

GET REAL PHILIPPINES

Book I

by benign0

Presented to all on the Sixth Anniversary of

www.GetRealPhilippines.com

01 August 2006

*I would rather have a Philippines run like hell by
Filipinos than a Philippines run like heaven by
the Americans*

Manuel L. Quezon
First President
Philippine Commonwealth Government
1935

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Foreword

by Cocoy Dayao

Who is Juan dela Cruz?

For the longest time, Filipinos everywhere have asked this question: *Why are we in a rut?* In generation after generation there is this unshakable sense of melancholy, this sense that our world will never get better; that we will never reach our dreams as a nation. A defeatist attitude, a sense of hopelessness some might say that is. Yet all one needs to do is look into our collective past, look deep into the Filipino's psyche, ask the right questions and one's self to know *why*. The glass is not half-empty, it is half-full!

All this “glass is not half-empty” mumbo jumbo is just “crap”, one might think. But is it? Have you – the Filipino – stared into the mirror lately? Doctors routinely turning into nurses then flying off to the land of milk and honey. GDP that has not shown any spectacular growth in the last several decades. Everyday we see people begging in the street corner; hungry people. Not just ordinary people but *children* routinely go hungry. In our farthest barangays, the things we in the 21st century take for granted – power and water, among others – are luxuries. The Internet barely penetrates, heck, *computers* barely penetrate our society that far out. And school children remain locked in 19th century-ish ideas. Then we are deluged by bad news daily, each news snippet increasingly depressing. It is indeed a hard press to smile and smell the roses.

We have not risen to greatness and we may never do. Then again, do we want to? On most occasions, Filipinos work really hard. We are an industrious people. We seemingly never exhaust ourselves in the daily grind. Our people never stop toiling, and we continue to smile as we toil; our inspiration, undoubtedly, to uplift our lives. Yet in many instances it is not for ourselves but the endless string of Extended Family members that must be supported. It may be a brother supporting a younger sister or vice versa. It may be children supporting parents. It may be one or a combination of countless scenarios. Endlessly, generations work for the succeeding generations.

When one looks beyond our immediate community and out at the grand scale of things, one does not find this sense of Family. There is no *Filipino* Family. It simply doesn't scale up.

How else do we explain the squandering of resources, the divisiveness, the untrustworthiness. Have the stewards of this nation simply chosen to enslave, to work for themselves, to enrich their own and blindly and like parasites feed on this race? It is very much tempting to say so, to shout in a loud voice and point fingers but the fact of the matter is this: *it isn't entirely their fault either.*

And *that* is what this whole thing is all about. It isn't any one person, or group of people or this or that leader that has brought this Republic – this race – to this point; this *rut*. The moment, we choose to set aside the blame, to dig deep within our own Filipino psyche, to take our own destiny into our hands; *that* will be the moment we as a people step up and make good on the myriad of promise exhibited by generations past. Still to get there, one needs a greater understanding of who the Filipino is.

Get Real Philippines Book 1 is one such guide.

Get Real Philippines Book 1 is a labour of love. As you read you will discover its palpable flavour. It draws on that vast pool of frustration Filipinos everywhere know well, yet it is candid, straightforward, and honest; and that makes it an easy read, asking only that the reader maintain an open mind throughout. Its accomplishment is that it offers refreshing insight on the Filipino. It takes a deep, unrelenting, thought-provoking look at all aspects of the Filipino and brings us closer to that seemingly unattainable wisdom that enables us to answer the question, “Who is Juan dela Cruz”.

This is working smarter, not harder. It is only through an understanding of who we are, and its equivalent acceptance that we become one people – unafraid of global influences on our culture, relentless in our pursuit of economic prosperity, and certain of our identity – that we will be able to stand tall and interact as equals with our brothers and sisters in our global village. Who is Juan dela Cruz? That's easy. Turn the page and get real.

Cocoy Dayao runs the Web log Big Mango [<http://arkangel1a.blogspot.com>] where he articulates “analysis, intelligence, and opinion on and about the Philippines”. His views follow a rigorous thought framework, as evident in his 16-part “Understanding Nation Building” series of blog posts ending 28th October 2005 – a monumental work of critical evaluation that challenges the more readily accepted conventional views that prevail in the blogosphere.

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Introduction

“You give them rice and they expect you to cook it for them”. Words that pretty much sum up our lot – the Filipino people.

Before we get to the exciting stuff, let’s start with a brief introduction. I am a Filipino individual. I belong to the Filipino nation. I am one of ten million-odd Filipino individuals who had found decent to moderate success as professionals or entrepreneurs either overseas or within our islands nation. I myself am living not in that islands nation known as “the Philippines”, but in the beautiful Commonwealth of Australia. I consider myself, like most Australians to be enjoying a “decent standard” of living.

Many Filipinos who live in the Philippines enjoy decent standards of living too. How decent is *decent*? Just like most Australians, some island Filipinos have indoor plumbing and water on tap, eat three or more nutritious meals a day, live in homes that offer secure shelter from the elements, have at least 12 square meters of home floor space to themselves, and get prompt service from utility companies whenever needed. Public servants and law enforcement officers also generally treat this fortunate but small subset of Filipinos courteously and fairly. All these are civilised life’s basic perks. They should be, at the very least, within reach of even moderately industrious people, much more those who really work hard. *At the very least*. Indeed, as previously mentioned, most people in advanced nations – even lazy ones – take these basic perks for granted. Yet in the case of the Philippines, is it too much to ask that people who work *moderately hard* find it within their means to acquire these perks? The reality is that generations of Filipinos have worked – and worked and worked – and have nothing to show for their effort. Not even to their grandchildren.

A decent standard of living is, in fact, a human right that is taken for granted in most advanced nations. Yet Filipinos who do enjoy a decent standard of living pretty much constitute the *economic elite* of Philippine society. Think of this for one moment. A chunk of society enjoying a decent standard of living constitutes an *elite* sector – just over 10 percent of Filipino humanity (which is an optimistic estimate at best). An elite sector considered as such because they have access to basic perks that are taken for granted elsewhere. This means that almost 90 percent of Filipinos suffer from sub-decent standards of living – 70 million souls. This is not merely a majority of Filipinos but an *overwhelming* majority of Filipinos. No matter how many Lea Salongas or Jose Rizals we cite as beacons of Filipino pride and achievement, the fact remains that we, as a nation, have failed to achieve what should have been – no, what *is* – the whole point of being a nation in the first place – to build a community that first and foremost upholds the interest of its constituents and offers them the best environment to realise their potential. People originally come together because of shared goals, beliefs, or ethnicity. Today, however, Filipinos are in a situation where their personal goals are generally more achievable *outside* of their homeland.

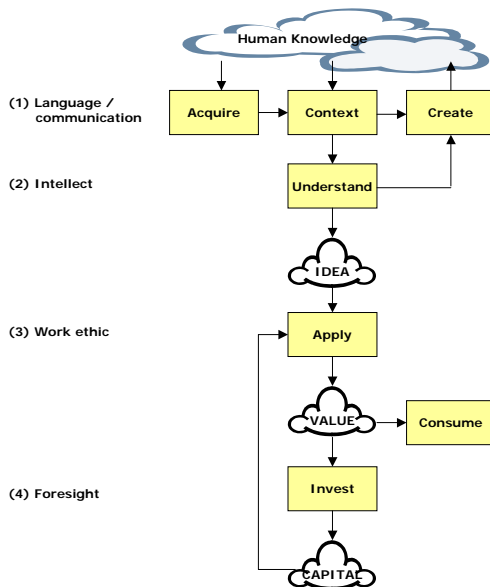
We therefore have built a nation – and a society – that offers a life that is disgracefully inferior to life offered to Filipinos by foreign governments and foreign societies. The Philippine Government for its part offers Third Class service to its own citizens, even as other governments are extending to resident aliens the already top-notch service they provide their own citizens. So much has been said of the exploits of Filipinos working overseas – how we are so successful as professionals overseas. Yet the fact remains that many of these very same Filipinos cannot even achieve half of what they achieve overseas *in their country of birth*. We Filipinos have failed to create an environment conducive to the success of our own compatriots.

Whatever we achieve individually is something we are able to (and should) attribute to ourselves, our prosperous host country, our host company or organisation, our education, or our parents. But by no stretch of imagination are we generally able to attribute our individual achievement to our being Filipino. The norm is a tendency to make half-witted citations of Filipino excellence whenever the Lea Salongas of this

world and that legendary Filipino who supposedly invented the fluorescent light – let’s call him Juan de la Fluorescente for now – come to mind. Whenever Filipino-Americans win beauty contests or take home medals of excellence, community leaders are quick to trumpet the imagined excellence of the Filipino – even if these individuals grew up in America and are, by all intents and purposes, American. In these examples only America can claim credit for the achievements of members of its Filipino community. They achieved because they live in America, not *despite* living in America.

At the bottom of the page is *The Diagram*. This is the roadmap we will use to explore the depths of the dysfunction that afflicts Philippine society. As you can see, it is very simple. Indeed, as GetRealPhilippines.com keeps emphasizing, *the solutions are obvious*. Many gurus of wealth creation have demonstrated that wealth is all around us and is not in short supply. There is enough for everyone. We just need to know how to harvest it and apply it in a sustainable manner. The Philippines, as many “nationalistic” Filipinos are fond of pointing out, is a country rich in natural resources. Yet its people are among the world’s poorest.

We Filipinos are blind to wealth even as it sits right under our noses. We are blind to our land’s natural wealth, and the wealth that is our people and their minds.



Chapter I

Know – fuelling sustained prosperity

For most successful Filipino individuals (both overseas and island dwellers), achievement can be strongly attributed to their access to resources generally not available to ordinary Filipinos. They live or lived in prosperous and intellectually-stimulating societies in other lands or in relatively affluent gated communities in Manila. They went to private schools, read foreign literature, understand non-Filipino progressive ways of thinking, and have parents, relatives and friends who celebrate the success of their peers. No Filipino parent in their right mind will deprive their children of a chance to study in a private school and learn how to speak English with a twang. It is not uncommon to see job ads for the best white-collar positions encouraging graduates from the top four schools – the Ateneo de Manila University, the University of the Philippines, De La Salle University, and Assumption College – to apply. Innovative ideas are articulated and exchanged in English at the highest levels of most organisations. And foreign technology and ideas entering Philippine society first touch base with those who are proficient in the use of English – arguably the language of choice of the creative elite of the world.

The world where Filipino individuals have a fair shot at acquiring a decent standard of living is a world far removed from the Filipino masses. The ordinary Filipino can only stand back and watch as the fate of his society is formulated, discussed, debated, and articulated by the elite in a language that offers intellectual tools to explore depths of knowledge that the masses can barely grasp. What he perceives to be his say in this

process – democratic exercises such as elections – are mere illusions. Democratic exercises are scraps thrown to the masses to satisfy their shallow concept of what democracy (and “freedom”) is all about. All the while our elite routinely feast on the multi-layered cakes of options they have baked for themselves long before the menu is published to the masses.

Many would say that these ivory towers exist in other societies. This is of course true. What sets the ivory tower in Philippine society apart from those of other societies is its astounding height. Many things account for the formidable height of Filipino Society’s Ivory Tower. In many cases, they are the same things that account for the gap between prosperous societies and poor societies such as that of Filipinos. They are things that Get Real Philippines! has made its mission to explore and expose. One of them has so far stood out in our discussion: superior command of the English language that the Philippine Elite currently monopolises.

Across every society, there is a common denominator among Ivory Towers – exclusivity of the elite clubs brought about by geography, asset ownership, and work ethic among others. In the most backward societies, however, the exclusivity is aggravated by a kink in the pipeline connecting the wealth of knowledge the prosperous world has to offer to all the others who want in on the action. At no time in history has so vast a wealth of knowledge – knowledge that took thousands of years to accumulate – been so easily available to so many. But it is this availability that makes the Filipino masses’ intellectual imprisonment by their native languages and dialects all the more tragic. For the key to tapping the wealth of knowledge now available and applying it is delightfully mundane. One need only to be proficient in spoken and written English, *or any language spoken by societies with a strong track record of contribution to human knowledge and a broad and profound body of insightful literature.*

Filipinos are imprisoned by native languages that articulate little or none of the knowledge required to thrive in the modern world. Language is a reflection of the intellectual power of a society and the intellectual power of a society is a reflection of

the language it speaks. A language comes to evolve the capability to articulate concepts that its speakers demand it to articulate. Language passes on these capabilities to subsequent generations of speakers who, for their part, harness these in their own intellectual endeavours, and, in turn, build on the foundation of vocabulary laid by previous generations of speakers. Do Tagalog speakers demand much of Tagalog?

That one struggles with Tagalog, or any Filipino dialect for that matter, to articulate even the most superficial layers of otherwise profound ideas developed by more advanced societies says a lot. Even more disturbing is the prospect of an untapped wealth of genius residing in many Filipinos' minds. This wealth remains inaccessible because of their originators' inability to articulate their thoughts and put them in context with other ideas of equal calibre (most likely ideas expressed in English). What they are left with, in their being trapped in the Tagalog prison, is Tagalog. The world of Tito, Vic and Joey humour and dust-gathering Filipinana material near the backdoors of libraries and bookstores constitutes much of whatever Filipino context is available. Indeed, Filipinos' minds are stifled at two points – the point where knowledge is acquired, and the point where knowledge is communicated.

Acquisition of knowledge – the fuel for intellectual advancement – is an unnecessarily challenging issue in Philippine Society. The few volumes of material containing useful information in, say Tagalog, being turned out by the heroics of a few purists – and translators – constitute a trickle compared to the torrent of knowledge that is churned out by the advanced world everyday. The Philippine Elite, armed with their private school or foreign university educations – and superior command of English – readily soak this all up. The masses, on the other hand, struggle to grasp the same ideas through severely limited communication faculties. The insult of an inability to acquire ideas articulated in English is added to the injury of their lack of access to quality education.

Communicating knowledge and putting it in context with other ideas poses an even bigger challenge to us – further stagnating intellectual progress in an already

intellectually-bankrupt society. Bursts of insight in insightful minds are usually fuelled by other insightful ideas – gained from, say, reading a good book or watching an inspiring movie. George Lucas built his entire make-believe (and spectacularly profitable) universe after a youth – and time even today – spent taking in not only science fiction literature and cinema but the profound works of many other artists in many other fields. The most successful businesses were built by thinking “outside the square”. And these ideas blossomed in fertile ground enriched by entire societies constituted by correspondingly insightful minds. To be sure, many Filipinos could think outside the square and many have insightful minds. But for the vast majority, the proverbial square is drawn within a universe of mediocre ideas – better ways of building jeepneys, better Filipino action movies, better Filipino ballads, better Tito, Vic and Joey style humour. Thus, “thinking outside the square” even for most of the small majority of insightful Filipino minds, is more like thinking outside a *Wakasan* comic book.

The list of things Filipinos are so good at being mediocre at is long and poignant. Why? Because, we apparently cannot fathom meaning in ideas beyond that square within which Filipino minds are hard-wired by culture and language to understand. We are completely baffled by the idea that the stratospheric value of a Mercedes, a Rolex, or a La Coste shirt comes primarily from the excellent engineering, design, or quality of these products; that pedestrian crossings and lane markers painted on roads are not simply to make a road “look modern”; that true artistic beauty is a product of depth in structure and meaning and not just of chaotic expression; *that democracy is a discipline and not merely a freedom to enjoy wantonly.*

Just as we’ve turned the Jeepney into a grotesque caricature of American engineering excellence – and called it “Filipino ingenuity”, we continue to build our local knowledge on this shell of an understanding of things foreign. Our entire practice of democracy itself, for example, was built on the concept of “freedom”. Yet freedom is merely the sugar coating of democracy. Freedom is a by-product of a system whose core inner workings and underlying principles and philosophies are little understood by most Filipinos. We watch the show but cannot – and will not – accept that good

shows do not just happen. They are planned, engineered, and executed. The freedom that mature democracies enjoy today, for example, is the show that Filipinos see. The backstage where all the hard work happens and all the discipline is practiced is beyond the grasp of the Filipino mind. What we seek to understand is just the tip of the iceberg of philosophies, principles, and approaches to thinking, that underlies democracy and other ideas of the West. These are ideas and ways of thinking that Filipinos presume to subscribe to yet seem hopelessly incapable of putting to practice properly. What language do you think are most of these ideas articulated in? You guessed it.

We have shown so far that so much knowledge is out there. And so much of it is needed to overhaul the philosophical infrastructure of Philippine society to retool us collectively and make us competitive in a world in which Western Society – and increasingly Confucian society – defines success and sets the standards for achievement. That is the reality. Our society desperately needs to acquire the virtue of humility to acknowledge that we aspire to achieve and succeed in a world defined by Western Civilisation.

Just as nineteenth century Japan hunkered down and *quietly* built a society that now rivals and at many times in history surpassed the West in achievement.

Just as Singapore diligently engineered its spectacular transformation from Third World to First World in a matter of decades.

Just as Malaysia recognised the cultural weakness of its Bumiputra and set about implementing a clear plan to specifically address this.

Just as China is now mustering its immense cultural capital to recover from the 200-year blip in its history that impoverished its people.

At this point, you may be thinking: we have argued that one of the fundamental reasons behind the continued failure of Philippine society is our feeble capacity to

grasp progressive foreign ideas. Is the application of foreign – specifically Western – ideas the only ticket to prosperity? If we are so hopelessly hobbled by culture and language to grasp, much less apply productively the fundamentals of foreign ideas, why not build a nation on indigenous ideas? China, as we have pointed out previously, is flexing centuries of pent-up cultural muscle in its relentless rise to superpower status today. Why can't Filipinos do the same?

So many questions – all pointing to one thing. So let's answer all of the above questions by issuing this one simple challenge: *Cite an example of an indigenous Filipino idea that we can use to underpin any purely home-grown effort to prosper.* And here is one clue that is indicative to any prospect of meeting this challenge: *there is no Tagalog word for "efficiency"*. Like we have shown early in this chapter – Language is a reflection of the intellectual horizons of its speakers. This is not a small problem. It is huge. We are not only unable to produce productive ideas internally; we are also inefficient at acquiring them externally. The first of several other *double whammies on Philippine Society* that we will be discovering in our journey!

Whammy 1.1: Can't acquire ideas.

Whammy 1.2: Can't create ideas.

Refer back to The Diagram. What we have discussed so far is literally the tip of the iceberg – the very top layer of The Diagram. There alone, we can see that our society is already choking its people's access to that vital fuel of sustained prosperity – Knowledge. So many Filipinos are led to believe that if Tagalog is used more often in communication, the masses can be "brought into the loop". What these drumbeaters of "progressive" thought fail to mention is that this "loop" they wish to bring the masses into by shoving Tagalog down their throats is a stunted and shrivelled one; dwarfed by the global whirlwind that is now sweeping many societies off their shacks into heights of unprecedented prosperity. Indeed, for all that has been achieved in getting Tagalog used in news programs and political talk shows, very little has been achieved in terms of translating existing knowledge into – much less creating new

knowledge in – Tagalog. So while the masses are now able to understand Tagalog language news programs and political talk shows, they still struggle with business, science and technology material expressed in English. Tagalog is like a dog collar donned by Philippine society as a puppy. The puppy is now struggling to grow but the size of the collar remains the same. This puppy has only two choices – (a) remove the collar or (b) suck all its food through a straw. Both alternatives are equally difficult. I’ve never known of a dog that managed to remove its own collar without help. Similarly, I’ve never seen a dog pucker up its lips much less suck anything through a straw.

Yet, the question persists to this day. Should we undertake a massive effort to translate as much of the world’s knowledge as possible into Tagalog? Or should we start engineering massive change in the institutions of Education and Family to impart a culture of speaking English properly and *intelligently*. Speaking in English is certainly not about speaking it to look cool. Filipinos in the Philippines use English (even as they struggle with it) as an instrument to perpetuate social stratification – as a tool to delineate social class boundaries – the A-crowd with their country club “coño”-speak, the general private-schoolers with their collegiala or “Arneo” accent, the “jologs” with their SMS-messaging-derived form of spoken and written pidgin English, and the English of movie stars portraying rich Filipinos. To be sure, ways of speaking English also vary in other countries. In England, for example, there is the Queen’s English and then there is cockney. However, the grasp of language and the degree of use of the language for profound conceptualisation does not differ as significantly as it does in Philippine society. Use of language between the classes in the Anglo countries (and, for that matter countries with strong traditions of contributing to the collective intellect of humanity) may differ much in accent and intonation and slightly in breadth of vocabulary. But by and large, the reading lists or personal libraries of, say, an English cab driver and an English company CEO are far, *far* more likely to have one or two identical books between them than those of a Filipino cab driver and a Filipino company CEO.

Of course one could argue (in order to muddle the point) that this is so because Filipino cab drivers are not likely to read (nor could probably afford) English language books. But even *that* is a point I make earlier. Filipino cab drivers are confined to Tagalog language literature (for reasons of both preference and economics) and therefore imprisoned by the stunted knowledgebase articulated in Tagalog, while the Filipino CEO with his exquisite private-school-honed English language faculties is served up a broad and profound world of English language material. But as I said, whoever brings up this argument would cause us to digress as the point had been made early in this chapter...

The real point we are trying to make here, at this point, is that among Filipino English speakers, there is a far wider chasm in the depth of use of English than among native English speakers, say in England. So this brings up the question of the wisdom of undertaking a massive effort to translate English books into Tagalog books. For argument's sake, let's say popular pulp fiction like *The Da Vinci Code* is sold as *Ang Koda ni Da Vinci* in Manila. We choose this book as an example because its sales in the West transcend class – both CEOs and cab drivers are likely to read it. Would a Filipino cab driver read *Ang Koda ni Da Vinci*? Maybe. Would he be able to follow the stock-standard-formula thriller plot of the book? Most probably. Will the pop-science underpinnings of the book capture his imagination and curiosity? Probably not. For one thing, because Philippine society hardly ever questions the authority of the Church (which is the claim to fame of *The Da Vinci Code*), very few Filipino artists will ever write literature or make movies that explore alternative views on the authority of the Church. This means there is likely very little in the way of Tagalog-language books that express even a smidgen of objective thought on religion. Therefore the mindscape of a Filipino, one built on material and experience articulated in Tagalog, lacks the ability to provide the context to spawn the curiosity and imagination to grasp such ideas in the first place. Since there is no Tagalog word for *dogma* it is unlikely that a Filipino will have any concept of an alternative regard for Christianity – much less *spirituality* – that transcends dogma.

This little thought experiment leads us to conclude that even if we translate works of English-language literature into Tagalog, and even if our education system becomes more efficient at cascading these works to the masses, Philippine society will continue to be imprisoned by the walls that Tagalog has built around the Filipino mindscape over several generations. Explaining the full depth of even a simple work like *The Da Vinci Code* to a Filipino will be like explaining colour to a person who has been blind since birth. Translating great works of literature into Tagalog will be like translating the word “blue” into Braille.

Chapter II

Think – how big the challenge really is.

As I write this section in mid-2005, President Gloria Arroyo is embroiled in a “cheating” scandal. The basis of this debacle is a recording of a wiretap that captured Arroyo in conversation with a Commission on Elections (COMELEC) official while ballots were being counted during the 2004 presidential election. Filipinos have so far been quick to call for *resignation* with “cause-oriented” and other civic groups, university faculties, and an assortment of ad hoc political “movements” issuing “statements” that articulate this and that “position” on the matter. The mantra of choice is that “the people have decided” as calls for resignation increase. The outcome of all this foolishness remains to be seen as of this writing. Either way, the point I am more interested in highlighting is that there is still this predisposition among Filipinos to ignore *due process*. While Filipino taxes go to sustaining expensive legislative and judicial institutions (democracy is an expensive – if not *the* most expensive – system of governance), people seem to prefer conducting investigations and dishing out justice outside the authority of these expensive institutions. The nation is one big lynch mob and lynching is the hallmark of a primitive society. The argument of choice among the millions of EDSA-revolution-happy Filipinos is that they do not have the confidence that these institutions will do their job. Well whose fault is it that Philippine institutions don’t work? The government they say. Whose fault is it that the government fails to keep lean and mean institutions? Because government officials

are corrupt they say. Well who elected those officials to office? Who holds them to account?

Our idea of holding our public servants to account does not go beyond “revolutionary” situations. We are quick to fancy ourselves as guardians of accountability whenever Fiesta Revolution is in the air. People find duty in ousting errant public officials from office by street politics. But we fail to consider that it is within every citizen’s civic duty to also ensure that their institutions work for them. This is a task that is ideally *routinely* performed everyday – via quiet achievement. This is what true *vigilance* is all about – *quiet* and *institutionalised* vigilance. Here is an example in all its ironic glory: Filipinos *cannot* see the impropriety of parading suspects in front of the media *before they have their day in court*. It is a basic human right in a truly free country that suspects be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Arroyo was not above partaking in this practice herself from time to time to calm the nerves of a crime-weary people. It is truly ironic that she now (as of this writing) herself faces the lynch mob that is Philippine society.

Filipinos are not systems-oriented. We are not into building sustainable systems that make life easier whilst increasing economic output. Instead of working smarter we work harder. Instead of applying a bit of brain towards sustainable improvement, we put in quick fixes, patches, and *pwede na yan* solutions. To Filipinos, “vigilance” is about losing sleep over our perennially bad politicians rather than putting extra effort at fine-tuning our systems of governance to ensure that keeping politicians and officials in check is inherent to government. We find no fulfilment in building finely-tuned humming mechanisms, and stepping back to watch them work wonders for us. Instead we would rather fancy ourselves as heroes constantly battling the evil Establishment. Filipinos fail to realise that this “Establishment” is nothing more than the face we put to systems whose bad performance can be accounted for by no one else but its owners – the people who fund it with their hard-earned taxes.

To focus on systemic issues and solutions rather than patches and quick wins requires *vision* – something Filipinos simply do not have. In the Philippine setting, nowhere

today can we find any semblance of a roadmap for change with a horizon of at least five years. Without a vision, there can be no focus on systemic thinking and no systems approach to building a nation. Many authors of books on running successful businesses attribute systems thinking as the key differentiator between perennial mom-and-pop businesses and those that go on to achieve remarkable feats of value creation. A business becomes more valuable to its stakeholders as it increasingly delivers more for less work in a *sustainable* manner. Mom-and-pop business owners are too busy running the day-to-day operations of their business. They don't have the *vision* to invest in time to sit back, create or acquire ideas to improve business performance, and execute these ideas. It is those that invest in *thinking* that go on to build the McDonalds and Jollibees of this world. They focus their minds on improving their operating model – to make it as scalable and self-perpetuating as possible. Like a mom-and-pop business, making the Philippines work requires its stakeholders – the Filipino people – to remain constantly and inefficiently “vigilant”. Filipinos overly rely on “investigative journalism” citizens’ “watchdog” organisations, and street politics to maintain check-and-balance in government and execute many ordinary democratic processes – like changing presidents. Filipinos run their country like a mom-and-pop business. We constantly have to be physically present in our proverbial stores and shop floors to assure ourselves that our employees are not ripping us off.

The Philippine Nation is indeed in big trouble. In the previous chapter, we've seen how our prospects for prosperity are choked at the very source, the point where knowledge, the raw material for value and capital creation, is acquired and nurtured. And what little knowledge is acquired – those seeds of change – often falls on the barren landscape of Filipino thinking. In this chapter, we will try to understand how truly big a challenge *thinking* is in Philippine society. We will explore how the Filipino fares in that fuzzy area in The Diagram between where ideas are first generated from knowledge and understanding, and where their productive application first begins.

The following is an excerpt from a letter I received in April of 2003 from a Filipino residing in the United States:

I enjoyed the company of Filipinos for their humor and the reminiscent qualities I've lost touch of. I realized I don't want the other qualities I associate with my people. I view Filipinos as [de]void of any intellectual enjoyment. I like reading philosophical books that are stimulating, but the people I know and see lack any commitment to any intellectual pursuits. This is not to be patronizing, but there seems to be a limit [to] which some Filipinos apply themselves intellectually. I have yet to encounter one who has taken interest in any cerebral activities, it seems as though they have no inclination towards art, humanities or education in general. As a result, I see Filipinos as irrational and illogical. Any argument on any issue ... is either avoided or seen as an attack on their ego. I find a more stimulating conversation with individuals from other ethnic groups.

Indeed, talk issues with a Filipino and you will often find that they will usually respond either emotionally (at best) or show indifference (in most cases). Be a bit critical of values they hold dear and they will surely take personal offence and lash out or simply withdraw. If there ever were a single character trait of a people that contributed the most to hobbling their march to progress, an inability to regard ideas with a critical mind would be it.

Very few Filipinos find merit in intellectual prowess and, more importantly, what can be achieved using intellectual capital. This is because Filipinos are not raised to be critical thinkers. Filipino children are regarded more as property by their parents than as individuals with minds of their own. Parenting is regarded as *developing family assets* rather than progressively *phasing one's self out* of the lives of one's offspring. Because Filipinos regard kids as a family asset, the youth are subject to strong pressures to conform in behaviour and thinking. Worse, Filipino children are often used as tools to further the egocentric ends of their parents. Michael Tan wrote in an article dated 22nd June 2005 on the the INQ7.net Website:

It is when men equate fatherhood with machismo that we get into problems: having as many children as possible to carry the family name, an extravagant lifestyle, including spoiling the kids with the latest gadgets just to prove one can afford it. I'd go as far as suggest that corruption is driven to a large extent by distorted machismo concepts of fathering.

To be fair, such attitudes are deeply ingrained into the reptilian complexes of our minds. These are traits that ensured that we prioritise all efforts to propagate our genes amongst the species. Unfortunately those attitudes are less relevant in a modern society.

Filipinos are spoon-fed behavioural cues and schools of thought rather than encouraged to explore, evaluate, and *create* options. I emphasise the “create” part. While there is a lot of opportunity to prosper by choosing the best from among *known* paths, there are far more vast potential payoffs in finding new paths to tread. Huge sums of money were made this way – new stories that were told, new ways of doing and making things, new ways to experience things, new brands; the list goes on. Here we come across the second double whammy that impacts Philippine society. Filipinos are so inept at critically evaluating even *known* paths that routinely discovering *new* ones is far beyond what one can reasonably expect of the people.

Whammy 2.1: Can’t choose wisely.

Whammy 2.2: Can’t beg to differ.

This is tragic considering that huge leaps of development are now required for the Philippines to catch up with the rest of the world – the kinds of leaps fuelled by creativity and innovation. But let’s get back to choosing known paths – the kind of challenge Filipinos *already* struggle with. Philippine society is abundant in *known* paths. Filipinos routinely see the results of bad decisions in the past. Runaway population growth continues to be an issue despite the obvious truth that the islands are already overpopulated, and the economy swamped with mouths to feed. Indiscriminate logging continues to be a major industry despite already routine deforestation-related “natural” disasters and chronic water shortage. Tagalog still rules despite its divisive legacy and lack of intellectual breadth and clear uselessness as a contributor to one’s employability. *Another* actor was almost voted into the highest office in the land. The list of things that manifest the Filipino’s virtually flat learning curve is long (another list to add to the list of lists Filipinos are good at

lengthening). Not surprising considering that one needs to be *critical* of the past in order to plan the future. Instead, Filipinos tend to be *sentimental* of the past. We are always invoking imagined glories of bygone eras while overlooking the real lessons of history. We even bumped our Independence Day back 48 years in order to appease sentimentalities about Aguinaldo's best effort – but no-results – shot at glory. Added to that is today's preoccupation with Edsa "revolutions" and a continued nursing of the delusion that People Power is a Filipino invention.

Worse, rather than choose amongst known paths, most Filipinos are encouraged to *limit* their choices to paths preferred by society (a society, we might remind ourselves, that dismally failed to prosper). Filipinos know that they should obey and respect elders. Filipinos know that they should go to church every Sunday. Filipinos know that they should get married before having sex. These are values both handed down by our elders and kept relevant by our institutions. Most Filipinos can pretty much go through life simply following their elders' footsteps and heeding their advice. At first instance, this order of things does not sound half bad.

But what if our elders start to lose the plot or become out of synch with reality? What if the Church tells us that we should continue multiplying like rabbits? What if we are surrounded with opportunities to have sex before marriage? Just like people from other societies who are faced with these moral dilemmas, Filipinos take steps into the unknown to explore their limits when faced with situations for which there are no known "values" to apply. But because Filipinos' ability to critically evaluate is severely stunted, those who stray from known paths quickly get lost. They are also quickly shut out from society and their existence played down. Philippine society would rather *judge* than *understand* those who beg to differ. Filipinos would rather silence "deviants" than listen to what they have to say. In effect, those who venture out suddenly find themselves alone. And those who remain inside quickly lose sight of their more adventurous compatriots. More disturbing are those who stray from "preferred" paths and are unequipped to deal with suddenly finding themselves outside the square. These unfortunates, for lack of any other code to latch on to (the Church being *numero uno* in terms of casting the proverbial First Stone to these

“deviants”) often end up wandering aimlessly and self-destructively, succumbing to social pressure to take “their place” among the marginalised outcasts. I once wrote that “Philippine society’s venues for such outlets [for “deviant” behaviour] are devoid of any authoritative guidance”. The best example for this is Filipino sexuality – a field of the human condition that is regarded in Philippine society within a narrow band of tradition and religion (lets coin the term “Tradition-Religion Complex” to encapsulate this concept) outside of which there is only chaos and ambiguity.

This may account for that seemingly bizarre love-hate relationship with sexuality that characterises Philippine society. While sex is not discussed openly it is practiced as liberally as any rich secular society. The widely-encouraged macho culture of married men using numbers of mistresses and first-borns as manly points, the huge demand for motels (by non-travellers), and the armies of girls dancing suggestively that are now standard background fixtures in many Filipino television variety shows among other things attest to this. And yet the topic of sex, when raised, will most likely elicit snickers, jokes, and blushes in most Filipino adults *or* expressions of indignation and disgust. That its discussion is often suppressed and at the same time made the object of childish giggles shows just how uncomfortable most Filipinos are with a biological process that is otherwise practiced so liberally.

In her article “Between Sensationalism and Censure” (*Philippine Journalism Review*, April 2002, pages 35-37), Diana Mendoza observed how the bizarreness of Filipinos’ regard for sexuality is reflected in Philippine cinema. Her observations are gleaned from among others, comments made by sociology professor Michael Tan of the University of the Philippines in the Sixth International congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific held in Melbourne, Australia from the 5th to the 10th October 2001:

Commenting if the Philippines could be at the forefront of education on sex and sexuality Tan said no, because "media have very sensational coverage but they still have this patina of moralism which is strange." He said this brims over to the film industry that churns out movies carrying the "crime and punishment" theme -- for instance, movies with pots of adultery that run steamy sex scenes but which towards the end, mandate that the adulterer, who is always the female, gets shot or imprisoned.

"With these endings, movies become a morality play after two hours of titillation," he said.

Furthermore:

Tan said Filipino movies also carry the "crime and redemption" theme, in which a sex worker eventually realizes there is a better life outside prostitution, but only after the audience [have] been treated to several sexual episodes.

More disturbing than simply being uncomfortable is how inconsistent and misguided Filipino responses to issues of sexuality can get. The Filipino Male enjoys the better half of a double standard that prevails in Philippine society. And this is what contributes much to the bizarreness of Filipinos' regard for sex. Male sexual indiscretion, as mentioned earlier, is routinely tolerated and even encouraged and cheered (the famously philandering Joseph Estrada was even elected president). Filipino men are predisposed to openly and indiscreetly staring at and regarding women maliciously. These indiscretions are clearly outside the more well-known but imagined Filipino virtues of modesty, humility, and adherence to tradition. They are nonetheless widespread and accepted as normal (although *desensitised* may be the more appropriate word to describe Philippine society's acceptance of this Filipino male condition), but there is presently no Filipino philosophy or code of ethics to frame this condition, it being outside the Tradition-Religion Complex that many Filipinos continue to "officially" validate themselves with. Thus the Filipino male – with all his *expected* indiscretions and excess – is a social aberration that is accepted, yet at the same time, is not normal and oftentimes unsavoury. Conflicting descriptions that are collectively oxymoronic, to put it mildly, encapsulated in a neat package that we find ourselves using the phrase *Filipino (male) sexuality* to describe. Remember how I used the word "bizarre" early in this paragraph?

Or take the whole debate on population and human capital. The issue of population – specifically the embarrassingly high rate at which Filipinos continue to multiply – is complicated by the Church's adamant stand on artificial contraception. Time and again, government efforts to roll out coherent and not-so-coherent family planning programs and population policies have been blocked by the Church. This is not

necessarily bad, except that Filipino humanity is not economically *productive* enough to sustain its own numbers. In other words, we love our multiplication but are clueless about turning out *productive* products of this multiplication. Many Filipinos are instead born “blessed” – they are blessed because they are poor, and remain blessed for most of their lives – straining state resources as they go (which is why they are encouraged to seek employment overseas). Strangely, the teachings of the Church to “go forth and multiply” are in fact balanced by other teachings. It is also written that The Lord hath given nature to man for him to use productively and that gold coins should be returned two- or three-fold to one’s master rather than kept buried safely in the ground. Why did the Filipino latch on to “go forth and multiply” but at the same time, overlook “make more gold for thy master”? The Church encourages Filipinos to multiply but seems to have obscured its own teachings on how to increase economic output to keep up with the mouths to feed. Worse, the mantra “The Lord will provide” was added to the lethal brew. So rather than focus on increasing economic output, the devout Catholic Filipino would go on to produce lots of babies *and then* pray for manna from Heaven – a sure recipe for disaster. And this disaster is unfolding right before an entire generation of Filipinos.

The point is, in Philippine society, the unwritten (and ironically vastly more ingrained) cultural framework for guiding “proper” behaviour and conduct is *itself* convoluted, inconsistent, and *unjust*. Much of it lies outside the increasingly irrelevant Tradition-Religion Complex. Does this mean that Philippine society is inherently unjust? Maybe. It seems to be a theory that neatly explains a lot of paradoxes about Philippine society, among which is the famous paradox of our high Church services attendance back dropped against the virtually institutionalised corruption and passive-aggressive “immorality” that prevails. We now find that these paradoxes are only paradoxes because we view them through the lens of Philippine society’s Tradition-Religion Complex. The fact is, Philippine society runs on a cultural framework that has already overspilled the Tradition-Religion Complex and is rapidly spreading in an unstructured manner – in other words chaotically (which is why we find so much difficulty making heads or tails of these cultural issues). To the typical Filipino philandering male, there is no conflict between his regular church attendance and the

harem of mistresses he maintains. He absolutely loves and adores his religion and complies faithfully with its dogma but at the same time he is aware of the reality of the moral ambiguousness of the society to which he belongs.

We can dare generalise that Filipinos get their kicks from breaking rules. Among Filipinos, there is some measure of cleverness and machismo (remember this is a backward male-dominated society we are talking about) associated with *putting one over* or being *above* the System. This contributes to explaining why Filipino motorists drive the way they drive, why tax cheating is so rampant, why corruption is so endemic, why personal connections are so valued in even the most mundane of day-to-day activities, and why street parliaments are favoured over robust institutions. Filipinos do not see themselves as *stakeholders* in the effectiveness of their own society's rules and conventions. And this is where we come – full circle – back to our original assertion about the utter lack of ability of Filipinos to think things through critically. Continuously taking stock of how we are organised, our framework of laws, rules, policies, procedures, and approaches to doing things (from the most macro to the smallest of tasks) and continuously tweaking, upgrading, and re-designing them takes an immense amount of structured analytical thought. And because Filipinos, as we've shown thus far, are deficient in that field of advanced thinking it is easy to see why we are such chronic rule-breakers. Rather than go through the proper exercise of keeping our governance frameworks (whether they be civil or cultural frameworks) scalable and, therefore, relevant, we simply look for workarounds. *Pwede na yan* – (roughly translated: “that'll do”) the triumphant mantra of the typical Filipino. We don't ensure that the systems work for our ends. Rather, we view systems more as roadblocks to our ends. Therefore very little systemic solutions are ever considered to address Philippine society's ills.

The irony there is that many Filipinos do consider the existing systems and frameworks stifling. It's just that we as a people are not, by nature, critical thinkers and therefore lack the faculties to *clearly* articulate our issues *objectively* (while tempering sentimentality). Clear understanding of the issues is a pre-requisite to coming up with a coherent solution and plan of action. Which therefore makes it even

less of a surprise that no clear vision of where the Philippines is *supposed* to be headed has ever been crafted.

And what kinds of ideas do Filipinos typically come up with to solve Philippine hunger? One recurring idea is “national pride”, which time and again I have pointed out simply begs the question: “Pride in *what* exactly?” Many Filipinos find it difficult to grasp the simple concept that to be proud, one needs to *achieve*. They react with anger when they are challenged to substantiate this pride they encourage their compatriots to harbour and respond by challenging you to be a “true Filipino” by *simply* being proud to be one. That indeed is a simple solution to our troubles, isn’t it? Small wonder that no amount of calls for Filipinos to be “proud to be Filipino”, has ever imbued *sustained* pride. A participant from one of the on-line forums I visit occasionally summed it up quite neatly:

There may be a few in this country that are good, that HAVE substantiated pride, but the rest only have pride.

Proud for pride’s sake is how I would summarise it even further. Just like we would paint zebra stripes across a road for the sake of having a pedestrian lane there, we would be proud to be Filipino for the sake of being proud to be Filipino. The need to substantiate pride may seemingly be a simple concept to grasp. But apparently many Filipinos cannot fathom it. And it boggles the mind how so many simply cannot understand that one cannot be proud to be part of something that consistently fails – that the solution to this lack of pride in being Filipino is to deliver something to be *objectively* proud of. Pride that is substantiated by achievement comes naturally whereas hollow pride – the kind preferred by Filipinos – needs to be force-fed.

This hollow pride that Filipinos have to live up to (*kelangan panindigan*) has pretty much painted our “patriots” into a corner. This cornered position becomes apparent whenever Filipinos find themselves at the, shall we say, *disadvantaged* end of a discussion on national pride. Because their basis is unsubstantiated pride, their ammunition becomes personal attack (for lack of anything else to throw). The noted American born consultant Clarence Henderson once noted:

Logical responses ... when posted [on a Web-based forum], led to inflammatory rhetoric and personal insults. The fact that the anonymous posters had no ground level knowledge of the topic was apparent but didn't stop them from challenging any point I made, regardless of how solidly grounded in personal experience and verifiable reality. It was, to be honest, somewhat disorienting.

To be fair, Filipino-style debate is multi-faceted. There are the usual fallacious styles and then there are the three approaches that stand out: outright personal insults, calls to show personal credentials, and challenges to compare personal achievement.

Outright personal insult is a no-brainer and is a close cousin of that typically Filipino trait of making jokes out of even the most serious of issues. This is the basest among approaches to discrediting ideas – by making the messenger or idea look funny. It is a response originating from helplessness – the same kind that prompts people to tack a nemesis's picture on the wall and throw darts at it. We won't waste many words on this first one because the other two are more interesting.

Calls to show credentials – what I call *credentialism*. Rather than regard an idea for its logical merit, Filipinos look for credentials to validate the ideas' messengers' credibility. Note the use of nested possessives in the previous sentence. Such arguments are clearly *twice removed* from the tabled discussion. Yet it is a Filipino favourite. Philippine society is such a credential-centric society. Licensed engineers like to be addressed as 'Engineer' – as in "Engineer de la Cruz, what do you think of this schema?" – and insist on having the prefix "Engr" used whenever their names are put in writing. Likewise, lawyers find pleasure in being addressed as 'Attorney' and also like to bandy around the prefix "Atty". The most bizarre I've come by is the title "Collector" (and the prefix "Col" which inadvertently gets confused with the abbreviation for "Colonel") used by officials of the Philippines' Bureau of Customs. So when one makes an assertion on issues regarding, say, Philippine economics a likely response from a typically cornered Filipino might be "What qualifies you to make that statement? Are you an economist?" Then one might say "Well, no, but what do *you* think of the assertion I made?" And that is usually where the discussion goes down the tubes – because that typically cornered Filipino has already made his

twice-removed assessment of your assertion (and cleverly sidestepped the *thinking* aspect of the discussion). The irony there is that the biggest thieves in Government have been among the most brilliant products of the Philippine education system – conspicuously be-medalled, be-credentialled, and be-prefixed (and suffixed) names, with a nickname in between to boot.

Comparing personal achievement. The all-too-familiar “You should talk, but what have *you* done? Me? I’ve done this, this, and that. What about you?” A tabled idea is normally evaluated on the merit of its inherent logic. Because I make a lot of assertions pointing to the accountability of Filipinos for their own country’s failure to prosper, for example, I get a lot of responses to the tune of “You are one to complain about how pathetic our country is today, have you done your part to contribute to nation building?” or something to that effect. I could easily say “Why nothing. But does my doing something or nothing have anything to do with the trueness or falseness of my assertion?” But then Filipinos don’t see things that way. For one thing Filipinos cannot divorce ideas from personalities – a failure in thinking that consistently manifests itself during election time. Second, and more importantly, Filipinos are not believers in *quiet achievement*. The Tagalog term *pakitang-tao* encapsulates this concept. It is a term that is all-Filipino and has only the roughest of translations in English – the words phoniness, superficiality, going through the motions, and shallowness all rolled up into a two-word Tagalog phrase. Pakitang-tao-ism accounts for a broad range of paradoxes in Philippine society. It explains why a church-going people *again* are among the world’s most corrupt (because we go to church without really understanding why we have to). It also explains why such a hardworking people are also among the world’s most unproductive (because we are not results-oriented). Our pre-disposition to act without reflection, planning, and yes, thinking, is deeply engraved into the Filipino psyche. It is a primal instinct that once saved our ancestors from being eaten up by predators. Unfortunately the world has since changed. Simply working hard no longer produces enough results. I once knew a guy whose idea of managing was occasionally getting on a forklift and helping out with the grunt work of stacking and re-stacking warehouse stock. The whole point of this effort, I believe, was to promote this whole “let’s roll up our sleeves and all work

together to tackle this” ethic in the team. The extra hand was of course helpful to the ten-odd forklift operators in the team. But let’s do the maths around this apparent augmentation of that team’s productivity by the *heroics* of this manager. To add another forklift driver to a team of ten forklift drivers in effect increases that team’s output by 10%. Very good. But then if we consider that this manager is paid ten times the salary of the average forklift operator, we find that he has effectively *doubled* the operating cost of that team by joining in the effort of driving around a forklift. So his net added-value to the team is actually in the negative (doubling costs while increasing productivity by only 10%). He would definitely have been better off spending his time doing what he was paid to do – managing and *thinking*. Imagine a bunch of forklift drivers goading their manager – a person whose core skill is thinking – to “get down from his ivory tower and just help us stack crates on the shop floor”. Sound familiar?

For every thousand-odd Filipinos beavering away and quietly adding value to the economy, you have the handful of self-styled “heroes” who continuously pontificate about the old cliché of how we all should ask what we can do for our country rather than what our country can do for us. Well if the country – and the society – provided a better environment for our quiet achievers to do their job more efficiently and without distraction, then maybe they’d be in a better mood to do things for their country *beyond what they do for their day jobs*.

Thus thinking is truly a challenge in Philippine society because (1) there simply is a lack of thinking faculties and (2) there is so much noise that clouds what otherwise are clear issues. The whole society is not conducive to clear thinking. It is neither encouraged nor admired. Filipinos would rather take to the streets to depose yet another bad apple president than carefully examine their government and society and come up with systemic solutions to their recurring problems. Instead of directing their energy towards ensuring that the System works (read: *institutional reform*), the Filipino’s approach to getting things done is via shortcuts and fixers. We’d rather work *despite* the system rather than with the system. Solutions are not systemic therefore they are not sustainable.

Chapter III

Work – smart versus hard

It is no secret that there are armies of university-educated Filipinos working as caregivers and labourers all over the world. Even bank tellers and sales clerks in Manila are university-educated. Certainly anyone who invests at least four years of their lives reading books and sitting in classes soaked up a significant amount of knowledge and developed them into ideas. Indeed, this knowledge gained from university is most probably foreign (as I emphasized previously, there is little – if any – worthwhile Filipino-authored university textbooks). This means that while the proportion of Filipinos who have or have had access to foreign ideas is miniscule, their knowledge, intellect, and skills are largely untapped anyway. Indeed, it would seem that the vast proportion of knowledge possessed by that minority group of well-read and well-educated Filipinos is creating value not for the Philippine economy but for the countries that host them and the multi-national companies that employ them.

The solution to this “brain drain” does not lie in inciting some kind of nationalistic fervour in these educated Filipinos so that they may “come home and apply their intellect for the greater good of the Republic”. That opportunity to appeal to nationalistic fervour is long gone and is a tired initiative at best. Educated Filipinos have pretty much given up on “making a difference” – which is a lot to ask for in the first place. How long can a society live on the heroism and altruistic efforts of the intellectual elite and the resource rich? I believe Philippine society had answered that

question – 88 years. From 1898 up until 1986 when the Edsa “revolution” transpired, headstones of “heroes” were pretty much the milestones that marked “progress” in Philippine society. It seems that the Filipino is forever waiting to be rescued from the various miseries and disasters that they inflict upon themselves.

Filipinos have come to believe that each individual “sacrifice” may result in groundbreaking social change (or legislative breakthroughs at the very least) – that there will be a big one-time windfall payoff whenever a “hero” sheds blood or a bit of sweat and tears. These hero-payoffs are what Filipinos then subsist on (living off the principal of this fleeting capital store) until the next big hero comes along and the next big payoff comes in his or her wake. That is Filipino thinking – it reflects our regard for human resource – that people are worth more when they are famously dead or suffering than when they are obscurely alive and prosperous. Filipinos celebrate the CEO who volunteers to serve soup to bums rather than the CEO who focuses on enriching his shareholders and securing the jobs of thousands. They celebrate mayors who direct traffic in major intersections rather than mayors who focus on turning public facilities into revenue-generating assets for the city. It is no surprise that a country that abounds in brilliant university graduates, professionals, and artists remains impoverished to this day. It is because Filipinos delight in seeing what should be their most brilliant compatriots acting like morons.

Ask the average Filipino what being rich means and he will most likely tell you it is about owning big mansions, driving flashy cars, and leading an entourage of servants while frolicking in a mall. Many more will say it is about having the right connections, being able to put one over the tax man, and having lots of land. Many more will cite luck and “blessings”. These are all true of course. But the most notably misrepresented aspect about being rich in the Filipino mind is *attitude*. The right attitudes in people enable them to tap the fundamental sources of wealth – innovation, productivity, managed risk, and accumulation.

Innovation

When was the last time you've seen a truly innovative Filipino idea? That elusive water-powered car? Those fluorescent lights and karaoke machines supposedly invented by Filipinos? They certainly are out there – somewhere. But no one can quite ascertain if they are mere urban legend or objective fact. What does prevail, as the symbol of “Filipino ingenuity” is the jeepney. As bizarre as it sounds, the jeepney today continues to be a source of pride for Filipinos. The jeepney started out as a quick response to the lack of public transportation at the end of World War II. “Ingenious” Filipinos at the time modified surplus United States Army jeeps into vehicles of mass transport. More than five decades later, the jeepney still dominates the public transportation infrastructure of the Philippines. And even if today's models are no longer built on American-made chassis, the general look and design has survived. So have the quality and the level of engineering – 50-year-old standards of quality and engineering are still built into today's jeepneys. While what were once Korean and Japanese bicycle makers now produce some of the world's best-built cars, Filipino jeepney makers continue to knock out two or three clunky vehicles from their job shops every few months.

Some societies make up for their initial lack of technological and engineering prowess with the development of innovative business models – new ways of producing and marketing indigenous technology, crafts and arts or resources that are unique or abundant in their respective settings.

Food is a simple example. As Thai, Indian, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Indonesian restaurants flourish all over the world, Filipino cuisine, otherwise equally exotic in taste and variety, languishes in obscurity. There are no business models for marketing it across cultures, no artistic or at least tasteful way of preparing and presenting it, and no wherewithal in the few restaurateurs of Filipino cuisine to expand beyond their ethnic Filipino clientele. At one extreme, the Japanese are known for weaving elaborate philosophies around food preparation and presentation. Filipinos, on the other extreme, have very little if any regard for food presentation. As long as their

chow can be contained in big vats and shovelled into one's maw as quickly as possible along with a fistful of rice, the Filipino gourmet is happy.

Another is cinema. The Chinese, Japanese, and Indian movie industries have proven that one need not emulate Western styles of production to be commercially successful. What started out as the cheesy, campy, corny cinematic styles of Bollywood, the Chinese kung-fu movie genre, and Japanese anime, among others, have now become established extremely valuable parts of the cultural capital of their respective societies. World class movies like *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* make use of cinematic devices unique to Chinese movies that were once an acquired taste for foreign audiences. The blockbuster hit *The Matrix* made extensive use of cinematic pace and camera angles attributable to Japanese anime.

Management guru Tom Peter's wrote in his rant paper "Project 05" in the summer of 2005:

So "all this" is a "story," short and sweet, about "intellectual capital added" (brand value, design excellence, cool ... in this instance). There's a special irony to this particular story: Why was I back in Singapore in March 2004? Answer: to speak at Singapore's (first ever!) "global branding conference," sponsored by the Singaporean government and ad giant/PSF Ogilvy & Mather. The point of that conference is the point of this paper: Singapore, as I observed earlier, needed to ... Race Up The Value-Added Chain. And the answer, at least in part, is becoming ... Brand Singapore, "Cool Singapore," or some such. Hence the conference.

Senior Minister K.Y. Lee (former PM Lee), architect of Singapore's awesome transformation, addressed our group, and acknowledged that Singapore had achieved its exalted status by becoming Southeast Asia's hub of "operational excellence." Singapore does it right! (Or some such.) But he also acknowledged, the reason for his invitation and presence at the conference, that Singapore, now, had to be ... and he almost cringed as he said it ... "COOL ." Thence "the" "Brand Singapore" conference.

There is no Filipino brand and no "Philippines Inc." The Philippines has no brand equity to speak of. Our cuisine, as shown in the previous examples, is virtually unknown and unmarketable globally. Chinese, Thai, and Indian individuals, by sole virtue of their being Chinese, Thai, and Indian, can set up a restaurant in any corner of the world and can easily command an immediate following. The very words, "Chinese", "Thai", and "Indian" placed before the word "restaurant" *by themselves*

already add value, just like Picasso (as the unverified story goes), carried around a pen and a doodle pad instead of a credit card or chequebook whenever he went out shopping.

What Filipinos fail to realise is that regardless of whatever physical or natural resource a society may possess, it is still intellectual capital that creates value out of the mundane. All the oil underneath those desert kingdoms would be worthless today if someone had not come up with the idea of the internal combustion engine. It took the American multinational companies Dole and Del Monte to create the immense pineapple production industries that sustains much of the island of Mindanao today. Indeed, even the one resource that Philippine society is so efficient at producing – warm bodies – is being harvested and put to far more productive use by foreign societies, foreign organisations, and foreign processes and technology. Just like the vast oil reserves in those little desert kingdoms and all the rubber trees in Malaysia and Brazil, countless Filipino souls would continue to languish in low-added-value Third World standards of productivity if not for the opportunities afforded to them by foreign employers and the local operations of multinational companies. Close to 10% of the Philippine economy is accounted for by the remittances of its huge overseas-employed work force. And these vastly more productive Filipinos are amply rewarded for their contributions to other societies’ economies. The rewards they get are beyond the wildest dreams of most island Filipinos.

Yet a typical argument a Filipino might make in light of all said so far is this:

“_____ (enter any First-World country) hospitals would not survive without Filipino nurses!” Or this: “The infrastructure to extract Saudi Oil was built by Filipino labour!”

All true of course. But these arguments miss the point. The opportunities for “Filipino labour” to contribute to adding so much value to the world economy is provided by the commercial activity built by advanced societies. There is no value inherently added by the act of driving a nail into a piece of wood with a hammer. The value of this task is determined by the one who determines *where* and *when* the nail is to be

driven. In the same way, the inherent industry of the average Filipino worker is useless where there is no environment or commercial activity to excel. Philippine society consistently fails to provide the environment where Filipinos can be all they can be and contribute to the full extent of their potential to contribute. The advanced societies where thousands of Filipinos migrate to every year are filling that gap.

Productivity

Anyone who has purchased a shirt in a department store in the Philippines has probably observed how each cash register is often manned by anywhere from two to four sales personnel – one to scan the merchandise, another to ring up the purchase on the machine, another to make all sorts of notations on the machine print out, and yet another to bag the item. Considering that a vastly more complex piece of equipment like a modern tank can be manned by a crew of three, this is very inefficient indeed. In fact, entire department store floors in advanced societies can be effectively manned by a team of five sales personnel.

Labour is truly an abundant resource in the Philippines. There is no pressure to develop and implement labour saving technology, methods, and processes because there are ample takers for any job no matter how dehumanising. Even modern photocopiers – machines that engineers took great pains to design into intuitive user-operated marvels – are each manned full-time by staff in many Philippine offices. To be fair to these workers and to the managers who design labour-intensive systems, Filipinos are not known to be the self-service type. Filipinos do not have an ethic of reading signs and following written instructions. This is partly because there is also no consistent use of instructional or directional signage in Philippine society. Traffic lights have to be augmented by traffic cops at intersections and lane markings in Philippine roads do not mean anything to Filipino motorists. Fixers and ‘facilitators’ are a necessity when transacting with government agencies because there is often no coherent and consistent system to follow and hardly any information provided to guide customers. Filipinos find no satisfaction in designing systems that run like

clockwork. Chaos reigns in many Filipino undertakings and chaos is a labour-intensive situation to manage.

Even Filipino politics is labour-intensive. Filipinos invest in a highly-disruptive and expensive process to select their leaders – *elections*. Yet when the going gets tough, they don't really see the people they elect to office as their representatives in Government. How's that for an irony?

Filipinos find no irony in participating in elections, *and then*, not seeing the people they elect to office as their representatives. In the same way they find no problem with working a system and not finding any tangible results or benefit for themselves after all their trouble. This kind of attitude is sometimes called *going through the motions*. Filipinos are good at going through the motions. We like to feel like a democratic society because we go through the motions of having elections or go through the motions of expressing our views in the “free” press. This is like how workers feel they are terrific employees because they go through the motions of putting in crazy hours. Worse, by virtue of having gone through the motions of suffering in poverty for most of their lives, Filipinos think they are entitled to some blessings sometime in their fuzzy futures – the old *habang may pag-asa* (“so long as there is hope”) approach to having a vision for the future. What those “blessings” are and what the timeframe of this fuzzy future is, nobody knows. How could we know? These hopes and visions are not hinged on any results-based action of any substance.

Which brings us to the kicker: *being cheaper and hardworking is no longer the game anymore*. Nick Joaquin in his essay “A Heritage of Smallness” wrote:

The Filipino who travels abroad gets to thinking that his is the hardest working country in the world. By six or seven in the morning we are already up on our way to work, shops and markets are open; the wheels of industry are already agrind. Abroad, especially in the West, if you go out at seven in the morning you're in a dead-town. Everybody's still in bed; everything's still closed up. Activity doesn't begin till nine or ten-- and ceases promptly at five p.m. By six, the business sections are dead towns again. The entire cities go to sleep on weekends. They have a shorter working day, a shorter working week. **Yet they pile up more mileage than we who work all day and all week.**

I highlight the last sentence in boldface for emphasis.

Operational excellence was the first step that today's East Asian Dragons took in their journey to national excellence. They became more productive and more efficient *workers* and *producers*. But that was then. Today China has already seized the market for cheap working and producing. This means that the Philippines, now an also-ran because it missed the operational efficiency boat back in the 60's and 70's needs to *leapfrog* China just to *remain* in the game. The Philippines can no longer compete with China in cheap working and producing. This means that our society is in a serious bind, because all we are good at is working hard and producing hardworking warm bodies. Our numbers have increased at an embarrassing rate relative to the value we add to humanity.

So now we have the *size* (i.e. population) but we do not have *scale* – the synergy and cohesiveness to turn size into *power*. Filipino undertaking consistently lacks scale and structure – both being key ingredients to world-class productivity. Large *well-designed* factories will always produce higher volume and quality than small mom-and-pop operations. The Japanese are well known for exhibiting extreme examples of prowess in the design of large-scale systems. Theirs go beyond the design scale of individual factories and into the design of entire production *communities*. Their just-in-time manufacturing systems are made possible only by tight collaboration among sellers and buyers of goods and services in these production communities. These well-coordinated *super-operations* did not just happen. They were *engineered* on a large scale.

However, of Filipinos, Joaquin went further to write:

However far we go back in our history it's the small we find--the nipa hut, the barangay, the petty kingship, the slight tillage, the tingi trade. All our artifacts are miniatures and so is our folk literature, which is mostly proverbs, or dogmas in miniature. About the one big labor we can point to in our remote past are the rice terraces--and even that grandeur shrinks, on scrutiny, into numberless little separate plots into a series of layers added to previous ones, all this being the accumulation of ages of small routine efforts (like a colony of ant hills) rather than one grand labor following one grand design. We could bring in here the nursery diota about the little drops of water that

make the mighty ocean, or the peso that's not a peso if it lacks a centavo; but creative labor, alas, has sterner standards, a stricter hierarchy of values. Many little efforts, however perfect each in itself, still cannot equal one single epic creation. A galleryful of even the most charming statuettes is bound to look scant beside a Pieta or Moses by Michelangelo; and you could stack up the best short stories you can think of and still not have enough to outweigh a mountain like War and Peace.

Indeed, large scale frameworks need to encompass large scale things. The skeleton of an elephant is not made up of collections of skeletons of mice. The skeleton of an elephant is one encompassing grand design that befits the scale of the animal it supports. Just like the effort to cobble together some semblance of mass transport systems in Philippine cities using jeepneys is a dismal failure. A lack of any large scale frameworks and, at the very least, thinking in Philippine society has led to its continued languishing in the world of mediocrity and the nurturing of "national pride" that latches on to nothing more than the little individual achievements of a very tiny Elite or worse, *heroes*.

There used to be pretence, at the very least, of a vision for Philippine society. In recent memory there was the New Society movement of President Marcos in the 70's and the Philippines 2000 slogan of President Ramos in the 90's. Today the whole idea of something that comes close to even dreaming of what is in store for the Philippines in the next five years has completely gone off the radar. If we cannot even come up with a charade of a vision, what hope do we have of coming up with a *serious* vision? The lack of anything to look forward to has for the longest time impacted our society's ability to "pull itself together". It is the reason why the Philippines as a whole is nothing more than a patchwork of pieces cobbled together by different administrations, different agencies, different heroes using different approaches. The Philippines is an aggregation of different things. But unlike advanced societies that are cohesive despite their diversity, the different stuff that comprises Philippine society fails to coalesce into a single force – because there is no framework for doing so. Filipinos cannot step up to the challenge of developing such frameworks. Again Joaquin attributes this to our heritage of smallness – *tingi-tingi* (little-by-little). Nobody wants to risk face by dreaming big. When one dares to dream, he or she is

quickly pulled back down by the ankles. *Tama na yan! Maki baka ka nalang dito sa atin* (“don’t waste time over there, join us in the here and now!”).

Nobody discusses fundamental issues because the immediate tasks at hand are more exciting – fiesta revolution, political manoeuvring, high-profile heroics, you name it. This lack of some sort of design or structure at a large enough scale to underpin any form of cohesiveness that any Filipino dreams of achieving in his society is also a key ingredient in what is arguably the single biggest factor that hobbles the collective productivity of the Filipino – *corruption*.

Corruption has always been thought of as a *root cause* behind the chronic dysfunction of Philippine society. It is not. It is a mere symptom of the underlying issue of the lack of scale in our society. Without scale and the *macro*-cohesiveness it creates, Filipinos cannot start to feel that they are part of something big. And, where there is a lack of a larger purpose in one’s being Filipino, any heartfelt effort to render one’s civic duty to one’s country goes out the door. The fragmented nature of Philippine society means that most bureaucratic undertakings are pretty much stand-alone. This insular approach to running bureaucracies has turned both the members and the users of these bureaucracies into its own saboteurs. Because of this, our individual bureaucratic institutions have turned onto themselves to create the convoluted services they dish out to the public today. The prevailing mode of operation in delivering services is the *presumed criminal intent* of the recipient of these services.

Jaime Licaucó in an *Inquirer* article dated 22 May 2001 put it rather bluntly:

A nation whose policies and rules are based on the assumption that everybody is a cheat and liar unless proven otherwise cannot long endure. Take a close look at our bureaucracy and its rules. It is burdened by elaborate and often unnecessary checks and balances so that nothing ever gets done in the process.

This mutual lack of confidence that the *proper* things or the *right* things will be done has fatally infected the entire society already. At every corner and even within shopping malls, heavily-armed security guards are ubiquitous. Sales clerks and bank tellers will not deviate from the narrow script and scopes of work that they are

authorised to apply in their dealings with customers. Homeowners (from the rich down to the lower-middle-classes) have cloistered themselves in gated communities. Each of these three examples represents the three key *enablers* to developing a cohesive and productive society – *security*, *empowerment*, and *access*. Without security there can be no *openness*. Without empowerment, there can be no *efficiency*. Without access there can be no *simplicity*. A society where everything is *closed*, *inefficient*, and *complicated* is fertile breeding ground for corruption.

We can see now how corruption and productivity are so closely inter-related. Corruption hobbles productivity and lack of productivity breeds corruption. Corruption therefore cannot simply be considered to be some kind of bogeyman to launch “wars against corruption” against. It is a feature inherent to Philippine society. Its roots are intricately interwoven into the very fabric of our society. True to form, efforts to eliminate corruption have always lacked scale and structure. Strong-arm low-thinking-applied approaches to rooting out corruption have failed miserably so many times, precisely because they were done without a clear understanding of the complex relationship it has with its host society. And because of this, procedures are designed and agencies are organised to work in an insular, stand alone manner which fails to achieve the scale that only a government with finely coordinated and inter-linked agencies can achieve.

Thus productivity in Philippine society is stymied at three fronts – (1) a lack of ethic of efficiency – *there is no Tagalog word for “efficiency”*, (2) lack of scale – *we cannot mobilise our huge numbers on encompassing frameworks towards common objectives*, and (3) lack of trust – *efficient systems have components that work interdependently to achieve a task larger than any one component can achieve*.

For a large-scale system to work, its components need to function both as individual *units* of excellence and as a coherent *collective*. Work needs to be parcelled out into modularly-managed chunks. People and groups of people who are responsible for each chunk or module should be counted upon not only to execute the required tasks, but to execute them well. It is an age-old simple formula for managing large complex

systems. And its principles can be used to categorically highlight the productivity challenges of Philippine society.

At one extreme, the Japanese have built a superbly productive society because they have mastered the art of perfection at a small scale and cohesiveness and harmony at a grand scale. Each Japanese worker is obsessed with the perfection of his chosen craft. The *quality circles* that are at the heart of Japanese manufacturing power are premised on the idea that small groups of workers can be counted upon not only to do the right thing, but strive to think of new ways to do things better. Everyone from a street sweeper all the way up to senior managers dedicate themselves to the pursuit of perfection. As observed by Robert M. March in his book *Reading the Japanese Mind*;

The philosophy of “never good enough” is the basis of the modern concept of *kaizen*, which has in the past fifteen to twenty years become well known as a characteristic of Japanese social or professional technology. Kaizen is used today to describe the tendency of Japanese to improve their systems, products, methods of manufacture continuously.

Many successful societies are not quite as meticulous or addicted to perfection as the Japanese. Yet it would be a challenge to find amongst these successful societies any lack of aspiration to achieve even some degree of *kaizen*. In contrast, the character of the Filipino is anathema to *kaizen*. To “never good enough”, Filipinos have to say “pwede na yan” (that’ll do). To “all this needs to be part of an underlying grand scheme”, Filipinos can only respond with the concept of *tingi* – use of small disembodied components to achieve a very specific short-term outcome for an absolute small cost. To “we all have to depend on one another to achieve big” Filipinos will respond by shrinking back to focus only on the immediate interests of his immediate family or tribe within an immediate timeframe.

There is no pride in one’s work and therefore no motivation to improve on something one feels no passion for. There is no thinking big and therefore no motivation to achieve economies of scale and the power associated with delivering at large scales. There is no national cohesion and therefore no motivation to achieve for the nation across long timeframes.

As a result bad practices and approaches are perpetuated. This state of affairs is best illustrated by this whole social problem that is festering around that ironic symbol of the Filipino – the jeepney. The way jeepneys are manufactured today hasn't fundamentally changed in the last 50 years (no ethic of efficiency). There has been no improvement in the way jeepneys are implemented as a coherent mass transport *system* (no scale). Jeepney drivers routinely scramble against and all over one another to collect as many passengers as they could at each stop (no collective trust).

Managed risk

Again, nobody could have described our long-term inclination towards taking little tentative steps more succinctly than the brilliant Nick Joaquin who wrote in his essay "A Heritage of Smallness":

The depressing fact in Philippine history is what seems to be our native aversion to the large venture, the big risk, the bold extensive enterprise. The pattern may have been set by the migration. We try to equate the odyssey of the migrating barangays with that of the Pilgrim, Father of America, but a glance of the map suffices to show the differences between the two ventures. One was a voyage across an ocean into an unknown world; the other was a going to and from among neighboring islands. One was a blind leap into space; the other seems, in comparison, a mere crossing of rivers. The nature of the one required organization, a sustained effort, special skills, special tools, the building of large ships. The nature of the other is revealed by its vehicle, the barangay, which is a small rowboat, not a seafaring vessel designed for long distances on the avenues of the ocean.

As pointed out in our discussion on Productivity, one of the reasons why Filipinos cannot seem to dream big is because our society lacks any framework for dreaming big. Our society for the most part is one big unstructured agglomeration of little things. Just like loose unbound gravel can only be piled so high without having to proportionately expand its base to support its constantly crumbling and unstable structure, Filipinos can only build so much using our *bahala na* (loosely translated: "come what may") and *pwede na yan* ("that'll do for now") attitudes. *Bahala na* and *pwede na yan* will get you across the proverbial stream but it will certainly not get

you across an ocean of challenges. And an ocean of challenges is what faces the Philippines today in its prospects as a viable nation in the next five to ten years.

Ours is a risk-averse society that abounds in people, institutions, and attitudes that will constantly remind the dreamer to stay put and do things a certain way. Right under the noses of indigenous Malay Filipinos, what were once third class citizens – the Filipino Chinese – built vast business empires and turned their little ghettos into today's prime real estate. This was because they were themselves a people who crossed vast distances and overcame cultural roadblocks to start new lives. Those favourite scapegoats Filipinos refer their failures to – colonialism and bad government – are irrelevant to the Filipino Chinese who themselves were subject to the same, if not worse, colonial abuse and bad governance.

What is really disturbing is that even small initiatives elude the execution faculties of Filipinos. Implementing a jeepney-based mass transit system was easy enough because it did not involve much systemic thinking and not much design scale. Large buses soon came into use, but even those were implemented the same way jeepneys were – haphazardly with very small aspirations in the way of efficiency gains. No effort was put into rebuilding the old streetcars and other great American ideas that were brilliantly applied to the island cities. The only legacy we have today of American thought is democracy, and even *that* is not working in the Philippine setting. Anything that involved intricate systemic development was deemed *too hard*. We'll make do with this *little initiative* for now. *Bahala na!*

So here we find another one of those vicious circles. Because Filipinos do not have an ethic of thinking and designing big, we therefore do not have it in us to exhibit any courage and resolve to undertake anything big. Instead of building a pipeline to the water supply, we would rather labour with buckets everyday. And because we never even try to undertake something big, we never develop an ethic for thinking and designing big. This is yet another example of how Philippine society is imprisoned in that unique way that it tends to imprison itself. Fear of the unknown grips the Filipino when faced with the challenge of undertaking a venture that requires a long planning

horizon. The long-term is a big unknown to Filipinos because of our weak intellectual tools for fathoming it. To be fair, therefore, we are averse to risk because of our inability to see *beyond* risk and appreciate the *opportunities* that risks usually underlie.

Chapter IV

Dream – big versus small

Ambeth Ocampo described how a lack of an ability to imagine and *dream* is readily evident in Philippine industry in an *Inquirer* article he wrote in September 2005 after a visit to the marble-producing Philippine island of Romblon.

Of this island's craftsmen, he wrote:

What did the people in this sleepy town do with their marble? They made them into tombstones, mortar and pestle. As a tourist, I asked myself: How many "lapida" [tomb markers] and "dikdikan" [pestle] do I want? How many lapida and dikdikan do I need? Come to think of it, how many lapida and dikdikan do they sell in a year? Here is a region that has skilled manpower and an almost inexhaustible natural resource, but their products are unimaginative. If culture comes in to introduce new designs and new uses of Romblon marble, that would go a long way in developing the industry and the province.

Indeed, one can draw similar analogies in the Filipino entrepreneur's penchant for following a "me too" approach to getting into business. There is an almost lemming-like behaviour in the way Filipino entrepreneurs get on a business model bandwagon. This behaviour accounts for the lechon manok (roast chicken) and shawarma (Mediterranean wrap) booms in the 80's and 90's. The proliferation of jeepneys and tricycles also illustrates how such safe but low-returning (and, in the long run, unsustainable) ventures are among the favourites of individuals with a bit of capital to apply. Lately it is call centres and business process outsourcing (BPO).

It is lemming-like because given Filipinos' less-than-admirable track record for innovation, a stampede of industrial copycats eventually smothers most of these

business fads to death or condemns them to chronic low-returns oblivion. Despite weakening demand because of robust supplies, Filipino producers continue to flood the market with their quaint “crafts” and mediocre services. Today cheap imported toys and knickknacks from China flood the Philippine consumer market. In many shopping malls, one could find rows upon rows of stalls and shops selling much of the same things – mobile phone paraphernalia and third-rate electronic goods. Oversupply and over-distribution of what are basically commoditised goods; a sure recipe for chronic low margins, low added value, and very little retained earnings which all contribute to stifling commercial expansion. This is the same situation that imprisons entrepreneurs like jeepney and tricycle operators, shawarma stalls, the Romblon *lapida* makers, and thousands of cottage industries that turn out the same quaint but undifferentiated products and services in price-crushing volume.

Indeed, we have just about condemned ourselves to be forever trapped in that tiresome cycle of superficial change by being averse to taking paradigm-shifting commercial risks. As said earlier, the Philippines is so far behind that it will take a huge leap forward to bring the nation up to speed. In the field of marketing, such corporate leaps are made by creating brands that form a category of their own – Yahoo is *the* “web portal”, Coca Cola, “the real thing”, and Nike supplied “athletic footwear”. In the same way “Japan Inc” stood for quality. Hong Kong is Asia’s financier. South Korea became the “new Japan”. Singapore is southeast Asia’s “trading and transshipment hub” and “hub of operational excellence”. Today, China Inc is the world’s “manufacturing base” and who knows what it is yet to become in the next five to ten years.

Meanwhile, the Philippines in the last 20 years since it had supposedly regained its “democracy” has gone from the “inventor of People Power” to the “perverter of People Power”. So beholden are Filipinos to the glorious days of the late 1980’s when Corazon Aquino was swept into power by the first People Power fuelled Edsa “revolution” that several more displays of People Power on Edsa were undertaken in subsequent years. The Edsa “revolution” of 1986 itself was no fruit of any particularly significant leap of imagination. It was, in retrospect, just an impeccably-timed call to

an idle population to hangout in the streets (something many Filipinos are already good at regardless). But then it has been latched onto by Philippine society and kept alive as a rallying cry whenever democracy is *perceived* to be “threatened”. There has since been no conceptual move from relying on romantic street “revolutions” to relying on robust institutions to hold a democratic government together. It’s the story of the jeepney all over again.

Capital

The Philippines is rich in natural resources and exports them raw with very little intellectual added value. There is no world-renowned brand for packaged dried mangoes and coconut products. Bananas and pineapples are exported under foreign-owned brands. The otherwise talented Filipino workforce is exported raw as well – as overseas foreign workers (OFWs) – rather than have their talents sold to the world market as packaged high-added-value brands like “Accenture” or “Bollywood” or “Filipino cuisine”. Instead of Filipino talent being channelled back to building our cultural and economic capital, it goes towards making multinationals’ and foreign employers’ brands and capital assets more valuable. Thus:

The natural wealth of the Philippines is *consumed* rather than *capitalised* on.

The above sentence uses very familiar concepts -- words and phrases often-quoted by be-credentialed economists and pundits. The statement is spot on, to be sure. But for us to understand how far-reaching the implications of this statement are on the Philippines’ prospects for future prosperity, we will have to understand these concepts more profoundly. Specifically, understanding the fundamental nature of *capital* will be essential to comprehend the dire implications of a society’s inability to dream and imagine.

The reason Arab oil is so valuable is because it is far more easily extracted compared to other oil deposits on the planet. Big oil exploration companies like Shell are

valuable because they are able to efficiently extract, process and distribute this oil to consumers. The means to extract, process, and distribute oil efficiently constitutes Shell's *capital*. Arab kingdoms that by some stroke of luck happened to have found themselves sitting on these valuable oil deposits lacked the *capital* to create value out of this natural asset. Capital to harvest this value would have come in the form of technology, equipment, and expertise (among others) applied in the extraction, transport, processing, and distribution of oil and its derivative products. This capital – principally *man-made* assets – is what a company like Shell (which does not possess any natural assets) brought to the table in its negotiation with Saudi sheikhs for the right to extract the vast deposits of *natural* assets they possessed. Stepping even further back from the role Shell played in the enrichment of these desert kingdoms, we can further assert that it was the technological and industrial revolution that was occurring in the West at the time that created the demand for oil. More than one hundred years ago, a vast *capital base* was being built in Western Europe and North America that created unprecedented amounts of value that enriched not only its host societies but a handful of desert kingdoms halfway around the world.

We have so far used the word “capital” in this chapter but have gone nowhere near any discussion about financial stuff. For most people, this can be quite disconcerting. However, a discussion on capital can potentially go on and on without *ever* touching on the subject of Finance. That is because financial stuff merely represents the mechanism – and a flawed one at that – for keeping track of and quantifying the value of *capital*. The fact is, capital continues to be created and destroyed below the radars of most economies' financial systems. This flaw manifested itself many times in history, most notable of which were the stock market crash in the 1930's that led to the Great Depression, the Asian Currency Crisis in 1997, and the *Dot-Com* meltdown in early 2000. In all of these instances, financial data consistently provided misleading information right up to the end when panic finally gripped the investing public. The *financial indicators* of the value of capital showed robust gains, but the subsequent crashes demonstrated with a vengeance the *true value* of the underlying capital itself (the assets – both tangible and intangible – owned by the businesses whose shares were traded in the equities markets) when people suddenly came to their senses.

Nevertheless, we will describe the nature of what, at best, is the loose coupling between *finance* and *capital* to appease those with much more established notions of what capital is.

How then does the true value of capital come to get so de-coupled from its financial value under certain circumstances? We will attempt to understand the failure of a mechanism we generally take for granted by using simple words and simple examples.

The role that capital plays in an economy can be illustrated using a simple example. Suppose that a person makes a living by producing and selling cut-out shapes. Using his bare hands, this person can only tear out the crudest of shapes from a sheet of paper. The work that this person does is not valuable because there is little demand for his products (because they are not pretty). This person cannot sell his cut-out at a high price (if at all). By using a pair of scissors, however, this person can start cutting out more recognisable shapes from the same sheet of paper and, in time, develop the skills to cut-out beautiful designs from the same sheet of paper. Such a person can potentially sell his products at a higher price and therefore earn more from his craft. The *product* of an *economy* that consists only of people engaged in the paper cut-out production business is the total *value* of the paper cut-outs they produce (the amount of money they earn selling them). The size or value of complex economies (that consist of many kinds of production activities) is often called its *Gross Domestic Product* or *GDP*.

A person who uses a pair scissors to produce and sell paper cut-outs will earn the equivalent income of scores of bare-handed producers with the same effort and material consumed. Therefore, an economy with only a small proportion of its cut-out producers equipped with scissors will need more producers, have to produce far more paper cut-outs, exert more physical effort, and consume more resources to earn as much as what is produced by an economy with a higher proportion of scissors-equipped cut-out producers. In this simple example, a pair of scissors (equipment) and the skill in their use (expertise) comprise a person's capital. A person that has not

equipped himself with a pair of scissors (much less learn to use them well) can be said to be *capital-poor* whereas those who possess pairs of scissors and have become experts in their use can be said to be *capital-rich*.

In this simple example, a capital-poor *economy* is where human power is mainly used to produce paper cut-outs. In a capital-rich economy, most people would be using a pair of scissors to produce their cut-outs. In a capital-poor economy, less valuable production is shared by more people, while in capital-rich economy, more valuable production is shared by less people. It is easy to see in this example how a society's ability to *manage* capital spells the difference between a future of continued prosperity and a future of continued impoverishment.

Capital, therefore, is the principal asset of an economic entity from which value is *created*. Most businesses start their life with a *business plan*. The business plan is essentially a document that articulates in specific terms how a business creates or *harvests* value from its assets. How much value can be *readily* harvested from an asset determines the value of this asset. How proficient (read efficient) a business is at harvesting this value determines the value of the business. Just as the economic value of a business is determined by how well it harvests value from its assets, the value of a society's economy is largely determined by how well it harvests value from its own assets.

Most people think funds are needed to acquire capital. Many backward cultures today, therefore, attribute their impoverishment to the lack of funds to acquire capital to develop. The truth of the matter is that capital can, in fact, be *created*. The invention of a tool such as a pair of scissors did not require any research funds provided by a venture capitalist. The most primitive tools that first gave their wielders advantages over the next-door tribe or local predator were progressively developed with a bit of luck, but mainly out of the creativity, innovation, and foresight of generations of craftsmen. These little incremental advantages constituted the correspondingly incremental *increases in wealth* of the communities who perpetuated these primitive technologies.

Technology

In early 2001, the second “people power” revolution in that landmark Manila road artery – the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (Edsa) – served as a catalyst for the removal of the hard-drinking, philandering but *popularly-elected* Philippine president Joseph Estrada from Malacañang. The enabler this time was not talkback radio or noisy picketing by the usual “cause-oriented” groups.

According to Eric Ellis in a *Time.com* article dated the 23rd of January 2001:

A pretty good argument could be made that it wasn't just some petty venal corruption that toppled Estrada. He might've been stunned by just how quickly Filipinos gathered to shout, or text, him down after he looked like he'd won a reprieve in office when 11 loyal senators vetoed the unsealing of incriminating bank documents last Tuesday. They soon knew what was in the accounts anyway, reading details on their message alerts.

Minutes later, thousands of grump Filipinos began to gather at the EDSA memorial to protest that their democratic rights weren't being exercised. Text messages were frantically exchanged by the anti-Estrada camp, advising meeting points and schedules. Such was the demand that one company even bought mobile cell transmitters to critical sites along EDSA.

Many were quick to tout “Edsa II”, as this “revolution” is now known, as the high-tech revolution. An entire “revolution” was orchestrated using text messaging resulting in a triumph, or so it seemed, of technology over the forces of evil. This indeed, is yet another feather in the old worn cap that is “Filipino ingenuity” – creative application of Western technology to suit our unique and *quaint* circumstances.

Yes, the technology is new but the application is *old*. The application is not only old. It is unimaginative and an embarrassment to modern governance. Just like excellent American engineering was turned into “ingenious” Philippine technology (the jeepney), text messaging was used as an “ingenious” way to patch up a typically Third World need – to extra-constitutionally topple their leaders.

Ellis, in the same *Time* article goes on to observe that;

Text messages are the mopeds and motor scooters of the Information Age for poorer countries like the Philippines. We all want and need mobility and instant communication. But because of bad government and poor economic management, we often can't afford either. Wealthy Hong Kong and Singapore have extensive mobile phone and car penetration. Vietnam and the Philippines have text messaging -- and mopeds. But the mobility and communication is no less potent, as Erap, as Estrada is known, would now ruefully acknowledge.

Indeed, even before Edsa II, text messaging has already infested Philippine society as a poor man's mobile technology. Moreover, what little technology Filipinos get their hands on gets used for the same exploits that uniquely typify backward cultures. Such is the degree (or lack of degree) of impact of that other, more high-profile, form of capital – technology – in a backward society like the Philippines. Rather than fundamentally change life, it is simply added as another ruse in the superficially modern facade that Philippine society presents to the world.

The same can even be said of the Internet. Filipinos account for a significant share of session traffic in Internet chat rooms and message-based discussion forums. Despite Filipinos generating among the highest volume of text messages in the world and a significant chunk of Internet chatter, it is doubtful if this huge and rapid exchange of information is making an impact on the collective intelligence of Philippine society. A comparison of the nature of discussions that engage the visitors in the message forums of MySpace.com (a U.S. based social network company) and PinoyExchange.com (a Filipino on-line discussion community) yields some interesting results¹.

Top five discussion topics – MySpace.com and PinoyExchange.com

MySpace.com		PinoyExchange.com	
Topic	% of total posts	Topic	% of total posts
Music	37%	Local Movies and TV	61%
News & Politics	14%	Personals	6%
Love & Relationships	11%	Love, Courtship and Marriage	4%
Religion & Philosophy	9%	Music and Radio	3%
Automotive	6%	Campus Chat	2%

¹ Statistics captured in the first half of June, 2006.

In MySpace.com, two potentially intellectually-stimulating topics made it to the Top Five – “News & Politics” and “Religion & Philosophy”, both of which accounted for a total of 23% of posts. This is a decent figure, considering that MySpace.com is known for its largely teenage members. In contrast, no equivalent topic made it to the Top Five in PinoyExchange.com. The equivalent statistic for the PinoyExchange.com topics “Local and Foreign Issues” and “Realm of Thought” is utterly dwarfed by their MySpace.com counterparts both topics accounting for no more than 3% of posts and languishing in a far distant ranking of 10th and 16th places respectively.

What is particularly astounding is the whopping 61% of posts accounted for by the PinoyExchange.com topic “Local Movies and TV”. The topic’s performance eclipses even the other topics that made it to the Top Five of that forum! This statistic seems to validate the label “star-struck ignoramuses” that has stuck to Filipinos since time immemorial. It is the high-tech version of the old Romblon marble story we shared at the start of this chapter. An almost inexhaustible resource used unimaginatively by an imagination-challenged society. Though there is no foreseeable limit in Internet bandwidth and Web server space (just as we once thought that forest resources, water supply, and clean air were inexhaustible), a time may come when the full weight of 80 million (and growing) Filipino souls engaging in largely idle chatter on the Internet may start to be noticed by website administrators. This is not such a farfetched scenario when one considers how little in the way of returns to Web advertisers Filipino Internet traffic accounts for. What then? Are we foreseeing the makings of the on-line version of the same state of affairs a century ago when signs saying “No Filipinos allowed” were occasional adornments on the front doors of American shops?

The point is, just like all the gleaming new highways, shopping centres, mass transport systems, and trendy clubs and restaurants that now adorn many Philippine cities, evidence of the use of information technology do not necessarily mean that *sustainable* progress has established itself in a society. Information technology is just another form of capital. It needs to be applied innovatively and productively for it to yield sustainable value to its owners and employers.

Wealth

Wealth, in primitive times would have been attributed to simple things like a reduced chance of being eaten by a predator, an improved ability to survive a fight with another tribesman, and increased hunting performance among others. Over millennia, as the amount of humanity's collective wealth increased this way the *nature* of wealth *changed*. The nature of wealth changed from merely surviving, to becoming more comfortable, healthier, smarter, more organised, and longer-lived. In modern times, the nature of wealth in advanced societies is now shifting from a form determined by control over physical resources to a form determined by control over *information*.

Wealth affords its owners the power to determine their destiny.

The more the wealth, the greater this power is. But what exactly is wealth and how does it give its owners this power to determine their destinies? Recall the old cliché “health is wealth”. In the previous paragraph, I mentioned that becoming healthier was one of the forms that wealth took once mere survival became something that could be largely taken for granted. One who is healthy can do more things and has more options compared to one who is unhealthy. Therefore between a healthy individual and an unhealthy individual, it is the healthy individual who has more control over his destiny and therefore wealthier in that sense. Let us examine how exactly the wealth that is health comes about. To make our examination simpler, we shall use the far simpler standards of health applicable to the Stone Age. How does one stay healthy back in the Stone Age? One way is to use fire to cook one's food to reduce the chances of succumbing to a bacterial infection. Another is to keep warm in the winter using the very same fire to cook one's meals. Warmth and cooked meals constitute the value created out of fire (which itself was created out of other forms of capital such as firewood and the expertise required to harvest this fuel from trees – i.e. lighting a fire). This value would have been wasted if there was no person present to

benefit from this value. The heat would have dissipated and the food eventually spoiled. However, a person using this fire *benefited* from it by *becoming healthier*.

The way cooking and warmth is turned into health in this example illustrates how value is turned into wealth. The health gained by an individual who cooked his meals and warmed himself with fire gave a certain degree of *persistence* to the value created by this fire instead of allowing this value to dissipate into the environment. This is a rather roundabout way of arriving at a very simple definition of wealth:

Wealth is captured value.

Health indeed is wealth. Today, a huge amount of capital is “burnt” to create the wealth that is our health. This capital comes in the form of medical and nutritional knowledge and technology, state-of-the-art gyms, parks and bicycle paths, and advertising to promote healthy lifestyles among many others. But how the wealth that is one’s health is used varies from one individual to another. An individual could choose to use their health to party hard every night. Another could choose to use his health to work extra hours to make some extra money. If we compare the outcome of the activities in these two examples, we find different results in terms of what has become of some of the wealth that is the health expended by these two individuals in their chosen activities. The first individual will wake up the next morning not only with a hangover and a less-than-ideal outlook towards the workday he faces, but also with a thinner wallet. The second individual, on the other hand, would have a bit of money in his bank account and the *option* to work lesser hours in the day he faces having compensated for the foregone income the night before. Which of the two do you think made better use of the bit of wealth that is their health that they “burned” over the night?

With the help of this simple example we are able to come up with an equally simple definition of the concept of wealth management.

Managing wealth involves determining how much of it to consume and how much of it to turn to capital (i.e. capitalised).

The cliché “all work and no play make Jack a dull boy” still applies though. There is no point in being wealthy if one cannot indulge once in a while. But then one cannot remain wealthy if one always splurges. The simple principle that *consumption* dissipates value, whereas *capitalisation* retains it for future use cannot be ignored. The natural wealth of the Philippines once lay in its forests. Rather than capitalise on these forests to produce assets that could yield other forms of value *persistently*, Filipinos consumed forest products by exporting them raw for profit *unsustainably* (as time eventually revealed). A capital-rich society (i.e. the ones with the capital to turn wood into valuable goods or sustainable income – or both) needed less timber to produce the same amount of wealth. The Philippines, a capital-poor society, consumed relatively huge amounts for timber yet earned far less. Vast tracts of forests could have been preserved and used, say, to attract tourists that could have generated far sustainable income for the economy over an indefinite period. Cutting them down and exporting them at a huge profit created lots of easy money and lots of even easier consumption.

And herein we get the really lucid picture that will serve as an ominous backdrop for that often talked about paradox of Philippine society – why a country so rich in natural wealth remains so impoverished today.

The key to prosperity lies in a society's ability to manage wealth.

A keen ability to decide how much wealth to spend and how much of it to save and invest is the no-brainer final piece of the puzzle. In the previous three chapters, we have explored the immense cultural and social roadblocks that Philippine society faces in meeting the challenge of acquiring, creating, and applying wealth. Yet even the little wealth that survives this passage into application is squandered because of Filipinos' utter lack of wealth management faculties.

Like one's health, financial instruments such as money are a means for capturing value. Money presents a far more efficient way of transferring value and converting it from one form to another. As something *saved* (say, in a bank account) it can in itself be a repository of wealth. The catch with money is that it is easily spent on goods and services that are nothing more than *perceived* to be of some value. The deliberations made by a person spending money today are a far cry from the days when wealth was a bit more tangible. In those days, Ten sacks of rice may easily be evaluated as being worth one water buffalo. Today, once an OFW's toil and "sacrifice" is converted into dollars, the funds are remitted to the Philippines, and eventually find their way into the clutches of his relatives. Once there, it becomes a matter of which corporate marketing approach works best on the limited faculties of Filipinos to *imagine* what one can do with money.

Imagination capitalises wealth

Beyond spending it, we do not know what else to do with wealth. Equipped with a better understanding of the nature of capital, we now begin to grasp the role played by *imagination* in the game of wealth management. Most of this book all but demonstrated how little of this imagination Philippine society possesses. The symptoms of our society's utter lack of imagination are all around us for everyone to see. The quality of our cinema and the mediocre products we produce, are obvious demonstrations. More subtle would be our inability to see the intangible value in our natural resources. Our forests were exported as logs rather than turned into fine art and architecture or left as is to preserve the natural beauty of the islands. Romblon's craftsmen flooded the market with tonnes of *lapida* (tombstones) rather than think of better (and more valuable) uses for the almost inexhaustible resource they were blessed with.

The ultimate failure of imagination is the way Philippine society *consumes* (rather than *capitalises* on) what is now its greatest resource – its people. Having all but depleted its forests and commoditised its minerals and farm produce, Philippine

society is now turning to burning *human capital*. Like Romblon marble and our forests of decades past (we thought), Filipino *people* are potentially an inexhaustible resource. So we are now exporting raw the premium elements of this resource – doctors, engineers, nurses, technicians, computer programmers, and entertainers – without investing in sustaining this resource (through education and healthcare). Like the once magnificent Philippine forests, Filipino humanity is being harvested and exported raw. Even if the supply is being physically replenished by the country’s embarrassingly high birth rate, the product (an entire generation of under-educated and partially-parented Filipino youth) is of significantly inferior quality to the current generation being exported. Public spending on education and healthcare have sharply dropped (or not improved) in the last 50 years, and consumer goods that divert young minds to unproductive endeavours have become widely available and affordable.

Philippine society has been hopelessly incapable of creating domestic business entities with lucrative proprietary rights to the distribution of pure human capital the way entertainment companies and industries like Walt Disney and Bollywood, big-name professional services firms like Accenture, publishing companies like Random House, and content providers like Time-Warner have made billions primarily on the intellect and talents of the people they employ. Even the Philippine Army, despite decades of experience in jungle warfare and counter-terrorism operations, continues to be a net importer of foreign expertise. The value generated by the human capital of advanced societies is purchased worldwide, but their physical assets (the people themselves) are largely based in their respective hometowns, generously contributing to their local economies – and *raising their children right*. Compare that to Filipino human capital. Filipinos are physically at their customers’ sites, adding value to their employers’ businesses, and remitting earnings to a generation of aimless half-parented youth.

Ironically, most of the funds islands Filipinos receive from their overseas-employed “heroes” are channelled back into the bank accounts of the very same multinational companies that employ their heroes. Three situations account for this tragic state of affairs. Firstly, the capital base of the Philippine economy that supports a large chunk

of three of the most basic of human needs – food production and distribution, clothing, and energy – is now funded largely by foreign investment rather than domestic enterprise. Second, desirable consumer goods such as mobile phones, branded clothing and personal accessories, and other electronic equipment – also produced and distributed by multinational companies – have become affordable and readily available to Filipino consumers because of globalisation. Third, and this slightly overlaps with the second, imported products – including food – have all but flooded the Philippine market for non-durable goods. With an abundance of goods and activities beckoning the easy dollars of OFW's kids and relatives, an ethic of saving – much less investment opportunities – simply cannot compete. Furthermore, funds released into the economy by spending in consumption are raked in primarily by foreign enterprise which do not necessarily channel these funds back into the Philippine economy.

It can be of course argued that advanced societies are just as pre-occupied with showbiz as Filipinos (though the MySpace.com statistics seem to say otherwise). However, *even without these distractions*, Filipinos have never had a track record of technological advancement and the innovative application of technology. As seen in the previous section on Technology, *60% of the collective intellect of Filipinos seems to be pre-occupied with showbiz*, even as the Information Age serves up a vast menu of *other* things to do – or at the very least talk about – on the Internet.

Indeed the way capital is created *and* used in a society reflects how imaginative that society is. The nature of the simple relationship between imagination and capitalisation had already been *implicitly* threshed out in the earlier parts of this chapter using very simple examples. This section described the relationship *explicitly*. From here we then step back and view the broader implications of our lack of imagination and inability to capitalise wealth from the perspective of our country's mediocre politics, vacuous approach to governance, and short-sighted regard for national development.

Back in the 1950's Lee Kuan Yew had the *audacity* to envision a Great Singapore – great in stature, achievement, and power. This was at a time when Singapore was still a small mosquito-infested backwater province that just recently seceded from the far more powerful Malay Federation. Nevertheless he marshalled his society towards that vision of greatness and the results speak for themselves today. In contrast, Filipinos pride themselves in being a quaint society of people “doing their individual little parts”. The hope is that an agglomeration of the little and the quaint can eventually come together to form the big and the great. This is a hope that is nowhere near being fulfilled.

The audacity to dream and *imagine* fuels the exploitation of opportunities. It took leaps of imagination to prompt kings and financiers to send ships halfway around the world to discover new lands and treasures, for Einstein to undertake the monumental work involved in formulating his Theory of Relativity, for Steven Jobs to develop a product around the idea that ordinary people can use powerful computers. Ideas borne out of leaps of imagination are powerful motivators for risky behaviour. If Filipinos cannot even imagine a fundamentally different society that will underpin a prosperous future, there can be no inspiration to drive deep systemic change. We have delegated the courage to dream and work at fulfilling these dreams to politics and our politicians. This is a monumental tragedy because Filipinos lack any context to hold to account the politicians they elect to office. This contextual void in Philippine society is reflected in the lack of any thought leadership in any of the mainstream political parties in the Philippines. Political parties in the Philippines do not stand for anything. In Philippine society, political parties are created and dissolved at the drop of a hat and politicians readily hop from one party to another to suit the personal agendas of the powerful. This is a situation that is blatantly obvious but routinely escapes the attention of most Filipinos. Ordinary Filipinos cannot grasp the degree to which democracy has been perverted in the Philippines by such a state of affairs simply because they lack the conceptual tools to comprehend it.

Instead of framing our politics around a clear vision of where we want to see ourselves in five to ten years, we will forever be trapped by a complex that is content with merely surviving one crisis at a time and from one term of office to another. Very little imagination is required to do just that.

Conclusion

How then can we as a people aspire for greatness when we are too busy acquiring the most basic of civilised life's perks and too hollow-headed to imagine a different future? Why are we stuck on *subsisting* and *consuming* when we could be *building* and *accumulating*? If we find that trying to ask these two questions leaves us merely scratching our heads, the most disturbing question of all comes to light: *Are we as a people capable of greatness in the first place?*

We have so far described truths about Filipino culture. Many of them are extremely difficult to come to terms with and no doubt many Filipinos will react with anger, denial, and – worse – apathy towards these truths. Thus, it may help to come closer to home and examine from our individual perspectives three of the more readily-observed inputs into the very fabric of our lives as members of Philippine society. It is fairly obvious that the character of our society today is a direct outcome of its inputs. Garbage in, garbage out goes the tired old cliché which in fact is a powerful principle that still applies to even the most advanced technologies in use today. It most certainly applies to the character of Philippine society – its culture.

Philippine cinema

Philippine cinema has an immense influence over Filipino minds and is, bizarrely, the single biggest factor to consider – primarily because *it may be the easiest to change*. As shown in the section on Technology, a huge proportion – 61 percent – of on-line discussions in PinoyExchange.com is accounted for by topics on Philippine cinema and television. It is a number that dwarfs all the rest, which is not a surprise because watching movies and

television are disproportionately affordable forms of leisure activity in the Philippines (you don't hear of too many Filipino families going off on scuba diving trips over the weekend despite an abundance of scuba diving sites around the islands).

However, of the Filipino masses' favourite, readily-available form of leisure Isagani Cruz wrote in an *INQ7.net* editorial dated 16 June 2006:

Benjamin Franklin said that if the people misuse their suffrages, the remedy is not to withdraw the precious privilege from them but to teach them in its proper use. The entertainment industry, which has the most available access to the [Filipino] people through the movies, television, radio and the tabloids, is instead purposely miseducating them.

The Philippine entertainment industry is not only a vast wasteland, as television has been described in America, but a vicious instrument for the abatement of the nation's intelligence. The shows it offers for the supposed recreation of the people are generally vulgar and smutty, usually with some little moral lesson inserted to make them look respectable, but offensive nonetheless. On the whole, they are obnoxious and unwholesome and deserve to be trashed.

The indiscriminate audience eagerly laps them up because it has not been taught to be selective and more demanding of better quality shows for their pastime. In fact, the easily satisfied fans have been taught the exact opposite reaction -- to accept whatever garbage the industry offers them and, to add insult to their injury, to pay for it too.

The leaders of the entertainment industry are supposed to be responsible people but they have evaded their duty to elevate the taste of their mostly unthinking supporters. They have instead cheapened them into a mass of automated individuals whose ultimate joy is to roll up in the aisles at the lewd jokes of potential senators.

In the article Cruz goes on to describe the obvious link between the way the Filipino masses behave in the polling booth come election time and the twisted values, dearth of insight, and dismal vision served to them by the Philippine Media. Of course it can be argued that the Philippine entertainment industry produces according to public demand (and, itself, is a reflection of the character of our society). But it can also be argued that the Philippine public get what they deserve, as Cruz himself points out. There is only one nugget of insight that can be drawn from this – Filipinos deserve their entertainment

industry and the Philippine entertainment industry deserves the Filipino people. Just as there is a sector in Philippine society that is frustrated or even disgusted with the quality of the products of the industry, there are artists within the industry that have given up on producing quality as well.

However, the fact remains that between the Filipino masses and the captains of the entertainment industry, it is the latter – the producers, studio owners, and artists – who are in a position to be agents of change. This is a bit of an idealistic expectation and a stretch given that we have just about entrusted cultural leadership to private enterprise.

Regard for the youth

A visitor to GetRealPhilippines.com sent a letter by email dated 31 October 2005 that, in a nutshell, best describes the whole problem with our society's regard for the youth. Here is an excerpt:

we filipinos are so hypocrete. we live on lies and half truth.

when I was a kid (am now 40 [years old]) our elders never give us straight answer. one day while playing to my female friend, we were both taking a bath (nude and I was 5 [years old]) I shout "ay pepe" [referring to my friend's privates, and] my aunt scolded me for saying bad words.

another was, when I ask my aunt again how did I come out in this world. and without hesitation she said "galing ka sa puwet" [*you came from the rectum*].

there's a lot more lies and half truth i learn from my elders, when we went to US at my age of 10 [years old], I was so surprised how ordinary folks explain everything as if am talking to them as the same age as mine. up to now am still wandering why we filipinos doesnt treat kids as intellectual and the future of our country, in the philippines, youth are deprive of ideas what is better for them.

If you will pardon the grammatical and spelling errors of the text, you will find that this person's message comes straight from the heart.

It seems that at an early age, Filipinos are already systematically desensitised to lies and half-truths. How then can we presume to build a society underpinned by a continuous effort to acquire the truth? If we do not find joy in the inquisitiveness of our children and do not dignify their questions with well thought-out answers, isn't it a bit hypocritical of us to expect our own leaders to respect the concerns and objections we raise? A very simple challenge “benign” routinely fields in Filipino on-line discussion forums – *cite specific points that substantiate whatever hope of a prosperous future we may harbour* – is routinely met with scorn and condescension. It is a question a child could have asked of a typical “nationalistic” sloganeer encouraging his fellow compatriots to have “hope”.

Hope in what exactly?

We seek comfort in the idea that there is hope in seeing a prosperous Philippines someday but balk at responding to a childlike inquiry on what exactly the basis of this hope is. Even more bizarre, we are quick to latch on to the empty promises of the next politician heckling a sitting incumbent from the streets. Hope in the Philippines it seems rests on nothing else but the shoulders of the very politicians Filipinos love to hate.

We are indeed hard-pressed to find things to substantiate hope that the Philippines will be a prosperous country someday. I have issued the substantiate-our-hope challenge so many times and very few if any have come up with a convincing response. Notwithstanding all this, I believe the rock on which Filipinos can *potentially* build any semblance of hope for a better future is the youth. However I say “potentially” because the Filipino youth is certainly not going to be the next hero that will gallop in on horseback from the horizon anytime soon. Like anything else, they are an asset that needs to be developed. This requires *foresight*, a bit more in fact than what we are known to exercise routinely. Our regard for the youth needs to change, and our investment in them stepped up. The starting points are obvious. Spending on

public education is amongst the lowest in the region and our entertainment industry is feeding them junk. We ourselves should stop feeding them the lies and half-truths we have become accustomed to in our own youth and teach *today's* youth to demand the truth and critically evaluate situations for what they are.

Pride in being Filipino

Pride in what exactly?

Who really wins a game, the star player or the team? Our star players – doctors, IT professionals, artists – are leaving in droves for a better life with the winning teams because they are tired of propping up (being heroes for) what essentially is the losing team. Lea Salonga is an achiever. But cascading her achievements to the rest of Filipino humanity is a stretch and nothing more than pure fantasy. To be proud to be Filipino because of the achievements of a handful of individuals *is* an underclass fantasy. Let's instead be proud to be Filipino – but let us be proud *for the right reasons*. Our pride needs to be underpinned by an ethic of *collective achievement*. Collective achievement is achievement that cannot be attributed to any one person. For example, Japan's achievement of recovering mightily from its World War II defeat is not because of the efforts any one Japanese hero or even small handful of them. Its success can be attributed primarily to the overall character of Japanese society.

If we have achieved nothing collectively as a people, then how can there be pride in being a part of this collective? We need to at the very least feel a shared accountability for the overall character of Filipinos *collectively*.

Individual achievement is easy because each one of us have direct control over our individual destinies. There are in fact thousands of examples of Filipinos that are individually successful. To have true, sustainable and *natural* pride in being Filipino the real challenge lies in *pulling ourselves together to achieve*

as a people and not only as individuals. Our success as individuals is our own individual business and no one has the right to piggyback on any one's individual achievement. The collective success of The Filipino, on the other hand, is *our* collective business.

We therefore cannot go out there and achieve individually and then trumpet the *overall* greatness of Filipinos on the basis of this individual achievement. For every successful Filipino individual there will be hundreds of thousands of others who will undermine this achievement. How then do we impart the mindsets of achievers on the collective character of the Filipino?

Unfortunately there is no easy way of doing this. Pointing out the obvious fact that the Philippine *nation* amounts to nothing more than a dismal failure merely elicits anger and denial. Indeed, careful examination of what so-called “nationalists” encourage us to uphold in the name of “national pride” yields some disturbing insight. *Be proud to be Filipino and the rest will follow* – this encourages delusional and empty pride that is ultimately unsustainable.

Express yourself in “Filipino”, our national language – this essentially cuts Filipinos off from the language that connects us to cutting-edge knowledge – English. *Protect and perpetuate Filipino tradition* – why should we if there is nothing in our tradition that made us successful as a people?

We need to cut through the layers of mindsets built up over the centuries and get to the very heart of what it means to be a nation – a collective dream to achieve *together* and not only as individuals and certainly not apart from one another. Once we have achieved this, then the substance we crave to feed our pride to be Filipino will come *naturally*.

Certainly there are many higher-profile initiatives led by a who's who list of political names aiming to achieve progress. Such initiatives come and go. Yet the above three inputs into our culture stand out as unchanged constants in the last five decades that saw the Philippines go from a shining legacy of American colonial rule to what it is today – a basket case in a region of achievers.

THE END

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My heartfelt thanks go out to a number of people who were instrumental in crystallising most of the ideas in GetRealPhilippines.com and much of the content of this book.

At the top of the list is the *Get Real Squad*. The Get Real Squad is a group of really, *really* smart people – most of whom are ethnic Filipinos – who met and acknowledged each other as fellow “getrealists” over the period of the last six years (as far as I know) in various on-line discussion groups. Although we go by the name “Get Real Squad” and refer to each other as “getrealists”, by no stretch of imagination do I presume to be the leader of the squad. Neither do I presume to have introduced getrealist concepts to them. As a matter of fact, many of them have been getrealists far longer than I have, and we in the squad all generally agree that by no means does the Squad hold a monopoly over getrealism.

Personally, I’ve always had a clear stake in participating in political and issues-based forums and blogs – mainly because I had a website to promote and, admittedly, I get a real kick out of seeing the effects of my promotional efforts reflected in the typical Website traffic and profile metrics of GetRealPhilippines.com. On the other hand, the rest of the Get Real Squad members – most of whom have none of my promotional agenda – battled traditional Filipino thinking on these forums for the sheer passion they felt for their ideas and the need to impart and disseminate these ideas to as many Filipinos as they could reach. To be sure, each one of us is an independent thinker in our respective right and subscribe to our own flavour of getrealism. As such, our individual tirades on the Net (and who knows what more of these go on off-line) do not follow any official getrealist dogma or tag line. But because we all subscribe to the idea that the search for truth is underpinned by child-like lines of query, I believe I speak for all in the Squad in asserting that we are all robustly aligned in our vision for the Philippines.

This group of fine men and women do me an immeasurable honour by adopting the term “getrealist” to define their collective identity and acknowledging themselves as members of the Get Real Squad.

The second group of people I would like to acknowledge are all of the fellow Filipinos that I (together with many in the Squad) rubbed the wrong way in the course of seeking the Truth

about Filipinos. Though it is good to be in the company of like-minded individuals (which is why the Squad was formed), I believe I learned much from the bizarreness of the ideas and counter-arguments expressed by my detractors. More importantly, the barrage of “input” from detractors, which at some points in time became daunting, went a long way towards strengthening my resolve to hone my conceptual frameworks, read voraciously, and expand and deepen the content of GetRealPhilippines.com. In fact, I can safely say that a huge part of the inspiration to expand GetRealPhilippines.com came from my detractors and a lot of the content of many articles in the site had their origins in some of my better responses to these detractors in these discussion forums.

I respect many of my detractors. Unfortunately much of the respect ends when a discussion leads to a show of credentials. Because many a discussion with detractors ultimately led to a show of credentials, I have a fairly good idea of the academic and professional backgrounds of some of the people I have battled on-line. Credentials ranged from holders of Doctorate degrees and some government officials to analysts within government agencies. Some are actively engaged in charity work and volunteer organisations. A big proportion consisted of white-collar workers and overseas foreign workers. But regardless of their respective backgrounds, they all mightily contributed to developing my deep understanding of what someone once called the *underbelly of the Filipino psyche*. More importantly, being Filipino myself, I have come to terms with my own very Filipino character – that many aspects of what constitutes this psyche are in me and ingrained in my character as well. And whilst much of it will not be eradicated overnight (if at all), the understanding I acquired from probing the minds of my detractors with my child-like questions have progressively equipped me with the tools to recognise them whenever they rear their ugly heads in my own day-to-day interactions. This is a big step in itself. Learning how to compartmentalise aspects of my own character as Filipino allowed me to, in a sense, take a step back from these nuggets of aspects and regard them as an observer. It is with these tools and with the skills I acquired in their use that I now often use myself as a laboratory for much of the content I write.

To the remaining portion of the Filipino population who would rather sit on the fence, this book is really for you. To the Get Real Squad, the ideas articulated here are nothing new, and to the rubbed-the-wrong-way Filipinos I mention above, these ideas are mostly incomprehensible or unacceptable at best. People who sit on the fence are in quite a comfortable position. They are either profiting handsomely under the status quo, are immune or apathetic to its effects, or are somewhere in between the earlier two. Fence sitters *can*

afford to be fence sitters, and many of the most successful people I know are fence sitters. It is generally recognised that a society may fail to provide an environment that enables the majority of its constituents to realise their full individual potentials, but still produce world-class individual talent and achievement. The Philippines is such a society – brimming with individual talent but a chronic failure in collective achievement. That Filipino migrants are prized for their resilience, high-quality work, and quickness to quietly assimilate into any society is a testament to this paradoxical dichotomy of individual brilliance *and* collective impotence. We can easily relegate our being Filipino to the dusty corners of our identity, achieve as individuals, and eventually set ourselves apart from the collective failure associated with our ethnic background.

It is ironic though that one of the most celebrated collective “achievements” of Filipinos – the 1986 EDSA “Revolution” that toppled the evil regime of Ferdinand Marcos – was instigated and brought to its conclusion by what are essentially the fence sitters of Philippine society. They are the same people that other would-be “revolutions” attempted to move. But moving a comfy lot is always a challenge. And wherever there is a Mount Everest of a challenge, you will usually find getrealists. On behalf of the Squad, I therefore dedicate this book and all of the conceptual framework of GetRealPhilippines.com to the fence sitters of Philippine society.

Finally, I would like to thank the circumstances of my upbringing that equipped me with the ability to think outside the square.