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SEN. EDGARDO J. ANGARA: Pointers from the statesman and intellectual

Mar 23, 2013 (Menafn - The Manila Times - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) --As he comes to the end of a remarkable 24 years in the Philippine Senate, the Honorable Edgardo Javier Angara finds himself in high spirits. One can actually liken him to a college kid who is ecstatic at the beginning of a basketball season, certain his team will finally win the elusive championship.

"I can feel it in the air--that vibrancy. The Philippines is definitely ready to take off," exclaimed the 78-year-old solon.

For a man who has practically devoted his entire life to public service, it is both moving and inspiring to see that his love for country and faith in the Filipino passionately endures--even after four long decades in the often stormy political arena.

"We are literally at a crossroads now for economic and social development," continued the patriot. "The momentum for growth is present, and it is really up to the leadership of this country to keep that momentum going."

While The Sunday Times Magazine originally sought to celebrate the pending legacy of Edgardo J. Angara in this cover story--the graduating senator who is famously touted as the only statesman of this generation to have authored and implemented the most far-ranging reforms (BizNews Asia)--what transpired during the interview was a timely series of pointers that every candidate in the upcoming elections would be fortunate to read and hopefully emulate.

Truly a public servant to his very core, the man whom another great senator, the late Honorable Blas Ople, declared as "a national living treasure" admirably takes every possible opportunity to help steer the country in the proper direction.

Angara continues to do so even when he deserves to take the limelight at this pinnacle of his storied political career, and take pride in the gratitude of countless Filipinos who have been given the right to education, healthcare and dignity in old age through his pivotal body of work.

Sense of service

The best starting point for a successful and meaningful career in government is to nurture a strong sense of service. For Sen. Angara, his earliest childhood recollection as the son of a town mayor--who also happened to be a practitioner along with his wife--was to wake up to crowds of people in the family's living room and yard, all in need of help.

"My parents were both nurses and dentists," related the sixth of a brood of ten children. "Since they were the first health professionals in Baler, they became the town's doctors, nurses, midwives and dentists all combined into one."

Instead of resenting the unusual set up of their home, the young Angara chose to embrace his parents' chosen way of life, which was to serve as many men, women and children as they can in their beloved province.

"That was where all of us [his siblings] got a strong sense of service to people, so that all of us took up service-oriented professions. Three of my sisters had their first jobs in the field of social work, [another] three in health, and two--my sister Bella and I--went into law."

Besides an altruistic attitude, another compelling ingredient in becoming an outstanding statesman is a

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genuine desire to be one.

"It was almost a precocious thought that from day one, I always knew I wanted to go into public service and be a leader of men. I don't know how I got that notion so early on, but that's also why

I was obsessed with just one profession--law," said one of the foremost Filipino luminaries of the field.

"Growing up, I had read and heard over and over that the great leaders of our country were great lawyers, so I also wanted to be one. I knew my path and I didn't deviate at all from that direction."

Angara, who secured his Bachelor of Laws at the University of the Philippines (UP) and Master of Law from the University of Michigan in the United States, eventually went on to become president of the Philippine Bar Association (1975), as well as the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (1979). He would also become a founder of the ACCRA Law Offices (1972), which continues to be one of the top legal firms in the country today.

Best mindset

It was in 1971 that the young and brilliant lawyer finally felt he was equipped to go into elective service. By then, he had also gained valuable experience working for the revered Ponce-Enrile Siguion-Reyna Montecillo & Belo Law Offices.

"My first attempt at elective office came in the Constitutional Convention of 1971," recalled Angara.

"I was pretty young then, and I represented the first district of Quezon, which is one of the biggest provinces of Luzon. It is the about three-fourths the length of the island, and I represented half of that."

An idealistic 36-year-old at the time, he confessed to The Sunday Times Magazine that he was turned off by his baptism of fire during the elections when he came across people who asked him for money.

"That was the source of my unhappiness; parang nawala yung idealism ko [my idealism waned]," he recalled. "I thought to myself, why are they doing this when the position of Con-Con delegate is non-salaried, non-patronage and supposedly non-partisan? So I said to myself at the end of my stint, 'I'm going to be a good lawyer and still continue to serve,' and that was when I organized ACCRA."

As his career flourished in the field of law, more and more sectors of society took notice of Angara's exceptional intellect and undeniable potential as a leader.

"I think [it was because of] my having acquired prominence as president of the Integrated Bar that I was asked to be president of UP [1981], which was entirely out of my career path. There, I kept the very mindset I've always had: To do the best in whatever job I'm asked to do."

Taking on this "best" mindset--a very basic, yet simple approach he encourages aspiring leaders to adopt--Angara revolutionized the state university. As the official chronicle of his presidency, At the Helm of UP, documented, "[His] administration's solutions to the university's problems [went] on record as unprecedented and unsurpassed," citing the introduction of a general educational program for all campuses, the institution of a seven-year honors medical curriculum, and the victory of obtaining fiscal autonomy as the most laudable reforms. (www.angaracentre.com)

Following the People Power Revolution in 1986, then President Corazon Aquino handpicked UP's hero to be part of her senatorial slate, and despite his previous disenchantment with elective positions, Angara did not turn his back on this call to service.

"I believe being a policy maker is the ultimate in public service because you can translate your ideas and ideals into the law of the land," he expounded. "And in effect, I think that's what can institute change in a country."

Wide and varied

The laws and reforms that Angara's four consecutive terms in the Senate were categorized by one newspaper as entitlements for the Filipino people "from womb to tomb."

Indeed, he has addressed the improvement of every aspect of a person's life--education, health and livelihood--as well as avenues that enrich and enhance the nation as a whole, including banking and finance, and arts and culture, among others.

"My interest is wide and varied. My initial, primary focus was on improving education because I came from UP, and so I put together all these educational reforms. That was post-Edsa, the first major overhaul of the educational system," he recounted.

"Then I moved on to health. After that it was food and agriculture--I was at the center of the move to modernize Philippine agriculture, and during my mandatory break I was appointed as Department of Agriculture secretary by former President Joseph Estrada," he touched on another prolific post in his political career.

"Then I moved on to financial reform, strengthening the capital market and our banking system; and then I went back to education, giving special attention to science and technology."

Angara took time to enumerate his advocacies in order to demonstrate that the key to being an effective policy maker is to understand that the Filipino's life is multifaceted, so that a leader cannot--and should

not--focus on a single specialization.

"A leader should always consider how to better everything," he emphasized. "Legislation should be comprehensive so that even the surrounding of a person will be made better."

And so with Angara's handiwork, Filipinos now have better access to education, with the Kindergarten Education Act; the Free High School Act; the Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education, which is the country's biggest scholarship program to date; and the institution of the Commission on Higher Education and the Technical Education and Skill Development Authority among others. (www.angaracentre.com)

He has greatly improved the Filipino's quality of life with the National Health Insurance Act that led to the creation of the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth); the Magna Carta for Public Health Workers; the Breastfeeding Act; the Generics Act; and the Senior Citizens Law, which is one of the country's most enduring laws on social welfare, as well as its succeeding expanded act. (www.angaracentre.com)

He has also stewarded Filipino talent and national pride as the author and sponsor of the laws creating the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, the new National Museum; and the Natatanging Manlilikha ng Bayan Award, the equivalent of the National Artist Award for Filipino folk and traditional artists. (www.angaracentre.com)

The list of Angara's accomplishments, not for himself, but for the Filipino people goes on, what with legislations even in the areas of agriculture; good governance; banking, finance and economic growth as a whole; science and technology; and information and communication technologies in this modern age.

No excuses

Granted that Angara is, without a doubt, one of the greatest minds this country has ever seen, The Sunday Times Magazine dared to ask how one man can gain such an astonishing amount of knowledge on practically every nook and cranny of human life, so that he was able to dramatically develop, reform and enrich them in his many capacities in government.

The intellectual simply and surprisingly replied, "I'm just a curious fellow. If you ask me what my distinctive trait is, it's curiosity. Lagi akong nagtatanong, nagbabasa [I always ask; I always read]. I am always eager to learn and to listen. Being curious has allowed my mind to be resilient, expansive and absorptive as well."

His advice to present and aspiring elective officials is to be "tolerant, understanding and open to new ideas."

Sound knowledge on any given problem or situation, according to the wisdom-filled statesman, will lead to the wellspring of solutions.

"Especially now that information at their fingertips because of the Internet, the younger generation of politicians have the power to change things because of technology. It's also why they are luckier than most of us because we are the generation who had to go to the library and lift hefty books to look up everything we needed to know. So they shouldn't have any excuses today," he added with a chuckle.

Angara further shared what he believes is the most valuable insight he has gained about the Filipino in his decades in public service: "The most important thing I've learned about the Filipinos is that they care very much about leadership. They respond to an enlightened leader. Filipinos are very passionate and idealistic despite the suffering and the hardship, so it is up to the leaders of today to keep that passion and idealism alive not just by their words but through their work."

Hopeful future

Even as the end of his fourth and final term in the Senate draws closer, life for the Honorable Edgardo J. Angara continues to be as hectic as the last 42 years. On the day of The Sunday Times Magazine's interview with the legendary legislator, the man hardly had a breather in between appointments.

Straight from meeting with Spanish envoys (Angara institutionalized the Philippine-Spanish Friendship Day Act and continues to be at the forefront of this diplomatic relations), he patiently sat down for this one-one-one, and hurried off to a speaking engagement at the end of the allocated hour. Different groups continue to clamor even for just a 15-minute speech of his wisdom.

"I will still be very active in public affairs," he said when asked about his plans following June 30.

"But it will be different model now because I was just recently elected president of the GOPAC [the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption], and that requires a little bit of traveling." The GOPAC is an organization of close to 500 active parliamentarians from 67 countries, and Angara's election to its leadership is the first not just for the Philippines but for the entire Asian region.

"But I will not be detached from domestic and national affairs," he also promised. "My connection will be sustained through the Angara Center for Law and Economics, which is [the first and only] Philippine policy and academic think-tank that is dedicated to the scientific analysis and international assessment of Philippine and regional legislation, policies and public sector programs."

Once outside the halls of the Senate, however, he can only hope that the new legislators--as well as the new executive leaders--will sincerely put country first, rather than personal reputations. He hopes they will not simply institute something new for the sake of laying claim to it.

"To build institutions, you don't knock down foundations started by others," he advised. "You build on these foundations if they're good."

He is therefore pleased that he often hears his son Rep. Juan Edgardo "Sonny" Angara of Aurora, who is now running for a Senate seat, dispel the necessity for reinventing the wheel, but rather encourage a generation of leadership that makes things better. His namesake has been taught well.

"No person ever leaves this earth and be able to say that I've done everything and achieved everything," said the senior Angara. "There are always unmet needs and goals that one always leaves, and it is the younger generation that can take on the advocacies that I have started in education, culture and the arts and science."

He was quick to add, however, that while he mentioned "unmet needs and goals," they are not a source of regret. "Overall, if you ask me, are you happy with your life at the end of your career in public service, yes, I will tell you I'm absolutely happy and satisfied, and at peace with myself, with my family, with the world.

"When I say, 'If I had more time, I could have done more,' it is an expression of hope for the future--a way of saying that I'm very optimistic for the Philippines."

Finally indulging to The Sunday Times Magazine's original objective of writing about his legacy, Angara disclosed that his greatest achievement in public service is this: "My life's work has upheld that innate sense of hope and optimism of the Filipinos by the kind of policies I've established in all the different aspects of their lives."

Optimism, based on the statesman's invaluable experience is a very powerful thing, especially in the life of the Filipino. It is what will always keep them going despite any odds.

Let us hope, that the country's next leaders will continue to nurture this intrinsic gift in us, just as brilliantly as the legendary man named Edgardo Javier Angara.

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