

2

Behind the Scholar

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“How concrete everything becomes in the world of spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome, and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one’s entire life.”
(Bachelard 1994, 224)

Humans have the capacity to establish our presence everywhere we go. Human settlements, be they permanent or temporary, have made some mark in almost every part of the world throughout history. From a personal perspective, we always hear about finding our place or making our mark in this world. Buddhist teachings tell us that our primary purpose is to be here, and to be present. Whether we are working on finding a higher purpose or are just focused on being here and trying to improve our own lives and the world, we are making our mark.

I view the concept of Project DEAI: Cultivating A Place Together in the same light. The project is about three scholars at the early stages of our efforts to make our mark in Mindanao, Philippines. With the help of Dr. Waka Aoyama and Dr. Nelly Limbadan, this project enabled me to trace the origin of my initiatives, appreciate my achievements and contributions to research no matter how small, and lay down a path for future endeavors. This project is very personal as I attempt to open doors in my life in the hopes of showing the struggles and dreams of a Mindanaoan scholar just starting to embark on an exciting yet challenging journey.

The Person Behind the Scholar

I have always believed that the person we are today is not only a result of our past but also our decisions. Even our most traumatic experiences can make us better

persons if we use them as tools for the future. My past was not always favorable in some ways, and many would not choose my life for themselves. I was an illegitimate child who grew up with my grandparents. The experience allowed me to bond with my grandfather. He inspired and encouraged me to engage in community work. At the age of four, he taught me songs about Martial Law, the 1986 Edsa Revolution, and environmental and peace efforts. However, I did not appreciate this as a child. While my friends were learning nursery rhymes and watching Disney movies, I was learning socially engaged songs and watching updates on the war in Iraq, for example, which I did not even understand at the time.

My grandfather would also encourage me to participate in church activities. He thought it was an excellent way to get to know the people in our community and their roles in society. He was always busy, but he always found time to share stories about his childhood, like playing and growing up with their Bagobo¹ neighbors, his experiences during World War II as a soldier, and even his parents' life during the Japanese occupation. He also taught me Latin prayers and even tried to teach me basic Koine Greek. There is no denying that he was my first history teacher, a teacher



Photo of me during a coastal clean-up activity in Toril, Davao City, by the Department of Science and Technology.

1 The Bagobo are one of the ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao.



Sharing our research findings with the Municipal Health Officers from Bagumbayan, M'lang, and General Santos City in one of my community health related research projects.

who shared history based on personal experiences. However, I failed to appreciate it at the time and found his stories more personal rather than something that I could use academically later in life.

In one instance, I asked my grandfather why he was still serving the church and community when he could retire and even accept an offer to immigrate to the United States. With a stern look, he said, “to pay his sins and the sins of our ancestors.” He elaborated that his father was one of the Spaniards who took the lands of the Lumad². He also felt that he had blood on his hands as a soldier, even though he merely did his duty. He aimed to repay his community through community service.

The inspiration and example shown by my grandfather led me to join church organizations and civic volunteer groups. I also remember participating in protest rallies, such as against the reinstatement of the death penalty in our country when I was still in high school. The lessons my grandfather taught me about politics and critical thinking helped me when I completed my undergraduate major in Political Science and minor in Philosophy. Finally, I appreciated his stories about the Lumad when I started studying for my master’s degree in Anthropology. I regretted not asking for clarifications but was grateful that I had the opportunity to hear those stories.

2 Lumad is a Bisayan term for native or indigenous people.

Learning about the struggles of the indigenous people for self-determination, I understood why my grandfather wanted to recompense on behalf of our ancestors. Having the opportunity to hear their stories propelled me to advocate for them. The least that I could do is share their stories in various fora as much as possible.

The Experience Behind the Scholar

Aside from my ancestral roots, a significant life experience also shaped my advocacy. My experience of domestic abuse, being a teenage mother, the stigma that I had to endure in escaping my marriage, and continuing to survive in a culture with negative connotations of women separated from their husbands ignited my advocacy to support women. It was a traumatic experience that turned into self-discovery. It was a difficult journey, one that I am not proud of. However, I am pleased with what I have become and how that experience strengthened and shaped me as a woman.

Amidst the difficulty of raising two children, I was determined to obtain a degree, knowing that in addition to being able to find a better job to provide for my family, I wanted to show my children the importance of education. Despite having to work hard to maintain my grades for my scholarship and work simultaneously, I still managed to participate in clubs that promote gender awareness and advocate against violence against women in college.

My undergraduate thesis was about the implementation of the Women Development Code of Davao City, Philippines. My personal experience deepened my understanding of women and their struggles. In a country where colonizers impose a patriarchal society, Hilsdon (2009) articulated that being invisible is linked to the word 'woman'. In one of my papers, I added that being a woman and indigenous worsens matters even further.

This awareness was put into action when I volunteered as a community development worker for about a year with the Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association (LASIWWAI) in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato. I assisted the organization in submitting grant proposals and implementing various development projects. It was a tedious yet rewarding experience. Seeing the efforts of these indigenous women to rise from discrimination imposed by their culture was an inspiration that I carried with me going forward.



Photo opportunity with the T'boli Dreamweavers during my volunteer work with the Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association (LASIWWAI).

The Vision of the Scholar

We often measure the impact of a scholar on the number of published articles or the number of community organizations formed. While those are valid measurements and correlate with the achievements of a scholar, we also need to view them as people, as human beings with a personal history, challenges within their families and relationships, financial struggles, and even insecurities and mental health challenges. Project DEAI made that possible for me. It was a project that encouraged the humanity of the researcher to unfold without judgment or discrimination. It helped me trace the origin and reasons for my advocacy and simultaneously convey a clear vision of the future. True to its title, it cultivated a virtual home for us, a safe space where we could establish ties. For researchers who often work alone or with various research colleagues, connections and avenues like this project are essential for growth and self-discovery. This project may end, but it has impacted how I view myself and my vision for my work. Ultimately, this project has opened the door to my past and future.

References:

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Hilsdon, A. M. (2009). Invisible bodies: Gender, conflict, and peace in Mindanao. *Asian Studies Review*, 33(3), 349-365.