

A PASSAGE TO READING

Imagine a world without words, where untutored tongue and unlettered thoughts hangs like a curse over every living soul. When I visualize an alternate reality like this, my mind cannot comprehend the loss of the three things I love most: speaking, reading and writing. I distinctly remember how my parents would bring me to bookstores to introduce me to the world of books; I will never forget the feeling of the pages under my fingers, my wonder at checking every shelf and my determination in finding a quiet corner where I could browse whatever storybook caught my attention. Little did I know, my first few trips to the bookstore would spark my interest and my ultimate love for books and make me view words as my own way of self-expression when I could not convey certain emotions and feelings. In my perspective, the invention of the alphabet was easily the most muted earth-shaking event that would surpass any natural cataclysm in terms of life changing significance. As witnessed from history, civilizations that created reliable methods to decipher information independently metamorphosed into advanced cultures as proven by the Greeks and Romans in the West, as well as China and India in the East. Even today, this skill has remained relevant; a tool that can be utilized to attain liberal thinking and intellectual freedom, literacy has prevailed in this ever changing world as an essential aspect of living and interacting with others. The literary skill encompasses not only the ability to read and write, but also the capacity importance, illiteracy and impoverished minds continue to be a plague that blights the Filipino youth of today. Unfortunately, regardless of the known relevance of literacy, studies conducted have shown the declining numbers of Filipino youth who choose to read books to further enhance their knowledge in various areas of learning. Although this trend is hardly astonishing for many, the truth that books are a treasure trove for all who desire to embrace fresh perspectives and broaden their horizons is undeniable and self-justifies the imperative for the Filipino youth to experience the revolutionizing power of books, just as I did and still do.

The wistful notion that books would possess as much charm as gadgets and video games is a fantasy that would instantly turn the tables if seen as fact. These trends,

inseparable as they are now from the lifestyles of the youth today, were once rare and used to be some of the privileges beyond the reach of the common man. Tracing their rise to popularity would give us helpful insights into how the same situation can be mirrored to build a culture of book-reading and literary appreciation. Three factors present themselves as vital for proliferation of any social habit or commodity: necessity, desire and accessibility.

The necessity and affordability of a commodity determine the reputation and popularity of a commodity; the demand of the consumers and the price of the product strongly affect whether or not people would employ a certain product. The circumstances do not differ from the situation of books. Over the years, books such as reference materials, fiction and non-fiction literature have spiraled out of reach of many Filipinos; they cannot afford the books that come at high prices, even if they truly desire to read the book. After realizing that books that they may have an interest in are not within their reach and are too costly for them to afford, they will lose the fascination they may have for books. This is another explanation as to why illiteracy is a plague in the Philippine society, and the seemingly simple skills of learning to read and write are coveted abilities even today.

These circumstances may impact the way the Filipino youth view books; however, the root cause of the decline is their loss of intrigue and fascination in books themselves. The youth of the nation would rather choose to visit internet cafés, or closet themselves the entire day surfing the web than learning more knowledge from reading and research. Books are labelled as dull and uninteresting, but love and respect for books must be cultivated both in the school and home setting. Reading books may be associated with being dull, introverted or anti-social; however, a vast world is waiting to be discovered in books. Countless youth still cringe at the thought of reading because they have yet to find a book that speaks to them in their voice. When I was little, my parents gave me the liberty of picking out and choosing the books that aligned with my interests; they never refused me the opportunity to learn more about things I was fascinated with. At a young age, they encouraged my love for books and even gave me some of their old books and the classics

expose me to all genres. Despite all the new inventions and gadgets in this day and age, my interest in books has endured because even when I was younger, books became constants in my life. It was in reading books that I learned and found myself through the various characters and points of view from the different books; it was in reading books that ushered me into the world of writing and made me a more liberal and independent person. Both the home and school have the responsibility to stimulate the students' interest by offering a wide spectrum of reading materials in various areas of knowledge to serve as a take-off point for the learners to further their own reading once they have identified their own interests.

Books as a whole remain a luxury for many Filipinos who would rather spend their hard-earned income on living essentials even to the point of giving up education altogether. To foster reading as a national pastime and activity, public libraries must be revived, restored and replenished so that they will become sanctuaries of research and learning. Public libraries within easy access of the Filipino are extremely rare and if the youth of the nation would have the opportunity to stumble upon quality books worth perusing, they would frequent libraries with as much verve and enthusiasm as they visit internet shops. Every successful advertisement that beckons to the youth, from cigarettes and liquor to gadgets has always appealed to and capitalized on the youth's need to be "cool," and if we can do the same with reading books, it would reveal to the youth how significant the power of books can be.

A large proportion of our national life is actually spent waiting-waiting for your ride, your turn at doctor's clinic, your flight at the airport, your cup of brew to cool, your food to be served, your turn at the internet shop or sports club, your automobile to be serviced. Why not convert our patience in waiting to productive hours of browsing and reading? Every nook and cranny, every waiting shed, bus stop, gasoline station, coffee and internet shop, physician's clinic, where the public may be found congregating and converging, may be provided with shelves of books to while away the minutes and even emerge upgraded and updated versions of themselves.

While technology is partly responsible for steering the youth away from reading books, its power to disseminate is undeniable and may be put to good use for this cause. Online libraries which house classics may give the Filipino youth the opportunity to explore the world of books, and utilizing technology to propagate the benefits of simply browsing books will motivate and introduce quality books that the youth may find enjoyable. Movies and television shows have become more popular among the youth today, and books that have been adapted into shows or episodes as part of series shows have surprisingly become in demand in bookstores, proving that if books from various genres are transformed into documentaries and shows, the youth would be enticed to read these books.

Aristotle once said, "Man is by nature a social animal." Humans are known as interactive creatures; from birthday parties to simply walking on the street, Filipinos love sharing stories and chatting with each other. Why not share stories and talk about various books and encourage others to read books on certain topics they are interested in? I myself have experienced recommending books and receiving book recommendations from relatives, cousins and friends.

Reading books is about civilizing and cultivating the mind; it molds the way the readers begin to view the world and allows them to think in the best way they can. Despite the circumstances the nation is in now, reading provides a new perspective and a foretaste of a possible, better reality than the present. The Filipino youth is the hope of the future, the light that gives the Philippines an aspiration for a better tomorrow. It is in reading books that the youth learn empathy, determination and the ambition to create a brighter fate for themselves and the nation. It gives freedom in its purest form, a freedom that no one can steal: the power to think liberally and forge new paths, not just for oneself, but also for the country.