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Tales from the Heart (text only)

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Tales from the Heart

Teddy O. Amoloza – 2000 Du Pont Award for Teaching Excellence

April 19, 2000 – Illinois Wesleyan University

A couple of years ago, Prof. Mike Weis began his speech at Honors' Convocation by quoting that "great philosopher" Jackie Gleason when he said "How sweet it is!" While I certainly agree with that sentiment, I hasten to add a quote from my daughter when she was in first grade just before the start of the Diocesan Spelling Bee. She said: "I am so nerv-ious!" Feeling rather overwhelmed with the task ahead of her, she had unknowingly juxtaposed the Tagalog and English words to describe her rather frayed nerves. I certainly feel the same way right now; I imagine there will be many more slip ups throughout this speech and I beg your indulgence when that happens.

As I took a trip down memory lane, I tried to remember what I wanted to be when I grow up. Remember the question school children were always asked? I don't remember mentioning that I wanted to be a teacher but I do remember that I wanted to be a chemist: there was that glamour in the white lab coat, the test tubes and the Bunsen burners that appealed to me. But of course that was all part of a child's dream for as a child I did not know whether college education was something attainable. I knew that those with money could go to college but how about those who don't have money? Back in those days, I had always accepted social stratification as a given. I was aware that there were wealthy people who owned vast tracts of land and there were those, like my parents, whose only piece of land was a plot in the cemetery, and there were those with none at all. But isn't that the way things are supposed to be: that there are those destined to be doctors and engineers

while there are those destined to be laundry women, vendors and street cleaners. Any sociology student would quickly recognize this as the functionalist perspective. As a child I was aware that we were poor. Our house had a packed dirt floor, tin roof, thin plywood walls, no electricity, one faucet in the kitchen sink, an outhouse, a bath area consisting of galvanized iron sheets put together with gaping holes in between – but that did not bother me much. I believed that we would “evolve” out of it – I naively assumed that our simple life would later progress to a more complex, progressive one. Students who studied development theory with me would recognize the similarity of my naïve assumptions with the premises of the modernization theory. But my assumptions beg the question: how will that happen? I became painfully aware of the toll that poverty exacts in the human spirit one weekday noon when I was in elementary school – it is a scene that is forever etched in my mind. My older brother who was in high school came home and asked my mother what there was to eat for lunch. My mother said, “there’s rice – just sprinkle some salt or brown sugar over it for taste.” While my mother watched my brother (the rest of us had already eaten our simple meal) she slumped down on the floor, nursing her youngest child and cried. As painful as this memory is, I share it with you today because I consider that as a defining moment in my life. For it was at that moment when I resolved that I would do my very best to help lift my family out of poverty. It was a scary and uncertain journey from that very moment; it was a long and circuitous journey from there to here.

As I sailed through the journey of my life I learned numerous lessons: lessons in love, lessons in humility, lessons in patience and perseverance, lessons in caring and sharing. I would like to share with you today how I learned those lessons and so I chose to speak from the heart. As my parents struggled to put food on the table, my father constantly reminded us of a quotation from

one of the great Filipino heroes from our hometown, Apolinario Mabini, the brain of the Philippine Revolution. Coming from an impoverished family, Mabini's inspirational message was: "Poverty is not a hindrance to success" – and my father quoted this to us in English!! That quotation became my family's mantra. In high school I was inspired by the poem "Invictus"- so much so that I still remember three stanzas: Out of the night that covers me/ Black as the pit from pole to pole/ I thank whatever gods may be/ for my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance/ I have winced but not cried aloud/under the bludgeoning of chance/ My head is bloody but unbowed. (Then I forgot the next stanza.) It matters not how straight the gate/how charged with punishment the scroll/ I am the master of my fate/ I am the captain of my soul. The poem inspired me because it spoke of courage, determination and the resiliency of the human spirit. I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul: I can control my destiny, I can be whatever I want to be! But reality tempered my idealism and arrogance! I cannot be whatever I want to be without the help of others. I was taught my lessons in humility as I watched my parents approach other people for help, as I listened to them use deferential language ("po" and "opo") when talking with professionals much younger than they were. I learned humility as I welcomed my mother home after her trip to her village to borrow money from their local moneylender. I learned humility when I lost my college scholarship when I flunked my PE class - swimming! (And I still don't know how to swim – quite interesting for someone who comes from a country of more than 7,000 islands, isn't it?)

In college, I came perilously close to squandering my opportunity and reneging on my personal covenant. In our western and eastern thought courses, we studied the writings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the work of Bertrand Russell, the teachings of Jose Rizal and Apolinario Mabini,

the work of Confucius and other Asian philosophers. But the one that greatly influenced my thinking was that of Karl Marx. It was the Vietnam-war era, the time of unrest of the baby boom generation. I developed a very strong class-consciousness. I became acutely aware of the social stratification and the wide gap existing between the social classes. I began to question the social structure and the prevailing social injustice. Marxism provided a convincing paradigm to answer radical questions. The Philippines was poor because of American imperialism, exacerbated by feudal arrangements of the country's resources and enforced by a fascist state. Deeper and deeper I got drawn into the struggle for social justice: I attended radical meetings and discussions, participated in barricades and demonstrations; I believed in armed struggle. When the government declared martial law, I accompanied members of my group to a small village at the foot of the mountain where they would be picked up by members of the underground movement. Only one thing prevented me from going with them: the thought of my family. I knew that if I disappointed my parents by throwing away the opportunity that they struggled to give me, the fate of all my other brothers and sisters would be doomed. It was a difficult inner struggle and love of family prevailed over love of country!

Lessons in loving, caring and sharing: I have had plenty of that as I watched my parents struggle to send us to school. I learned that as I watched my mother look at every crevice of her wallet for some hidden pesos when I needed extra money to pay for a lab manual in college. I remember watching my father cry while he was counting money from the piggy bank that he had crushed open; my youngest brother was just born then, we needed money to buy food, my father cried to me because he could not send me to summer school. I knew how much my father wanted to give us all an education and he felt that he was failing early on! So, when I finished

college and got a job, I fulfilled my personal covenant; I sent a sister and two brothers to college. Later on, they helped the other younger ones and the responsibility was passed on and on. Lessons in sharing and caring, lessons in patience and perseverance: we sure had plenty of that! Inspired by Mabini's message, through our parents' determination, through their blood, sweat and tears, through the strength of our sense of family obligation we all received that most precious gift – our ticket out of our poverty – our education!

That is why any story about the struggle for education resonates very strongly with me. Some years ago, I sat in the audience when Prof. Jim Matthews in his speech at Honors Convocation talked about his friend Yeno Matuka who walked miles and miles to get to school in Belgian Congo – in my heart I saluted his friend. At the same time, another image was evoked in my mind, that of another time and another place, that of another schoolboy who walked to school everyday through rice fields and railroad tracks, sometimes munching sugarcane to while away the time, that school boy who is now my husband. (That is why we are such kindred spirits!)

Now, many years later, my siblings, my husband and I share our stories, mixed with nostalgia and amusement, with our children so that they will learn to appreciate what they are enjoying now. Sure, we talk about our hardships but we also tell them about the funny ones. For instance, (well, this is gross, but I'm going to tell you anyway) the black soot we always found in our nostrils every morning because of the smoke of the kerosene lamp, or how we fought over rubber bands and marbles. We tell them about how we had to enter a raffle at noon at the Reserve Section of our library in college. The winners got to take home at ten o'clock that night one of the few textbooks available – to be promptly returned at seven o'clock the following morning.

Oftentimes, they chuckled at our funny stories, sometimes they looked at us in disbelief. At one time my daughter remarked to me: “You see, Mommy, you have all these interesting stories to tell us, like, you did not have an inside toilet, you had an outhouse. Sometimes, I wonder, what will I tell my kids, that I did not have a what – a play station – when I was growing up.” What a perfect example of relative deprivation! In those simple words I knew that by sharing the stories of our lives with her she is thankful for all the many blessings she enjoys.

As much as I value my formal education, I also believe strongly in the experiential one. We acquire education formally and informally; our views of the world and of life are shaped by the formal lessons we learn inside the classroom and the informal lessons we learn everyday. I learned more about the world outside my little town when I came to the US as a high school exchange student. I learned about the many faces of culture from the research scholars and students who came to our university in the Philippines, I learned more about the Filipino character and about other Asians when I was in Australia. Knowing how my horizon has been broadened, how my perspective has been enriched by my international experiences, I am very passionate about international education. I want to help broaden our students’ perspectives; I want to help them get excited about the world. We are teaching today tomorrow’s leaders, and tomorrow’s leaders cannot be effective if they cannot understand the world from a multi-dimensional perspective. That is why we have faculty members from across campus teaching international studies courses. If we can help bring the world to our students, if we can make a difference in their outlook, if we can help them appreciate the diversity in the world – that the physical differences between us should make us more interested in each other and not a wedge that separate us, then we have reason to hope for a nice world of tomorrow.

Let me share with you another dimension: that of being an immigrant in this country. Immigrants have rich and diverse experiences; that of Filipinos in America is no exception. Their stories are chronicled in such books as Ronald Takaki's "In the Heart of Filipino America", Fred Cordova's "Filipinos: Forgotten Asian Americans" and Reuben Seguritan's "We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Doors". Carlos Bulosan in his 1946 semi-autobiography "America is in the Heart" showed how people like him, uprooted from the fields of Central Luzon and transported to the plantations in Hawaii and California and the canneries in Alaska endured the humiliation and the struggle to find a place in this country. Bienvenido Santos in "You Lovely People" wrote about the inner strengths of "the hurt men" and how they found solace among themselves through hope, determination and compassion. Thanks to those pioneering, trail-blazing Filipinos, we indeed found a place in this country and we continue to preserve the significant inroads our predecessors have made in this society. Starting life in America was not easy, there were so many uncertainties, so many difficulties. I won't bore you with details – but struggling here, we had to lick our wounded spirits so many times. We nursed our hurt pride when we knew we had been treated differently; we salved our hurt feelings when people give us the askance look. Some of us may have gotten better opportunities but we are keenly aware that subtle discrimination still exists. It is a public issue that must be continually addressed as America continues to work toward greater tolerance in this multicultural society. My story pales in comparison to that of the lives of those trail-blazing Filipinos and I am very humbled to be able to reap the rewards of their struggles. Being here at Illinois Wesleyan is one such reward. Hurt feelings, hurt pride; those were what I had to contend with. But I still feel considerably luckier than Carlos Bulosan and his cohorts, than Bienvenido Santos and his hurt men because I have

my family with me. I am so grateful that I have a husband and soul mate who despite all the obstacles thrown his way manages to maintain a cheerful outlook in life and prop my sagging spirit when the going gets rough. I am so thankful for our daughter who saw all the ups and downs as we struggled to find a place in this country, never complaining, always believing... They have my undying gratitude and love. My story, our story is but a single thread in that diverse tapestry of cultural experiences. I hope it contributes to the richness of that vast quilt of American society.

Immigrants work hard. We work hard to do justice to our decision to migrate; to leave our native country and endure loneliness in search of a place in a distant land. And when we finally think we have found our place we start asking the question: where is home? For as Seguritan quoted: "in the end, immigrants and non-immigrants, the history of all our struggles reduces to the quest for home". Home is where the heart is, and as I said in one interview, my heart is in two places; I am at home in the Philippines, the country of my birth where I first learned the basic values of life and love, where I can identify my heritage. I am at home here in America where I was constantly challenged to prove the strength of my spirit, where I was able to realize my potentials, where people around me embraced me despite my being different. Some say that immigrants have the best of both worlds. We enjoy the material comforts of our adopted country but can still go back and enjoy the red carpet of welcome in our native land. Yes, that is true for the most part but we also have to wrestle with painful questions. In February 1986, when the Philippines stood at the brink of uncertainty when millions of unarmed Filipinos stood up against the military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, we worried about our families back home. A number of us also asked ourselves: "Why are we here and not there?" When we start looking

into the future we ask ourselves: Do we spend our waning years in the land where we first knew life or in the land that gave much meaning to that life? Do we spend our last years 10,000 miles away from our only child and have her go through the same painful experiences my husband and I went through when our fathers passed away? What is the right decision? Is there a right decision?

While worrying about what to write about for my speech today, a number of people encouraged me to share the stories of my life. I was further encouraged by Prof. Kathleen Montgomery's comments. She had invited me to a panel discussion in her class "Women in Politics"; one of her students asked if there are any opportunities for women in developing countries. I said yes, I am living proof of that – and told them a bit of what I had just told you today. Prof.

Montgomery told me later that my comment made some deep impressions on some of her students and she encouraged me to write about it. After I wrote the first draft of this speech, I fretted over its content (too simplistic, I thought) but after reading Dean Matthews' editorial in the Division of Student Affairs' April newsletter, I became more at ease. He wrote about providing opportunities for students (our campus guests) to share their "otherness" as a way of extending "deep hospitality". To that I add that the "deep hospitality" will also be manifested if we, the hosts, share our "otherness". Sharing with you my story is my contribution to that "deep hospitality" that hopefully will make our small corner of the world a "less fearsome place".

(And, I also tell students who reluctantly come to me late in the semester because they initially felt intimidated that "I don't bite!") Not that I am holding all of them responsible for boring you today, but reflecting upon some of the comments of my own students I became further inspired. Last semester, when I was going through difficult times dealing with my father's illness 10,000

miles away, I prepared my students for the possibility that I may have to leave within the semester. I explained to them why it was very important for me to be with my father, I shared with them my story (so maybe some of them are already bored stiff by now – are you still awake?). My students were so wonderfully caring! A number of my students wrote me such heartwarming notes, sent caring cards, some even brought me a care package for my trip to the Philippines. There's one message however, that I would like to quote to you because her comments touched me immensely. She said: “ I want to tell you that my thoughts and prayers are with you. This is my first class with you, but I have enjoyed having you as a professor. You convey a deep love for your field of study and for your students. I know you are worried about shorting your students, but we all understand that you need to be with your family now. It is the right thing to do. Your father has blessed IWU with such a wonderful professor and good friend. He must be an outstanding and giving person. I am sure you are thankful for all that he has given you.” Thank you, (you know who you are), for easing some of my self-doubts, for assuring me that I should not worry, most of all, for recognizing my relationship with my father. You may not have gotten an A+ in the class but in the book of memories I keep in my heart, your comments rate an A++!

It would be utterly un-Filipino, if after savoring the thrill of being bestowed this honor, I will not express my gratitude. There is a saying in Tagalog: ang hindi lumigon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makararating sa paroroonan. Translation: One who does not look back where one came from will not reach one's destination. But far more important than reaching that destination, this Filipino proverb is yet another example of how we learn lessons in humility. That we should always recognize and honor those who have helped us. So inasmuch as you honor me, permit me

to recognize other people outside my family who have touched my life. (I know that this is not the Academy Awards, but I would like to express my thanks anyway!) I am grateful to my students, past and present, all you out there, for all the gifts of wisdom and humanity they have given me. I honor my teachers for their unflinching devotion to their profession; for the lessons inside and outside the classroom that they had shared with me. I honor my colleagues for their commitment to achieve the common goal for our students to be better- informed and responsible citizens in this global society. I honor the women and men – the subjects of my research- who labor endlessly under the sun and cheerfully carry on with their day to day struggles. I thank this academic community for embracing me, for taking a chance with me, for recognizing what I have to offer. Thank you, Jim Sikora for believing in me. Thank you Alison Sainsbury and Kathy O’Gorman for reinforcing that!

Finally, please indulge me for a few moments while I pay tribute to my parents, the heroes of our lives: those simple, ordinary, “salt of the earth” folks whose romance amidst the ruins of World War II produced 10 children, who dedicated their lives to us, who denied themselves of all comforts in life in order to give us our only ticket out of poverty – our education. Inay and Tatay, Mother and Father, this honor is as much yours as it is mine. This expression of gratitude is especially more poignant because I know that my father is looking at me now from the great beyond. Tatay, I know you are smiling at your little girl right now. I still remember the sparkle in your eyes when I shared with you this great news last summer; I felt your pride when we talked about it the last time I saw you alive last November; I felt your spirit strengthening me during your funeral. I hope that you again feel that humble pride in your heart – I am at this podium because of you and Inay. This is again another testimony to your great legacy. We will

always treasure your great gift to us! Your spirit will live in our hearts forever! From the bottom of my heart, from all your children, thank you very much!

And to all of you, thank you very much for listening!!