

## **Public Lives**

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### **The instinct for honesty**

I've sometimes wondered why "corruption" is the word used for acts of dishonesty committed by people in positions of trust. Corruption means debasement, decay, deterioration, weakening. These terms are usually applied to metal and, in particular, to living matter. So, what is it that decays, deteriorates, or weakens in corrupt people?

Is it morality? Virtue? But these are notions that change over time. I think that what corruption signifies when applied to human behavior is the weakening of instincts, in this case, the instinct for honesty. On this simple instinct depends many of our social institutions. Instincts are sources of energy, and corruption is "energy in decline."

The phrase comes from Nietzsche, who wrote: "For there to be institutions there must be a kind of will, instinct, imperative, which is anti-liberal to the point of malice: the will to tradition, to authority, to centuries of responsibility to come, the will to solidarity of generational chains stretching forwards and backwards in infinitum." When a person violates the trust that is lodged in his social role in a moment of opportunism, he weakens the institutional chain of which he is a vital link.

It is in this sense that one might explain the harshness with which US Army authorities at the Infantry School in Fort Benning treated 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Rolly A. Joaquin after he was caught switching the discount tags for merchandise at the school's commissary. The misdeed involves the glorious sum of 50 cents. That was what Lt. Joaquin, the brightest of his Philippine Military Academy class, stood to gain. In the context of Fort Benning's jealously protected institutional pride, dishonesty is not defined by the amount of money that is stolen. It is defined by the act itself – the breach of trust. Ambassador Ramon J. Farolan, himself a former military man, made a similar point in a previous column on this page.

It is a point that is largely forgotten in today's world, where the gravity of an act is typically reduced by referring to the material insignificance of what is gained or taken. We know it is against the rules – it is not supposed to be done – but since the value is petty, it is therefore not really wrong. This mode of reasoning is only one step removed from other common techniques of neutralization, such as: “The value is small compared to what the government or the company earns,” “I am entitled to it because I have paid for it,” “No one gets hurt,” “Everyone is doing it anyway,” or “The rules are stupid.”

The other day, after I spoke at a teachers' congress, somebody slipped me a note about high officials in state universities and colleges who abuse their privileges by habitually filling up their private vehicles with gasoline paid for by the government. The practice, I'm afraid, is as rampant as the unauthorized use of public vehicles for personal purposes. Petty as they may seem compared to large-scale graft, such practices constitute the model for more serious offenses in the bureaucracy.

What is this model? Even if we know it is wrong, we do it anyway because it is easy, and because it would be stupid not to do it. We don't even have to summon willfulness to do it. All that is needed is weakness, a lack of self-esteem and pride. Similarly, we do what is right not out of a sense of duty, or conviction, or instinct, but simply out of fear or lack of opportunity to do otherwise. These are symptoms of a culture in decline.

Natural calamities may often challenge our will to live, but if they don't kill us, we might emerge from them stronger and more united. But corruption is something else. Its danger is insidious. It weakens the whole community and its effects are passed on across generations. In this sense, the fury of a thousand typhoons is nothing compared to the demoralization and cynicism that corruption in the military has brought upon the nation.

Discipline and duty are the hallmarks of the armed forces. No other institution draws its purpose more from the nation than the military. Thus, when the rotteness in the armed forces is exposed, what does this signify for the nation? It can only mean we have hit the limit, beyond which we cannot go further without calling into question the

nation's very reason for being. At that point, we would do our people and the world a great favor if our leaders openly admitted failure and allowed the United Nations to supervise our affairs.

Although many of our people are leaving this country in desperation, I refuse to think we have already crossed the line in our seemingly irresistible drift towards decay. Yet the current situation is urgent enough to warrant a close examination of what the crisis of our institutions is telling us.

To my mind, it is warning us of the exhaustion of the sense of responsibility for the future. This is manifest in the growing inability of our young people to identify with anything worthy beyond themselves and their families. The Filipino nation as a collective undertaking seems so remote from their everyday concerns. National pride has become passé. For many, there is hardly anything left in which to anchor a sense of personal honesty.

In times like these, heroic figures with immense energy usually come forward to revive the flagging spirits of a people. The slightest most accidental stimulus can often bring them out, says Nietzsche. I think we need not wait for a Filipino Napoleon to get us out of the doldrums. The power of consistent example in daily life by those whose instinct for honesty remains strong should turn the tide.

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