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*"Paglayang Minamahal"*

On Defending Truth, Guarding Hope, and Preserving Memory

The Honorable J. Prospero E. De Vera the Third, the Honorable President Danilo L. Concepcion, guest speaker Senator Loren Legarda, Chancellor Michael L. Tan, respective deans, college secretaries, esteemed guests of the national, international, and UP community, dear parents and fellow graduates—a blessed morning to you all.

I entered the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2014 as an overenthusiastic freshman. I would have at least three friends in every class I was enrolled in, I loved to recite and participate in discussions, and I could not wipe this smile off my face during three-hour lectures no matter how hard I tried. Every person who met me from GE courses to elective classes would tell me, "*Oo nga, halatang taga-Broad Comm ka,*" or "You really do seem like a student of Broadcast Communication." Now, I hardly find these remarks surprising because even as a child, I thoroughly enjoyed telling my family every new piece of information that I learned from school. My parents would joke that there was no use for a radio when they had me with them inside the car.

Being the bookish and outspoken person that I am, my favorite GE subject in the span of my entire college life was my *Kasaysayan 1* class under Professor Ros Costelo.

It was my very first (and come to think of it, last) seven o'clock in the morning class where I unlearned and relearned Philippine history. Some of the most memorable lessons imparted to me in class included the role of the *babaylan* in precolonial society—how this central figure of the arts, religion, medicine, and culture was demonized by Spanish colonizers based on differences in expression and practice—along with the rich account of the coming of Islam to the Philippines, and the historical reasons why our Muslim brothers and sisters seek autonomy because of how different our national narratives are. At the break of day, we talked about reforms and revolutions, unsung heroes beyond the propaganda movement and KKK, and the macro-scale crises of colonialism and imperialism from the Spaniards, to the Americans, to the Japanese; that is three hundred thirty-three years under Spain, forty-eight years under the U.S., and then three years under Japan.

*Noong ika-labindalawa ng Hunyo, ipinagdiwang natin ang ating ika-isang daan at dalawampung taon ng kalayaan. Sa diwa ng ating malayang bayan, nais ko kayong tanungin: may dilag nga ba ang tula at awit sa paglayang minahamal? Tunay nga bang tayo'y malaya?*

Perhaps it depends on what kind of freedom we are talking about.

At this very moment in our lives as college students, we are free from quizzes and exams, the endless demand for papers, plates, and productions; free from 7-7 lecture classes and sleepless nights which lead to exhausted mornings (with the occasional 3 am meltdown in between). Once we shift this sablay from our right

shoulder to our left, we become free from this university that, in the span of seemingly endless semesters, we have grown to both loathe and love so much.

On another note, freedom can also refer to our nation being rid of colonizers, although the prevailing threat of foreign presence in the islands of the West Philippine Sea may refute this assertion. The reason why I am named China is because I was born in 1997—the Handover—the year when the British colony Hong Kong was turned over to China. My second name Marie is attributed to the Virgin Mary, with a prayer and the hope that the country will be touched by the heart of the Immaculate Mother—be it even in realms beyond spirituality. We carry this same hope even today; that the grace of reciprocity may replace that of animosity, and where higher understanding and enlightenment may guide our relations with our neighbor. China... being strong, like the superpower that it is, and also construed as delicate and sensitive as the precious porcelain that is china. Insofar as our freedom is concerned, we can be firm in our stance yet sensitive to the dynamics of global order. Whatever contention we might have can be worked out through diplomacy—hardcore, as it may need to be—but always keeping that delicate balance between an assertion and enjoyment of rights, and empathy based on a sense of global citizenship and common humanity.

On a more "grassroots" level, being an UPSCAn taught me that freedom is the state where people are presented with all the alternatives and given the right to choose their course of action; this definition reinforces the truth that our education was designed to take us far beyond the four walls of the classroom. That semester of

*Kasaysayan 1* ended with a discussion on *Batas Militar* or martial law in the Philippines under the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, and its implications for our national, collective memory. It was in that second floor classroom in the east wing of Palma Hall where I began to understand the perils of historical revisionism as a college freshman.

In this age of alternative facts and fake news, we can all agree that media plays a huge role in either advancing or combatting revisionism, and being a student from the College of Mass Communication, I can attest that we are trained to pursue and to report the truth. My hardbound ticket to graduation is a postmemorial study on the Digital Museum of Martial Law in the Philippines. It asks the question: *can* media memorialize political repression? The backbone of my work is to counter any person who tells me that I am not allowed to contribute to discourse on Marcos's martial law simply because I did not live through it. The concept of postmemory tells us that the memories of the generation before ours, who experienced nine years of trauma under martial law, continue to live on through stories, photographs, newspaper articles, music, films, and works of literature. Similar to how Rizal's *obras* such as *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* were meant to be a "faithful reproduction" of the social conditions during his time, I look at media as a means to promote positive values, to deepen our appreciation for our own Philippine culture, and most of all, to both mirror and defend truth.

If you switch on your television set to watch evening news, turn on the radio, pick up a broadsheet, or scroll through your timelines... what do you see? Martial law is

ongoing in Mindanao. Black Friday protests have become more frequent. Voices have been silenced, people unjustly imprisoned... or worse, killed. The truth is, we are not free from the horrors of our past. We contest the validity of our memories up to this day, and we find the same terrible chapters of our history repeating itself, with evil manifesting in a different form. For a freedom-loving people, we have allowed too many tyrants to rule our nation. *Kung noon pa man hanggang ngayon sinisiil ang ating mga karapatan, ano nga ba ang kalayaan?*

Freedom is liberation from the hardened shell of oppression that has been weighing us down for centuries and holding us captive: layers upon layers of not only colonization but also systemic corruption and brutality from our government, and inferiority that stifled the development of our national language, our writing system, our educational institutions, and our sense of democracy.

Now, one cannot be freedom-loving unless he or she pursues justice and truth. Even after securing our diplomas, will we really be free from UP? Probably not. Because wherever we might find ourselves, the call to serve the people will echo far too loudly in the back of our minds. One of my most striking experiences as a college student happened back in junior year, where I copped-out of my last class for the day, chanted in indignation and took to the streets with hundreds of my fellow students, not only from UP but from other universities as well. It was a fateful Friday in November of 2016 when we found out about the hasty burial of the notorious dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, in a Heroes Cemetery. *Kapit-bisig tayong nag-martsa mula A-S patungo sa Katipunan, namamaos subalit hindi umaatras.* I will never

forget how we shouted "never again" together with such urgency and indignation, and there was no room for fear because I was surrounded by a throng of impassioned individuals who were determined to defend the truth and the integrity of our story as a nation. Truly, the greatest gift that this university has given us is perspectives on using the lenses of history, social justice, and our respective disciplines to look at national issues and to address them head-on. Wherever the future leads us, from the biggest cities to the most remote islands in the archipelago, we are empowered to choose by what means we can liberate ourselves and the least of our people from this shell of oppression.

All the years of my study in UP has led me to conclude that we can overcome any battle and escape the darkness of our past through a shared vision and collective action. The call of the times is for us to become truth-seekers, but I challenge each of us to go the extra mile by becoming a guardian of hope and memory. Through faith, we must develop a strong moral compass and listen to our conscience that goes beyond individual idiosyncrasy and is attuned to the needs of the greater community.

*Magpakatatag at magpakagiting tayo para sa ikauunlad ni Inang Bayan.* Let our enthusiasm to learn transform into enthusiasm to serve and to remember; together, let us create new memories for our liberated *Pilipinas*, stand for truth, and actualize our loving vision for the Filipino society. To do so is to make honor a prerequisite to excellence—all for our nation's sake. With that, we can finally, courageously say, go forth... *padayon*, Class of 2018!