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lost without  
purpose



Angelo Valencia speaks to farmers and teachers at a community gathering on Mount Pulag

## INTRODUCTION • LOST WITHOUT PURPOSE

All that is gold does not glitter,  
Not all those who wander are lost.

JRR TOLKIEN, THE RIDDLE OF STRIDER

There is a purpose for why we are here, but we don't always know what it is.  
And that is okay.

That is how I found myself sitting next to my wife and son as our driver, Dodoy, drove the SUV up a steep unpaved trail that led to one of the highest villages in the Philippines. I had come to the mountain to talk to someone who would reveal to me the secret of finding purpose.

As our vehicle bounced on the rutted path, I reviewed my research notes about the man I was going to meet.

Name: Angelo Valencia, or Kuya Pultak (which means “bald big brother” in the native Kalungaya dialect)

Year of birth: 1968

Occupation: Community organiser for Klasrum ng Pag-asa, a civic organisation which has built 60 classrooms and schools in places where the roads end and the streets have no name; COO of Southeast Asia's largest corn production factory; senior partner in a law firm. And construction worker, farmer, café operator. (Note to self: Is he for real?)

Singular accomplishment: He headed north to build and repair five schools in villages near the base of Mount Pulag, where there were no roads, electricity or running water. He did it by mobilising friends, farmers and teachers – as well as his ex-boss, former classmates and senators – to be involved in community projects. Then he headed south to build more than 40 schools and classrooms in the remote and war-torn Sulu area. Here, he organised the Filipino Marines, Christian volunteers and Abu Sayyaf rebels to build classrooms, even while fighting raged on between insurgents and government forces. Angelo did this while juggling his work as COO of the corn production factory. He did it all in three years. (Note to self: Is he nuts?)

As we arrived, I found myself surprised by the beauty of the village, perched high on the mountain, with clouds scudding overhead. Crops of potatoes, carrots and cabbages blanketed the terraced slopes, creating a sea of green with orange dots. We drove past bent pine trees cradling electrical wires and water pipes that criss-crossed the road. We passed well-tended houses. We waved to children standing by the roadside.

Around one final bend, Dodoy drove us to a wooden house where the Baban family, our hosts, warmly welcomed my family. After we unpacked, Angelo showed up, flanked by giggling children at play. He beckoned me to walk to Mount Pulag Primary School, which he had helped to build a few years earlier. We climbed the stairs to a classroom for Grade Six students, as the roof above us rattled under gale-force winds.

“Angelo, how did you find purpose? And how do you create purpose for so many people?” I asked him.

I had flown across the South China Sea into Manila and travelled nearly 10 hours by SUV to arrive here. And I wanted to get to the heart of the matter.

“What’s the secret?” I asked.

“Let me tell you a story,” he demurred.

For the next hour, Angelo told me how he lost himself deep beneath the sea, went searching in the countryside, and then found himself again, on top of this mountain – right where we were standing.

As the youngest of six siblings, Angelo grew up in a middle-class family in Manila. His father worked as a chief engineer of a shipping company, while his mother managed the household. Blessed with a photographic memory,

Angelo breezed his way through university and boozed his way through the fraternities. He woke up from his stupor when he received a call – his father had died of a heart attack while working in Sweden. “Take your studies more seriously,” his mother told him. He buckled down.

After graduating with a law degree from Ateneo de Manila University and working in a few law firms, he joined a conglomerate owned by a billionaire businessman behind the country’s top brands. As senior counsel, he won big cases that saved the company millions in tax dollars. Despite his achievements, he felt restless.

One Friday in 2011, while diving in Tubbataha, a protected reef in the Sulu Sea, Angelo heard a pop. His middle ear had burst. Despite losing control of his limbs, he managed to surface slowly and ended up sprawled flat on the boat deck.

As he lay in great pain, his life flashed before him – how he won the Quiz Bee, sailed through law school, parlayed his social and political skills to ascend the heights of corporate life, and won big cases for one of Asia’s richest men. He was grateful for these amazing opportunities.

“But is there more to life than this?” he asked himself. What if he were to die this instant? Then he realised: “I don’t want to be remembered for my death. I want to be remembered for how I live.”

Weeks later, he quit his job. He decided to get lost – literally. Without a destination in mind, Angelo and his driver Dodoy drove due north. They forded rivers, visited farms, slept in tents, and talked to strangers. As he wandered, he wondered:

- Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?
- How do I discern the things of lasting value?
- How do I use my strengths in the right way for the right reasons?
- What are the goals that truly matter?

Angelo had been swimming in the sea of success, pulled by the undertow of what other people wanted, thinking that it was also what he wanted. But his near-death experience woke him up. He was now a seeker of purpose.

“I left my job not knowing what I was looking for, but believing that along the way, I would find it,” he told me.

After two weeks of wandering, Angelo headed to Mount Pulag, the highest peak in Luzon, the largest island of the Philippines. At the ranger station, he

started talking to the children who knew the scientific names of all the plants. Fascinated by their innate intelligence, he asked to visit their school. It turned out to be a one-room daycare centre, where 21 students shared 3 textbooks. There was no toilet, only a hole in the ground. As the wind blew, he felt his heart strangely warmed.

“What does the school need?” he asked Josie Sumakey, a new university graduate who volunteered as the daycare teacher.

“We need crayons, pencils and toys,” she said.

Angelo promised to bring those things and more. Just as he was leaving, Josie ran after him.

“Sir, we’d like to ask one more favour. Can you replace our tattered flag?” she called out, pointing to the threadbare flag blown by the perpetual wind.

“I will,” Angelo promised.

As he drove off with Dodoy, Josie wondered: Would he really return?

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There is a crisis of purpose in our world today.

We live in a divided world where many citizens feel their political leaders are producing results nobody wants, grasping for power and grabbing the spoils for themselves, usually at the expense of the poor.

Thomas Fuller, the former Southeast Asia correspondent for the *New York Times*, wrote powerful investigative pieces as he travelled throughout the region for a decade. We occasionally met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I covered news for the *Associated Press*, and we often talked about how scandal-plagued leaders in the region reigned with impunity.

In his 2016 valedictory essay on Southeast Asia, Fuller wrote: “Watching the rise of Asia during my time here, I have wondered whether there can be continued prosperity without justice. Can societies so riddled with corruption carry through with the economic advances made over recent decades?”

Despite cynicism towards global leadership, many of us still believe in the power of purpose. We seek purpose-led leaders who inspire us to do something wherever we are. But while we believe that purpose matters, the reality is that for most of us, purpose is hard to find: at work; in the struggle to make money; where we live and where we raise our families; or when we go through difficult or defining moments in life.

## THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING PURPOSE AT WORK

From the stainless steel-and-glass offices in Singapore to the distant villages dotting Indonesia’s innumerable islands, millions of people young and old are struggling to find their individual purpose. Instead, it seems that their only purpose in life is to endure long hours of work. In Asia, the average worker spends 60 to 80 hours in the workplace. The Japanese have a word, *karoshi*, for sudden mortality due to overworking.

Years ago, a young man came to my home, and we talked till past midnight. As he was leaving, he told me he was going home to continue working. The next morning, his mother found him lying in bed with his laptop still on. There were no obvious causes for his death. Later, we learned that he had worked for three days without sleep. I was the last person to see him alive.

When we make work our sole mission in life, we risk being consumed by a force that can destroy us or break our families apart. This is because we unknowingly take on the expectations and responsibilities thrust upon us by the companies we work for.

But most companies do not care about our job security, or purpose in life, or our families. Employers are more concerned about whether their employees fulfill the company’s goal of maximising profits. Fewer than 3 out of 10 people feel happy at work, even though more than half of them could recite their company’s vision and values, according to a survey of 1,000 companies in the Asia Pacific. And despite being ranked as one of the richest countries in the world, Singapore’s workers are the least engaged in Asia, according to a 2016 survey by Aon Hewitt.

Most of us are working hard, driven by goals at work. But like Angelo Valencia, we may still feel lost.

## THE PITFALL OF FINDING PURPOSE IN MONEY

Many people I talked to believe there is no point in finding purpose at work. They claim they already have a purpose that works for them: keep finding money.

“The people who talk a lot about purpose are those who don’t have to worry about making money,” said a young man, while rolling his eyes. He was an analyst at a billion-dollar investment fund in Malaysia.

“Your company offers a high salary and great benefits!” I told him. “And you’re still concerned about making enough money?”

“Right now, I’m just trying to stay afloat and put food on the table,” he said. “I need a purpose that enables me to continue earning a living.”

I considered the greater truth he was trying to express. It is true that we all need money to make ends meet – especially for low-income workers who need to support children, parents or family members with special needs. It is hard to live purposefully while struggling for survival.

“Money could be an important pre-condition for finding purpose,” I conceded. But I also wanted to tell the young executive what most of the world’s thinkers, teachers and theologians agree on: Don’t let money become your real purpose in life.

If you believe earning money is your primary purpose, perhaps this purpose was inadvertently imposed on you early on in life. Your parents might have emphasised the value of saving for a rainy day. However, such advice was not meant to make money your sole mission in life.

Would you tell your boss that the biggest reason why you want to work for him is just to make money? Probably not. Nor would you want to work for a boss whose primary mission is to make money – and who has no interest in coaching or guiding you to become better. And even when we are focused on working for money, most of us really do want to achieve something more meaningful.

Aaron Hurst, bestselling author of *The Purpose Economy*, wrote: “Money often conflicts with finding purpose, as it creates a false substitute for defining success. The learn, earn and then return model is inadequate for today.”

The purpose-led leaders I talked to put it more bluntly: If all you aim for is just money, you won’t achieve your aims.

## THE STRUGGLE TO FIND PURPOSE WHERE WE LIVE

I have discovered that finding purpose is particularly difficult for people who live in collective societies – where the cultural norms, society, friends, extended family, parents and children influence their direction in life.

- In Singapore, I met young people who were experiencing “quarter-life crisis” because they never had to contemplate their purpose in life. Since the age of five, they have been automatically jumping through one hoop

after another – acing exams that led to universities that funnelled them into jobs. According to a survey of 390 new graduates, more than 70 percent fear making the wrong decisions as they fret about not saving enough or losing out on their hopes for a better life.

- In Japan, professionals are expected to work long hours and face long commutes home. The problem is exacerbated by the country’s rapidly aging population, where adult diapers are outselling baby diapers. Fewer are entering the labour market, while more people under their 40s are questioning why they labour as mindless drones in jobs that are no longer as secure as before. “I don’t find joy in my work,” a young man told me in Osaka. It is difficult to find purpose when you are doing something you don’t enjoy to live a life that doesn’t go anywhere.
- In Cambodia, every person I talked to has a traumatic story about a family member who died or suffered under the Khmer Rouge regime. Under their dictator, Pol Pot – who advocated “no gain in keeping, no loss in weeding out” – one out of every four people in the country were killed. The genocide targeted doctors, lawyers, merchants and clergy – and destroyed the country’s culture, economy, currency and spiritual fabric. In just four years, hope and purpose were purged from the people. Decades later, the energy in their cities is vibrant, but in some way, everyone I met was orphaned. They had been scarred by the past, and they remain scared of the present.
- In multiracial countries with religious and ethnic diversity, such as Malaysia, the challenge comes from forging a common purpose when everyone seems to pursue different priorities.
- In the Philippines, Indonesia, India and China, where populations range from 100 million to more than 1 billion, the struggle to find purpose arises because each person is a faceless resource on an assembly line in a factory among thousands of factories.

No matter where you live, you will face family-related dilemmas. You work long hours to provide a better life for your children whom you do not get to spend time with; you run around frantic and frazzled to keep your family members fed and fulfilled; or you feel torn apart by what you aspire and what your family members expect of you.

Along the way, you may have heard or read advice that says: “Stop being

such a people-pleaser, and start choosing what makes you happy.” But this does not make sense either because you do love your family. Their happiness makes you happy. Your family, after all, is the first arena where the seed of purpose is nourished, especially when you were a child. And no matter how old you are, your family will continue to shape you into who you are – and rightfully so.

But this also means that purpose, expectations and obligations morph into one when it comes to family, and you cannot figure out which is which.

You may still feel lost even when you belong in a family.

### THE UNCERTAINTY OF FINDING PURPOSE IN DECISIVE MOMENTS

On a television show broadcast in May 2015, Alibaba CEO Jack Ma spoke to young South Koreans about how to be successful in the different stages of life.

“Before you turn 20 years old, be a good student,” he said.

According to Ma, before you turn 30, you should follow a good leader at work who teaches you with passion. Before 40, you need to decide whether you want to be an entrepreneur. Between 40 and 50, you have to think about how you can focus on what you are good at. After 50, you rely on the young, so you should invest in them to ensure they are good.

“When you are over 60 years old, spend time for yourself...on the beach, in the sunshine,” he quipped, drawing laughter.

Whenever I show the YouTube video of Ma’s message to friends or clients, it strikes a chord with them. What he says makes sense. But what he doesn’t say is what happens during the transitions into each life stage:

- In your 20s, life offers you so many opportunities to learn, but you are also faced with life-changing decisions – which jobs to apply for, what career to pursue, where to live, maybe even who to marry.
- In your 30s, you are blessed with tremendous drive, but you are also pulled apart by competing demands. How do you prioritise your young family with work demanding more of your time and attention?
- In your 40s, you are enjoying the sweet spot between the strengths and experiences you have attained, but you are faced with priorities that involve not only your family but also your company or your community. How do you make life-giving choices that benefit you and the people you serve?
- In your 50s, you start thinking about your legacy and impact. How do

you instill a sense of purpose in others as well? Is there something else significant you can do in the second half of your life?

- And in your 60s and beyond, life may become more challenging than sunning on the beach. The usual reasons that give you purpose – parenting and work responsibilities – may have receded, while new issues emerge, including declining health and a dwindling circle of relationships. What is your purpose for waking up each morning?

All these questions came to the fore a few years ago, right after I had published my book *Barefoot Leadership*. At my book signing, I met a downcast-looking woman. “Why are you sad?” I asked her.

“I’ve just been named a junior partner in the law firm,” she said. It took her only five years to achieve the position coveted by most young lawyers.

“Congratulations?” I said. “Don’t you enjoy your work?”

“No!” she whispered fiercely, as a line of colleagues formed behind her. Her eyes were rimmed with tears.

“If you don’t like your job, why don’t you quit?” I whispered back.

“I have no choice. My parents wanted me to be a lawyer, so I’m still stuck here,” she said.

I couldn’t believe it. Here was a woman who excelled at a job she didn’t want, achieving a dream that wasn’t hers. She knew how to advocate on behalf of her clients, yet she couldn’t advocate for herself.

I wanted to help her, but because the line was now snaking down the room, I merely handed her the signed book and wished her well.

For months, her dilemma stayed with me. It seemed terrible that what should have been a cause for thanksgiving became a catalyst for tears. I wished I could have done more for that woman lost in a sea of expectations.

Her plight planted a purpose in me to write this book.

But one night, as I lay in bed, I realised that it was not just the young lawyer who felt lost. I, too, have been lost. There are stages in life where I feel convinced I have found my purpose. And then that purpose slips away leaving me a little lost.

We can all feel lost when we think we have...

- No choices: “You’ve burned all your bridges,” my father said sadly, when I told him I was on the verge of flunking high school. I was grieved by the chain of stupid choices I had made that led me up to that point.
- Too many choices: Four years later, I graduated with the highest honours

from university and became overwhelmed: Should I go to Wall Street, work in the university, or attend graduate school? United States (US), Hong Kong or Malaysia? I was confounded by how difficult it was to decide between equally good choices.

- Too many responsibilities: Many years later, when I became a father, making bold choices grew difficult. I realised that my choices had a cascading effect on the family, organisations and community that I served. It was easy to feel that I had little choice.

Many books on purpose quote the poem “Invictus” by English poet William Ernest Henley, which says: “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” But here is the reality for most of us: You may think you are the captain sailing your boat in the sea of life. Yet your father is hoisting the sails, your mother is holding the tiller, your relatives are pulling the oars, and your friends are shouting where you should go. Don’t be surprised if you end up on a different shore.

It is hard to find purpose. And it is not your fault.  
But we can do something about it.

## WHY PURPOSE MATTERS

Purpose matters at work and in our lives. In the recent decade, neuroscientists, psychologists, leadership experts and theologians have concurred that the power of purpose impacts almost everything we do.

**Purpose transforms work.** Companies in the US and Europe are recognising that an authentic mission spurs higher performance. A study on purpose and performance, published by London-based non-profit organisation Blueprint Trust, cites dozens of studies and books published in the past 10 years arguing for why purpose can make a difference for companies, employees and society. *Harvard Business Review*, which publishes an annual list of 100 best-performing CEOs in the world, has revised its selection methodology to consider how top leaders think long-term about environmental, social and governance matters. “When we compared the results of the best-performing CEOs to those of their less successful peers, we found that best-in-class CEOs...

show a greater sense of purpose and mission, and demonstrate passion and urgency,” wrote Dean Stamoulis, whose team conducted psychometric profiles of 200 chief executives in the world.

Meanwhile, top researchers and psychologists, including Martin Seligman, Adam Grant, Carol Dweck, Dan Ariely and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahnemann, have conducted research in intrinsic motivation, mindsets and purpose. Spurred by Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, more companies are trying to do good and do well. Social enterprises, Silicon Valley unicorn start-ups and management consultancies all tout the power of purpose.

Capturing the spirit of our times, *Fortune* magazine has developed a “Change the World” list of companies that create positive impact through their core business strategies. While the purpose of businesses in the past was to maximise profits for shareholders and owners, the magazine asserts that today, the “ultimate purpose of a corporation is to serve society and to make the world a better place.”

**Purpose helps you live well.** Besides work, purpose is good for our lives in at least three ways. First, people who have a sense of purpose in life, whether religious or not, are more likely to look after their health. In studies that involved 136,000 participants from the US or Japan over 7 years, researchers concluded that the mortality rate was 20 percent lower for participants with a higher sense of purpose in life. The flipside is also true: People with a low sense of purpose are more likely to consider suicide, suffer from depression or anxiety, and get involved in drug abuse.

Second, we sleep better. A study in the journal *Sleep Science and Practice* reported that people with the most purposeful lives had better sleep quality overall.

Third, purpose enables us to endure tough times, especially as we age. Research on a group of nursing home residents revealed that those who were encouraged to make simple decisions in their daily life, such as watering a plant, had a lower mortality rate compared to the control group. Other studies show that a higher purpose in life corresponds to reduced risk of stroke, heart attack, depression and Alzheimer’s.

**Purpose changes how people value you.** Purpose creates a halo effect on how people perceive us and the companies we work in. In 2013, I was invited to speak at the Ernst & Young (EY) World Entrepreneur of the Year awards

ceremony in Monte Carlo. During the awards dinner, the event organisers flashed two-minute video clips of each country's winner. The CEOs at my table started canvassing for our top picks for the global winner. It was clear that we picked our favourites based on which companies delivered the most social impact. I found myself rooting for the businesses that were curing cancer, creating products for the disabled, and recycling waste.

The World Entrepreneur of the Year turned out to be Hamdi Ulukaya, a yogurt maker. The judges cited his prowess in growing his company, Chobani, LLC, from zero to more than a billion dollars in less than five years. As the fireworks exploded and he lifted the award, I could not help feeling disappointed. How was he building a better world?

But I changed my mind as I learned more about his story. In 1996, the Turkish immigrant arrived in the US with US\$3,000 in his pocket. After taking a small business loan, he bought an old Kraft factory in upstate New York. He grew the business till he was selling US\$1 billion worth of Greek yogurt every year – by employing Syrian refugees and promoting the health-related advantages of Greek yogurt. (Three years after winning the EY award, he pledged to give his employees 10 percent of the shares in Chobani.)

Entrepreneurs need to infuse their companies with a sense of purpose to change the way business is done in the world. Hamdi has told entrepreneurs: “Don't be shy of bringing your purpose (to work). If new trees have a sense of purpose, we will have a better forest.” The Chobani story, retold thousands of times in print and television media, has garnered him millions of dollars of free advertising. Other yogurt makers are still scrambling to catch up to Chobani. Purpose, evidently, sells.

## SEARCHING FOR PURPOSE-LED LEADERS

Beyond reading about scientific research or talking to business leaders, I wanted to meet actual people who were living out their purpose on the ground, particularly in areas and countries where purpose is hard to find. I wanted to see how purpose had made a difference in their lives – and the lives of the people around them. But where would I start? Who could I learn from?

Everywhere I looked, the best ideas and research on purpose came from

the US. The hundreds of books I read exhorted readers, in some way or other, to become captains of their own souls and masters of their own fates. Was there a different way of understanding how we discover our personal sense of purpose while living among others?

In 2012, I met Nur Hamurcu, a Dutchman of Turkish descent, who recently set up a management consultancy in Kuala Lumpur. He told me how his Netherlands-based company, &samhoud, helped their staff to find purpose.

A devout Muslim, Nur explained that work matters to God and humanity. “Work is not just work. When I work, I can combine my higher purpose with what I'm doing. Work is a waste if it doesn't serve the right purpose.”

When I talked to dozens of &samhoud staff, both in Kuala Lumpur and Utrecht, I found that every single person knew the company's higher purpose, core values and organisational goals. Even more remarkably, everyone in the company was able to tell me his or her individual purpose in life. Meeting Nur in Malaysia helped me to realise that the best place to look for purpose is *right where I am*.

Malaysia is at the confluence of great religions. So is Asia. Why should most business and leadership books on purpose come from the West when more and more people from the West – from young professionals to retirees – are travelling to Southeast Asia, India, China and Japan on pilgrimage? In fact, the greatest spiritual leaders in history, including Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Krishna, Mohammad, Moses and Zoroaster came from Asia.

My research team began developing lists of people I might want to meet. Who are the people alive today who, regardless of race, religion or social status, have harnessed the power of purpose to address unique challenges, particularly in Asia? And thanks to a fellowship from Khazanah Nasional, the national investment agency of Malaysia, I travelled to 10 countries and interviewed more than 100 purpose-led leaders.

When I landed in each country, I crafted universal questions on purpose that were specific to the leaders living in that country.

- In Singapore, a nation depicted on many maps as a “little red dot,” I asked: How might your limitations in life actually empower you to think about a bigger purpose?
- In Indonesia, where people are spread across thousands of islands, I wondered: How might purpose connect disparate groups of people?



- In the Philippines, where patriotism runs high every time the national anthem is sung, I pondered: How might purpose keep you focused on the common good?
- In Malaysia, whose people have long been divided along racial lines, I inquired: How might purpose bring radically different people together to serve each other's best interests?
- In Thailand, where pitched battles have been fought by political factions, I contemplated: How might purpose help to heal deep wounds?
- In India, where there are so many layers between the rich and poor, I reflected: How might purpose spur me to think beyond myself?
- In China, where you are one among a billion, I examined: How might purpose help you to learn more about yourself?
- In Hong Kong, a city struggling under two systems of rule, I mulled: How might purpose help people make a stand for what matters?
- In Cambodia, where a despot wiped out the country's reason for existence, I probed: How might purpose help in the recovery of the people and nation?
- In Japan, with its burden of an aging population, I explored: How might purpose bring energy and renewal?

The purpose-led leaders I talked to included the following:

- A metal welder who was deserted by his wife and mother while trying to reinvent the sanitary napkin;
- A woman who served the cause of the poor by training the elite on how to make money;
- A former marketing executive who turned gamblers and assassins into security guards and guardians of community values;
- A woman who kept on returning to the jungle despite contracting malaria more than 50 times;
- A group of business owners who met regularly to challenge each other to stop paying bribes and start paying taxes in full;
- A doctor who has been regarded by many as a god;
- A funeral director who found life by helping grieving families bury their dead;
- A young man who mobilised volunteers to build houses for the disadvantaged from start to finish in just three days;

- A hospital administrator who lost his job but ended up becoming a pioneer in medical tourism;
- A teacher who challenged her high-school students to build houses and medical clinics halfway around the world;
- A backpacker who persuaded thousands of tourists to each carry one extra kilogram of teaching materials for rural schools;
- A man who named himself after a toilet; and
- An Englishman who sold his Ferraris to give to the poor.

As I spent hours, or days, interviewing them, watching them work or joining them in what they do, I discovered that the purpose-led leaders were quite ordinary, like the rest of us. They experienced joys, faced struggles, and shared with me their tips for finding purpose. Through them, I learned that it is possible for the rest of us to live purposefully in the midst of our ordinary lives.

#### **SEEKERS, DECIDERS, CHANGE-MAKERS AND THE REST OF US**

My goal is to write a playbook for living a purposeful life together. I write this book for seekers. If you see a broken world or experience brokenness within and are looking for clarity, these are the questions you may be asking:

- How do I find purpose when life is already charted out for me?
- What are the core principles or values that energise me the most?
- What are my greatest strengths and abilities?
- What are the most important personal and professional goals I want to achieve in the next five years?

Secondly, I write this book for the deciders. If you want to make life-giving decisions during life-changing situations, this book offers you a process for doing so as you ask the following questions:

- Can I pursue a career that helps me strike a balance between upholding my current responsibilities and creating my own space in the world?
- Is it possible for me to find – or maybe start up – a company that is driven by the same core values that I value?
- How do I find my purpose and calling while caring for those I love? And how do I help them find purpose too?

Thirdly, I write this for change-makers. If you want to transform your own life, your family, and the organisation you serve, the ‘step by step’ exercises in this book will help you to connect the dots between you and your world.

Not least, I write this for the rest of us who live ordinary lives – the mothers and fathers, sons and daughters with daily duties and responsibilities. I will share with you stories from my family’s life. Hopefully, the personal examples will help you see your place in this world and find purpose together with those you love.

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One tattered flag.

That was all it took to breathe purpose into Angelo Valencia. In that simple request for a flag from Josie, the volunteer teacher, he saw the dignity of the Mount Pulag villagers and felt their patriotic pride for the nation of the Philippines. He could see the farmers’ willingness to sacrifice to educate their children, and the children’s potential to become the best. He discerned the villagers’ community values that held them together, high up in the clouds.

That simple request offered him something that he had been seeking and yet not finding: redemption.

“Each of us needs redemption,” Angelo said. The diving accident made him realise how he had squandered his gifts and talents. On this mountain, he had a chance to begin anew. He challenged himself with this thought: Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future; despite what you have done in your past, you can still make a difference.

“In that moment, I was awakened,” he told me.

Deeply touched, he brought back three flags. He also brought toys, books and computers. He enlisted more volunteers and led them back to this mountain village again and again. They brought winter clothing, slippers, umbrellas, raincoats and food.

“Draw what you want to see happening in a year’s time, and we will see what we can do,” he told the children. The kids drew roads and lamp posts, a school with classrooms, and a flag blowing in the breeze.

“By Christmas, you will have a school with classrooms,” he said.

Using his network, Angelo lobbied non-governmental organisations,

corporations, politicians and his university fraternity members to help. He hired construction workers. Two farmers donated land for the primary school. The villagers transported sand from the riverbank using their vegetable trucks. They built during the typhoon season, when the winds could sweep you off the mountain. The nights were freezing and dark because the village had no electricity. To ward off the biting cold, Angelo slept with a cat in his jacket, flanked by dogs and chickens, next to the fireplace. On 10 December 2011, 8 months after his diving accident, the 50-plus children carried chairs into the two newly completed classrooms.

“Attorney Angelo is kind. We are willing to give free labour so that our children can continue till high school and university,” said Narsie Adais, the president of the school’s Parent-Teacher Association for the past 12 years. A farmer and construction worker in Abucot, Narsie grew up an orphan and was a high school dropout. “We want our children to manage themselves even when they are far from family,” he said.

Angelo subsequently lobbied the local and provincial authorities to fund two more classrooms and pay for the salaries of five permanent teachers. A few years later, when I visited, there were seven teachers and classes from kindergarten to Grade Six.

Altogether, Angelo has built three schools on the mountain. And then in a staggering move which merits a whole book by itself, he mobilised the Marines, Christians and militant Muslims in the Sulu area – the lair of the separatist Abu Sayyaf – to build more than 40 schools together.

Not only had Angelo found his purpose, but he was able to energise others – villagers, teachers, children, farmers, politicians, corporations, media and even terrorists – to join him in the cause. Today, the seed of his purpose has sprouted into a full-grown tree that has given shelter to many. Now the people on that mountain village describe their history as Before Angelo/ After Angelo.

Before Angelo: Villagers sat in the winter darkness to eat bland meals of boiled chicken and vegetables for dinner. Children had to walk for hours to get to school. Farmers grew only five kinds of crops. They had no contact with the wider world.

After Angelo: There are roads, electricity and water supply. They have a primary school with solar panels, computers and a library. Meals are now seasoned with spices. The walk to school can now be measured in minutes.

Children can study at night. They have won regional and national contests in sports and studies. A group of 50 farmers have organised themselves into an organic farming cooperative, and they are engaging with corporate sponsors and seeking certification from authorities to diversify into new products. More city folks, including myself, have come to visit or volunteer.

Nana Wais, the school principal, told me there were 134 students from kindergarten to Grade Six at Mount Pulag Primary School. “When Sir Angelo announced plans to give us a building, the parents donated the land. When he brought the cement, the parents mixed it. The teachers did the cooking, while the community built the school,” she said.

“Even if he stops coming back to the mountain, we will still be all right. We are not dependent on him for handouts. We tell our children that we will always hold community meetings to solve our problems together,” she added.

“What’s the biggest difference he has made for all of you?” I asked.

“Angelo awakened us,” she said firmly, without hesitation.

Years ago, Angelo arrived at this mountain feeling lost and seeking for purpose. His awakening to purpose awakened others. I then arrived at this mountain feeling a bit lost and seeking from him the secret of finding purpose. He didn’t answer my question directly.

Instead, my conversations with Angelo and the people together with him led me to a more important question: When we are lost, what awakens us to purpose?

My quest for purpose, I now realised, had just begun. Where shall we go to find the answer?

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Two boys eating lunch in school, located 7,748 feet above sea level