PARDON ME, Myth
Have You Met Dr. Hernández García Diego?

Fairy tales and mythology are replete with archetypical imagery of the small and insignificant who speak smack to power; underdogs who discredit, slay, and drive monarchs, warriors, giants and other larger-than-life’s to ground. The emperor parades in raiment too grand, he’s been told, to be visible to the unworthy eye. The veils of deceit and intimidation are stripped away by the observation of a child along his route: “The Emperor is wearing no clothes!” A stunned Goliath drops on impact of the scrawny shepherd’s slingshot stone, paving the way for a ragtag army to overpower warriors of considerably disproportionate training and armament.

Relegating tales of such modest heroes to the land of fantasy would be a real myth-take. Our shrinking world is rich with stories of the seemingly powerless who successfully challenge influential opponents: In the Mixteca region of Mexico, for example, there lives just such a hero. In search of a unique gemstone amidst the mother lode of organizations working to resolve water conflicts in Mexico, this 2014 Peacebuilder Fellow had the good fortune to share an afternoon with him.

Having traveled through a land where periods of conquest and independence tumble over one another in a whirling dervish of subjugation, my meeting with Dr. Raúl Hernández García Diego took some serious cognitive regrouping. At first blush, it was difficult to reconcile this man of modest stature and humble attitude with the undaunted valor and imagined physique of the one whose tales preceded him (his height, gentle voice, humble nature – and wry patience with my comedic Spanglish – belied the giant slayer within).

Striding forth from halls of academia more than 30 years before, Dr. Hernández García Diego marched cross country, armed with a degree in philosophy, a wife, and a raison d’être: the quest to eradicate a giant named “Poverty.” He soon discovered that this beast, who had taken up an entrenched and very comfortable residence, was a Frankenstein-like construct composed of bits and pieces: an unforgiving environment, gluttonous downstream industry, corrupt government, inequitable legislation, and lack of political participation.

Poverty, he reflected, with its hodgepodge anatomy, was not an entity readily perceived at the time by those who had been living within its shadow. To the indigenous and others on the margins, Poverty bore other names: Thirst, Hunger, and Disease. These tangible manifestations were attributed to lack of water: Water for crops, livestock, and humans had to be carried great distances, depleting already-limited time and energy reserves. The supply was, at best, suitable for providing inadequate sips for crops and wreaking gastrointestinal havoc.

He laughed then, remembering that, at the time, he wasn’t convinced that a degree in philosophy would be the most obvious weapon of choice (from my vantage point, the heart, soul and stamina of
this man in whose scabbard it was carried clearly made it so). Enlisting experts in a myriad of sciences (paleo-hydrology, engineering, horticulture, anthropology) and locals, he discovered that the ancient ways combined with modern tools, materials, technology, and the ingenuity, love of land, and work ethic of the people, might be interlaced to create systems that would carry and store water sufficient to meet their basic needs AND to reconstitute dry aquifers.

At the point of a sword forged of sheepskin, this gentle man who sat with me had marched Thirst, Hunger and Disease into gradual retreat. He described to me how, under the auspices of Agua para Siempre (Water Forever), the people learned and grew, fine-tuning agricultural techniques, implementing renewable energy processes, creating wastewater systems, and sharing knowledge and sustainable lifestyles via agricultural cooperatives and a water museum that garnered national support and international acclaim.

That would have been a fitting time to definitively snap closed the worn leather cover of my treasured book of fairy tales: Poverty’s corpse rotting upon the ground; people living happily ever after; a diminutive hero ambling into the sunset, an immense shadow the only testament to a job well done. The story and the pages upon which it is writ, however, defied closure.

Beneath the passing pages (he shook his head sadly as he told me), the giant reassembles. He rises from dust in the guise of threatened criminal prosecution. He gains momentum through regulations that defy compliance. He feeds voraciously upon the greed of industry and government that challenge the genetic foundation of an entire culture.
But, my hero was no longer a lonely voice in the wilderness; if ever, indeed, he was. I met him then, flanked by a battalion; a ragtag army comprised of proud farmers, compassionate officials, insightful scientists, a variety of organizations, and a couple of surprisingly judicious judges. That army, as I saw it and as I continue to follow its exploits even now, has formalized, becoming regal in bearing and effective in strategizing. It would seem that, though the good doctor may never completely eradicate Poverty in this marginalized region of his country, he clearly has been a force to bring it to its knees.

As I think about it now, I see that his strength is in his relentless pursuit of social justice, whatever flames of inequity the dragon throws. His strength is in refusing to allow appearances of grandeur, power, and futility to cloud his vision. His strength is in the recognition of points of vulnerability and opportunity. His strength is in the understanding that he is but one part of a large and capable collection, catalyzed into action by clarity of vision and tenacious spirit.

Though, in my opinion, Dr. Hernández García Diego might easily have stepped from the rich tapestries of mythology, I found him to be a very real character in a very real tale. In a land of historically lopsided conflict, he dares to see the playing field and his personal strengths from a unique perspective, not hesitating to volley small munitions against mighty giants.

Contrary to lyrics from a song that influenced us both along our youthful paths and gave rise to an instanta-neously shared, if somewhat off-pitch, memory:

It was time to make a change—
He did not relax or take it easy!
Though he may not be here tomorrow, his dreams live on!

I cannot help but hope that Dr. García Diego’s dreams and the reality they weave serve to fortify the giant slayer in each of us. Pardon me, Myth! Have you met ________________?

Amy Clark is a retired lawyer and graduate of Middlebury Institute where she pursued a Certificate in Conflict Resolution. Amy divides her time between exploring and exacerbating conflict. She is networking infrastructure for a village in Colombia, and sits at the confluence of a variety of water issues. In 2014, she served as Peacebuilding Fellow to Mexico.

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