

**Talk delivered by Emily Abrera, Chair of Children's Hour and Cultural Center of the Philippines
during the Women Connect : Women to Women Mentoring Part 2
at the Philippine Trade Training Center, Nov. 8, 2011**

TOPIC : CHOOSE TO SOAR: A Fresh Perspective on a Life Strategy

The first line and the last are always the hardest ones for me to compose, and so I doodle... I pick out a starting thought and an ending one and then let the rest of the in-between float in.

Musing one evening about my talk today, I thought I might begin with the idea of success, touch on choices, careers... and end on a happiness note. Perhaps no need to talk about leadership, since you'd have had big doses of that stuff by end of day. Then as I sat there reflecting on these thoughts, I heard from downstairs an old Beatles tune, "Money Can't Buy You Love." Ah, serendipitous! It convinced me I was on the right track. (I always think the Universe is listening in on my thoughts and encouraging me with little tips from out of nowhere.)

I wondered what leads us to make the choices we make in life... is it the way we are brought up?

My musing nudged me to pick up an old family photo album, and as I turned its pages, I stopped at some pictures, and I let the memories take me where they wanted to go.

*The first picture is of a tired-looking woman in a dark dress with lace at the collar, her gray hair in a bun, and with large sad eyes. It is my *Nonna* Emilia. I never met her; she died when I was eleven. From her I inherited only my name, and my father's stories, but I am deeply grateful she gave us him.

*The second picture I stop at is of a handsome man in his 30's --- with wavy hair, a broad forehead and an even gaze. He's wearing a bowtie. My father Franco was a giant of a man, 6'4"; my siblings and I all took after his height. What the picture doesn't show is his bias for books, his influence on us children to think independently, to be responsible residents of the earth we inhabit. He was an Italian, from Florence, and a real Renaissance man. While most parents might say, "Keep your feet on the ground," my father said, "Go; be free; don't get sidetracked by trends, by other people's opinions, by habit or bias. Think. Do what you believe is right. Always." It is even amazing that I ended up in advertising when we weren't allowed to watch TV! My father was convinced it was a tool for brainwashing. By the time he relented and bought us a TV set, I was in 1st year

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college! My father was friend and teacher; from him I learned that I was the main architect of my life; it was in no one else's hands.

*The third picture: a lissome *chinita* woman stands with one hand on her tiny waist, smooth-skinned and smiling, sure of herself. This is my mother. It was she who made my father decide he'd found paradise in the Philippines so that he'd never want to go back to Italy. While he passed away relatively young at 63, she is virtually indestructible. On Sunday she will turn 94. She can still negotiate the stairs by herself. Although my mother had little formal education --- she can literally do anything --- and she is my master professor in a course that ranges from high cuisine, to repairing electric fans and fixing leaks to trimming hair. I had a career because she was there to look after my two children. We owe so much to our mothers, don't we?

*The fourth picture is of a 1-year old, a curly-haired, giddy-looking little girl, smiling away. It is me. And it occurs to me suddenly that we are all born this way, smiling and happy as puppies, and so easy to please. I wonder how far I have strayed from this original state, secretly hoping not too far. The phrase *mababaw ang kaligayahan* takes on new meaning.

Beside the child is a large thick book, open to a page with pictures and text, probably what inspired my father to take the snapshot, and perhaps, it is a portent of my future fondness for reading.

*The fifth picture is a white 2-storey house in the style of the 50's, with a wide grassy lawn, and three children standing in the foreground, one of them carrying a fourth. This is in Cebu, and the house holds many memories for me, including the scent of jasmine, a vine that grew beside the row of light glass blocks on one side of the living room. Our evenings smelled wonderful in that Cebu house... it is the fourth of the 26 homes I have lived in since birth. We were like nomads; we traipsed halfway across the islands. (Only in 1999 did my husband and I finally build our own house.) Why so many places? What was my father searching for?

I imagined my mother packing up faithfully and setting up house 26 times! Only a few things came with us: 2 trunks, some paintings, books. It was a lesson in the value of detachment. Yes, we were happy with little by way of material things; we were rich in one another's company.

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*The sixth photograph is a 7-year old in tears, her arm linked in her older sister's --- it is me and Frankie. My father is leaning over to comfort me. We are wearing regulation uniforms of the Catholic school we were enrolled in. I am in tears because my white, collared school blouse was not finished on time for the first day of school and my mother had me wear another white blouse that was close but not quite. I didn't want to be different; I wanted to belong. Uniforms do that for children, they equalize us. But is it also possible that uniforms encourage sameness and conformity to the detriment of our individuality? Perhaps as a reaction to this regimen, when I became a parent, my husband and I chose to put our kids in Montessori where they could wear what they wanted everyday.

I leaf through many more pictures of us and the children as they grew, of the friends we made and kept, the places we visited, and of the significant milestones in our lives. I think by normal standards, we were considered a successful couple. Better yet, though we had very few of the usual trappings of success, we were obviously happy.

How **do** we measure success? How does it relate to happiness?

Success seems easy enough to define; it refers to the achievement of a goal. But there's a more common understanding of success, and it's this: Successful people are generally seen as those who have acquired wealth, a high position, and a certain amount of fame. Whether those were their goals or not, they are generally considered successful by others. Now let me ask you, do you think all successful people are happy?

Let me tell you about my 5th grandchild, Leona.....

One night as she was being tucked into bed, she said to her father, "You know what I want to be when I grow up, Papa? I want to be a make-up artist!" she had watched an interview of a ramp model who had described how important her make-up artist was in her line of work. Also, the make-up artist looked just as attractive as the model herself and certainly just as fashionable, so who could blame 7-year old Leona, who loves to draw and paint?

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Her father, trying to be open-minded, replied, "Hmmm. That sounds interesting. I'm sure Mama will like that." Sensing that her father didn't seem all that excited, she reassured him, "But Papa, if I'm not happy being a make-up artist, I'll become a carwash girl instead!" this last she declared with a big smile. So you see, even 7-year olds know the difference between success and happiness and that one doesn't always follow the other.

Success is a sort of moving target, which we define differently as we grow older and our world of experience expands... and while it doesn't necessarily have to be attached to material wealth or fame, as we grow older, we imbibe certain societal values around us that suggest otherwise. (When I was Leona's age, I wanted to become a shoemaker; it seemed like the most fun kind of job! Later, I wanted to become a singer, and much later yet, a writer. Then as a young mother needing to augment our family income so that we could send our children to a good school, I ended up in an advertising agency.) For many of us older people, we feel we are successful enough when we have acquired a home of our own, have stable jobs, raised healthy children and put them through school. We feel no need to become famous for anything, beyond being respected and loved by a small circle of friends and family.

Now, consider this: **Dr. Deepak Chopra**, an Indian doctor who has written many books on physical and spiritual health, **defines true success as "the ability to replicate for others the feeling of happiness."** For Dr. Chopra, you're not really successful unless you're happy, and the thing about happiness is that it automatically wants to share itself. It is contagious, and funnily enough, the more of it you give away, the more it fills you!

Think about all the so-called "successful" people you know and try to gauge how happy they are... you will agree with me that not all successful people are happy. So the philosophers are right, and so are the Beatles: money can't buy happiness or love, although it can often provide some welcome temporary relief, and distract you from unhappiness.

I have had the privilege, for the past 8 years, to meet up close, many great people, successful in their varied life goals, by virtue of my trusteeship in the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, an organization dedicated to seeking out these outstanding individuals throughout Asia, and recounting their stories to the world so that these may, in turn, inspire others to do the same. The award has been in existence for over 50 years now, and

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has recognized over 300 laureates who have made Asia a better place because of what they do. Some of them went on to receive global awards like the Nobel Prize. What have I learned from this?

First of all, I've learned that greatness, unlike its cousin success, has no perceived connection to material wealth or positions of power and authority. However, we have seen a number of individuals who have used their material success as the base from which to establish projects that benefit countless communities around them.

Take the case of Horace and Lawrence Kadoorie, the sons of Jewish immigrants from Iraq, who made HongKong their home. Highly respected and successful industrialists in the early years after the second world war, they chose to embrace philanthropic endeavors to rebuild farmers' lives, teaching them how to be agriculturally self-reliant.

There is Princess Sirindhorn of Thailand, whose life has been dedicated to keeping alive traditional handicraft, music, and literature for all generations of Thai people and making these the stuff of cross-cultural understanding between her country and the rest of Asia. The princess is of royal lineage; she didn't have to teach history at a military academy, and yet she chose to do so, in order to better understand her people and use her influence for the greater good. Much of her work embraces children --- orphans and unwanted infants, refugees, and the disabled.

For some of these great people, they started their work from nothing more than the desire to serve others ... they simply went to work ministering to the needy in their communities out of tremendous love and compassion, like Mother Theresa, and countless others who have built hospitals, brought war victims across borders, taught children in makeshift classrooms, saved the environment... basically, placing the needs of others above their own.

They did not seek greatness, but all were led by a vision of helping create a better world. In some cases, the opportunities simply arose to challenge them and they willingly took those paths. Like our beloved Cory Aquino, who did not aspire to become the country's leader, but who found meaning in serving her fellowmen at a time when we needed her most.

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Or Helen Lim of Ewah College in Korea, the first woman who earned a doctorate degree in her country... she chose to use that opportunity as a springboard, becoming a beacon for the education and emancipation of women in Korea.

I have learned that the desire to serve is not held back by age or gender, or background or nationality ... Seiei Toyama of Japan was way past 60 and retired when he decided he would plant a forest in the Mongolian desert.

In the rosters of greatness you will find dancers, film-makers, musicians, alongside scientists, doctors, farmers, rural activists, mayors and spiritual leaders. But very few business leaders. For that matter, why don't we have more women business leaders?

How conducive is the country to success for women? A Newsweek Special Report was released last September with this headline:

**PHILIPPINES TOPS ASIA IN NEWSWEEK RANKING OF
'BEST PLACES TO BE A WOMAN'**

The survey analyzed indicators for 165 countries as to which countries offer women the most expansive rights and the best quality of life, and the Philippines ranked 17th overall. Women's progress was measured in five areas and here's how we scored ---

Treatment Under the Law (88), Workforce Participation (89.1), Political Power (85.6), Access to Education (92.2), and Healthcare (57). Alright, so we need to do better in healthcare for women, but think about our overall ranking *vis-a-vis* the world...

Iceland was #1, followed by Sweden and Canada. The US was #8, followed by other Scandinavian and North American countries, and the Philippines took 17th place. The rest of the top 20 were European countries. Filipino women are more empowered relative to their counterparts in Belgium and the UK!

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How did the rest of Asia fare? China was #23, Singapore #37, and Vietnam #45. Only four Asian countries in the top 50 and we, the Philippines, at the top of that list. If you check out other surveys, the Philippines is always the top-ranked Asian country in terms of having a social environment conducive to women's success.

At the recent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned this survey, declaring a tipping point for women, and saying that the success of women was an opportunity boost for all people.

We really have no excuse to not be successful! And once we are, why shouldn't business leaders serve a higher purpose? I believe it is a matter of choice, rather than some vague idea of destiny. Business people can soar, why not?

What does it take, soaring? Here are some tips.

1. You and no one else must first make the choice to soar. (May I recommend that you look up Jill Bolte Taylor's talk on TED... she is a neuro-scientist who suffered a major stroke and lived through it. It is a riveting account of how the brain functions when we make the choices we make. Or get the book, *My Stroke of Insight*.)
2. Having made the choice, you must leave all unnecessary baggage behind. You will soar higher the lighter you travel.
3. You will need to get used to the initial discomfort of pure air and clear light; but you will get to perceive things more clearly.
4. Often, the only company you will have is yourself. Accept the loneliness.
5. While you will need your own functioning equipment, like wings, you will be able to count on the support of elements outside of yourself, like the safety of heights, the wind, and updrafts. Always be grateful and give due credit where they are due.
6. Stay alert. While your reputation will keep you aloft for a long time with little effort on your part, you must know your own strength, and continue to steer yourself in the right direction.

There are countless paths that lead to success; It's what you do with success that makes a difference, and that could even lead you to greatness.



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And so we've come full circle, and are back to that soundbyte from Deepak Chopra... to be truly successful, you must be able to replicate the feeling of happiness for others. In sharing, you will discover that you are without a doubt, on your own path to wholeness, happiness, and who knows Maybe even greatness.

