

This Deep Pierian Spring

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This Deep Pierian Spring:

*An Account of the Human
Quest for Meaning*

By

M.F. Sia and S. Sia

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Publishing



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To

THE PEOPLE OF TACLOBAN AND GUIUAN

In solidarity and in admiration

and

ALL THOSE WHO

“DANCED WITH THEM AMIDST THE STORM”

In gratitude

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.”
—Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism, Part II”

“A poor life this is if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.”
—W. H. Davies, “Leisure”

“Calamities (*huo*) are what blessings depend on,
In blessings are latent calamities (*huo*).
Who knows where is the starting point (*chi*)?
—*Tao te Ching* Book 58

“Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth.”
—*Ecclesiastes*, 6:11-12; 7:1

“Your purpose in life is to find purpose and give your whole heart and soul to it.”
—The Buddha

“Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence.”
—Victor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*

“The question of whether life has meaning, of whether our individual lives make any real difference, is a religious question not because it is about matters of belief or attendance at worship services but because it is about ultimate values and ultimate concerns.”
—Harold S. Kushner, *When all you’ve ever wanted isn’t enough*

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PREFACE

Fundamental questions about life arise in various contexts. Often certain experiences, like loneliness or suffering, make us wonder about the real worth of living. Other times, for instance the interruptions of an otherwise hectic or frenzied schedule, cause us to pause and question whether there is any ultimate point to all of our activities. Still other occasions such as a serious reflective period, like a retreat, can open up a more prolonged query into what life's goals truly are. But it is certainly a sign of our times, when one is alerted to the fundamental question about the meaning and significance of life by an ominous text message. Such a happening certainly can make one wonder and ponder.

This is exactly the starting point for this reflective account of the human quest for meaning. A text message warning of the onset of the strongest typhoon ever to make landfall is received by the main character of the story, Enrique de los Reyes. The news of the impending disaster becomes the focal point for him to recall, review and reconcile his philosophical wanderings and wonderings over the years with the immediate need for him to respond to this particular situation. How can he address this and similar calls when they seem to challenge everything that he has come to conclude about life's meaningfulness?

The title of this book draws from Alexander Pope's work advising his readers to "drink deeply from the Pierian spring". Greek mythology believed that this spring in ancient Macedonia was where the Muses frolicked and from which they drank to get knowledge. We have used a different context from Pope's original intention with those lines, penned to advise critics, in order to suit our own purposes with this book. If one is to give an account of the meaningfulness of life, a truly fundamental human concern, then one would have, as Enrique in the story learns, to "drink largely" and not be content with "shallow draughts". Our account "wades into philosophical waters", as one of our reviewers put it, in the hope that by drawing on them, one is encouraged to follow Pope's advice.

This is a work of fiction, and all the characters and their stories are imaginary. However, one event that serves as the background for it has been based on the unfortunate true-to-life disaster that hit Tacloban and Guiuan and elsewhere in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines on 8 November 2013: super-typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda. Many of the details in this

account, on the other hand, have been made up as literary additions even if they are based on that appalling incident. We certainly cannot—even if this were a factual report—do justice to the real experiences of those affected and afflicted. But we do hope, insofar as we visited these places, listened to the narratives of the people there and were ourselves personally affected and involved, that this fictionalized work can convey our sincere and real admiration for the resilience of the communities there and our deep gratitude to all those who helped and supported them.

As an account of a particular pursuit of meaning—no matter how widespread it is inasmuch as it is a human concern—this work reflects the experiences and reflections of merely one fictional character. Individuals, groups or even societies interpret the search for meaning differently and, as is to be expected, will provide varying answers. Although the main character in the book does seek out different interpretations of this in the imaginary lives of others, his aim is really to gauge the credibility of his own conclusions alongside the narratives of the other fictional characters in the story. His main concern is, as it were, “tasting draughts” from the springs of life as he himself sets off on the challenge “to drink deeply” instead.

The present work is part of a larger undertaking on our part to probe into philosophical themes in a more narrative way. The first book, titled *Those Distant Shores: A Narrative of Human Restlessness* narrates the life-journeys of three boyhood friends from the Philippines as well as that of a young man from Spain as they set out to fulfill their dreams in life. It deals with human restlessness and explores a fundamental philosophical theme: human transcendence. The second book called *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom: A Tale of the Human Thirst for Knowledge* deals with a fundamental craving of human beings. In keeping with their rational nature, they search for whatever will bring them closer to wisdom. This tale follows the pursuit of fictional characters for what will fulfill their respective goals. What starts as an academic sojourn for these individuals becomes a life-changing experience as their paths cross in the university town of Leuven, Belgium and they learn about each other and themselves and about life itself.

In electing to pursue a philosophical theme in this way, we are continuing a joint venture which we had undertaken in our earlier book, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life*. In that book we attempt to illustrate how our lives and concerns trigger off fundamental questions. We show how literature articulates these and how a philosophical quest pursues them further. Examining a

number of such questions which selected literary writers cite and describe in their works, we then turn to philosophers, past and present and from varying backgrounds, to continue probing into them more critically and systematically.

The books in this entire project are related not just in their literary form and themes, as indicated in the subtitles, but also in the association with water in their titles and in their settings. The human need for water in order to survive is obvious. But humans have also found water to be a source for learning about themselves and life. *Those Distant Shores* is a suggestive way of describing the restiveness of humans and their struggles to reach the “other side”, as it were. Life, like the sea that separates the shores, can be calm but is often choppy and threatening. It demands from each of us much attentive reflection and purposeful action. The restlessness of humans impels them to search for fulfillment. *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom* indicates the fluidity of the goal of human endeavours. Yet humans who by their very nature thirst for knowledge continue to seek it. Continuing that theme and taking its cue from one of Alexander Pope’s poems, *This Deep Pierian Spring* directs humans to the source of meaning and to the importance of “drinking deeply from it”. It draws from the philosophical waters with which the fictional main character had nourished himself throughout his career and the lessons he had learned from his work.

The different time-settings of the three books in this project indicate a life-long human quest, described in story form, for fundamental answers. *Those Distant Shores* starts with a boyhood escapade and with childhood dreams of a better life. Initially set in the 1950s, the narrative follows the literal and metaphorical journeys undertaken by the fictional characters into the 1960s and 1970s. Their questions reflect their youthful stage in life. With the tale of the second book, *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom* which takes place in the 1990s (specifically, spring 1993), the questions and pre-occupations of a different set of imaginary characters take on a more serious tone. They are somehow focused on work, careers and life-goals. *This Deep Pierian Spring*, in a more contemporary setting, follows the concerns of another set of fictional characters as they and others face up to, in their more mature years, the pressing issue of whether life has any meaning at all and the extent that one can nurture hope in the future.

The basic questions about life arise because of our nature as human beings. However, the specific trails we follow in pursuing them are somehow coloured by distinct backgrounds, particular concerns and unique personalities. Thus, we have opted for different sets of imaginary characters in each of the books. But rather than follow the same characters as they ad-

vance in years, we show instead some narrative continuity in the entire project by taking a minor character in a preceding book and transforming him or her into a major one in the next book and vice-versa.

Each of the books in this project has essays in the Appendix discussing the theme or a related topic of the relevant book in a more technical style. The first book contains essays which clarify and defend the literary-philosophical approach which we have adopted in the entire project. A third essay in that book develops the topic covered in the lecture by one of the characters; namely, the relationship between morality and religion. In the second book, the two essays discuss in a more philosophical way the two themes dealt with in that work: quest for wisdom, and the problem of evil. The first two essays in the third book discuss in a more scholarly way the main topic dealt with in the story: the search for meaning and significance. A third one pursues the quest for ultimate meaning by addressing the issue of immortality. It may suit more philosophically-minded readers to read these essays first before the narrative/tale/account contained in that work while other readers, having read those, can avail of another opportunity and method of dealing with the topic or theme. Our hope, of course, is that the reader would avail of, and benefit from, both sections of each book by gaining a fuller understanding of the theme/topic under consideration. There is an inevitable repetition in the two sections of the book, but this is intended to retain the integrity of the treatment of the thematic concerns in each section.

Our project would not have been possible without the full support of our publishers, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. We have benefitted from their professionalism right from the start. We certainly appreciate their confidence in all our writing endeavours in the past and in the present. Our special thanks to Sam Baker for his encouragement and support as well as to all the staff for their expertise and assistance. We would like to thank the editors and publishers for giving us their permission to include the slightly revised essays in the Appendix which had originally appeared in their publications.

We happily acknowledge our continuing indebtedness to our families and to numerous individuals, organizations and institutions for supporting and accompanying us all the way in our writing ventures. Of these it is particularly appropriate to express in a singular way our gratitude for the memories and the inspiration given to us by those to whom we have dedicated our work. We would also like to thank graciously all those who reviewed and commented on our work at different stages for their assistance and endorsement.

It has been our privilege, which we greatly treasure, to experience as educators and writers the relevance of a version of Seneca's maxim: "*Docendo discimus, scribendo cogitamus*".

A TEXT MESSAGE

CHAPTER ONE

The text was brief, direct—and ominous: “Spr tyfon pray 4”. The abrupt, incomplete, unpunctuated message was truly startling. The timing was even more alarming.

A few seconds earlier Enrique had heard the familiar alert tone of the incoming text message on his mobile. Deep sleep had eluded him, it seemed. Having checked the sender’s name, he was glad to know that it was from his friend Rodrigo. But the timing threw him off. It was only three o’clock in the morning, and he knew that Rodrigo was aware of the eight-hour difference between the Philippines and Ireland. Enrique started to sense that something was amiss—it was not like Rodrigo to be contacting him at that time. Besides, it seemed to have been sent in a hurry. So he sat up immediately to read and re-read the message.

Enrique tried not be unduly rattled. At least, not initially. His long-time friend, Rodrigo, had briefed him on the frequency and prevalence of typhoons in his native Philippines, a group of islands on the edge of the Pacific Ocean and prey to their fury. He had mentioned that the country gets on average nine or ten typhoons a year. Not surprisingly therefore, the impression was sometimes given that since these weather patterns were a constant in their lives the best attitude was to put up with them as best they could. Taking it in their stride or *bahala na*, as Filipinos would put it, was a way of life for them after all.

This text message was rather surprising since it was the end of the typhoon season which usually starts around May and lasts until about October. This was already November. One would not have been expecting, so he had been informed, yet another major typhoon until next year. Why now? Besides, there had already been a number of them, a couple of strong ones in fact, seemingly signalling the end of the period of gusty winds and heavy rains for this year. Besides, Filipinos are so used to them that these annual typhoons do not result in an alarming text message such as this one. But this one was definitely different.

Enrique immediately texted back without indicating his surprise at the truncated message: “Hi Rodrigo. Got msg. Any more news? Stay n touch. Enrique”. He clasped the mobile phone so that when it would vibrate on the arrival of a text message before the ring tone commenced, he would be ready. Meanwhile, he retrieved the text message again from the menu of received messages. He wanted to read it once more and confirm for him-

self the time when it was sent. His Samsung mobile phone was not the latest model or the Android type which retains the grouping of conversations in a chain, unlike that of his wife, facilitating in this way a review of the messages received. He had promised himself a new model, but somehow he found his present mobile adequate for his present needs.

Enrique waited. And waited further. But there was still no reply from Rodrigo. Was this a bad omen? Enrique wondered to himself. Usually, when one or the other texted, the communication would keep going for a few minutes—unless of course the other party was otherwise engaged. Perhaps, there was some problem with the receptivity of texts so he should be more patient, he chided himself. He did check, however, that he had not missed any additional messages in the meantime. Sometimes that was the case when one was engrossed. At times there would be a message warning that the transmission was poor where he was. Not this time, however. His mobile phone was fully charged—he made sure of that, too. So that couldn't be the reason for his not getting a reply.

Texting each other proved to be a very convenient and highly efficient way of communicating for these friends. Despite initial technical difficulties on their part, given their relatively advanced years, Rodrigo and he had both embraced this technical complexity because of the welcome benefits that one can enjoy from this development. Somehow the geographical distance between them was bridged.

They had retained grave reservations, nevertheless, as they noticed that increasingly this method of communicating was replacing a more personal one. Besides, there was the matter of squeezing one's text message into the smallest space possible thus ruining the spelling of words and the structure of sentences. Moreover, the text would be sent to a faceless recipient. All of these considerations ran counter to what they, as academic philosophers, had come to appreciate regarding social interaction.

But fortunately in their case, it had not completely eradicated the traditional ways of keeping each other posted on various events and developments in their lives. Unlike in so many cases when communication has been reduced to facing one's mobile phone endlessly, their fingers had not taken over the matter of staying in touch. Now and then, on special occasions, they would telephone each other. But long-distance calls, particularly on their mobile phones, were quite expensive; and reception was not always clear and distinct.

They had kept up their correspondence with traditional letter-writing until they discovered the ease, efficiency and speed of e-mailing each other. They could then literally exchange news in a matter of minutes rather

than weeks. But more significantly, they could share their views and reflections in this way, unlike in a text message. To both of them, this was particularly important since they were prone to elaborating fully on whatever they wanted to express. The last e-mail from Rodrigo had reached him just last week. He had replied to that only a few days ago commenting on Rodrigo's book proposal. Their technical know-how and residual reservations, however, had kept them away from Skype, Facebook or Twitter to maintain contact and carry on conversations. Somehow they felt there would be some drawbacks although they were aware of their increasing popularity not just with the youth but with their age-group and even with the much older generation.

For immediate and urgent communication, however, texting as far as they were concerned was the preferred choice. At times, it was a way of alerting the other that there was an e-mail awaiting immediate response. So Enrique could not help feeling anxious now, given the text message he had just received, as to why there was no quick reply from Rodrigo as was the usual practice.

Enrique and Rodrigo had met for the first time decades ago on the bus to the ferry in Dún Laoghaire port in Ireland which was bound for Holyhead in Wales. Both of them were going to sail on it for the first stage of their respective journeys back to their home countries. They were young adults then. Rodrigo was returning to the Philippines, having completed his B.A. and M.A. studies in Ireland while Enrique had been on a visit to Dublin and elsewhere in the country. It was a visit that had opened a vista of life to Enrique and had directed him to a definite route in life. He remembered that during their initial encounter on the ferry, they were both reflective as the ferry pulled out from the port. While they did not share their reflections then as they were bidding goodbye to Ireland, each wrapped up in the significance of his own thoughts, the rest of the voyage enabled them to get to know each other quite well. As they conversed and drank endless cups of tea, a habit both had picked up during their sojourn in Ireland, they discovered that they shared common interests and a similar outlook in life. It was a budding friendship that over the years they managed to nurture despite the great distance between their respective countries.

Perhaps it was their common heritage, he a Spaniard and Rodrigo a Filipino that had played some role. In fact, Rodrigo had talked a lot about his country's history. Three centuries of Spanish rule—even if he had not been around then, Rodrigo had quickly added!—had left an indelible mark on his country's history and outlook. As he pointed out, many of their

names, including his own, were of Spanish origin. In many cases, however, this inheritance from Spanish times had been indigenized, of course. But if one toured the Philippines, one would definitely feel that such influence was still very much tangible.

Rodrigo had added that on his summer trip to Spain from Ireland, he almost felt that he was back in the Philippines. He was also fortunate that Spanish was still taught when he was a high school student in his country. So he had managed to get by in Spain with his limited knowledge of the language as he toured the country and visited some outlying villages.

Enrique for his part had not been in the Philippines when he first met Rodrigo. But he had learned in his history class that Spain had brought Catholicism to the Philippines and that the three centuries of his country's presence in the Philippines had been both beneficial and disadvantageous to Rodrigo's people. Rodrigo had persuaded him to visit the Philippines where he could be assured of typical Filipino hospitality, including having tasty Spanish-inspired dishes. For his part, Enrique had promised that he would certainly do so in the very near future. After all, his father had given him the travel bug. He had been in Asia before but only in Japan when he accompanied his father to a conference there. Enrique had talked of how travel, as his father had stressed, broadened his horizons and opened up his mind. A trip to the Philippines at some stage would also enable him to experience at first-hand the close histories of their countries. Yes, he had promised Rodrigo that he would include the Philippines in his travel plans. He had added that in the meantime Rodrigo should undertake another trip to Spain this time to visit him, and he would be more than happy to show him around.

But it was most likely their shared interest in philosophy that cemented their friendship. During their conversation on the ferry, they had talked about this academic subject. Rodrigo had just completed his Master's degree in that subject and was hoping to do a doctorate at some future date. For Enrique, it was a matter of "breathing philosophy", as he smilingly put it, since he and his father-philosopher had seemingly endless conversations about it. It was very much "in the air around me!"—as he jokingly put it.

As the two of them talked philosophy during that voyage, they realized that they shared a view on the role and significance of philosophical thinking for human living. It was this common appreciation of what philosophy can offer that over the years enabled them to maintain their relationship and helped to transcend the territorial gap between them. Both believed that such thinking mattered and that human living is enriched by it. More importantly, however, the two budding philosophers held that such thinking must be grounded in life itself, rather than be diverted by seemingly

abstract theoretical concerns. Their youthful curiosity had fired such enthusiasm in them that they believed that philosophy was what they wanted to pursue in life. Even if it was not quite the most realistic option—they quipped together!

As it turned out, following his return to the Philippines Rodrigo was immediately offered a teaching position in philosophy at one of the prestigious universities in Manila. His love for this subject developed even further, a passion which he succeeded in communicating to many of his students. He was very much taken up with existentialism, particularly the insights of Marcel and Buber, since this movement in philosophy spoke about lived reality rather than engaged itself in dehumanized thinking.

Soon afterwards, however, Rodrigo came to realize that he had a calling to the priesthood. He had given it much thought. It was certainly not an overnight decision on his part. But it seems that his boyhood friend Juan, who had been a clerical student but had met a tragic death before ordination, had made such an impact on him that Rodrigo himself began to seriously consider this choice in life despite the fact that for him it had not been a boyhood dream or a professional ambition. But he thought long and hard. If Juan had wanted to devote his life to it—and even die for it—it must mean something. The idea kept bugging him. So after much reflection and prayer, Rodrigo asked to be admitted to the same religious order of which Juan had been a member. Following his ordination, after novitiate and theological studies, he was immediately appointed to Rome to study for his doctorate in philosophy. On his return to the Philippines he was assigned to a teaching position in the order's Faculty of Philosophy in St. Arnoldus Seminary in Quezon City. He then had some exposure time to missionary work in Latin America before returning to his seminary to take up the position of Dean of Philosophy.

In Enrique's case it came as no surprise that, with a father like Prof de los Reyes, he would also opt to pursue philosophical studies. Their seemingly endless conversations about the importance of a reflective life provided Enrique with much food for thought which would take several years for him to digest. But he was determined to do just that. He had come to appreciate the value of grappling with fundamental issues about life. Just like his Papa, Enrique had been endowed with an inquisitive and enquiring mind. It was therefore to be expected that since nature had placed him in this position, for which he was immensely grateful, he would pursue his father's legacy—despite knowing that it was a thought-provoking, challenging one.

At the same time, Enrique retained his deep interest in literature, a legacy from his late mother but which had been kindled by his father. Now and then, like his father, he found himself digging into literary texts for some insights into life. He agreed with the older de los Reyes that a number of incipient philosophical ideas could be found in several poems and dramas. But it was his father's frequent references to the value of philosophical thinking for living life to the full that had stimulated and directed him to his professional career. He would follow in his father's footsteps, not just because it had been the legacy and expectation but because he likewise had become convinced of its importance to life. The deeper he dug into this human intellectual resource, the more he appreciated its relevance and applicability.

Rodrigo's text had roused Enrique. The absence of a reply from Rodrigo prevented him now from going back to sleep. The disturbing message would mean that he would simply be tossing and turning in bed. Moreover, he did not want to wake up his wife who was fast asleep beside him. Such messages would only make her anxious. After all, it may just have been an advance notice from Rodrigo and therefore nothing to worry about.

So Enrique decided that he may as well go to the kitchen and make a cup of tea for himself. He would not even bother turning on his bedside lamp. The nightlight beside his side of the bed gave him enough illumination to move around safely. He retrieved his mobile phone and pocketed it inside his bathrobe, which was hanging behind the bedroom door. Rodrigo might reply to his text message in the meantime, and Enrique wanted to be able to respond immediately. Putting on the dark blue bathrobe which he had purchased on one of his American trips, he silently walked down the stairs, carefully holding on to the wooden banister as he did not want to turn on the light. He thought that there was sufficient lighting from downstairs as the nightlight under the hall table gave the place a soft glow.

Parting the drawn curtains, Enrique looked out the small window of the main hall, noticing that it was still dark outside. There was no stir, either. He had to admit that the darkness of the hour was adding to his anxiety. Even the moon was hardly visible because of the thick clouds. There was a slight breeze which stirred whatever leaves were left on the otherwise bare trees. The lights on the side-road of the house broke the darkness only here and there, unlike the lights on the brightly-illuminated main street which he could see in the far distance. Not surprisingly, there was hardly any traffic, only a car or two going in the same direction to break the silence of the early morning. The whole atmosphere was a bit eerie yet not gloomy.

He made his way to the kitchen at the back of the hall. Filling the electric kettle with water, he switched it on to make tea in the small teapot beside it. After pouring the tea into a mug which he had placed on a small tray to avoid spilling it, he headed for the sitting-room so he could watch TV. He closed the door behind him to muffle any sound he would be making and then turned on the television set, using the remote control. He switched it to the news on CNN. He had come to rely on this network for up-to-date news as well as for live coverage of incidents.

As he sat back, he suddenly realized that the live report on CNN was coming from the Philippines. It certainly got his full attention. It was about the super-typhoon Haiyan. Somehow the reporter was coming across not merely as reporting but warning, in a very sombre tone, about what was to come. She kept emphasizing that the approaching typhoon was going to be an immensely devastating threat to lives and property. While she reminded the viewers that this part of the world was used to such bad weather, this was really different. The forecast was that it was going to be the strongest ever to make landfall. The warning was definite and stark.

Enrique listened most carefully to the news reporter, trying to catch every word being drowned by the mighty downpours and silenced by the deafening sounds of the menacing wind. Suddenly, he realized that the live report was being relayed from Tacloban City—where Rodrigo was. Enrique immediately took out his mobile phone and sent another text message to Rodrigo to enquire what the situation was. Still no answer, so he decided to call instead, only to get a recorded message informing the caller that there were no available connections to the mobile number which he was calling. Enrique was starting to get worried and despondent.

Enrique stayed glued to the television. He switched over to the BBC World News because he had also come to appreciate the comprehensive broadcasts on that channel. He was right. Their reporters were on the very spot where the typhoon was barrelling itself into the Philippines. The news and the pictures were horrifying. The winds were blowing much stronger than usual, ripping off the roofs of houses and buildings and blowing parked vehicles up into the air. Trees, even hardy ones, were being uprooted and started to line the already blocked roads and clogged fields. Branches, some of which were particularly huge, had been turned into flying weapons hitting anything that was in their path. The rain lashed out vehemently, abetted by the mighty winds. Galvanized iron roofs were flying like kites across the landscape. The TV reporter stated that all power was down. It was truly frightening, she added. It showed on her face. They were able to broadcast only because they had brought their own equip-

ment, having anticipated the problems that the typhoon would bring in transmitting their reports.

While leaving the TV on, Enrique grabbed his laptop. He had it neatly placed near the armchair. After turning it on, he decided to google Tacloban news. Quite quickly, he soon noted a number of links. He clicked on one of them since it indicated that it was a very recent one. There was a film being shown now. It seems to have been uploaded on YouTube by someone who had taken shelter inside a hotel room. Given the shakiness of the filming, it seemed that whoever was filming courageously was also being buffeted by gusts that appeared to have been blowing all over the place. The crashing sounds which accompanied the terrible scenes added to the horror of the situation. The film caught a man who was hanging on to the side of another building. The wind kept pounding him as if he were its target until he released his hold. The rain was so strong that now and then it blanketed him from view. Soon afterwards, there was no sign of him.

And to think that this was merely a warning of the impending disaster. Worse was to be expected—much worse, this was the constant warning from the various broadcasts. This is truly horrible, muttered Enrique to himself. Just when Tacloban had been making much headway. The city had expanded and developed in the last decade or so. The well-known Philippine shopping mall, Robinsons, had branched out there; the University of the Philippines had opened a Tacloban college; and many of the facilities and structures in this capital city of Leyte in Eastern Visayas had been improved considerably. A number of businesses and offices had extended their services to the city. There had been some optimism that further developments were on their way. And now, in a matter of minutes everything was going to be reduced to ruins. It seemed really ridiculous and totally unfair. Enrique was left baffled and speechless.

Why was this happening? He couldn't help but search his mind for some kind of answer. The situation was mind-boggling, however. What explanation could one have for all this? Climate change or global warming? There had been much talk about this, but somehow this phenomenon seems to have escaped the urgent attention of many nations. Why cannot nations take a global view on this matter and realize that their care of the environment or lack of it does affect the entire world? Are these leaders not concerned about what is happening due to all this carbon emission?

On his earlier trip to Ireland when he first met with Rodrigo, Enrique had spent a number of days touring around Ireland visiting famous sites. He had been very much taken up with the beauty and peacefulness of the

countryside. He always felt, following that extraordinary experience during his retreat, that that was the time when the light which his father had kindled during various conversations between them became much brighter and shone in a particular way, thereby enabling him to pursue a specific direction in life. It had been a silent retreat, but he had his father's words and advice to guide him throughout. As Enrique communed with nature, examined his inner self and pondered on their dialogues, he came to appreciate more clearly how he should live his life.

After a considerable period since that first trip, he had now returned to Ireland. He had long wanted to revisit the place and perhaps even to re-live his experiences here. He had a sabbatical leave from his academic post in Spain, and he wanted to pursue a writing project, perhaps his last book before retirement—he smiled as he thought of what lay ahead of him and the pressure that had been put on him. Following his lecture on the benefits of philosophical thinking, he had been challenged by the president of the university to address a pressing question now before his days of leisure; namely, how philosophical thinking can contribute to meeting the challenges of contemporary society. Enrique had merely smiled then, but he promised to give it his serious consideration.

He had taken it for granted that retirement, when it came, would be a wonderful opportunity to follow up on reading interests and to undertake even more travel to various destinations in the world. Enrique had convinced himself that it would be an important way of continuing his intellectual concerns and cultural interests. But for the present, as he was engulfed in the debates and discussions of various issues, his mind turned more and more to ancient times in China when indeed philosophers were expected to give practical advice to political leaders on how to deal with society's problems. He balked, however, at the idea of providing solutions—he realized that he did not have that kind of competence. In fact, he was always doubtful of the efficacy of the leadership of a philosopher-king whom the Greek philosopher, Plato, had proposed.

Enrique had indeed been pondering on the remarks of the university president who had added that since Enrique had always defended the importance of philosophical thinking in life, he should, before his retirement, seriously consider its significance in addressing various issues of life in society. It was tempting indeed to pursue the question of how philosophical thinking can facilitate the search for viable answers. After all, philosophy prided itself on clear and logical thinking. Would that not be of tremendous help in this case? What about the philosophical insistence on dealing with fundamental issues and not just with the immediate concerns? Surely, that is an important and even necessary undertaking in dealing

with the challenge of life in society. He had been critical of how much of that was displaced by political discussions which seem to centre on scoring points against one's opponents rather than on grasping the real issues.

Not surprisingly, when he got from Newman University in Dublin an attractive offer to do some research during his sabbatical leave, he immediately accepted. There was a strong academic link between that university and his own, and his president did indeed pave the way and even ensure that Enrique would take up his challenge. Fortunately, Enrique's record of publications seemed to have been of great interest to one of the research committees at that Irish university. He had discussed with its members what he had in mind, and it seemed to have coincided with what they wanted from him.

Accompanied by his wife, Maria, who had fortunately received a research grant from her own college, Enrique made the necessary arrangements through the Irish university to spend a semester in Dublin. As luck would have it, the Chair of the Department of Philosophy of Newman University had been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship and was going to spend the semester at one of the universities on the east coast of the USA. His family would be with him in the USA for the entire semester so their house in Dublin would be available. The accommodations officer of Newman University offered it to Enrique, an offer which he promptly accepted. Enrique and his wife planned to arrive in Dublin in August before the academic year commenced as they wanted to tour the country before settling down for the serious academic work that they were going to undertake.

Enrique had realistic goals: all he would be able to do in the period offered to him would be to write a first draft of the manuscript. But he intended it to lead to a book at some stage. For the present he wanted to do more research on the topic. After all, he needed to inform himself of the various relevant issues, many of which were concrete issues which were constantly developing in different directions. He wanted to be thoroughly acquainted with the ongoing discussions of these issues.

His determination to pursue the project and accept the challenge from his president enabled him to make considerable progress in so short a time.

That is, until this early morning's totally unexpected communication from his friend in the Philippines. The more Enrique thought about the whole situation, the more he realized that the phenomenon was more than just a weather-related event that one can weather out, so to speak. Lives were at stake, thousands and thousands of them. It was making the innocent suffer—and suffer unjustly. Why could life not be better for these

people? Why are they being buffeted by nature to this extent? Enrique was getting angrier as he watched the ongoing coverage of the typhoon. Nature seems to be preying on the vulnerable to an unforgiveable extent. The whole scenario demanded a far deeper explanation. It was completely senseless.

His eyes unexpectedly rested on the large painting hanging over the marble fireplace in the room. It depicted a very serene scene of a man driving a cart on the strand. The sea looked so tranquil. The waves were gently lapping the beach, a lone bird was winging its way across the horizon, and the rising sun was partially illuminating the sea. On top of the mantelpiece, a number of small artistic objects were on display, appreciative signs of culture from different countries. Beside the fireplace was a cabinet carefully lined with books and other decorative objects. Near the window to the right of the Sony TV set was a small box with a carving of three frigates. On the opposite wall beside the settee was another painting of a sea-shore. It was all so tranquil—so unlike what he was seeing on the TV screen and his laptop.

It seemed rather strange, but somehow Enrique could not help but wonder whether his anxiety was more than he had anticipated. It was being driven by something more fundamental. That was why he found himself pursuing the matter even further. He was not a disinterested observer, certainly, not by the way he was reacting to what was unfolding in Tacloban. In addition, he personally knew some of the people. Rodrigo's text message had triggered louder alarms in his mind. It had forced Enrique initially to switch on to some news about Tacloban in the hope that he could get more details to throw some light on Rodrigo's message. But now he found himself being challenged even further. After all, given what he was viewing, Rodrigo was in imminent danger and his people were being threatened. The lack of direct contact worsened the situation. It was unquestionably impacting on him. He could feel himself tensing up more and more.

Enrique felt helpless, however. What could he do? What resources did he have that he could turn to? Could thinking about it, while waiting for more details, even be of any use right now? Would he be able to give an adequate response in the face of such a calamity? What kind of response would it be anyway? At the moment was it merely a matter of wait-and-see? However, all he could think of right now seemed rather unhelpful.

The extensive coverage by the news media of what was happening in Tacloban and the surrounding areas continued. More and more details on the typhoon and its effects were being released. As Enrique monitored the

unravelling situation on the TV screen, his mind provoked him even more as he glanced again at Rodrigo's text.

The second part of Rodrigo's message, surprisingly, required some deciphering for its meaning and significance if he were to deal with it adequately. Why did Rodrigo add "pray"? To some extent that was to be expected. After all, Rodrigo was a Catholic priest. But for what was he to pray? For whom? What good will it do anyway in this instance? Was it an act of desperation or one of hope? And what hope was realistically possible in these circumstances? On what basis?

As he continued to wait for another message, Enrique's personal anxiety, unrelieved by a response from Rodrigo to let him know how he was faring, was forcing Enrique to turn to his memories and unscramble his thoughts, as it were. Could what he had experienced and learned in the past be of some help in this instance? It sounded rather incredible, but he wondered whether recalling the past would enable him to deal with the present and hopefully face the future—whatever that may turn out to be?

Waiting has a way of boring a person. Worse, it can be unnerving. But it can also prompt one to search one's mind as it were for some form of an answer, even if only to pass the time. Enrique thought it was at least some alternative.

CHAPTER TWO

Hoping that he would get more news about the impending typhoon in the Philippines, Enrique kept switching channels. Perhaps he would get another perspective on the disaster or another location on the typhoon path. Since he wanted to view what the Irish TV channel, RTE1, would be covering, he pressed the key for that station. But soon he realized that it was not after all the RTE News Now channel that he had in mind but rather the main one for its TV programmes. Right now it was replaying the series on the “Meaning of Life” with Gay Byrne, the well-known Irish TV personality who used to host the long-running TV show “The Late, Late Show”. This particular interview was with the renowned atheist scientist of Oxford University, Prof Dawkins. As was to be expected, Dawkins was rejecting any religious reading of the universe and was criticizing any meaning to life derived from religious belief. He certainly would have no time for prayer and would be highly suspicious of its usefulness in any situation. He would have found Rodrigo’s request nonsensical, mused Enrique.

Enrique was quite interested in the interview but decided that he would like to watch the programme at another time. So he pressed the recording button this time. Although he was familiar with Dawkins’ views, it would be instructive to hear his arguments regarding what provides meaning to a non-religious person. But under the present circumstances that topic would have to wait. He would retrieve the recording at some other time.

Meanwhile, he changed over to another news channel, this time to Euronews. He had come to appreciate their take on news events not just in Europe but also worldwide. It showed other dramatic photos and provided further reports on the frightening situation developing in Tacloban. It seems that, like the BBC World News and CNN, this particular channel was concentrating on a coverage of nature’s fury in that part of the globe. Since Euronews is broadcast simultaneously in various languages, it meant that news about the typhoon was reaching other language groups at the present moment.

Enrique couldn’t help but remain perplexed at what was occurring in Tacloban while being concerned about the plight of its people.

As more questions because of the tragedy that was unfolding in Tacloban buzzed in Enrique's mind, he recalled how his father had explained to him as a young man that our thoughts can be an ally in meeting the challenges of life. His Papa had spoken of the significance of cultivating a questioning attitude. Human beings by their nature, as he had put it, are inquisitive. They become restless as they thirst for knowledge, for answers to their questions. There is something about and in them that spurs them on to stretch beyond themselves and attempt to reach, metaphorically speaking, "distant shores". Throughout life, certain incidents or particular situations prompt them to do so.

Enrique found himself doing just that as he kept waiting for word from Rodrigo. He could feel himself being stretched by the situation. It was more than mere information that he needed right now. It was not just getting and increasing his knowledge of the situation. Somehow as the wait grew longer, he was becoming preoccupied with the importance of the larger picture, as it were. His interest in it had been triggered by Rodrigo's request to pray. Perhaps there was a connection after all with the RTE programme on the meaning of life. The coincidence was rather odd nonetheless.

Something struck him then. His father had mentioned the need for human beings to provide themselves with what he had labelled "comma moments" in life to enable us to get hold of that "larger picture". Papa had maintained that life contains a message. Likening its message to a written text made up of sentences, Prof de los Reyes, Sr had pointed out that for such a group of sentences or words to be readable and comprehensible, it is necessary to punctuate them properly. Unless this is done, its meaning can be misunderstood or even rendered nonsensical. This was the context for his explanation of "comma-moments".

Some situations—exclamation points of life—make us wonder, according to his Papa. Others, including crises, cause us to ask and ponder—these are the question marks about life. But whether life has an overall message, that is to say meaning, can only be discovered if we make the effort to read it properly and more thoroughly, just as commas separate sentences into meaningful clauses or groups of words thereby enabling us to see the over-all meaning. To be able to do this, we need to take deliberate pauses, like commas, which assist us to put our lives, as we live them, in proper perspective. Only then would we be better placed to give our response in a more thoughtful way. Punctuating our lives properly, as we do with sentences, can help us understand life's over-all message.

What a time to be reminded of this lesson, exclaimed the now much older Enrique to himself. He shook his head in some disbelief. Despite