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# Parable of the talents:

## The University of Santo Tomas, Crossroad of history and creativity\*

Allan B. De Guzman, Ph.D.

University of Santo Tomas, Graduate School

*“We are leaving the Knowledge Age and entering the Innovation age where the students of today will experience more new inventions in their lifetime than all the discoveries from the recorded history to the present. We are on the crest of the wave of a tsunami of accelerating change.”*

**Rodney Culver Hill (2007)**  
**Institute for Applied Creativity, Texas A & M University**

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### Introduction

The late Dr. Norberto de Ramos (2000) in his book, *I walked with twelve Rectors*, averred that “UST may be old, but definitely, it is not aging. In the Filipino idiomatic expression, we normally utter the words “*kalabaw lang ang tumatanda*” Hence, we may ask the following dialectical questions: *Sino ba ang matanda? Ano ba ang matanda? Sino ang nagsabing matanda na tayo? Paano ba ang tumanda? Paano na kung matanda na tayo? May pinagkatandaan nga batayo? E, ano ngayon kung matanda?* The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said: “One cannot bathe in the same river twice.” Indeed the environment in which we live is in a continuous state of flux. Our 400-year-old UST is a clear-cut example of an institution that has courageously and faithfully withstood the challenges of change and continuity.

Various social, economic, cultural, technological, political and ethico-moral developments taking place in our internal and external environments have challenged our being and existence and have shaped our collective identity as a university. Through the years, we have become part of a chaotic world in which human reason continues to struggle in order to

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find a place. And even up to this point, continuous and more aggressive efforts are being initiated and implemented at both macro and micro levels with a view to incarnating meaning in our being as part of a classical university like UST. Regardless of our years of service in this institution, have we ever been bothered by the following perennial questions: Why do we hold the annual opening of classes via the *misa de apertura*? Why do we elect a new rector every after four years? Why do we have to change our deans? Why do we revise our curricula? Why do we raise our tuition? Why do we upgrade our library collections? Why are we looking for new service and partner communities? Why do we conduct research and other scientific undertakings? Why do we bargain collectively for our social and economic lives as faculty members and employees? Why do we promote our faculty members? Why are some faculty members get retained in their current academic rank while others get terminated? Why do we encourage teachers and employees to engage in professional-development activities? Why do we challenge our students to excel in their fields? Why do we establish networks and linkages with the alumni, the industry, and any other stakeholders? Why do we conduct annual assessment and strategic planning? Why do we give teachers new academic preparations and assignments? These are some of the endless questions that bring us to the idea of the inevitability and permanence of change, which is considered as the real point of establishing equilibrium in any dynamic and learning organization. Had it not been for this constant

questioning, we will not be able to reach our 400 years as an academic institution. Our gift of questioning facilitated our collective actions and decisions. Our actions and decisions helped us shape our history as a university. Our history is our present-day memory. Our individual and collective memories inspire us to meet the challenges of the future with great anticipation and certainty.

### **The University of Santo Tomas as Mirror of the Parable of the Talents**

On November 28, 2010, two months before the university's quadricentennial celebration, *The Guardian*, which is the British national daily newspaper, reported that an anti-aging therapy is now on its way. Harvard scientists claim to be a step closer to reversing the aging process after rejuvenating worn-out organs in elderly mice. The experimental treatment developed by researchers at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard Medical School, turned weak and feeble old mice into healthy animals by regenerating their aged bodies. The surprise recovery of the animals has raised hopes among scientists that it may be possible to achieve a similar feat in humans – or at least to slow down the aging process.

Such a great and promising news may pose several policy imperatives or implications for institutions like UST, especially on matters that relate to planning for faculty retirement, benefits, assignments and loading, among others. While such a therapy may seem a proximate possibility or a concrete reality, are we bothered by the increasing number of aging administrators, faculty members and

employees, aging structures, aging curricula, aging politics and policies, and aging symbols and practices in the University? Is aging for us a natural human phenomenon? Is aging for us a dynamic process? Is aging for us a gift of time and space? Is aging for us a journey or a destiny? Does aging for us hold threats or promises? Have we become more optimistic or pessimistic as we age in this institution? Have we experienced aging gracefully and without any regrets? Have we actually realized the price and the prize of aging? Is our old age something to celebrate?

On January 27, 2012, we gracefully and joyfully celebrated our 401 year of unending grace. Although we were awed and fascinated by the 19th century atmosphere of UST through the *Velada Tomasina*, followed by the sea of pastel colors during the 40,000 voices for UST's 400 and the 10-minute multiposition pyrotechnic lights, one may deeply reflect on what we actually celebrated when we ushered in the University to its neocentennial year. Was it UST's age or UST's aging? Was it UST's history or UST's creativity? What then does our history mirror? What then does our creativity as an institution reflect?

Through the years, the University has assumed various faces; it has undergone several phases and has evidenced a number of paces. Similar to a mirror, the University has become an authentic and dynamic "reflecting surface that forms an image of an object when light rays coming from that object fall upon the surface." At times, we look like a plane

mirror that is flat and reflects light without changing the image. At one point, we resemble like that of a convex mirror where objects look bigger in the center. There were times we were like a concave mirror whose bowl shape renders objects to look smaller in the center. And in another time, we tend to play a concave parabolic mirror that typifies how a reflecting telescope operates. Our overall tendency to assume various mirror types speaks of the richness and thickness of our history and how it informs our contemplative moves, decisions, and actions as an evolving university.

The University of Santo Tomas is a melting pot of plurality and multiplicity of talents. These talents were honed and nurtured by both time and space. UST's dynamics has been constantly inspired by a common philosophy and values and the intersection of reflective thinking and practices coupled with a high a degree of openness to change. The constellation of talents in the university has collectively paved the way for observable behaviors to be evidenced, behavioral strategies to be implemented, mindsets to live by, mental models to follow, and paradigms to adopt. By and large, our collective talents in the University are frames through which we determine our focus and directions. These frames also serve as our institutional enablers that help us capitalize on our strengths, improve on our weaknesses and limitations, and concretize our long- and medium-term plans reflective of a proactive vision, dynamic mission, and contagious passion.

Our talents as a University are not born overnight. Such talents are by-products of long years of self-examination, passion for learning, deep reflection, risk-taking behavior, openness to change and possibilities, and engagement for and with others. Our individual and collective talents are our ways to incarnate life to what Bruno Latour termed as differentiation (1987) where change initiatives are not considered as ready-made science but rather science in the making. The development of our collective talents and capacities may be best viewed from Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal's Frame Analysis (2008). The extent to which talents in this University have been identified, developed, maximized, assessed, and aligned is based on structural, human-resource, political, and symbolic frames, which, in this discourse, are viewed and interpreted as gifts. The same gifts are to be used whenever we reframe our institutional thinking, values, and practices.

#### **A. UST's Structural Gift**

Similar to a factory or machine working for efficiency and effectiveness, this gift has perennially challenged the University to successfully formulate sound rules, goals, and policies and at the same time, develop clear-cut and well-defined roles, technology, and environment that promote an ethic of excellence in all the institution's processes and undertakings with a view to nurturing a sense of authorship among various sectors in the University. Leadership in this frame is

viewed as a social architecture where the challenge lies on aligning structure to tasks, technology, and environment.

#### **B. UST's Human Resource Gift**

Inspired by the ethic of caring, this gift has prompted us to dynamically look at the University as a family where needs, skills, and relationships are met, developed, nurtured, and established in the context of empowerment-driven leadership. Love, as a leadership contribution, is experienced because of aligned organizational and human needs.

#### **C. UST's Political Gift**

The University, though viewed as a jungle faced by a mixture of risks, certainties, and uncertainties vis-à-vis the polarity in disciplinary perspectives and orientations, has consistently harmonized our efforts in developing clear-cut agenda and powerbase that describe an advocacy with a view to enabling people experience power coupled with an ethic of justice.

#### **D. UST's Symbolic Gift**

Similar to a carnival, temple, and theater, the University has collectively formed and observed various portraits of meaningful ceremonies, rituals, traditions, stories, and heroes. Driven by leadership by inspiration, the said cultural practices fostered faith and significance to administrators, faculty, students,

employees, alumni, and other sectors within and outside the University.

### **Developing Creativity as the New Academic Orthodoxy**

The four gifts of structure, human resource, politics, and symbols that the University has developed, enjoyed, and shared for the past four centuries give us the *raison d'être* not only to celebrate but to constantly evolve as an institution as well. The German word *dasein*, which means to be here and there, serves as a clarion or wake-up call of who we are and what we can possibly be in the years to come as a University. Today, more than ever, the core values of competence, commitment, and compassion need to thrive in ecology where our individual and collective efforts are geared toward the creation of more problem space. This space is a mental representation of a problem that contains knowledge of the initial state and the goal state of the problem as well as possible intermediate states that must be searched in order to link up the beginning and the end of the task. Thanks for the gift of our five senses. As the doors and windows of our intellect, our senses continue to enable us to recognize and identify problem situations. The more we make use of our senses, the more problems we spot. The more problems we recognize, the more goals we set for this institution. The more goals we set, the more we are challenged to be creative and innovative in all our undertakings.

The neo centennial celebration of the University is a form of extraordinary expectation. As the biblical statement puts it: "To whom much is given, much is expected." Alarming, Paul Tinari (2001 as cited in Hill, 2007), in his speech to the World Future Society, averred that "the university will be the least prepared to prepare individuals for a world of change" (p.1). Hammond (2007), in his book *The World in 2030*, outlined six key drivers of change, namely: (1) world population explosion and changing societal demographics; (2) climate change and the environment; (3) the looming energy crisis; (4) expanding globalization; (5) accelerating, exponential technology development; and (6) the prevent-extend model in medicine. Considering the said inescapable changes, are today's universities aggressive enough to transform themselves into creative institutions? What programmatic reform agenda are being crafted and pursued by today's universities? Are these reforms products of universities' intelligent use of their backsight, hindsight, and foresight? Do universities have a well-defined educational platform that nurtures a culture of creativity? The Filipino idiomatic expression "*ang hipong natutulog ay natatangay ng agos*" may give today's universities the reason to back out from the race and evaporate from the surface of the earth. Lundt and Wiles (2004 as cited by Hill, 2007) added that "despite constantly accelerating social and technological change, the paradigm of education has remained essentially static"(p.1). As Rodney Hill of Texas A & M University observed: "We are leaving the Knowledge Age and entering the Innovation

Age where students of today will experience more new inventions in their lifetime than all the discoveries from the recorded history to the present. We are on the crest of the wave of a tsunami of accelerating change” (p.2). Rainie in 2006 shared: “In the life of a typical 21 year old entering the workforce today has, on the average, included 5000 hours of video game playing, exchange 250,000 emails, instant messages, and phone text messages, 10,000 hours of mobile phone use. Add to that 3,500 hours of time online: (p.1).

Our rich and long years of encounter with the past should enable us to aggressively and proactively confront the future with great creativity. Across disciplines, creativity has been defined and interpreted in various ways. Sociologists termed it as innovation, while businessmen equate it with entrepreneurship. The fields of education and psychology, for their part, consider creativity not only as a quality found in exceptional individuals but also as an essential life skill, which needs to be fostered from the early years onward. Today, more than ever, learning outcomes should be at the core of higher education. The success of our mission as a University entails both internal integration and external adaptation mechanisms. Internally, we are bound to embrace a unique pedagogy that underscores quality teaching and learning. The uniqueness of our pedagogy depends in great measure on the kind of innovation taking place in all the internal processes of our educational delivery services. Interestingly, our institutional mission challenges us to implement policies

and observe practices that promote access, affordability, and accountability.

Notably, Teresa Amabile (1999) of Harvard Business School once averred: “While we don’t’ kill creativity on purpose, but in pursuit of productivity, efficiency, and control, all worthy business imperatives are undermined.”Hence, if we mean business in education, then creativity should be the language of our actions and decisions. The revival of the UST Office for Research and Development which banners a new and aggressive name of Office for Research Innovation (ORI), the launching of the first multidisciplinary "Innovation Challenge" called NEOVATION by the Research Center for Applied and Natural Sciences, the inclusion of the Traditional Filipino Arts in the Fine Arts curriculum by the College of Fine Arts and Design, the internationalization program of the UST Graduate School, among others speak of the University’s long term thrust for dramatic alteration or disruptive innovation as seen in the kind of roles we assume, rules we implement, and relationships we establish. If today’s universities were to survive, then creativity should be the core of our reform agenda. As Hill (2007) succinctly puts it: “If universities are not developing knowledge creators, are they prepared to go out of business?” (p.3). In a highly creative academic and research milieu, there should be no room for Matthew effect, where the “poor become poorer and the rich become richer.” The challenge to nurture creativity in the overall educational delivery platform of any university

can be best mirrored in what Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the author of the *Little Prince*, aptly described “If you want to build a ship, don’t round up men to get wood, to perform jobs and to divide the work, but teach them the desire for the wide and endless sea.” In other words, creativity should provide all stakeholders with equal, respectful, and exceptional opportunities.

The changing educational landscape in the country, specifically the implementation of the K to 12 system of education and the increasing interest for outcomes-based teaching and learning platform, has situated our schools, colleges, and universities in a sea of changes, challenges, and possibilities. Historically, systems of education across the globe have anchored their best thinking and practice on theories of psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, and philosophy. In recent years, the tendency of educational systems to gradually embrace, adopt, and adapt some of the business concepts and processes is gaining grounds in academic literature which include Total Quality Management, benchmarking, asset optimization, merging, knowledge management, data mining, ISO Certification, performance-based assessment, zero-based budgeting, and McDonaldization, among others.

In an environment fueled by technology and where knowledge is considered as a major resource, universities are bound to dedicate their curricular and cocurricular efforts toward addressing students’ appetite for knowledge production and not simply

consumption. As LaDuke (2004, cited in Hill, 2007:3) posits, “the person that cannot create and produce knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be destined to live with the equivalency of a 20<sup>th</sup> century minimum wage. While our students are being armed with the knowledge of the past and present, they are expected to create the future in return. Our academic curriculum, research-program centrepiece, and community-development component are vibrant and valuable means in making creativity as the language of teaching and learning. By and large, institutional creativity should be geared toward an ecology of difference and a universe for survival. Simply stated, creativity as a new academic orthodoxy should transcend institutional service-delivery platforms.

## Conclusion

As we start a new and creative academic year, it is safe to claim that history and creativity can comfortably coexist in our midst as a University. As history informs our actions and decisions, our passion for creativity shall reform and transform all our educational efforts. Our gifts of structure, human resource, politics, and symbols speak of UST’s parable of the talents. Our judicious and conscious use of these talents will bring the University into what Johansson’s The Medici Effect calls as the Intersection—a place where wildly different ideas bump into each other and build upon each other. In the words of Johansson (2004):

*For most of us, the best chance to innovate lies at the Intersection. Not only do we have a greater*

*chance of finding remarkable idea combinations there, we will also find many more of them....The explosion of remarkable ideas is what happened in Florence during the Renaissance, and it suggests something very important. If we can just reach an intersection of disciplines or cultures, we will have a greater chance of innovating, simply because there are so many unusual ideas to go around. (p.20)*

As we continue to intersect our expertise, creative thinking skills, and motivation, being the building blocks of creativity, we can expectedly witness and enjoy a University where historicity, religiosity, and creativity define our true identity as a classical university. While the issue of an aging university or aged university becomes negligible, the irony of aging remains the same “as a child, he hears but does not listen. Now he listens but does not hear.”

The truism of the said irony may be typified by some sectors in the University who remain complacent about changes in their environment and who are satisfied with the status quo and are open to become fossils in the university museum.

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## **About the Author**

### **Prof. Dr. Allan B. de Guzman**

He handles pedagogy, management, and research courses at both graduate and undergraduate levels in the University of Santo Tomas. As a prolific writer in educational policy studies, adult learning, and teacher education, he has extensively published a total of 115 articles in various ISI-listed journals and, at the same time, serves as editor, board member, and reviewer in international journals. He has received various prestigious awards such as the 2007 SEAMEO-JASPER Research Award given by the Government of Canada and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), the 2006 National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP)-Department of Science and Technology (DOST) Achievement Award, 2014 Australian Awards Fellowship, and the 2011 Metrobank Foundation Search Most Outstanding Teacher Award in Higher Education, among others. In an article published in the *Journal of Scientometrics* (91:2012: pp 277-294, Springer, The Netherlands), Dr. de Guzman has been identified as the most productive and one of the most cited researchers in the fields of education and psychology in the Philippines. As a researcher, he pioneered in 2001 the introduction of the Thesis-by-Article style in the country—an innovation that has contributed much in the UST ranking in the QS Top 200 Universities in Asia. At present, he is a research fellow of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Regional Centre for Innovation Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH).