, but in his native Argentina, Che is the common

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nick name for just about every kid. Randall notes that she is both old enough to remember when Che was with us, but was part of that world that brought his combination of ideas and action to life. And who was he?

Beyond academic inquiry or theoretical relevance, he is a rebel energy imprinted on generation after generation. In Che, the saint (in its secular iteration) and the outlaw (in its broadest definition) in habit a single body.

In the story of Che as Margaret Randall unfolds, we are drawn inside the world that both Che and Margaret lived. Margaret was friends with many of the friends and relatives of Che. She heard the stories of his triumphs, the quality of his revolutionary vision, critical assessments of his strategic decisions in terms of direct involvement in Africa and finally in Bolivia. Like the iconic image of Che that is found on walls in Havana and also on the tee shirts of teenagers around the world, Che was both an historic activist and revolutionary and became even before his death, but certainly following his death a myth. Perhaps this is true for most revolutionary figures....for Gandhi or even perhaps for Mandela? But in the able and creative capacities of Margaret Randall, the many verses of Che's life are woven into an epic poem. The Che on Margaret's mind could easily be a character in a powerful historical drama written for the stage. The only thing is that in this case, Ernesto Che Guevara was and is real. As it is said, Che lives!

As did Margaret in her book, let us close with a poem by the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti who had known the Guevara family before Ernesto became Che.

I met you as a boy
There in that countryside of Argentine Cordoba
Playing among the poplars and maize fields,
The cows of the old manors, the peons...
I did not see you again, until I learned one day
That you were the blood-stained light, the north
That star
That has to be watched at every moment
So as to know where we stand

Review by Budd L Hall, Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. He is also a poet