

José Florencio F. Lapeña, Jr., MA, MD

Director and Trustee, Healthway Philippines, Inc.

## Calamities, Corruption and Complicity: Critical Consciousness and Community

*Oh, what a tangled web we weave,  
When first we practise to deceive!*  
— Sir Walter Scott.<sup>1</sup>

**The perennially worsening** floods accompanying natural calamities have brought untold suffering and misery on millions of people, highlighting the role of uncontrolled corruption as the underlying cause. The images of students and workers wading in filthy floodwaters as strong currents rampage, mud and debris destroying produce and property, contrast starkly with photos and videos of crooked legislators and crony contractors, as well as their friends and families, comfortably and callously splurging their ill-gotten wealth on pleasures untold in places unknown. Indeed, “We are witnessing the greatest corruption scandal in our scandal-prone history.”<sup>2</sup>

The English word corruption comes from the Middle English *corruptioun*, (of material things, especially dead bodies, “act of becoming putrid, dissolution, decay;” also of the soul, morals, etc., “spiritual contamination, depravity, wickedness;”) derived from the Latin *corruptus*, which means “to destroy, spoil,” figuratively “corrupt, seduce, bribe,” from the intensive prefix *com* - (meaning “with” or “together”) and *rup*, past participle of *rumpere* (meaning “to break”).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the word’s etymology literally means “to break with” or “to break together.”

One cannot be corrupt alone, for corruption entails *complicity*—“the state of being an accomplice, partnership in wrongdoing or an objectionable act,” from the Old French *complice* “accomplice, comrade, companion,” Late Latin *complicem*, accusative of *complex* “partner, confederate,” from the Latin *complicare* “to fold together,” from *com* “with, together” + *plicare* “to fold, to weave.”<sup>4</sup> The scale of complicity is mind-boggling, involving multiple levels of engagement, in diverse branches of governance, and trillions of pesos. Accusations and counter-accusations, exposés and allegations, inquiries and investigations, evolve by the hour, with no one (senators, congressmen, cabinet secretaries, who else?) seemingly immune from involvement. And yet they (may) all go scot-free; or will they?

**Keywords:** *calamities; corruption; complicity; consciousness, critical; community; oppression; inequity; social justice; health; education*

Correspondence: Prof. Dr. José Florencio F. Lapeña, Jr.  
Healthway Medical Network  
7F Makati Stock Exchange  
6767 Ayala Ave., Makati City 1226  
Philippines  
Phone: +63 2 7720 6128  
Email: lapena.jff@achealth.com.ph

The author declared that this represents original material that is not being considered for publication or has not been published or accepted for publication elsewhere, in full or in part, in print or electronic media; that the manuscript has been read and approved by the author, that the requirements for authorship have been met by the author, and that the author believes that the manuscript represents honest work.



Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)  
Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International



The toll on health and well-being is enormous, as disease and displacement are direct consequences of the calamities whose effects are compounded by complicit corruption. As health-care providers, we may participate in rescue and relief operations, rendering whatever aid we can, wherever we may do so. But such a response is at best superficial and temporary, akin to participation in annual international coastal cleanup days,<sup>5</sup> as the rubbish we pick up from the shore over a few hours is immediately replaced by more trash after we leave. Is publishing photo documentation of such activities any different from posting photos in social media of our participation in rallies such as the “*Baha sa Luneta*”<sup>6</sup> or “Trillion Peso March?”<sup>7</sup>

Can such activities really play a role in addressing the situation? Did the EDSA People Power uprising 39 years ago<sup>8</sup> make a difference, and if so, what difference did it make? I believe that like the EDSA People Power uprising in 1986, the *Baha sa Luneta* and Trillion Peso rallies in 2025, with a bigger rally set for the 162nd birth anniversary of Filipino hero Gat Andres Bonifacio on November 30,<sup>9</sup> can serve to raise communal critical consciousness. Critical consciousness, a term coined by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>10</sup> However, after 55 years, “divergent” and “inconsistent” views of critical consciousness still need to be resolved to attain “conceptual clarity” and regain “transformative potential.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Jemal, “transformative potential (TP), a theoretical framework informed by and developed in response to the theoretical limitations of Freire’s critical consciousness pedagogy, is defined as levels of consciousness and action that produce potential for change at one or more socio-ecosystemic (e.g., individual, institutional) levels.”<sup>12</sup> Just as critical consciousness has two dimensions—critical reflection or critical analysis, and critical action or social action, Jamal continues, “transformative potential (TP) comprises two dimensions: transformative consciousness (TC) and transformative action (TA),” where “critical consciousness and critical action are the highest levels for each dimension and produce the most transformative potential.”<sup>11</sup>

Critical reflection and action entail collective reflection and action. Just as corruption entails complicity, so must our critical reflection and action in response be collective and communal. *Conscientização* (critical consciousness-raising; conscientization) and *Praxis*, the cyclical or simultaneous process of reflecting and acting, must be engaged in collectively by the community. Co-learning, communication, and group process are essential elements of consciousness-raising for true transformative action to take place.<sup>10</sup>

We, the people, are the community who need to collectively engage in critical reflection and action against the complicit corruption that brazenly continues unchecked. To paraphrase Küng, “we must be informed of what transpired, so that being inspired, we can transform”<sup>13</sup>—our lives, our nation, and the abominable corrupt situation.

## REFERENCES

1. Scott SW. Marmion: Canto VI. The Battle. XVII. [cited 2025 October 4] Available from: <https://allpoetry.com/Marmion:-Canto-VI---The-Battle>.
2. Magno A. Untouchables. First Person (Opinion Piece), The Philippine Star. 2025 Sep 30. [cited 2025 October 4]; Available from: <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2025/09/30/2476382/untouchables>.
3. Harper D. Etymology of corruption. Online Etymology Dictionary. [cited 2025 October 4]; Available from: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/corruption>.
4. Harper D. Etymology of complicity. Online Etymology Dictionary. [cited 2025 October 4]; Available from: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/complicity>.
5. Torib YF. Thousands of Filipino volunteers joint Intl Coastal Cleanup 2025. The Manila Times. 2025 Sep 24. [cited 2025 Oct 6]; Available from: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/09/24/business/maritime/thousands-of-filipino-volunteers-join-intl-coastal-cleanup-2025/2188867>.
6. Sarao Z. ‘Baha sa Luneta’ protest starts. Inquirer.net. 2025 Sep 21. [cited 2025 Oct 6]; Available from: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2112385/baha-sa-luneta-protest-commences>.
7. Talusan L. ‘Trillion Peso March’: 100,000 Filipinos rally to denounce corruption and demand justice. CBN News. 2025 Sep 25. [cited 2025 Oct 6]; Available from: <https://cbn.com/news/world/trillion-peso-march-100000-filipinos-rally-denounce-corruption-and-demand-justice>.
8. Jamilla P. EDSA People Power 2025 commemoration in UP. University of the Philippines website. [Internet]. 2025 Feb 25. [cited 2025 Oct 6]; Available from: <https://up.edu.ph/edsa-people-power-2025-commemoration-in-up/>.
9. Esmaguil II PR. Trillion Peso March Movement sets bigger rallies for November 30. Rappler. 2025 Oct 1. [cited 2025 Oct 6]; Available from: <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/trillion-peso-march-movement-launch-2025/>.
10. Freire P. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 30th Anniversary Edition. Ramos MB, translator. Ó1970; 1993. New York/London: Continuum; 2005. p. 35.
11. Jemal A. Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *Urban Rev*. 2017 May 2;49(4):602-626. DOI: 10.1007/s11256-017-0411-3; PubMed PMID: 29657340; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC5892452.
12. Jemal AD. Transformative consciousness: conceptualization, scale development and testing (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) NJ: Rutgers University; 2016. In: Jemal A. Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *Urban Rev*. 2017 May 2;49(4):602-626. DOI: 10.1007/s11256-017-0411-3; PubMed PMID: 29657340; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC5892452.
13. Küng H. The Church. Ockenden R, Ockenden R, translators. New York: Burns and Oates; 1968.