

Everyone Dreams: Everyday Humans, Everyday Heroes and Everyday Lawyers

The ability to dream is where liberty and prosperity and prosperity. How these dreams are realized is through the rule of law.

To have a dream is costly. Juan, whose father is unjustly detained on false drug charges and whose mother is a *labandera*, has no time for this. At the age of nine, he has to sell *sampaguita* along the streets of Quiapo together with his seven siblings. His clothes are tattered. He is drenched in the rain. His stomach is grumbling. A dream will not buy him new clothes nor give him shelter nor fill his stomach.

But every *sampaguita* sold will. Perhaps tomorrow – when his clothes are clean, when he has a roof to protect him and when there is food on the table – he can dream. For today, he still has to work double time or else Pedro will sell more *sampaguitas* than him.

To Juan, dreaming to be a lawyer one day so that he could help those similarly situated as his father is a waste of time. To Juan and Pedro, having food on the table is already a dream when it is, in fact, a need.

Yes, it is a cliché and it is a shame that such a story is a cliché. The story of Juan has become a mainstay in all poverty-themed documentary and news feature in media today.

Multiply Juan to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people chained to poverty. We cannot blame them. We cannot say that they should have still dreamed of a better life. They do not have the privilege that many others have – the privilege of knowing that when you wake up, there will be food to eat, and clean clothes to wear, and a home to come back to.

Some have broken the chains of poverty through determination, hard work or, sometimes, sheer luck. Yet still, a vast majority of the poor remain chained to poverty because of the deeply-rooted absence, nay, adulteration of the rule of law as it trickles down to those in the peripheries of our social spectrum.

While many in the legal profession have a role in this desolate reality, many still have the opportunity to transform this reality. This is done when lawyers have

a deep and critical understanding for the rule of law and how it bridges the dream of the people for liberty and prosperity.

DREAMS UNDER THE RULE OF LAW

How can something so unrestricted as a dream be achieved through something which appears to be so rigid like the rule of law? The rule of law plays three roles in the dreams of people.

The rule of law is an instrument. It must free the people from the oppressive force of poverty. More than that, the rule of law should also ensure that the people remain free to dream and to achieve their dreams.

The rule of law is a process. It should be there every step of the way. It should not only give freedom but also cover this freedom with a protective mantle that ensures that the freedom it has given will not be lost.

The rule of law is a goal. Through its constant and authentic application, the rule of law must obtain for the people a shared dream of liberty and prosperity.

This is what liberty and prosperity under the rule of law means for me – that the people, poor or rich, are free to dream and to achieve their dreams. One does not need to defer his dreams to be an astronaut or a painter just because there is no food to eat for today.

Retired Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban exemplified this in one striking enumeration: justice and jobs; freedom and food; ethics and economics; democracy and development; nay, liberty and prosperity must always go together.

To me, liberty and prosperity meet when humanity is as hungry for freedom as he is for food. Liberty and prosperity meet when the people stop living for survival alone and start realizing their dreams for a dignified life.

While poverty should not limit one's ability to dream, it surely has an impact on how much of his dreams can he achieve. Poverty is a chain, not a jail. The poor are bound, not imprisoned.

It is now incumbent upon the workers in the field of law – especially lawyers – to ensure that these people are detached from these chains. And, what better weapon to use than that which we have studied and worked hard for: the rule of law.

The rule of law should be our gift, as legal professionals, to the “least, last and lost”. We should ensure that it exists in the delivery of basic social services, in the equalization of opportunities to employment, in the protection of the environment, in the promotion of business, in the administration of healthcare, in the enforcement of the criminal justice system, in the enjoyment of human rights and in many other aspects of human life.

With the gift of the rule of law, we are giving the poor not only a better economic situation but also a more dignified life. We are not only freeing them from the chains of poverty but also giving them the necessary tools to achieve their dreams.

In the pursuit of achieving their dreams, we are somehow giving them value in that we recognize their innate ability to better themselves and change their situation.

Over the years working as an accountant, I have come to realize that people put worth to the things they value the most. People value health so they put worth to doctors and other medical workers. People value safety so they put worth to policemen and military. People value homes so they put worth to engineers and architects. People value money so they put worth to their accountants. Also, people value their dignity and rights so they put value to their lawyers.

This is why we should make the likes of Juan realize their value – that they can and they will achieve their dreams.

The poor, too, possess the potential for prosperity. The rule of law must provide them with the opportunity to realize their true worth – that they are not burdens of the government but partners in improving the nation, as a whole.

It is with this realization that CJ Artemio Panganiban struck my core when he placed his belief in the collective ingenuity of our people. I also believe in the collective genius of our people, especially in our untapped human resource found in poor and marginalized sectors of society.

In a seminar I attended, I learned that the poor have given birth to ideas that changed the corporate world. Where else did the industry of “*tingi-tingi*” come from but from the collective genius of the poor? This is now a major strategic consideration of many big corporations involved in the production and packaging of

goods. Where else did the ubiquitous run-to shop known as the “*sari-sari store*” come from? Not from the subdivisions of Forbes Park but from the *eskinitas* of Tondo.

The collective genius of the poor is our way out of poverty. Our role as legal professionals is not only to empower them to dream but also to enable them to achieve their dreams through the rule of law.

This is my dream not only for the poor. This is my dream for the legal profession – one where lawyers work in partnership with other sectors of society to ensure that everyone receives good quality education, a modern healthcare system, job opportunities and security, full enjoyment of their civil rights, and many others.

To me, the legal profession is not a grand institution which cements lawyers on a pedestal on which no true change can be done. I refuse to think of lawyers as intellectuals – this tends to put the profession in an ivory tower, disconnected with the realities of the people who need them most. I believe that the legal profession demands respect not because of its grandeur or sophistication. It demands respect because of its humanity.

I believe that lawyering is a profession of humanity.

TO LAWYER FOR HUMANITY

I have dreamed becoming a lawyer ever since I was young drawing inspiration from my father. He runs a small office near our city’s public market, where his neighbours include a storage room for a *wagwagan*, a vendor of *tsinelas*, and banana dealers. While I was working as an auditor in Makati that time, I thought to myself that when I become a lawyer, I will work in a big law firm and become one of its partners. My father would always encourage me to be bigger than he is.

So when I asked him for advice on what I should do when I start my law school, my father told me a story of why he never left the *palengke*.

His parents were both public market vendors. He himself was a public market vendor while he was studying for law and depended on the scholarships he would get from the school. He has been fighting for the public market vendors’ right to their stalls and to their livelihood since he first became a lawyer. Back then, he would get paid in bananas and beans and rice and meat. For all intents and purposes, he was

a *palengke* boy. He never complained. It was him, giving back to the community that nurtured him to what he is now.

Realizing this, I have made an unpopular decision. I returned to Baguio City, where I would now take up my law degree while working as an accountant. I realized that this is the lawyering I want for myself – along the narrow streets of the city that nurtured me and among the simple life of the people I grew up with. It is in the home where the lawyering begins.

I envision my legal work to be in Baguio City. Aside from a private practice of law, I want to teach in law school and be able to imbibe in the students the values of safeguarding liberty and ensuring prosperity as they practice of law. As we have learned in school, law is practiced everywhere – in the private sector, in the government, in the big corporations, in small alleys, in homes.

Law, as a profession, affects every part of our lives. Every lawyer can have an impact somewhere, somehow in someone's life. This inspires me a lot.

Imagine if this impact would be one of securing justice and the rule of law no matter what the lawyer may be doing. Through teaching, we want to make more lawyers who work to bring liberty and prosperity to humanity under the rule of law, one community at a time.

The legal education we wish to forward will not only be limited to making brilliant and benevolent lawyers. Our vision is to have communities that know the law and follow the rule of law as a way of humanizing the legal profession – one where lawyers are both officers of the court and workers of the community.

Ultimately, humanity is in the community and the community is where I plan to bring my lawyering to.

If our plans push through, we want to establish a localized consultative community watchdog or legal policy research center that involves the different sectors of society in the decision-making of the government agencies, non-government organizations and the private sector. As a way of giving back, we will employ underprivileged but deserving law students in this center so that they can support their legal education while working for the community. The policy research center will run public awareness campaigns on progress-oriented projects which are culturally-sensitive to the local heritage of the City of Baguio in both its legal and developmental aspects.

With our accounting and law background, we will endeavour to teach tax literacy and regulatory compliance for small businesses in the public market and sari-sari stores. In the future, we may even include other topics such as business development or social entrepreneurship. Someday, we will reach out to far-flung areas and educate them of opportunities for economic growth along with their legal rights.

The plan is still rough, but this is our dream budding in our minds. Having a dream is the first step in bringing something to reality.

As a student, I personally strive hard to study well along with keeping up with the demands of my job. Because I am financially supporting myself in my legal education, I value every centavo I pay to the school so I try to learn as much as I can in every course I enrol in. This will be in preparation of the Bar and my future law practice.

Aside from work and studying law, I am also currently involved in leadership training seminars and formation programs for young people in the Cordilleras as an officer of an organization of the Outstanding Students of the Cordillera Administrative Region (OSCAR), and in our Church where I serve as the youth director. Through these activities, I strive to contribute to the overall human development in my community.

EVERYONE DREAMS

I continue to feel the pressure of having been named BANOAR: the Ilocano term for “Hero”. When I was young, there was this expectation of doing some great heroic deed that would etch my name somewhere in the annals of history. As I grew older, I began to understand that I was meant for smaller heroic deeds, one that would put me somewhere in the memory of Juan and his family. Ultimately, heroism is a discipline cultivated day by day.

Liberty and prosperity, too, grow everyday under the rule of law through the heroism of legal professionals, both humble and grand. The seeds of liberty and prosperity are planted and nurtured through the rule of law until they bloom into a dignified life for all of humanity. We, as workers of the law, have this power to make Juan’s story as an exception rather than a cliché. Humanity, after all,

This dream is yet only poetic – one for the literary books. One day, I will make it into reality – one for the history books.