

MAKE YOUR ALMA MATER PROUD
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I am deeply honored to be your Commencement Speaker. It feels great to be back here in U.P. Diliman, when I have to face her and perhaps tell her what I have done so far as her former student.

I never thought that I would be coming back to our campus as a politician, or more precisely, as a public servant.

Looking back, I recalled the pages on Plato's "*The Republic*" wherein the foremost Greek thinker while recommending a course of study for political rulers, his conception was not a curriculum in political science or public administration; he prescribed mathematics, for example, because the habits of thought it developed would enable rulers to develop values of logical reasoning, analysis, and accuracy before arriving at solutions.

As a student, my cup of tea, so to speak, was Mathematics. Before I entered the UP College of Business Administration, I had been with the private sector upon graduating with a double degree program in Mechanical Engineering and Industrial Management Engineering at the other university along Taft Avenue.

What Plato was saying was that mathematicians make good politicians who want to solve problems with less waste and probability of error; unlike traditional politicians perhaps who may have profound knowledge in law and politics but count profits from dubious public works transactions.

Before you get me wrong, I am here not to encourage you to enter politics as your career. I am here to tell you that we need people like you to keep our country going, no matter which career path you will take after your graduation.

Out there, like the politician that you love or hate, you will have to choose whether to take the rough road towards delivering our people from the mess that they are mired in;

or take the more comfortable option of making yourself rich and powerful, regardless of whether you are happy or proud at what you are doing.

A STRONG HEART

Fifteen years ago, I faced the same choice. At the time, I was already working with the private sector.

I had already spent six years in contributing to wealth creation (and indirectly to nation building) as junior executive with the Magnolia Division of San Miguel Corporation.

But the opportunity came when I was called upon to lead in rebuilding Naga City, my hometown, in the heady post-EDSA Revolution era days in the mid 80s. Those were the times when Filipinos were beaming with pride, having authored a bloodless revolution that not only ousted a long-standing dictator but also provided the template for similar democratic upheavals that swept the world.

My passion to make a difference for our city forced me to answer then the call for the youth to serve the country. Thus, I had to leave the comforts of a well-paying job and a largely secure future in a big private firm and enter politics.

Becoming Naga's first post-EDSA mayor was not easy. Only a few hundred votes separated me from my nearest rival. And I had to take on formidable challenges associated with pulling Naga out of the doldrums --- which essentially became my business plan.

Executing that business plan was tougher. But it also gave me the opportunity to test theories and concepts we learn in school where they matter --- in the real world, and in my own hometown no less.

In executing our business plan, I had to face and make choices again and again. For instance, should I take the traditional way of running things that politicians are expected to do – that is, assuming full authority as leader, who knows what needs to be done, and always tries to make the right decision by relying on my own individual abilities? Or will I be facilitative leader --- one who realizes there is diversity of perspectives among the constituency. Thus he will rely on their abilities to arrive at a common decision that they own, in the process acting and engaging with their chosen leaders in government.

I have mentioned this because I believe that 15 years later, if there is anything that Naga is known for today, it is about how we have risen beyond our physical, social and economic constraints to craft proudly Filipino-made innovations in local governance that are becoming known around the world.

The common denominator of these innovations is how we have successfully put together three key elements --- (a) progressive, facilitative leadership; (b) functional partnerships and (c) wide-ranging inclusive participatory mechanisms --- in resolving the formidable challenges of urban governance, in the process making a difference in the lives of our people.

FILIPINO-MADE INNOVATION

We viewed our constituency, regardless of their political affiliations, as our partners and assets. We crafted a People Empowerment Ordinance, the first of its kind in the country, which instituted the Naga City People's Council. This Council, a federation of over a hundred non-government and people's organizations, has representatives who are empowered to propose legislations and vote at the committee level of the city council.

Today we engage ourselves in a program that looks at every Nagueno as the focal point of what government enterprise is all about. We call it the *i*-Governance Program. It not only recognizes the citizen's right to know but also encourages them to engage their government by freely providing them with information on what their elected leaders are accountable for. Under the program, we came up with a Citizens Charter which makes accessible to every citizen the services of the city by detailing step-by-step procedure to avail each of the services, the standard response time for the delivery of the service and the city official responsible for its delivery. It also features regular publication, through print and the internet, of the city's budget and procurements, bidding notices and other finances. Because of transparent governance and accessibility of information, construction of roads and purchases of supplies and medicines cost much less in Naga City than government standards. Never mind if the national economy was bleak because we were actually doing more with less.

Access to information is a crucial component of the right to participate. Transparency, as a normative and constitutional value, represents a means, not an end.

The means is the mechanism of access to information. People want to know what is going on. They want to know how their taxes are being spent and why certain budget

allocations are being made; why a new road has been tarred here and not there. These are simple things that our leaders today sorely miss. Their absence as vital governance components explains why our country has lagged behind in both economic and political development.

The i-Governance program, truly Filipino-made, has earned for us the 2004 United Nations Public Service Award. It also became the centerpiece of my presentation as one of the panelists about two weeks ago, from April 12-14, this year, in the 1st Biannual Global Network Conference held at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where incidentally I took up and finished my Masters Degree in Public Administration.

CHANGING PARADIGMS

Today, the quality of life in Naga City may not be at par with those of the developed countries but what Naga City lack in material wealth is compensated by its sense of community – how its citizens interact with their fellowmen – with how its scarce resources are shared – with how misfortunes and natural calamities are met with resilience.

I do believe that the goal of government is not simply to put as much food on the table for as many people as possible. Government must engage the hearts and minds of people to make these efforts sustainable. Government must make people experience that people in government are not masters but servants.

Our experience has shown that our people are our best resource and our best hope. Our experience has also shown that if we cannot do it at the national level, we can begin at the local level. Collectively, successful local governments, driven by constituencies who are well informed, constructively engaged, and willing to share the burden of community building, can rebuild our country.

We may not be there yet, but the important thing is that we know that we are on the right road.

MAKING HEROES OUT OF THE ORDINARY

Sometimes I would ask myself that while many of our leaders have succeeded in achieving their personal goals, the country continues to lag behind. Maybe, it is because they have failed to make heroes out of the ordinary Filipino. Maybe it is because they have relied solely on their own capacities, rather than on the contributions of the ordinary people they are responsible for.

Or maybe we have not given enough space for people who are not rich, well-educated or well-connected and professionally qualified to exert influence.

Not all of you will graduate with honors or with distinctions. Only a few will be privileged to receive medals and special citations. But all of you tonight will come up this stage to be honored as the nation's promising citizens and professionals.

Our political history has shown that we have put the burden of running this country on our "best" people for too long. And yet the gap between the rich and the poor has only grown wider. For this country to succeed, we need to make heroes of the ordinary Filipino. We need to make heroes of ourselves.

In Naga City, we have a woman street sweeper, who held on to her broom for twenty years. Literally, she had swept every square inch of the city's business district. But through sheer determination, she was able to finish her secondary studies in a night school and graduated, at 54, with a bachelor's degree. This was some 8 years after her daughters had theirs. Today, she works on her desk at the City Environment and Resources Office, no longer on the streets. Recently she was conferred with the Naga Mayoral Award for serving as an inspiration to ordinary citizens, one who despite overwhelming odds, has risen above them. Her broom became a diploma. The woman was not an honor graduate --- but an ordinary citizen, struggling to make life better for her, her family, and her community.

As UP graduates, your diploma may get you to the best boardrooms in Makati, or in the most lucrative firms anywhere else in the country. But by and large it is your character, your heart and your vision that will make you an active participant in the overall renewal and transformation of a nation.

Why am I tell you this, my dear graduates?

It is because many of us feel that the world today lacks the values that used to mould the disposition and the character of the ordinary citizen.

The world today has so developed layers upon layers of behavioral patterns and lifestyles that have virtually hidden what is basic and essential in life. In pre-school, as bestseller writer Robert Fulghum observed, we used to be taught these: “Share everything. Play fair. Do not cheat. Put things back where you find them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours.”

How sad ---after ten years in basic education and four years in higher education -- we seem to have forgotten the basic tenets learned in pre-school.

When graduates go out into the world of business or politics or entertainment or government service, will they still “share everything”, “play fair”, or “put things back where they find them?”

Of course, we want our diplomas to be meaningful. As students, and eventually as graduates, we always wish to create a climate of competition. And so does government. Nothing is more deeply entrenched in human nature than the urge to compete, whether this is against yourself, or against someone else. We are always trying to better our achievements. In government, we have a name for this: it is called service delivery. We strive to perform our tasks more effectively and efficiently, to reach more beneficiaries and innovate programs that will help us shape the future of our communities.

And if we want to feel the warmth and compassion of government then we should experience it in the personal lives of our people, especially the ordinary ones whom we thought are less educated or less privileged than we.

Here I think of a jeepney driver who after a devastating typhoon, with bolo in his hand, cuts to pieces a fallen tree that obstructs a major road so that other vehicles can pass through.

I think of a barangay official leading neighbors to clean a canal to lessen the chances of cholera in the rural areas.

I also think of a school teacher who realizes that unless her pupils have proper nutrition they are not going to absorb the lessons she teaches.

These people whom you will be meeting outside of your campus are the human face of government. When you extend your hand, it becomes the personal touch of government.

If that hand is compassionate and understanding, then a bond is formed between the community and government which is the essence of nation-building.

My dear graduates, from here you will be on your own. Where your years in college are mere stepping stones, the years ahead will find you erecting milestone after milestone. At some point you will pause for reflection: an occasion to measure the distance traveled. But more significantly, it should be an opportunity to gauge the impact you have made in your chosen field. Has your life made a difference in the lives of others?

Have you made your Alma Mater proud?

Congratulations and good afternoon.