



Episode 6 with Joel Saracho

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PADMA: Hi Joel, kamusta?

JOEL: Hello Padma. I'm good, I'm good.

PADMA: Thank you for joining us today your...

JOEL: Yah, yah. I'm honored to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

PADMA: It's our honor to have you. So you wrote two poems, or three even, for Agam. Could you describe for us first the image you received?

JOEL: I got this picture of an elderly woman holding that colorful sack. What do you call that?

PADMA: Like a tarpaulin? Yah.

JOEL: The one they use for making sugar, sack for sugar and rice. So, she was holding it close to her chest and she was smiling. So yun. That's what I got and I was looking at it, where is climate change in this? **chuckles**

PADMA: **laughs** Yah, that was the challenge of the photos. Because we knew, those of us who were asked to contribute that we were writing for a book on climate change.

JOEL: That's right.

PADMA: But we had to start with these images we received without knowing anything. And then, we were told, 'You can't use the word climate change.'

JOEL Yes.

PADMA: So how did you find climate change in your image?

JOEL: I stared at the photographs for a long time and the first [thing] that came to my mind was *aleng masaya*. She was happy, she was holding that sack. So, I thought, okay, so what are you going to do with that? And then the title came first. What was the title again? The funny thing is I don't even remember what I wrote.

PADMA: That was, well, it was...

JOEL AND PADMA: five years ago.

PADMA: *Bahagbaring Saya ng Aleng Masaya*.

JOEL: Yes.

PADMA: Or, I guess we can translate it as The Rainbow-colored Skirt of the Happy Woman.

JOEL: Yes, that's right. So uhh, doon. And I started reflecting on that. But when I started writing the first words that came out were in English. Tinuloy ko na lang in English without changing the title.

PADMA: So you started with a Tagalog title and...

JOEL: Yes.

PADMA: And then wrote the poem in English. But you also wrote *Dalawang Awit* or Two Songs.

JOEL: Yes, that's basically a rip-off of two folk songs, *Paru-Parung Bukid* and *Sitsiritsit Alibangbang*. It's some wicked sense of humor at work. *chuckles*

PADMA: *laughs* Could you tell us why it's a wicked sense of humor?

JOEL: Yah, because these are very, very happy sounding songs. *Paru-Parung Bukid*, walking you know, nagpaparada siya eh.

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: And then, *Sitsiritsit Alibangbang*, I really don't know how.

PADMA: *sings softly* salaginto, salagubang.

JOEL: *hums in the tune of sitsiritsit* sa lansangan, kung...

JOEL AND PADMA: ...parang tandang.

PADMA: So it's also like strutting around, right? Showing your stuff.

JOEL: Yes. And then I became, yun nga. Because the woman was really happy holding that thing. She was like, parading it. So the image that came to my mind was she's going to make it into a dress. She's happy having colors. And then I reflected on what Yolanda was. And the stories that I heard, that I read and came out with this. So especially with *Dalawang Awit* while the folk songs sounded happy; the images are really stark, you know, 'yung aleng naghahanap ng anak.'

PADMA: They are, yah.

JOEL: Yah.

PADMA: So you have a happy song which children sing a lot.

JOEL: Which children sing, yah.

PADMA: I think all Filipino kids learn these two songs and it's really a, sometimes, it's just even like a nonsense rhyme that you just sing happily. But your, but, you reworked the songs so that they're about loss. So you have the same tune and the same happy rhythm, but you're singing about death.

JOEL: Which I think is very Filipino. Our sense of humor, uhh, even in times of death, even in times of catastrophes and disasters, we manage to sing. We manage to laugh, to make a joke of everything.

PADMA: Everything.

JOEL: Which is both strength and weakness for us. So *chuckles*.

PADMA: That's true. Because some things, we shouldn't be laughing about. And we're still laughing. *laughs*

JOEL: *laughs* And we're still laughing. Yeah.

PADMA: And climate change is one of those things. We're laughing now. *both laughs* *laughs*

So, I want to ask you now about yourself and the climate crisis and, and we know that you also have a background in news and journalism. So, I'm sure you'll have some thoughts on this. We, part of the reason

Agam came about is because of the observation that the campaigns around climate change get stuck in scientific and political jargon and that tends to make it hard for ordinary people to relate. So how, what's the importance of language and the way we use it communicating climate change.

JOEL: Yah, you know, funny, ahh, I had this talk with Red. I think about the time the book is being done, to translate, uhh, certain phrases, certain words in relation to climate change.

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: We never got to sit down really and plan it. Pero my first reaction was, meron ba tayong language for that? I mean, direct translation.

PADMA: Do we have that?

JOEL: Oo, do we have that, parang, nag-iisip ako, parang wala eh. So sabi ko, perhaps we can look at the other Philippine languages, Bisaya, or, or, Ilokano or what. Baka meron, baka they experience it in the ground tapos hindi lang natin nagagamit. But it's important to, kase when you say climate change or what do you call it now?

JOEL AND PADMA: Climate crisis.

JOEL: Parang ang remote. It's too remote, it doesn't hit anywhere, the heart or the mind...

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: ...of the ordinary person. And unless, we come up with something, parang, it will, the campaigns will never, will not be as effective as we want it to be. Yah, it remains in the level of academic science.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: Yah. But uhh, it does not hit. Even, even, even among students, it's hard to discuss climate change. It becomes, parang ano yan eh, parang you're discussing GMO or...

JOEL AND PADMA: ...genetically modified organisms.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: So it's big words, they sound like big words. Hindi nag filter.

PADMA: Yes and, and, I, what I noticed is, because we worked with students at Far Eastern University on climate change and on developing this podcast. And because of that tendency to use big words, the students felt that they didn't know anything about climate change if they didn't know the big words. So it kind of compounds itself.

JOEL: Yah, yah.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: And I think that's basically a problem, not only with climate change. But with other, campaigns for, for reforms and, and social development. You know, even human rights are big words. Even what else? Oh, we have a tendency, the academic activists, the middle class activists, we, we get all these big words and fail to translate it to the ground level.. I don't know if we fail or we, there's not much effort. So, we, we kind of, parang yung mga aktibista noong araw diba, you say imperyalismo, pasismo. Everything's on that, nobody knows what...

PADMA: What that is.

JOEL: ... these words.

PADMA: It doesn't matter...

JOEL: Yah.

PADMA: ... if you have other struggles.

JOEL: Yah, that's why, I think yung efforts like poetry and other creative forms might help. Except that, again, we were talking earlier, poetry in the Philippines is, has become, parang our relationship has become incestuous. We read each other's poems, we discuss each other's works.

PADMA: And we're not reaching...

JOEL: ...reaching people we want to reach.

PADMA: How can we surpass that? How can we get over that big hump?

JOEL: Ahh, I think, ahh, the only way is still work in the ground. Organize discussion groups, involve the barangays, involve schools, involve families. It may be hard but if you organize ten people and you get one who

understands and talks to other people. Perhaps, it may grow from there. But we cannot rely on social media especially not Facebook.

PADMA: No.

JOEL: Uhh, we cannot rely on each other's works. We really have to bring it to certain levels. I was talking to some theater friends a few weeks back and we were thinking of organizing community-based workshops for, for the young people. Ahh, as an entry level in discussing social issues, drugs, EJK, climate change. So yun nga. Your activism is more on the ground and discussing and forming the minds and focus on the young.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: Because it helps develop critical thinking especially now that even UP has reduced its humanities subjects.

PADMA: Yah. That's a great loss for...

JOEL: Yah, grabe.

PADMA: ...for the University.

JOEL: That's really bad.

PADMA: To cut down on humanities. And yah, it's a great loss for everyone and so, which is why there's also this imperative, this feeling, you have to push the humanities even more now in other venues if we can't do it in the university anymore.

JOEL: Yes, that's right.

PADMA: So there's...

JOEL: Even Filipino as a subject is being reduced too.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: I mean, that's, wow.

PADMA: It's going to change the way people approach...

JOEL: That's right.

PADMA: ...or encounter or engage with the world, with each other.

JOEL: Yah, because language is your infrastructure for thinking, diba? So if you reduce your discussion on language, education in language, it also reduces your capacity to... look at the world and express it.

PADMA: Exactly. So you mentioned theater already and you also work on stage...

JOEL: That's right.

PADMA: ... on film, on TV, and in many capacities as a writer, an actor, a dramaturg. You directed also...

JOEL: Yes, I did.

PADMA: ...so, what's the place of performance or theater in this world drama of climate change?

JOEL Yung performance art is, among the arts, I think has the biggest reach. I mean, you organize a theater performance and immediately, you get what, a hundred people, fifty people, 2000 people, to watch. If you do it on television, all the more, or films, unlike literature, unlike poetry, you get...

PADMA: Or even this.

JOEL: ... or even this. Oh well, well, podcast, if you go radio, probably, baka it might reach a broader audience. So yah, right now, maraming, maraming avenues no, maraming platforms available. Not only in theater but also digitally in Youtube, and, and uh, the streaming platforms for digital media. I think we can, this can be used, only if we have good stories to tell, you know, and we know how to tell these stories.

PADMA: So, I know you've also been very involved in different efforts that bring artists together to face social issues head on and one of the more recent ones was Art Forces of the Philippines, which came together before the elections to encourage people to vote and to use that right wisely. Now, if we were to take Art Forces of the Philippines and make it work in a climate context, what would such a gathering or movement do?

JOEL: Okay, ganito, first, even before we think of involving the artists in climate change, we should start educating the artists on the issue, not all of us are, I mean, even ako, myself, I'm not very adept in discussing the climate crisis ano. I don't know, I don't understand the science of it. And ano, what I know is that, it is dangerous, it is threatening, yun. But if we get people, the artist to sit down and discuss it and how it affects them individually then there will be, they will, they themselves will find the expression on how to do this and,

and, reach to their followers. So, I don't know,, there may be a lot of other platforms that can be used especially if you get the bigger names to be involved.

PADMA: Right.

JOEL: They start talking about mitigation, and conservation, and all these beyond, beyond tree planting...

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: ... and pag pulot ng basura.

PADMA: Beyond the big words again. *laughs*

JOEL: Eh kase diba kapag, when you talk of ecological preservation and all these stuff, it all boils down to pick up the plastic, and...

PADMA: Plant trees.

JOEL: ... plant trees, but there are other, there are other forms and there are bigger things.

PADMA: Definitely. Yah, which can get overwhelming.

JOEL: Which can get overwhelming.

PADMA: But that is, that's the, that would be an interesting thing to explore to get artists more attuned to climate change and see what comes out of that.

JOEL: Yah, kase kunyare, ang Art Forces was developed, again it was election related, come out, go out and vote, and vote wisely, vote intelligently. But I don't know kung masustain siya with other campaigns. There's also the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, there's LODI.

PADMA: Oh yah.

JOEL: Ahh, these are groups na, we just need to talk to, perhaps? And uhh, sit down with them on how they can help.

PADMA: Yah. I'm, I'm thinking of Desaparacidos right now and how that brings to the stage or that brought to the stage, I should say a very real and painful part of our history and now that we're talking about climate

crisis, I realized if I look at Desaparacidos and look at what's happening now, it's really difficult to dramatize what climate change is doing to us. How do you put that on the stage? Where do you even start?

JOEL: Right. It's not something very visual. Of course, Yolanda, if you take Yolanda...

PADMA: Which is a big dramatic event.

JOEL: We, we just have to identify which stories.

PADMA: ... to tell.

JOEL: -- to tell.

PADMA: Earlier, you mentioned the middle classes and so I want to go in that direction now and talk about how the class divide in the Philippines is very stark and some people say that climate change and its impacts like rising sea levels, the bleaching of coral reefs, and more frequent stronger storms and so on, that these are all going to function in society like some great equalizer. What do you think?

JOEL: Hmmm, no. In fact, uh, my biggest fear in climate change is that it will widen, widen the gap, widen the poverty gap.

PADMA: Yah.

JOEL: No, because the middle class will always have the option, the rich. I mean, the more economically stable you are, the more options you have. But what options do you have if you are a poor fisherman living by the coast, living by the sea. No, it's not going to be an equalizer or even before it becomes an equalizer, it will worsen the situation. It will, it will intensify the divide...

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: ... among classes.

PADMA: Thank you, thank you.

JOEL: Even, even if you look at ahh, films, apocalyptic films being introduced now. They will always show the divide, the les miserable...

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: ... of society. We'll be living outside bubble cities...

PADMA: Yes.

JOEL: ...that are populated by the rich and the middle class.

PADMA: One of my favorite post-apocalyptic films is Children of Men.

JOEL: Yah.

PADMA: And that's also very starkly shown there. People who live in high-rise luxury buildings and then the rest of the world. That's kind of.

JOEL: They'll create bubble cities where everything is good and then the majority will be outside. Or perhaps, ahh, some people will be moving to Mars, probably. Because...

PADMA: There's talk of that happening.

JOEL: *chuckles* Diba? And then us poor lads will be left here.

PADMA: And with what?

JOEL: Yes, growing weeds and also, to survive. *chuckles*

PADMA: Evolving. *chuckles* What scares you personally about the current climate crisis?

JOEL: The widening poverty. I think it will, the poverty will worsen. Food security. I did a documentary. I wrote an article for Oxfam a few years back on the impact of climate change on agriculture.

PADMA: Yes

JOEL: And the biggest worry was that we can no longer predict when to plant and when to harvest. Because the rains will come and take away,, destroy the rice fields.

PADMA: And we already live in a system in which food production is very precarious for the producers themselves. They provide food security for the majority but they themselves don't have that.

JOEL: And even if, even if they produce, there's no assurance that it will be available for everybody anyway. It will be costly, it will be, there will be scarcity and the people with money, the capitalists can always hoard the produce and price it higher.

PADMA: That's true. In many instances in history for example, famine never meant that there was no food.

JOEL: Yes.

PADMA: It just meant that it was being distributed...

JOEL: And controlled, yah.

PADMA: ... and controlled by a minority, a wealthy powerful minority. But, but there's many, there's much to fear and there's also much to be angry about. What, what gives you hope?

JOEL: Projects like this, people like you.

PADMA: *laughs* Thank you.

JOEL: For as long as there are people talking, discussing, and, and trying to reach out, I don't think we should lose hope. We start dying when we lose hope.

PADMA: Yah. And hopefully, after this, the conversation will go on and more people will feel that this is something they can talk about...

JOEL: Yeah.

PADMA: ... as well.

JOEL: Actually. Those who are listening, please, please, please, go out and try to find ways how you can contribute in the discussion, in the discourse and help.

PADMA Thank you. Thank you so much, Joel.

JOEL Thank you very much, Padma. Thank you.