

SPEECH

Honor, Courage, and Storytelling in Difficult Times

Caroline S. Hau

Editor's introduction:

We are publishing below the speech by Professor Caroline S. Hau, PhD of Kyoto University, Japan and associate editor of this journal. The speech was delivered online during the 111th General Commencement Exercises of the University of the Philippines Diliman held last July 31, 2022 at the University Amphitheater. In her speech, Professor Hau reflects on the event's theme "dásig"—a Cebuano term which means "liveliness" and "determination."

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Mga miyembro ng lupon ng mga rehente, President Danilo Concepcion, mga opisyal ng UP system, Chancellor Fidel Nemenzo, mga bise-tsanselor, mga dekano at opisyal ng UP Diliman, mahal kong mga guro at kawani at, higit sa lahat, mahal na isko at iska at ang inyong mga minamahal sa buhay, at sa lahat ng nakikiisa sa pagdiriwang ng araw ng inyong pagtatapos, isang marubdob na pagbati, isang taos-pusong pagbati! Ipagpaumanhin po sana ninyo na hindi ko kayo makasama ng personal dahil sa paghihigpit sa paglalakbay sa panahong ito. Pinupuri ko ang inyong kahusayan, pagtitiyaga, at pagsusumikap upang matupad ang inyong pangarap sa kabila ng pandemya at ng kahirapan na inyong naranasan at dalamhati na inyong pinasan sa huling mga taon. Makabuluhan ang seremonya ng pagtatapos dahil isang pagkakataon ito upang pagnilayan natin hindi lamang ang ating buhay, gawain, at hangarin, kundi pati na rin ang ating nakaraan, kasalukuyan, at hinaharap, at ang mga hamon nito.

The theme of this year's graduation ceremony—the Cebuano keyword "dásig"—is very timely and fitting. Allow me to play your teacher just this once, today. As an adjective meaning lively, enthusiastic, spirited, "dásig" nicely describes *you*, our

new graduates. As a verb, it means to encourage and inspire. “Dasig lang” means to keep faith, take courage, stay strong and determined. Look up the phrase online and the sample sentence you get is “Bisa’g unsa pa kalisod sa panahon karon, dasig lang gyud ta” (“No matter how difficult these times are, don’t give up”). Turned into a noun, it means someone who inspires others, and also an advocate. In other words, *dásig* is not only a mark of one’s character. It is a signal, a declaration of intent and, just as important, a call to action.

To understand how much has changed, and what remains the same, let me give you an idea of what life had been like when I graduated from the UP as a member of the Class of 1990. I was three years old when Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. declared Martial Law. I entered UP three months after the People Power Revolution of 1986. To do research, my classmates and I relied on books and other printed materials, as well as oral interviews and on-site data gathering. We spent hours at the UP libraries and worked hard to earn the respect of our “terror teachers.” Our term papers were handwritten. We used manual typewriters and bottles of something called Liquid Paper for our theses. The only way to hang out with friends was face-to-face, preferably in a *tambayan* or under an acacia, within sight or hearing distance of a bulbul (the avian kind). On graduation day, we sweated under our togas and mortarboards. Telephone conversations were largely faceless and one-on-one unless the party line who shared your phone subscription butted in. Someone who spent hours on the phone was a *telebabad*. Long-distance calls were for emergencies only. Outdoors, one used public payphones. No cellphones, no internet, just some kudeta, the usual trapik, and plenty of Zsa Zsa Padilla and Gary Valenciano over the radio. (I lovingly dedicate their songs to your parents and professors.) The nanotechnology revolution was about a decade away. Sustained HIV remission, Dolly the cloned sheep, CRISPR DNA editing, brain-machine interface, synthetic life, mathematical proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem, the Large Hadron Collider, the first quantum computer, and the first direct evidence of the Big Bang cosmic explosion were more science fiction than reality, though for many Filipinos and for people in the developing world, all these may still seem like science fiction now.

If this sounds like something from the Dark Ages, well, I can tell you it was literally dark for hours at a time because of the brownouts caused by the power crunch. Our country had yet to recover from the economic and political crises of the first half of the 1980s and lagged behind our newly industrialized East Asian neighbors. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, which had a devastating impact on the lives, homes, and livelihoods of our Aeta, Kapampangan, and other kababayan, had other long-term consequences as well, leading to the closure of the Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, forming aerosol particles in the stratosphere, and cooling the earth’s surface temperature for about two years. The People’s Republic of China was still in the early stages of its reform and opening

up and had not yet replaced Japan as the workshop of the world, though within less than a decade, Mainland China would move to occupy Panganiban Reef. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 would leave Americans with the impression that, with the end of the Cold War, America was the world's only unchallenged superpower, and that nation-states would eventually become obsolete as the free flows and movements of people, goods, capital, ideas, and technology promoted by American-centered globalization would turn the world into a village or, better yet, a giant shopping mall.

Thirty-six years, fifty million more of us, two more EDSAs, seven presidents, more political marriages of convenience and break-ups than we care to remember, and emerging economy status later, we find something old, something new, something borrowed, and not much blue, just different shades of red, green, pink, and yellow. One important development is that nearly seventy percent of the Filipino population now have access to the internet. On average, Filipinos aged 16 to 64 years are connected to the internet for 10 hours and 27 minutes per day, whether for keeping in touch with loved ones, for socializing, for work, for news and information, or for listening to music or watching videos. Only South Africans spend more time online. Experts talk about the presentation of the self and about personal branding on social media. We are the *bida* in the stories we tell about ourselves and our world through texts and pictures, through art and song.

To be sure, storytelling is universal to human beings. What stories do *you* tell about yourself—your dreams, your goals and mission in life, your achievements and contributions, your legacy, what you want to be remembered by and for? We tell stories. We listen to other people's stories. We read, hear, and see stories in newspapers, on film and television, over the internet and social media. Stories can cut across academic disciplines, because they are a way of understanding and explaining how something happens (or not) and why. Physicists tell us stories of how our universe was created, a universe of quarks that come in flavors of charm and strange, truth and beauty. Biologists tell us stories of how life began and how we evolved into the human beings that we are now. Economists and political scientists tell stories, too, with plenty of plot twists, of how economies grow and mature, of the birth, rise, decline, and fall of cities, polities, kingdoms, empires, and nations.

Nation-making crucially depends on storytelling. For a long time, the stories told about our nation either excluded or paid less attention to a *lot* of people—*tao*, *masa*, women, Indigenous peoples, Muslims, ethnic-Chinese and South Asians, LGBTQ, *taong labas*, rebels, rural Filipinos, the poor, non-Christians, people living outside Manila, Filipinos living and working in other countries. Some of the gaps, silences, and omissions in our stories have been filled, but much more needs to be done to make the stories richer, more nuanced and relevant. What we remember and how we remember are subject to debate, as our understanding and explanations of the past are informed by our present concerns and open to reinterpretation,

depending on new findings and frameworks. Storytelling is in fact one of the ways by which people agree and, just as important, disagree with each other. The freedom to disagree, the openness to new ideas, experiences, and information, the capacity to revise our understanding of history, and most important, the willingness to make and change history have long been the hallmarks of a UP education.

The challenge we face today has to do with navigating the flood of information and dealing with the truth and consequences of the stories we tell about ourselves, our people, and our planet. The internet has been a boon and bane for storytelling. On the one hand, it has put people in touch with each other across vast distances. To some extent, the internet has democratized people's access to information and their ability to create and communicate their own stories. On the other hand, the internet can spread misinformation and disinformation far and wide. Communities that form around the stories that people make out of information both verified and unverified can end up as echo chambers and deepen political and social division.

This year, we commemorate two events of great importance to our history as a nation. On January 20 and February 17, we marked the 150th anniversary of the Cavite Mutiny and the execution of the Catholic priests Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora. Was the Cavite Mutiny a local mutiny of soldiers and workers or a wider conspiracy? Was the mutiny used by the Spanish friars to frame critics like Burgos? If Burgos was innocent of the charges of organizing the mutiny, then why were the real masterminds sentenced only to exile abroad rather than executed? (One intriguing answer to the last question is that the masterminds who planned the mutiny and the Governor-General who cracked down on it belonged to the same international fraternal organization of Freemasons.)

The other, more contentious event we remember this year is the 50th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law in September 1972. Was the declaration simply a means by which Marcos sought to remain in power beyond the maximum two terms in office? How are we to judge the achievements and failures of the Marcos era? Shouldn't Marcos be credited with the Golden Age of relative prosperity between 1972 and 1980? If so, what about the war in Mindanao, and what about the 1980s? Were the human rights violations committed under Marcos's watch just hearsay? Did the Marcos family's wealth come from Yamashita's treasure or was it largely ill-gotten? How much responsibility for the economic and political crises lay with Marcos and his family and cronies, and how much had to do with historical timing, external circumstances, bad policy advice, and faulty implementation?

And what exactly *was* EDSA? Was it a military revolt? a civilian-backed military putsch? a people's movement? a religious miracle? a US plot to remove Marcos? a mass insurrection? a revolt of the middle classes? a spontaneous uprising? Who are the *bida* of EDSA? Juan Ponce Enrile, Fidel Ramos, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, Jaime Cardinal Sin, Cory Aquino, the Virgin Mary, the Catholic Church, the business community, the middle classes, the Reagan administration?

Was the EDSA Yellow Revolution a revolution? Did the post-EDSA system's revolutionary potential fall short of people's hopes and expectations of more comprehensive, equitable change?

Last question: even as the events of 1872 and 1972 drove activists overseas or underground, to what extent did they inspire and embolden future generations of activists like Jose Rizal, for example, or the people who would go on to wage color revolutions around the world?

Whether you think the competing and conflicting narratives that have collected around these events are plausible or not is largely up to you, of course. Let me just point out that there is more at stake, intellectually and politically, in getting your facts and stories straight. How you, our new graduates, go about figuring things out for yourselves has an important bearing not only on your individual lives, but also on our country's present affairs and future prospects. This is not only because you are *iskolar ng bayan*. It is also because, as future leaders, whether intellectuals or public servants or entrepreneurs or professionals or community workers and activists or artists, you are expected to have a strong sense of social responsibility. Above all, you are expected to serve our country and people. Apolinario Mabini once wrote that "The frustrated Andres Bonifacio was wont to say when he was still alive that we should fear no one except History, and indeed History is implacable in doing justice, and its judgment is terrible against the offender." But when history can easily be falsified or distorted or forgotten, what kinds of stories you tell about our country, what purposes they serve, who benefits from these stories, and how you conduct your own lives based on their assumptions and worldviews—all these will have real consequences not only for yourselves and for your loved ones, but also for your fellow Filipinos.

I trust that your education in UP has equipped you intellectually with the skills necessary to conduct careful research, engage in logical reasoning and critical thinking, and work together with people from all walks of life. To weigh the evidence and tease out assumptions. To separate the pebbles of misinformation from the palay of evidence-based research. To not be afraid to question authority if people in positions of authority engage in questionable activities. To be prepared to question your own belief system and be open to new ideas and information. To find ways of reaching out to people, even those with whom you disagree, and not demonize each other.

I have every confidence that your time in UP has helped you nurture the qualities that give you the necessary strength of mind and force of character to lead a life of principle and purpose. The philosopher and environmentalist Aldo Leopold defined ethical behavior as "doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal." Don't just follow your *erpat* and *momshie*, your *kyah* and *achi*, your *beshie*, *barkada*, *lodi*, *kabiyak*, *jowa*, *padre*, *titser*, *pare*, *kumare*, or the people on Facebook, YouTube, Tiktok, Twitter,

WhatsApp. Listen to the inner voice that tells you, “Mali ito. Hindi ito makatwiran. Ano ang magagawa ko, ano ang magagawa natin, upang mapabuti ang kalagayan ng ating bansa?”

Making up your own mind can be scary. It’s so much easier to outsource decision-making to other people because, then, you won’t get trolled, you won’t put yourself or the safety of your loved ones at risk, and you don’t need to feel accountable or take responsibility for what happens next. To do the right thing, you will need cultural sensitivity, intellectual rigor, emotional intelligence, social tact, and a strong stomach. You need, in other words, *dásig*. Are you up to this challenge?

Sa araw ng inyong pagtatapos, maaasahan ninyo na saan man kayo pumaroon, sa anumang sulok ng ating kapuluan o sa ibayong dagat, nananahanan sa inyo ang diwa ng UP nating mahal—dangal, giting, tapang, husay, at pagmamalasakit—at kaakbay ninyo habambuhay ang pamayanang UP. Nawa’y manatiling malaya at malawak ang inyong mapanuring kaisipan at matatag ang inyong loob at paninindigan laban sa lahat ng uri ng karahasan at kawalang-katarungan. Bisa’g unsa pa kalisod sa panahon karon, dasig lang gyud ta. To the Class of Twenty twenty-two: Mabrouk and congratulations! Mabuhay tayong lahat, mabuhay ang Unibersidad ng Pilipinas, mabuhay ang sambayanang Pilipino, mabuhay ang Pilipinas! Daghang salamat at maayong buntag sa inyong tanan.

