

THE HEAVENS OPEN

Like many other Americans who watched the peaceful revolution in the Philippines in 1986 on CNN, I was spellbound. When “People Power” was born, many of us felt a mysterious hope for the rest of the world. Watching a housewife like Cory Aquino become a president was truly inspiring. Her courageous invitation for Americans to help her fragile country touched my heart. Before I knew it, I was on a journey that changed my life.

When I arrived in 1987, the Philippines was a magical place. Everyone was eager to share their moment in history. Each taxi ride became a history lesson, enlivened with examples of extraordinary courage, determination, and faith such as I saw everywhere I went.

For almost twenty years, Filipinos had agonized as President Marcos sold their country’s soul to the highest bidder. But when Ninoy Aquino, their imprisoned hero, was assassinated, they’d had enough. Prominent Filipino women started talking with their friends and gathering facts about the corruption, greed, and deception drowning their country. They persuaded their influential husbands to turn their economic power against Marcos. With the strength of their numbers they chipped away at the status quo. In the process, they risked their personal comfort and security, their marriages, their families, and even their lives. Every day for three years, they prayed for a better future, and in February 1986 their prayers were answered.

At first it looked as if the Philippine Revolution would be a bloodbath, with all the soldiers, guns, and tanks around. Marcos cut off communication with the outside world. The people were terrified, but a local radio announcer coaxed them to join together in Manila's streets, and for one day, these frightened souls became an army. Teenagers put their bodies in front of tanks, befriended the soldiers, and placed flowers in their guns. Singing, "All we are saying, is give peace a chance," they rekindled the spirit of the sixties, showing how to make love, not war—slowly, gently.

For nearly a year, I worked alongside these Filipinos. One of my greatest teachers was Marietta Goco. A tall, strong woman from a privileged family, she had a generous spirit, a clever mind, and a deep commitment to making the system work for those less fortunate than herself. She used her political savvy to build bridges between poor villagers and global funders.

Marietta took me under her wing and introduced me to her world. Each day we'd meet with those who were planning the country's future. We traveled together to some of the seven thousand Philippine islands—listening to business, government, and community leaders as well as farmers, educators, and laborers. Each night we shared with each other the lessons we were learning.

One of the toughest lessons was the cost of ignoring a problem. Twenty years of Marcos's greedy rule had left the country in shambles. UNICEF's report on malnutrition in the Philippines woke the international community to the country's crisis, shocking the global funders who'd thought that their millions were improving life for the

poor. Their refusal to continue funding the deceptive Marcos dictatorship helped topple it, but \$28 million in debt was strangling any hope for the future of the Filipinos. The gap between the haves and the have-nots had grown to an impassable chasm. Almost half of all Filipino families were destitute. Unless they resolved this inequity, it was clear that their newfound peace would be short-lived.

People told us they were euphoric about bringing down Marcos, but they were angry with the destruction left behind. Many were excited by the opportunity to rebuild their country's democracy but feared an unknown future. Some were in despair, questioning whether the revolution had been worth it. Having been united against a common enemy, some were lost without one. Through all this uncertainty, though, we heard a common refrain: People wanted a better life for their children, and a lasting peace.

One night, Marietta awoke as if from a deep sleep. "My father used to tell me about *Bayanihan*, one of our traditional Filipino values," she told me. "To help me understand, he used to tell me stories about people called Bayani, or heroes, who worked together for the common good. What made them special was their willingness to think of others instead of themselves, to perform a kind of selfless service." She remembered, "My father told me that *Bayanihan* gave people the courage to face their fears, stand up for their convictions, and make choices that bettered their family, community, and the world."

As Marietta reflected on her father's words, she said, "Over the years, we've forgotten about the importance of working together for the common good. If we're ever going to create lasting peace in the

Philippines, we'd better remind our people—and teach our children—about *Bayanihan*.”

Indeed, over the next ten years, I saw that the Philippine Revolution inspired others to find peaceful ways to freedom in Poland, Russia, South Africa, and Berlin.

After Cory Aquino's close friend and ally Fidel Ramos was elected president, he asked Marietta to develop a plan to decrease poverty by 10 percent in five years. She drew on *Bayanihan* to rally her countrymen to make this goal their own. Each citizen personalized a plan to meet his or her own basic needs and help rebuild the country. People quit smoking and learned how to read or be a better father. They took care of their neighbors and ran for local government.

At first it wasn't easy. As Marietta's deputy, Chukie, remembers, “Over the last twenty years, people had forgotten the basic goodness of Filipinos. But after a while, Marietta's sincerity touched people's hearts. It was like coming home. She helped you remember your own goodness.” And people—six million of them in just five years—in turn helped Marietta reach her goal. Her program became the heart of the Philippines' social and economic recovery. On his last day of office, President Ramos awarded Marietta with the Order of the Golden Heart, similar to being knighted in Britain.

Today, Marietta works with the poorest Filipinos through the Sambayanihan Foundation's micro-enterprise initiatives. “Our security initiative includes military as well as human and ecological security,” she explains. “If we are to be successful, the heart of our antiterrorism strategy must be an antipoverty program—so people have basic human

needs—and hope for their future.”

Marietta continues to open people’s eyes to what can happen when we empower people to change their lives. As a true *Bayani*, Marietta muses, “It’s not that I want to do this: I just can’t do anything but this. It becomes a choiceless choice—a calling. And once you make the decision, the heavens open.”

Bayanihan, it’s the goodness in every Filipino.

Bayanihan, each one helping each other.

Bayanihan, let’s learn to give and take.

Bayanihan, this is the hope for our country.

JIM PARADES

If you would like to learn more about this *Bayanihan* spirit and the Sambayanihan Foundation, e-mail Marietta Goco at mariettagoco@yahoo.com.