

RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOUNDATION
December 20, 2005

DR. TON THAT THEIN
223 Britannia Road, Ottawa
Ontario, Canada

Dear Dr. Thien,

Warm greetings from the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation!

We are delighted to share with you selected essays written by secondary (high school) and college/university students who participated in the recently concluded **4th Ramon Magsaysay Student Essay Competition (RMSEC)**, which was conducted this year in the Philippines. The essays we have selected are those which focus on you.

The **RMSEC** is a project of the Foundation which seeks to connect the sterling lifework of Magsaysay awardees with the aspirations of today's youth. The essays in the fourth cycle of the RMSEC were written on the general theme, ***"Inspiring Me to Make a Difference: Personal Lessons from a Magsaysay Awardee."*** The students who chose to write about you have obviously been moved by your life, character and work. We hope you will enjoy this feedback on the impact you have made on each of the essay-writers.

We continue to wish you good health, meaningful work, and much affection from friends and family. Please keep us updated on your current concerns and involvements.

Sincerely,

CARMENCITA T. ABELLA
President

Lessons of Life

“If there is one thing that we should protect above all else, it is our right to unrestrained and unrestricted expression of our thoughts and emotions.”

One of my high school teachers said that to us, and I agree wholly with her. After all, isn't it our right, as citizens of a free and democratic country, to be informed of what goes on around us, to know the truth of what concerns our lives, and to *understand* it?

Thankfully, we Filipinos are fortunate in that aspect. Our generation lives in an era where the media is surprisingly free and unaffected by the controlling power of the government. Reporters and journalists alike are able to inform the public about the issues – controversial, mundane, or otherwise – that they want to hear without fear of retribution from the state. Talk shows and publicized debates between influential and learned individuals enjoy lots of valuable airtime, all because they cater to the unquenchable need of human beings to *know*, and to *know everything*. There are segments in news radio programs and newspaper allotted for texted or e-mailed feedback from the people, ensuring that the views and opinions of citizens from all levels of society are heard. The desire to hear and be heard, to know and to be known, is ingrained in every individual. Business-minded people are highly aware of that fact, which is why the information giving body called the media enjoys the extremely high influence it has over the public. In such a time, and in such a culture, you would think that it would be hard to imagine the opposite situation that has been faced, and is still being faced by some countries with media-repressive governments.

In actuality though, we really do not have to search far and wide for a suitable example of such a country. Take Vietnam, for instance. They followed the principles of Confucius, or *Nho Hoc*, in the beginning. However, conflicts and unresolved issues within the country itself led them to 'lose touch with the peasantry' and become 'vulnerable to Communist persuasion.' This shift, in turn, gave the government influence over everything, so much that they were able to control businesses to livelihoods to domestic issues, and most importantly, the dissemination of information to the public.

We have heard about stories of brutality to media, wherein hardworking journalists committed to exposing the ugly truths of their country are persecuted either through the legal process or by more nefarious ways. There are stories about reporters just up and disappearing mere days after the release of some of their government exposes, their bodies turning up mangled and broken after weeks of searching... There are stories of beatings and threats and torture... We consider many of these inhumane accounts to be mere myths, but the people of war-torn Vietnam recognize them as hard, cold facts-true-to-life stories of the people who live there.

That is why many idealists, daunted by the suppression of the press by the government, left the country to find refuge abroad... all but a few. One of these brave souls is the one recognized by the Ramon Magsaysay Awards Foundation, *the one who inspires me to make a difference*: Ton That Thien, writer, editor, government official, and relentless warrior for the fight for media freedom in Vietnam.

Born in 1924, from the earliest stages of his childhood, Thien showed signs of great promise. He was well versed in history and the philosophies that his country believed in. He earned a degree from the London School of Economics shortly after World War II and was continuing his academic pursuits at the Institute of International Studies in Geneva when his patriotism was tweaked by the

Vietnamese delegation asking for his help. He gave it freely, and played an important role in the conference that paved the way to the eventual liberation of the Vietnamese people.

He ventured into private journalism with his stint on the *Saigon Daily News*, but with other advocates of free journalism, he founded the *Vietnam Guardian* and became its managing editor. Thien exhibited great determination in continuing the fight for freedom of thought which he believed was most important when the Guardian was suppressed in December of 1966. Instead of caving in and giving up, he wrote for other publications instead; continuing on and eventually organizing an intellectual group which up to now is still dedicated to learning the lessons from the past of Vietnam to help raise its present.

When Thien became the Minister of Information in 1968, his first, and most important act was to lift the censorship of the media. To justify this, he is known to have quoted, "Why have 25,000 Americans and more than 100,000 Vietnamese died in this war, if not for freedom?"

Thien's legacy lives on today, and his lessons are kept safe within the minds, hearts, and souls of all responsible journalists and news personnel. He dedicated his life to the pursuit of knowledge, protecting the right of the common people to free speech and discourse. However, he was wise enough to temper this freedom with sensible moral restraints, because the right to information should never be abused. After all, people must never forget that it is still the responsibility of the writers and reporters to print and speak only that which is true.

He has inspired me because, above all else, he is a man with unwavering convictions. To go against the tide and to fight for what he believes in is one of the greatest strengths a person can have, and he had that strength *in spades*. I believe that a lot of Filipinos can learn from him, myself included because we have to learn to fight for our rights, to stand by them, and to *defend* them should the need for it arise.

Our country is in need of strong leaders... Credible, responsible, *honest* leaders who can raise us up from the quagmire we are in right now. And in spite of all the crises that we are going through presently—moral, political, and economic—there are still some exceptional individuals out there who are doing what needs to be done, no matter how hard, for the country. I cannot say that I am one of those individuals right now... but because of what Ton That Thien has taught me, I, and all those of my generation who know his story, *will* be in the future.

The Edifice of Learning

“Learn the full meaning of ren, practice ren constantly, and above all, never cease learning, for learning is living.”

Emphasizing on logical human perception about learning, this substantial footnote was stressed by Vietnam’s Ton That Thien.

A set of fundamentals governs man’s behavior throughout his life. Acquiring without worthiness of this standard is, indeed, a great insufficiency in grasping one’s perfection. Nevertheless, this gaining of collection of lore needs accountability in actions and emotions. These conceptions were vividly marked by this pride of Vietnam.

“No one is born a sage,” Ton That Thien insisted. Wisdom is recognized through purposeful learning of truth. Because learning is a process, it takes a long time for a man to be able to understand what life is. On the other hand, this intellect is become profound through everyday acquisition and perception of lessons from experiences. Yet, upon learning, man is responsible of obtaining knowledge without forsaking the rules of being a man.

Having received the first class education; Ton That Thien has constructed an edifice moral obligations conforming the principles of Confucianism. As his life goes on, every time he acts and speaks, these subordinate and stem from the rules of Confucianism.

Ren, which means humaneness, has been the center of the philosophy of Ton That Thien. This complex philosophy marked basically the difference of man than any other creatures. Man has a big difference in a beast. Man is civilized and decent. Thus, applying beast’s behavior makes a man an outcast. In other words, in everyday actions, man should conform the standards of morality and realize one’s moral and social obligations.

His teachings fill my container of ignorance. He enlightened my spirit about the value of ren. Ren is very important. Ren is a part of learning which each of us should manifest. In my sound life, ren is the dormant nature that I need to explore. To unleash this amiable nature, I should need an extreme fiber of perseverance. Thus, I should seize these fortunes.

In indefinite time and place, I face different form of uncertainties, restlessness and failures. Excuses do not exist in any particular space. Indeed, one needs an effort to overcome those obstacles. This wisdom is what I gain from his principles. Keeping clear peace of mind, will, indeed, turn these blocks of paints. Furthermore, learning from everyday experiences will give strength to my spirit in order to destruct those hindrances. It would be hard in conquering yet a fruitful outcome accounts after these challenges.

Learning is living. It is right. This powerful message that I grasped marks my soul. Throughout one’s life, learning needs a receptacle in my spirit. Now, I built a belief that education is letting wisdom in one’s empty intellect sprouts and blooms bearing fruits of success. If I abandoned those virtuous principles of mankind, I will, certainly, be brought in a world of nightmares and sorrows. Ceasing education will then take the whole spirit of my body, my purpose in life will be banished. But, of all, I know, in a certain time, I will be seizing the perfection of my being human because the nature that obeys standards of morality is on my hands.

New knowledge is gained. Yet, every acquisition needs an application. How can these principles help humanity in establishing an affluent future? Since moral standards have been designed, acts and behaviors have their limitations. I will do only what is right and good for the people around me. I will not accentuate the bad. Through the help of my conscience, I can weigh things and infer and evaluate what will happen. Thus, advocating peacefulness in the human race. Making everything in order and creating the sense of unity that can be seen throughout the area.

Brilliance of morality and dedication in acquiring lessons are the best assets that a man should possess. Aside from the perfection it will bring, an assurance of a beautiful life is waiting: the purpose of life was meant. Everything that one has achieved will, then, be recognized because it is a product of moral obligations.