



“LESSONS FROM MY LEADERSHIP JOURNEY”

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A SHARING TO THE YOUTH PARTICIPANTS DURING THE YOUNG LEADERS PROGRAM

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Let me first convey to you the universal greetings of peace, to you our dear young leaders of the Young Leaders Program, the “future of the next generation”, as the great hero Jose Rizal was quoted to have said. Some greetings as well as to the program sponsor and its cooperators who helped make this event possible, and to everybody else who may kindly be reading this, all stakeholders to living in a better world, a world of peace, love and harmony...

...a world that believes in The One and Only Creator, called in the most Majestic Names by their respective different languages of nations: GOD in English, ALLAH in Arabic, DIYOS or PANGINOON or GINOO or BATHALA to us here in the Philippines, TUHAN to the Malays (Indonesia/Malaysia), DIO to the Italians, GOTT to the Germans, APO MAGBABAYA to the Highlanders of Mindanao, YAHWEH or JEHOVAH to the Jews, to mention some.

To all of you, Assalamu Alaikum, Shalom, Peace of God Be Upon everyone, ang Kapayapaan ng kaisa-isang Panginoong Diyos ay mapasa-ating lahat, ang Kalinaw sa Ginoong Diyos maanaa kanatong tanan.

I consider it a privilege that I am asked to share with you the story of my life as a Muslim leader who had to struggle in the past because of the unfavorable if not notorious image of my town, practically a no-man’s land, a war-zone that saw bitter fights among feuding families and clans, of revolutionary guerillas versus government forces, where lawless and criminal elements were very bold to do their “trade” – be it hold-ups, robbery, kidnappings, sometimes even in broad daylight.

Today, actually starting the late 1980’s, Datu Paglas town had transformed into its present identity, as a zone of cross-cultural harmony, a bustling economic zone, showcased as a “living model” of how lasting peace can be attained thru sustainable economic development. Today, Datu Paglas is providing employment to more than 2,000 people, a good number of them are supporters, sympathizers, even combatants, of the revolutionary group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Today, people of different races, culture and creed (Israelis with their technology on drip irrigation and tissue cultured seedlings, Americans with their marketing brand, Italians with their shipping network, Saudis with their trading expertise, and initially Christian managers contributed their corporate managerial skills during the initial years of the project, and the predominantly Muslim landowners and laborers in my town with their willing and able bodies) all work together to make the banana plantation attain its renowned status, which is that of a world-class, state-of-the-art producer of export quality Cavendish bananas.

Today, the story of my town is featured, talked about, not just locally but also in international media and other fora. I did not wish it to happen, particularly the “dark past” of my town, to be exposed beyond its local boundaries, but then, as a saying goes, “when a lamp is lighted, do not hide or cover it. Let its light shine for others”, I guess the way my town’s story has become of interest to others.

What lessons could be learned from my town’s transformation? One is that leadership is a key, and that the challenges were far from easy.

I first went thru the “simple” realization that the people in my town deserved a better life, a peaceful place to live in and life that at least can provide food, shelter for the family and education for the children. In order to do this, we have to be economically developed, our poor villages and lands have to be productive.

My town cannot continue to be a fertile breeding ground to “terrorism and other forms of criminality and lawlessness,” or theaters to “war and rebellion”

The next question then was how could we develop? We cannot be dependent on scarce, almost in existent government livelihood programs.

That realization then brought me to the subject of ENTREPRENEURSHIP as a sustainable way to our economic development. Yes, Entrepreneurship has to be the effective means of changing our negative image.

We have to be ENTREPRENEURS, whether we be farmers, civil servants, political leaders, datus and other religious leaders, small businessmen, or even as an ordinary, “jobless” member of society, or even as “rebels” or, more accurately, believers in the revolutionary but peaceful struggle.

There are many definitions of an Entrepreneur, this is the one I prefer. It means an INNOVATOR, it is one who recognizes opportunities and organizes resources to take advantage of the opportunity. How do I innovate?

I had to possess the right ATTITUDE. I am definitely not in the position to prescribe what should be done in your respective cases, as young leaders in your own rights. I however am happy that I am able to share my own story, with the hope that through it you may find from my experience how your own story may also unfold, in your own circumstance and time. I had to be a leader.

I told myself, I have to open my town to investors, whatever it takes. I declared that private investments, which I know was the sustainable way to economic development in my own case, must come in. Then, for investments to come in, I must have a “business plan”. I then sought the wisdom of my elders.

My elders, and in particular my dear late uncle **Hashim Salamat**, former **Chairman** of the rebel group **Moro Islamic Liberation Front** who returned to our Creator few years ago, had the following three things to say which I then adopted as Guiding Principles:

- 1) “protect the environment at any cost because this is all we have for the next generation,”
- 2) “do not abuse the workers, protect their rights and look after their welfare and safety,” and lastly,
- 3) “provide education for the children.”

I considered the First and Third Principle to be very personal to me. I will continue to invest in the future of our children. I believe and I have seen this myself - that poverty and economic inequality are a fertile breeding ground for terrorism. Equally and in fact much more important in relation to the children, they have to learn (in fact more so with us adults) to preserve the environment, resources of this earth. *As the saying of the Wise goes, we did not simply inherit this world from our parents, the better truth is that: we merely borrowed this world from our children.*

Through all these, I learned that a clear **sense of vision and mission** helps clarify and purify our intentions. Modesty aside, I was not born poor although ever since my younger days I had always found natural affinity with the house helpers, drivers and bodyguards of my parents. And because of that, I had seen the **glaring divide** that separated the Muslim nobilities from the common families. I protested the norms where the leadership of the ruling clans put their interest over the most basic concerns of those in poverty. As my father’s successor, I vowed to use the influence of my family to make a difference in our community because I was tired of seeing the same vicious cycle of violence and poverty. I wanted to try something new because the traditional “Muslim way” of leading our people was not working. It worked for the elite Muslim families and the politicians. But it never worked for the people.

I also learned that as a leader, I had to be a part of efforts to BRIDGE the economic, social, and political divide among the tri-peoples in Mindanao (*Muslims, Christians, and Highlanders*), I knew I had to **change certain rules and norms of my cultures and traditions**:

- When the convention dictates that the Datus – or members of the local “royal families” --- are the only people who can make sound decisions for the people, I encouraged dialogue and consensus among local folks. By doing so, we share the accountability to make things work for all of us.
- Philippine “Muslim culture” is basically very exclusive. I challenged that by bringing everyone’s concerns on the table ... the government, the military, the religious leaders, the workers, the rebels and even the “lawless elements” because I believe that what each of these groups say is of great value.
- We often had difficulty welcoming new ideas and new ways. We did not want outsiders in our territory. But again, this system did not work for us and therefore, I invited NGOs and the academe to work with us so that we could learn how to invest in our future through training, skills building, values formation and education.

We built partnerships with as many groups as possible, regardless of culture, faith, and ideologies, to hasten the progress we deserve and dreamed for.

- I was brought up in a culture where guns and goons define a Man's status in the society. I challenged that convention. At first, I was not comfortable because it was "*not the normal thing*" to go around town without my bodyguards. But, I decided to put an end to that fashion because the old ways were not working for others and for me either. My personal campaign took a toll on me. I lost my father and 3 brothers due to violence and lawlessness, before I could demonstrate to the rest that we don't need guns. Some of our traditional and political leaders are still relentless, but I keep the faith that in due time they will change.
- I was brought up in a culture of "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth". Throughout my growing years, I was witness to vengeance killings (we call "RIDO" or "ubusan ng lahi") among clans, perpetuated throughout the succeeding generations. Inspired "ironically" by my late uncle former MILF Chairman **Hashim Salamat**, I decided that this "culture of hatred" and cycle of violence **MUST STOP**. Therefore, when my father and younger brothers became murder victims, I decided to accept that it was their fate, their time had come, God had Allowed it to happen, and I must forgive. I left justice to the laws and to the authorities.

For me, the bigger challenge is always **HOW TO SUSTAIN THE GAINS**. And my simple but honest response to this is to continue to **LISTEN** to what other people have to say --- and **LEARN** from the **WISDOM** of their stories --- as they gave me great inspiration to continue to improve, to be a **BETTER** leader.

So much has been told about the "Datu Paglas Story". I am sure there are other stories of transformation for the better among yourselves, they all show that we can all innovate, we can all transform, everything have their own respective timing, but we have to be around to grab the opportunity when they come.

Yes dear young leaders, you have your respective roles to play which you may already be playing those roles of leadership, of service to others. What you are doing, silently perhaps, may not even be noticed, not even on a smaller scale if compared to the way the Datu Paglas Story has been catching attention although it was never an intention or expectation that we be noticed. But then the most important and ultimate witness to what we are doing, aside from our own selves, is God Almighty, and the people of our respective localities, small people whose lives we had touched. A Christian brother had shared with me a quote from the Holy Bible "whatsoever you did to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me." Very true indeed!

May this little sharing from your humble "older brother" have even a little impact in your mind and in you heart. May this "little story" contribute to your becoming great leaders in the future, greatness in terms of humility and service to our people and country, of deeper compassion to those who seek to be understood, of more respect for ethnic cultures and religions in our country. May we all continue to be of service to the cause of lasting peace thru sustainable economic development.

*(As we are gathered in this historic Islamic City of Marawi, let me take this occasion to recognize a Maranao leader, young and idealistic like you are. His name is **DATU ELIAN ABDULRASHID MACALA**, or Elian to those who know him personally. Five years ago, when he was still at his 20's, Elian ventured into a Hybrid Rice Project in support of the Job Creation Program of Her Excellency President Arroyo. Simple and humble as the project was, it became a model of self-help, private initiative, that it was even visited by dignitaries including President Arroyo herself. The project's momentum was halted by certain sad realities, that our system is not perfect. But Mr. Macala had planted the seed in the heart of young Maranaos and leaders like himself, it will have its continuation in God's Own, Perfect Timing, hopefully soon. May the organizers of this event find Elian's story to be a valuable part of its courses for young leaders.)*

Thank you once again and Wassalamu-alaikum, God Bless all of us.

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