

Seeing by Insight

*Commencement speech addressed to the graduating class of the John Gokongwei School of Management and the School of Science and Engineering, Ateneo de Manila University, as delivered by **Roselle R. Ambubuyog** on Friday, 25 May 2018, 4:00PM, at the Ateneo High School Covered Courts.*

Mr. Ernesto Tanmantiong, President Fr. Jose Ramon Villarin, Fr. Bienvenido Nebres who was the university president when I was an undergraduate, Dr. Maria Luz Vilches, Fr. Nemesio Que who was OAA director for three of my four years as an ASPAC scholar, Dr. Evangeline Bautista who was one of my math tormentors (I mean, mentors!), Dr. Luis Dumlao, Dr. Jonathan Chua, Dr. Fernando Aldaba, members of the Board of Trustees, the university administration, faculty and staff, proud (and relieved) parents, family members and friends, and above all, the graduating class of 2018 – good afternoon, and thank you for the honor of being here to share this momentous occasion with you.

Twenty-one years ago, a totally blind girl had no desire to study in the Ateneo, no aspiration to major in Mathematics, and no ambition to graduate with honors. Today, she is – I am – standing before you as a proud alumna of this great institution of excellence and service.

Now, I would like to take a slightly different approach in this commencement speech. Instead of sharing stories interspersed with ‘nuggets of wisdom’, I would like to tell you my story first, let you take from it what you deem is worth remembering, and then conclude with the insights I gained living this story. I believe that parts of it would resonate with you, even if you are not blind. As I said in my valedictory address in 2001, all of us experience some form of disability, mine is just more obvious than yours.

By my final year in high school, I was determined to study only in a university where the blind can graduate without being subjected to discrimination and prejudice. I decided that the Ateneo would not be the school for me when I learned that they have never had a blind student, unlike the University of the Philippines and the University of Santo Tomas. Those two were the only choices for me. My high school, however, encouraged their Top Ten to apply with all leading universities. I agreed to take the Ateneo College Entrance Test, in spite of my misgivings, and did not even bother with De La Salle University’s entrance exam. (Now why am I not surprised you think that’s funny?)

A couple of weeks before schools started posting their entrance test results, the Ateneo’s Office of Admission and Aid requested me to meet with their director then, Dr. Manuel Dy, Jr. He informed me that I passed the ACET and could study for any degree I desired with a full scholarship. He admitted they knew I applied with UP and UST, and that they were confident I would also pass their admission tests because, he pointed out, “Our entrance exam is much

harder than theirs, and you did very well in the ACET,” so they wanted to convince me to choose the Ateneo before the other schools got in touch with me.

He also told me that the president, Fr. Ben, wanted me to consider majoring in Mathematics, which was not among the course options I indicated in my application. I told them I was not sure I could handle all the visual aspects of math (the graphs, charts and geometric illustrations). I was amazed when he said that they had already done some research into this and they were ready to purchase special equipment for producing materials in Braille and tactile format.

I made no rash decisions, promised that I would think about their offer, and left that meeting still convinced that either UP or UST would be a better choice for me. Two weeks later, I learned that I was one of the top fifty who qualified for the UP Oblation Scholarship that year. Shortly after that, UST was letting me know they would match whatever the Ateneo was offering in terms of scholarship and special equipment, would pay for a sighted companion to assist me around the campus, would give me a private room to stay in during breaks, and would provide free hospitalization and eye surgery upon request. My parents did not pressure me to choose one school over the others. In fact, my dad, who was a consultant working on seismic instrumentation for PHIVOLCS, asked for advice from his colleagues – some of whom were UP and UST alumni, but none were Ateneans – as to which school I should pick. And every single one of them said, “Ateneo!”

For days, I prayed for discernment and guidance, but rather than giving me an answer, I felt like God kept throwing these questions at me: What difference would it make for the disability community if I choose UP or UST when their doors are already open to the blind? If I turn my back on the opportunity the Ateneo was giving me, how long would it take for another person with any kind of disability to get the same offer? In the end, it just felt wrong, irresponsible, cowardly, and ungrateful not to choose the Ateneo. And since I knew I was already taking a gamble, I went all in and enrolled as a Math major.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned in the Ateneo happened early on, in my freshman year, with Dr. Flordeliza Francisco and Math 21. She informed me that my pre-Finals grade was a B+, high enough that I could choose not to take the final exam unless I wanted to try raising that B+ to an A. I assured her I was happy with the B+, even though I was not, especially as I was confident of getting As in all my other classes that term. She told me to give myself some time to think about it. Intrigued that she seemed to be urging me not to give up so easily, I asked what was the score I needed in the final exam for that A, and she said, “189 out of 200.” As you know, a single question in a math test could be worth 20 points, so this meant I could answer all but one problem correctly and it might still not be enough. I took the finals and got an A! Much later, I found out that I scored 196 in that test; the 4-point deduction was for forgetting to indicate a hollow point on a graph. Yes, I still remember that! Dr. Francisco was a tough mentor, but also one of the best I had. That was the first of the five terms when I got straight As, and that A was only one of the 49 I got – yes, I also remember that number as it annoyed me that I did not make it a nice round 50. That A meant more than the rest though, not because I worked hard for it, but because I almost missed it, had it not been for a teacher who cared enough to make me remember why I should always commit myself to excellence and never settle for ‘good enough’.

My fear that teachers would be discriminatory, condescending or indifferent towards a disabled student did not become a reality. They knew I wanted to make the most out of my time in the Ateneo so they did not exempt me from doing Chemistry and Physics laboratory work on my own. They allowed modifications like when my father stuck Braille labels on lab equipment I could use, or when I brought modeling clay and bendable wires to create rather than draw 3-D representations of molecular geometry.

There was some preliminary discussion about exempting me from Physical Education. Then, one registration day, they found me in the queue signing up for fencing. They said, "Please, not fencing! You might accidentally kill your instructor!" My dad, who was accompanying me that day, said, "That's what I told her when she asked first if there's a class in archery!" NO worries – I did Ballroom Dancing that term and the instructor survived to give me an A.

Students, on the other hand, took a while to get used to having a blind classmate. Someone who became a friend only in my third year told me that he initially resented my taking tests in the same room and on the same schedule as the rest of the class. Apparently, since I was writing my answers in Braille (which means punching small holes into paper with a pointed stylus), I was, in his words, "Making noise that distracted others taking the test." When he grew accustomed to this sound, however, he admitted I was motivating him to study harder for the exams, saying, "When I no longer hear you making any sound, I realize you're done with the six-problem math test, but I'm still stuck on number 3!"

I suppose the other students saw me as a bit of an oddity, simply because they did not know how to relate to someone with a disability. There were some who thought I would be offended if they used words like 'see' and 'look', until I pointed out that it would sound sordid if, instead of saying, "I'm looking forward to seeing you again," they would hit me with, "I'm feeling forward to touching you again." Others, fascinated to hear me talk about the latest film releases, were curious enough to ask me to go with them when they see a movie one weekend... so off we went! I could sense how nervous and awkward they felt, especially when the ticket lady asked if I was joining them. To break the tension and remind everyone how I could still enjoy the movie despite being blind, I replied, "Yes, I'm with them, but maybe you could charge me just half the ticket price, since I will only get the audio and not the visual experience." I explained to my new friends that they could help me 'watch' the film by describing whatever is happening and whoever is speaking. They gamely told me everything in excruciating detail, getting louder and more excited, particularly while describing the fight sequences and love scenes. We had lots of fun, and I think that was also when they began seeing me in a new perspective – as someone with special needs but who was normal after all.

When it came to joining student organizations and my extracurricular activities, I chose a different path. It started when The Ateneo asked me to meet with young people – children, mainly – who lost their eyesight due to cancer, kidney disease or some other cause, and to help them and their families cope with their altered circumstances. I realized then that I wanted to do activities where my being blind was significant. I worked with organizations outside the Ateneo to train blind high school and college students in the use of specially adapted technologies. I also did some advocacy work, speaking to parents of blind children about sending them to school, and

to other school administrators and even to small business owners who had questions about teaching or hiring the disabled. Most of these personal projects were not linked with any student group in the Ateneo, however. There were people then, not knowing about these projects, who criticized me for being part of only a few student organizations and activities, when I was selected class valedictorian.

I was not aware that graduating seniors were invited to vote for whom they wanted to be their valedictorian, so I was surprised when I was asked to submit my credentials and an essay on a topic I cannot recall anymore. When I heard that it was possible to opt out of the screening process, I decided not to submit the requested documents. One evening, I received a phone call from then Associate Dean of Student Affairs, Mr. Rene Salvador San Andres, who told me they were waiting for me to hand in my papers. Not wishing to be difficult, I finally did as asked, and even showed up for the interview with the Committee on Standards.

I found out later that not only did I get most of the student votes, but that one of the candidates interviewed – a fellow Summa Cum Laude graduate, from the School of Humanities – submitted an essay not on the designated topic but one titled, “Why I Think Roselle Ambubuyog Should be Class Valedictorian”. This person whom I had never met during our four years in the Ateneo, gave up the chance to be the class valedictorian herself, and made me see how foolish my reluctance was in this matter. In a conversation with Dr. Queena Lee-Chua – to whom I will always be grateful for teaching me more than just Probability Theory and Statistics – I confessed that I did not want people to think I was selected to be valedictorian because my blindness made me seem special. She assured me that I deserved this distinction for what I have achieved, and advised me not to underrate the inspiration I have given the Ateneo community for there was much that people can learn from my story.

I hope she was right. Much of this speech is a testimonial because I wish to encourage you to do what I have just done: to look back at your life in the last four or five years, and discover the experiences, the people, the insights, the choices that brought you to this point today, and then reflect on how all of these have prepared you for the life and challenges ahead.

I was sure I wanted a career in Actuarial Science and was pursuing a graduate degree in that field when again, God made me see that He had other plans for me. I received a job offer from the Vice President of Software Engineering at Freedom Scientific. They are a US company based in Florida, and the leading developer of both software and hardware products designed to help people with reading-related challenges such as blindness, low vision, and dyslexia. By this time, I had received several offers to work for multinational and local companies, but this one piqued my interest because of what they wanted me to do and why they were asking me to do it.

One of the most important products they make is called a screen reader. It is a software application that conveys what text and nontextual information are displayed on the screen to a user who is unable to see or read. This is done through text-to-speech output, or as Braille dots simulated using round-tipped pins that are raised or lowered through holes on the flat surface of Braille displays. It is not the same as virtual assistants like Apple’s Siri or Microsoft’s Cortana. Through keyboard operation or touchscreen gestures, a blind user can do a whole lot more with a

screen reader. What they hired me to do was to provide the design specifications of a screen reader that can speak and focus on different parts of math and science notations. In other words, my first job needed me specifically because I am both blind and a math graduate. I left Actuarial Science for what some refer to as the Access Technology field, a specialized part of the IT industry.

Over the years, I have worked on other projects and for other Access Tech companies abroad, all from the comfort of my home. I have helped develop screen readers for smartphones on different platforms, apps that identify or describe what can be seen in photos, and talking GPS navigation apps that provide pedestrian routes for the blind. Among our customers are blind celebrities like the multi-talented musician Stevie Wonder, the operatic tenor Andrea Bocelli, and the intrepid mountaineer Erik Weihenmayer who climbed the world's Seven Summits. However, what gives me the sense that I am accomplishing something worthwhile and deserving of the passion I put into my work is the appreciation from ordinary people whose lives have improved drastically because of our products.

There is the blind, deaf and mute girl whose multiple disabilities made it impossible for her to use a mobile phone and communicate with most people, until I designed the Braille interface for the mobile screen readers produced by Code Factory of Barcelona, Spain. She now has several friends and is on social media. There are the soldiers blinded in the war in Afghanistan who, despite all the psychotherapy sessions, only regained their hope when they were trained to use computers again with our products. There are also the people who were delighted by the color recognition app we made initially just to give blind people some use out of their smartphone's camera. It turned out that this app, which would describe the colors of an object after a picture is taken, enabled them to sort the contents of their closets or cupboards without sighted assistance. These days, we have image recognition apps that can do more for the blind, namely, identify the coins and banknotes of different currencies, read printed texts like on street signs and book covers, and describe people and scenery. I have discovered that such apps quite inadvertently have a sense of humor sometimes. When I ran the photos of my pet dogs through one, it correctly identified the breeds of my Golden Retriever, Yellow Labrador, and Rottweiler. But when I showed it the picture of an Askal/Aspin mongrel, I swear it seemed to hesitate for a second before tactfully saying, "Brown dog."

Incidentally, I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to consider donating your laptops and mobile devices to blind people, especially students, when you are ready to replace them with a graduation gift or the new gadgets that would come with your first job. I mention this because I realize that blind people would not be your first choice of beneficiaries if you suppose they are unable to use regular technology. Well, there are now free, open-source and even built-in screen readers for Windows, MacOS, Linux, Android and iOS, so be assured that blind Filipinos will find much use for your old stuff.

I would like to spend the last part of my speech satisfying those who are still asking, "So where are the nuggets of wisdom we expect to hear in a typical commencement speech?" There are a few points I would like to expound on a little, insights that have given me a deeper understanding of life, that I hope would help you 'see' your way better in the years to come.

1. "Man proposes, but God disposes."

I think the Book of Proverbs explains this best with the verse: "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." (Prv. 16:9 – NRSV-CE) I am not saying that we should forget about free will and just wait for the Lord to shove us towards wherever He wants us to go. Remember that God has designs for each of us that may not be immediately evident. His reasons and plans were certainly not obvious to me when I lost my eyesight at the tender age of six, nevertheless, I now have more to be grateful for than to complain about.

As you make your own plans for the future, have faith in divine providence. Even if some of your efforts lead to a disappointing outcome, trust that the Lord's purpose for that part of your life has been fulfilled, and learn what you can from that experience to gain more wisdom, courage, and strength.

2. Value significance over success.

As you stand at the threshold of your life after the Ateneo, you have dreams of success. Everyone expects you to succeed in whatever you undertake – you are Ateneans after all, and this university's reputation will always precede you. And, of course, there is nothing wrong with success and wanting it. Just remember that living your life purely for success can leave you vulnerable to the fear of failing sooner or later, and of feeling unfulfilled in spite of all you have attained.

When I decided to study in the Ateneo, I took a risk, and when the Ateneo welcomed me as their first blind student, they took a risk. Our choices were not based on a certainty of success, but on the possibility of significance. Promise yourself now that whatever happens, you will strive to live a life that matters and is worth emulating.

3. Do not let your vision become a mere delusion.

A speech to graduates invariably includes a mention of 'vision', more so, I believe, if the speaker is blind. Yes, I am blind, not 'vision-impaired' which sounds delusional, or even 'visually impaired' which I suspect is a euphemistic way of calling someone ugly. Seriously though, this is my vision: A better world for people with disabilities built on the foundation of equal opportunity, innovative technology, and a compassionate, inclusive society. Does it sound realistic enough not to be considered a delusion? Yes, a world like that definitely took shape on a smaller scale in the Ateneo from 1997 to 2001.

A vision becomes just a delusion when you are no longer focused and passionate for it. Set goals that establish a clear direction to this end, uphold core values in every action and decision, and do not allow yourself to be distracted or disheartened.

4. Face adversity with fortitude and gratitude.

Meeting challenges head on with fortitude, which for me means courage plus endurance, needs no explanation, I believe. But what does gratitude have to do with it?

One of the first things my blindness has taught me is to be grateful and not take for granted who and what I have in my life. When I would have wallowed in denial and misery, gratitude that I only lost my sight and not my life or loved ones taught me acceptance and perseverance. When people's prejudice and discrimination could have turned me into a person full of hatred and self-pity, gratitude for the love and support of my family taught me forgiveness and resilience. Therefore: Fortitude + Gratitude = a Winning Attitude.

Always take time to be grateful, , letting your thanks flow from your hearts as well as from your lips, for your parents, mentors and, if you are one of the 381 graduating scholars, your benefactors – for what the Ateneo as a whole has done for you. Speaking of which... Thank you, Fr. Ben, for recommending B.S. Math for me and trusting I would fit well in the Ateneo. Thank you to all my teachers, especially those in the Math Department (Dr. Catherine Vistro-Yu and the others). Thank you to the Ateneo Schools Parents Council for my scholarship, and to Dr. Dy, Fr. Nemy and the OAA staff for taking good care of us scholars. Thank you to my parents and brothers for everything. When, in future, you find yourself going against seemingly insurmountable odds, recall how these people did not give up on you and how much you owe it to them not to give up either.

5. Hope is your sight, not the light, in the dark.

I often hear hope being compared to that spark of light you see in times of darkness, as though hope was something elusive outside of us, to be sought desperately. My experiences have taught me that hope is the ability to see there is light despite the darkness. That means despair and the temptation to give up stem from the inability to see in the dark of life.

I read that in the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country, mental health experts say that each day, at least six persons end their own lives, and there are more and more suicides among children and teens. Dr. Queena, who also teaches Psychology here, tells me that even the Ateneo, with many kids from privileged families, is also concerned with a disturbing increase in the number of students with suicidal tendencies needing counsel.

Let me tell you something... My life as a blind person has never been easy, and it got harder when in February of last year, my father whom you have heard me mention a number of times as I shared my story, died from an accident that occurred within the safety of our home. Not only has my faith in God's plan and benevolence been shaken, but the resilience that has kept me bouncing back from every adversity throughout the years has been tested repeatedly in the last 15 months and 12 days. The pain of losing him is far worse than the pain I felt when I lost my eyesight.

When I got off that phone call from the Ateneo asking me if I could be this year's commencement speaker, the first thing I did wasn't to tell my mom the news, or to freak out over what to say in my speech. It was to burst into tears, because my dad was no longer around to see this day come. He loved the Ateneo, you know, possibly more than I ever had, since he didn't have to prepare for Philosophy oral exams. He did not actually stay with me in class, but he did drive me to school each day, went into the library to read for me if I needed to do some research, and picked me up at the end of my class hours, whatever time of the day that happened to be. Admin and faculty members here today who have been around since the late 90s can attest to this, that Papa was seen a lot in the Ateneo. Some even suggested – jokingly or not, I don't know – that he should have received a diploma as well when I graduated. And if I am counting the years correctly, I think I gave a talk to EN10 freshman students about four years ago, so some of you must have seen him, too, since he always went with me to my speaking engagements.

Just as my father taught me not to let my blindness destroy my life, I will not let the disability of hopelessness – this spiritual blindness – ruin me. If you ever find yourself dealing with this kind of disability, have faith that there is light to see, push your way through the pain, look to others for support, harbour gratitude, and hold on.

Well, I do not wish to end on that sad note, so please bear with me for one last insight.

6. Desire to inspire, and serve without reserve.

Never underestimate your capacity to inspire and be inspired. You do not need to be extraordinary people or perform extraordinary feats of heroism. You can inspire as ordinary people who are willing and ready to do what is right, just and good extraordinarily well. But with the way things are going in this country now, am I asking you for miracles. Perhaps... The deafblind author and inspirational speaker Helen Keller once said, "When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another."

Giving inspiration can come in different forms, but the most guaranteed way will always be through service. A commencement speech given in the Ateneo will not be complete without exhorting the graduates to continue being men and women for others. I ask you to be of service wholeheartedly and not to define limits on what you can do or whom you can serve. Commit to excellence in service and don't settle for "good enough".

When I ask for the light of God's guiding wisdom, more often than not, He leaves me with questions to find the answers in my heart. So, I leave you now with a question: If a blind person can do all this, accomplish everything you heard this afternoon, just imagine... How much more can you, who are not blind, achieve?

I wish you all the best, dear graduates. Congratulations and may God bless you always!