

May 3, 2004

Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Always a Filipino

My wife, Farida, and I left the Philippines for medical residency training in Chicago under the foreign student exchange program on December 31, 1962, about a year and a half after our graduation from medical school. I remember spending the New Year's eve aboard Northwest Airlines, mostly in a fetal position in our seats, uncomfortable and restless, trying very hard to sleep, as the other passengers (Americans, Europeans, and some Asians) were merrymaking, drinking champagne and toasting the old year out and the new year in. We were very tired, sleepy and emotionally worn out from the crying, from the sadness of parting with the family, and from the anxiety of "leaving home" for a destination half around the world for the first time, uncertain of what the future would bring.

But thank God, five children later (which was nine years of surgical residency training and a cardiac surgery Fellowship at the Texas Heart Institute for me and four years of Pediatric residency, two at Cook County Hospital, for Farida), we braved the competitive medical practice arena in Munster, Northwest Indiana, about 8 miles south of Chicago, Illinois. We were very lucky: the timing of the initiation of our professional career was perfect. Our private practice was at the prime during the golden era of medical practice in the United States, thanks to the support and confidence of our American and fellow Asians peers.

Most Asian physicians in the United States are specialists and super-specialists, because, unlike their American colleagues in training, the Asians, especially Filipino physicians, have the continued support of their parents back in the Philippines when needed. Most of the American medical students are self-supporting and compelled economically to finish shorter residency training to start earning money to pay for their student loans, etc. This is the Asian Advantage.

Since 1997, I have been traveling every other month from the United States to Cebu, where my team of cardiac surgeons and I perform heart surgeries. And I feel very much at home coming back much like during the formative years of my life while I was growing up in San Francisco del Monte, Quezon City. Coming home has always been, and continues to be, a most pleasant and rewarding journey for me, in spite of the fact that I have been in the United States for more than 40 years. And also in spite of the corrupt politicians running the country, the resultant plunging economy, the swarming beggars on the street, the terribly hot and humid weather,

and the aggravating paralyzing traffic in most metropolitan areas of the country, etc.

Anyway, the personal scenario I related above is only a preface, a necessary introduction, to the important issue I wish to highlight in my column today.

Something is bothering me. As a Filipino-American, I feel a sense of nausea and national disgrace to note that some of my compatriots in the United States, who have gained US citizenship, feel that they are now Americans, and no longer Filipinos. These fellow pinoyos I am referring to even exaggerate their “diction,” using more slangs and curse words than the native Americans themselves, and appear to be ashamed of their Filipino heritage.

When I was president of the Association of Philippine Physicians in America (APPA) in 1986, I spearheaded the largest Christmas homecoming of physicians ever during our grand convention at the Manila Hotel (and medical missions in the barrios). President Cory Aquino, Vice President Doy Laurel and then AFP Chief Fidel Ramos were our guest speakers. This yearly Christmas trek home and medical missions in the various provinces have been a tradition since.

Farida and I were aboard the Philippine Airlines at the Ninoy International Airport in Manila, preparing to depart for the United States, following one of these annual visits, when we heard a woman (a Filipino who obviously was an American citizen) angrily and loudly cursing the “terrible hot weather,” the “stupid traffic” and “the shameless and annoying beggars” on the streets of Manila. Before seating down, she continued her tirade on everything wrong with the Philippines, and then said, “I should not have come to this country; I’ll never come back!”

Seated about 4 rows in front of her, I was furious, trying to hold my temper. Farida was likewise brewing inside. What did she mean by “this country”? Couldn’t she have said “home,” or “the Philippines”? She must have really succeeded in deluding herself into thinking that she was a full-blooded American! A pitiful travesty!

Sensing that I wanted to stand up and give a piece of my mind to the unhappy “American,” Farida placed her arm on top of mine against my armrest and looked at me and whispered not too silently, “Don’t! Hwag mong patulan ang loka-lokang yan (Don’t go down to the level of that crazy woman).”

I was about to rise and say (calmly but as sarcastically as I could): “Yes, ma’am, you should not have come to this ‘terrible’ country, and thanks for your promise not to come back, ever.”

To break the overly serious tone of my discussion here, I wish to relate a joke relevant to this particular phenomenon of self-perception on the part of some of the

Filipino immigrants in America that the US citizenship given them has instantly and totally erased in them everything that is Filipino, and has transformed them into a pure white American --- body, blood, and soul. What a tragedy!

Anyway, the joke I heard went like this: A Filipino US citizen, who had been in United States for five years, went home to his province to visit his parents. During lunch in their modest home, he asked his father, “Papa, please pass the “few toh” (meaning puto, “poo-to”). Never hearing his son talk to him in English before, nor addressing him as “Papa,” and pronouncing the word “puto” with an exaggerated American slang, the father, who was very annoyed with his son, barked back, “Anak ka ng few-ta, limang taon ka lang sa America eh dina-daig mo pa ang Americano.”

This may sound funny, or even corny, but the essence of the joke underscores a serious and shameful reality among some of our compatriots abroad. Fortunately, the majority of the Filipinos all around the world have remained loyal to our roots, to our culture and heritage. And this is what it ought to be! How can we, in good conscience, forsake and abandon our blood mother simply because she is poor and ill, and cling to our adopted mother because she is wealthy and well?

I am proud to be a Filipino and I love my native land. While I also adore my adopted home, the United States of America, which has been wonderful to me all these years, and to which country and people I am most grateful, I still feel deep inside me that, although I am an American citizen, I am not really an American. I am a Filipino and I shall die a Filipino. I have no qualms, ambivalence or psychological conflict with that reality, and I truly have pride and peace within. Even my American friends and patients understand, respect, and admire such loyalty to one’s homeland.

I am not defending or making excuses for the sad state of the Philippines and my fellow Filipinos at home, either. I am not saying my native home is perfect or heaven, and that there is nothing wrong with it. I can list at least a hundred things that could be better in my beloved Pilipinas, but these are imperfections that I would like to help improve and not to curse the whole country and its people for. After all, the economic, social, environmental and political ills in the country today are “endowments” from generations of corrupt politicians, the trapos that we voted into office, time after time after time. To paraphrase a great someone, “Let us not curse the darkness; instead, let us light a candle.” This coming national election, exactly a week from today, I challenge everyone within the reach of my voice today, and those within the reach of yours tomorrow, to light a bright national candle with our ballots and get rid of the ugly darkness of corruption amidst us once and for all.

And to those confused compatriots of ours all around the world, I have but one advice: when you wake up each morning, instead of counting your dollars, stand before a mirror and look at the image staring back at you. If you see a tall, blonde,

blue-eyed, anglo-saxon before you, especially one with a swollen head, a terrible attitude, and a big mouth, its time for you to see a psychiatrist for delusion of grandeur and identity crisis. Or, a plastic surgeon for skin replacement, a hematologist for total blood exchange, a cardiac surgeon for a heart transplant, and a neurosurgeon for a brain transplant. (In the United States, I would not be surprised if these four specialists turn out to be Filipinos.)

After those “transformation surgeries,” you can proclaim to the world to your heart’s content that alas you are an American, and not a Filipino anymore. But mind you, even then, I still would not allow you to insult my people and my country.

Philip S. Chua, M.D. is Surgeon Emeritus in Northwest Indiana, where he practiced cardiovascular surgery from 1972 to 2001 and is currently Chairman of Cardiovascular Surgery of Cebu Cardiovascular Center, Cebu Doctors' Hospital, Cebu City, Philippines. He is past president of the Association of Philippine Physicians in America and the Society of Philippine Surgeons in America. Presently, he is also Vice President-Asia, Cardiovascular Hospitals of America, a Kansas-based an international conglomerate of cardiovascular centers around the world.