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Why community is the key to dealing with the Philippines' current political situation

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This work was originally written for Young Star PH and published on their now-defunct website, youngstar.ph, on May 25, 2019. Apart from minor grammar edits, the essay is unchanged and thus may communicate ideas in a way that I would choose to word or approach differently today. — Adrienne Onda

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More important than the effort, we have to start reorienting our movements towards being more relational, emotional, and personal. We aren't just building a political force—we're building deeper, better relationships with people to rebuild the idea of what society should and can be. We aren't just moving for better elections, better politicians, or better laws; we're moving because we're learning day by day that there is something inherently wrong with how this world treats people who aren't made to survive under the conditions it imposes on us. We're not just building a future; we're unlearning what the past taught us the world was supposed to be.

Things will be slow, not because we want them to be, but because we are strengthening our relationships with each other. This will not only be our personal lifeline, but our movement's as well. Things will be rough, so we need to have a more personal reason to stay.

Because of that, things will take time. Things will be arduous and insanely hard. This is a struggle, after all. And if you demand change without struggling for it and learning on a personal level, then something might be missing in your approach.

The silver lining of the mess of May 13 was that it proved that we aren't just resilient in our scavenging for hope, passively looking to it to stay afloat. We are willing to take up the responsibility to fight for it, keep it alive, whatever it takes.

But people tend to look at hope so abstractly, as if it was something that we needed to reach for metaphysically, deeper or higher than the normalcy of giving up.

As cheesy as it sounds, I'd like to say that hope is here. All we ever really need to do is to reach for the hands of the people who have been with us all along.

It's easy to feel sad, defeated and alone in the wake of this dumpster fire we call the 2019 Midterm Election. In our output-oriented world that values production so much we feel guilty in moments of rest, we can get swept up in things that we instead choose to think and act immediately on our emotions instead of feeling them. But my therapist, who's helping me with depression and anxiety, reprimanded me for that exact thing. She said, "Feelings aren't meant to be intellectualized. They're meant to be felt."

And they are. Emotions first must be felt, processed and understood before we can do something about them.

From what I've seen, what most of us feel post-elections is a mix of helplessness and isolation. We may be looking for ways to address that, trying to see where we can find answers to both our personal and political struggles, but I'd like to point out that we'll only be able to find answers in community.

Community, now more than ever, is exactly what each one of us needs. For one, despite claims that social media has allowed us to be more connected, it seems to have fostered more division and hatred. The prevalence of fake news, callout culture, and cancelling people has drastically lowered the quality of our interactions despite its ever-increasing quantity, trapping us in the logic of echo chambers rather than constructive, necessary diversity.

Nowadays, we talk just to win, rather than to build things together. And that forces us into a sense of helplessness, too; the lack of genuine togetherness, of bridging differences and seeing a new world rise beneath our feet, of accepting and working with the complexities we each bring, inevitably makes us feel as if we can't do anything about the issues we face under this bloody regime.

Building and rebuilding your community today isn't just a personal need at this point. It's a *political imperative*. If we focus on building a sense of community through kind, nuanced interactions, we can build the bonds that link us together—not only strengthening us and our movements, but anchoring us to a place of rest and recuperation as well.

If community is the answer, then, how do we start building them?

Find friends—old or new

You don't need professional political workers or organizers to start organizing your community. We can go back to the basics: our friends, or people we already know or want to know and feel we can trust.

You might need to send out a bat signal (“Hey! I’m super *agit*, anyone I can rant to about politics?”) or set a hang-out. Maybe it’s time to finally fulfill the century-old prophecy of “lunch soon!” Maybe an eyeball with long-time internet friends is necessary. Maybe a house *inuman* is in order. What matters is to hit friends up or make new ones. It’s always the right time to either strengthen bridges or build new ones.

Take things offline

We can’t keep doing things online. Aside from creating our own echo chambers—which is unfortunately unrealistic and unrepresentative of society—no real change can ever come from just posting Facebook essays and engaging threads.

The most important thing to do now is to step out and talk face-to-face. Just talk in real life. We’ve been so used to our convenient spaces online that now, especially in our lowest lows, multiple chats opened don’t really make that much of a difference. The warmth and feeling of belonging that comes with physically being together, unfortunately, can never be replicated by cyberspace. However comforting and comfortable our chatboxes are for genuine, honest venting, the fact that you can see how someone responds, feel their presence, and hear the emotions in their voice in real time will almost always be better for emotional connection than some words on a screen precisely because of the spontaneity and genuineness that cannot be communicated online.

Ask yourself not just what you can do, but what you want to do

When you’re done venting and the frustration and the nervous energy haven’t gone away, you know it’s real. Now it’s time to ask, what *exactly* do you want to do?

And it’s not just asking what to do. Being realistic about your own resources and limitations is important, too. We want a better society, but we can’t have it when people don’t know how to maximize their resources and skills, or when people are burnt out or not yet in the right space to act.

Political action doesn’t just mean street mobilizations or massive rallies. If there’s something people get wrong with movements, it’s that. You can always start with small, accessible, and inclusive actions. You can do anything, from talk-

ing to more diverse people about politics, to sticker-bombing and zine-making, to street performances, to pestering lawmakers on- and offline.

What we need to keep in mind is that there is no limit to what we can do. Big political movements and actions exist, but so do those of a smaller scale. What you want doesn’t have to be big and groundbreaking immediately; new ideas of any size and focus are good, too.

Do something, anything. Just please don’t let that energy go to waste by ranting and then moving on as if it was all you could have done. Because you *can* do more. You can *always* do more. And now, you should be able to do better because you have people who will be there with you.

Find allies

When you have an idea of what you can and want to do in the current space of movements (because there’s always space, even within movements, to be otherwise, and our activism has to start being more creative and different), you can immediately start doing it. But my advice is to find more people who might be good at it, or who might want to do it, too.

When we started our women’s and gender issues community *Usapang Lalaki*, our first step into the outside world was to message friends about meeting and to ask them to bring one extra friend with them who was either self-aware or interested in talking about men’s, women’s, and gender issues. We pitched the idea: a community dedicated to opening up spaces for conversation on women’s and gender issues which specifically aims to include men because of the glaring absence of efforts to involve *everyone* in the struggle against patriarchy and toxic masculinity. We had to promise some free food, but ultimately people came when we asked. And, really, extending the invitation to be present together was all we needed to make our ideas a reality.

Building a movement means building a community

Don’t be discouraged when things take too long or are too difficult, because these things will always take time and effort. In movements, both old and new, we need to start unlearning the idea that this is just another job we have to do. Remember that you *wanted* to do this, and so did the people working with you.