

UP School of Economics

Graduation Rites

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**Fearless And Faithful**

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From the outside, the University of the Philippines that I remember in the four years that I spent here—is not much different from the university now. The acacia trees at the oval also stood like sentinels, guarding the dreamy thoughts and follies of our generation. I was told dorm food is still bad as it was during our time, the toilet flushes still barely breathing and so was the way Ikot remained clunking along sedately even when we were already late for our class. Of course, Rodics is still there and a few other establishments.

But it was also very, very different, because we were then at the height of fighting a dictator. Ninoy Aquino was just murdered and images of his body on that tarmac changed something inside all of us. I remember one day during my senior year here in this very college reading an expose called The White Paper that was so bold, so true ...so fearless and yet so faithful. That white paper wrote about graft and corruption in government/ cronyism and misuse of public funds. Most of all, it painted to us the real economic picture that the government then did not want the people to see. It pointed out how the regime was handling our economy It used the language of economists, and yet it was also emotional and full of heart that it struck the very core of our political consciousness.

I remember thinking during that moment: what a very brave thing to do! Back then, as you well know, when the hidden eyes and ears of the regime find you, you could easily be prosecuted and even disappear. My dear young ones, that wasn't a horror story used to make children go to sleep. It really happened. Those were very dark days that your elders went through. You could lose your life if you were a subversive or be just plain vocal of your mistrust of the government.

Some of the writers of that white paper were my economics professors. Some are still here with us today. The very professors of UP Economics who have nurtured me here and here where it truly mattered! Professor Winnie Monsod, already an institution, taught me, perhaps without her being aware of it, that the audacity of dreaming for a better world could very well be demonstrated using empirical evidence coupled with real, unfettered patriotism. My dear graduating students, I hope you feel the same kind of privilege that we felt, of having walked with and having been mentored by our heroes too.

Like Jose Rizal, they undauntedly used the power of the pen, and they also used a daring arsenal of facts and of numbers. They took it a step further, however, and didn't just stop at writing. They encouraged students to be proactive/ to engage/ and even join the rallies. It came to a point when students who joined the mass actions were already exempted from regularly attending their classes. There was an option to just have either a Pass or Fail grade on the classcards. In their academic wisdom, they saw fit to teach students the real lessons from off the streets.

They made the right call. That was the experience that started me on this path of good governance. I learned that I couldn't stand by and do nothing when so much needs to change. That singular feeling of utter patriotism is perhaps the key to who I am today.

I remember thinking then: “How wonderful to walk with heroes. To study beneath their watchful eyes.” That was when I began to understand what is REAL **UP-style** “tuwid na daan.” What is unfeigned courage and love for country. How you must put yourself out of your comfort zone, even into the danger zone, to fight for what is right.

My father was a lawyer and had been a long time judge in our city. As far back as I remember, it was the same path that I have dreamt of taking. My life was all planned. After graduating from the UP School of Economics, I would go straight to law school and be a lawyer like my father. But EDSA somehow changed that. After joining the People Power revolution, with a new President at the helm of our government, I was inspired to be part of the big change that was unfolding before my very eyes. I went home to my native Naga City for what was supposedly a short break after graduation and learned that a government agency taking care of the Bicol River Basin was looking for economists. With a patriotic flare in my stomach I applied. My boss was to be Jesse, who would eventually become my husband. I have heard of how the organization was already changing because of him. However, he was unimpressed with my application, because I carried with me a recommendation from his politician-uncle. He told me quietly that that was no longer how things worked. I was mortified and told him that it was a lapse in judgment and the mistaken understanding that the recommendation would help me get the job. But he left me biting my fingers for quite a time.

In the end, I was called back to take the required examination and was asked to write an essay of any topic of my choice. I wrote about the role of Cory Aquino in the EDSA Revolution. I got the job and the rest is history. Incidentally, my first day of work was on August 18, 1986. He died August 18, 2012, exactly 26 years later.

Jesse and I were at exactly the same wavelength. He was already a fast rising junior

executive at the San Miguel Corporation and after EDSA, gave up his job to find more meaning in what he was doing. He went home to Naga from Manila, wanting nothing more than to serve the country he loved. You could say our love story was born from the euphoria of EDSA. . from a passion and desire to truly serve. We saw a country that was in the nascent stage of greatness, but was still flawed and conflicted.

Less than a year after I started working for the government, I got engaged to the boss and had to resign from work. I taught economics during the day in a local university and went to law school during the evenings. Jesse also eventually resigned and ran for Mayor of Naga City at the age of 29.

I was and continue to be a fiercely private person. I chose to stay away from the public eye. After I eventually became a lawyer, I chose to quietly work assisting peasants, fisherfolk, laborers, the urban poor, battered women and the marginalized sectors in the Bicol Region while Jesse donned the mantle of the city mayor. After he died, I initially resisted the call to run for office, preferring to drown myself in the minutiae of daily tasks surrounding my daughters. But when it became clear to me that Jesse needed me to fight for the gains in Naga City he had long worked for, and to continue the work for good governance he left behind. I simply had to make the sacrifice and took the chance.

To be honest, wasn't sure I was cut out to be a Congressman, much more, a politician. In all the years that my husband was a Mayor, I was never actively involved in his work and in his politics. Slowly, I realized that the years of supporting a Mayor of 19 years up close, of getting a front row seat to watching his brand of leadership in action, of observing how he brought politics closer to the people, was all the training I needed.

I am now trying to continue the legacy my husband left behind. I am running the last mile. He started in Naga City his campaign for transparency, accountability and people

participation and sustained the fight at the DILG. He was fond of raising battle cries that will inspire his constituents to take action. He always believed that good governance is the metric by which our leaders will be measured. He always said that /It is not enough for leaders to have integrity. They must also be excellent. It is not enough to have the intention to make reforms. They must also learn to set up systems and to institutionalize these reforms. It is not enough for a public official to be good. There has to be a system which will force him to do good.

I believe that my responsibility now is to ensure that that legacy is kept alive. My role is push for bills that will create Naga Cities across the country. My battle is to push for systems. We cannot just keep on decrying corruption and forever holding hearings. We need to PREVENT it. We **CAN** fight corruption through transparency and good governance. Would that the Lord see fit to allow those two values to be ingrained in the consciousness of our people. Then, and only then, can we be sure of our path to greatness.

As in the days of my youth, so it is in yours. Each man, woman, and child is needed to ensure a government that is truly by the people and for the people. There are fewer rallies for you to join, but there are a hundred other good governance advocacies and tasks to perform. There may not be a dictator who can make you fear for your lives and that of your loved ones, but there are still the dictators of complacency and corruption still to push back.

Econometrics and numbers will serve their purpose when you use them to build up a nation that is tragic but beautiful. Do not think that when I say “nation”, I am talking about your Makati and Ortigas business districts with bustling streets and beautiful lights. I am talking about communities you have to hike for three hours to reach. I am talking about those who are hungry and uneducated, who deserve to have a shot at a

prosperous life and yet, despite all their hard work, cannot even begin to imagine a day where their only problem is what frappe to order. This? What you see in Metro Manila, is not the real score.

I go to those communities as often as I can. Sometimes I have to walk three hours one way to personally find out how children are walking 5 kilometers every day just to go to school. I inspect broken bridges and roads. I see classrooms with no roofs and walls and children just bearing out the sun and rain in order to learn. Most of the time, I feel helpless knowing that in a sea of so much suffering whatever limited power is never nearly enough to change the world. Many times I still wish that Jesse was still here not only because it would have been much nicer to have a husband to keep a home for and a co-parent who I could share parenting highs and lows with but also because I sincerely believe that with his years of experience he would have made so much more difference and would have done a better job.

It has been a year and a half since the plane crash, but if you must know, we are still not over with the grief. Until now, all his things in the house are still in the exact same place where he left them/ The clothes he wore before he left the house for the last time are still hanging behind our bedroom door. His toothbrush and shaving cream are still in the same spot in our bathroom sink. His clothes are still neatly piled in the cabinet, as if waiting to be worn tomorrow. But even as I have to conquer the fear of facing a future without him, there is work to do and an entire constituency in my district pinning their hopes on me.

I may have lost my mentor and partner in good governance but maybe you can be my partners now. You are young and you have the idealism and energy that Jesse and I have NEVER lost. Don't lose it when you start working. Don't lose sight of what is truly important when you get those paychecks. Find a job that inspires you and makes good

use of your talent. Go beyond your comfort zones. Learn to love our beautiful country. Live so that those who have less can live more.

Anchor your relationships on things that are greater than you. Always express your love in ways unique to you. You never know when your plane will go down unexpectedly. Jesse never left anything unsaid. When he left us, we all knew how we were the center of his life. Even when he was in Manila working at the DILG five days a week, he was our go-to guy when something in the house was not working. He would fix the plumbing when he gets home. Even when he was Interior Secretary, he would ride the bike in his trademark tsinelas to go to our local hardware store and buy the stuff men of the house normally buys. Being a husband and a father grounded him. It was extremely important to him not to get used to the perks of being a government official. Despite his role in government, we were his topmost priority.

Create your own version of tsinelas leadership. Jesse has passed on, but you can still bring it alive. Strive not just to be true and honest, strive to be excellent in all that you do. Any job that is worth doing should be done with excellence. Shed off the cloaks of mediocrity. You are UP Economics graduates!! Mediocrity has no place in our midst.

There is much work to do. Like our economics professors and our heroes, embrace the audacity to dream for a better nation. Then you will be the heroes of the next generation. Thank you and congratulations.