Can I Help You?

THE GIVE AND TAKE OF A 20-YEAR FRIENDSHIP

By Brad Newsham

Neither fire nor wind, birth nor death can erase our good deeds.—BUDDHA

Unfolding behind me, completely ignored in this bewildering moment, is an isolated Philippine valley—a certified world-heritage site complete with world-class views. If I turn around I will see brimming rice terraces, thousands of them, shining like sequins and rising step-by-step from the riverbed all the way to the green valley's rim.

But in front of me, stealing all my attention, lies a thigh-high pile of charred timbers and twisted tin roofing, the work of a midnight arsonist in 2006. This is what remains of a handicrafts shop that once belonged to my friend Timango ("Tony") Tocdaan, a rice farmer—and for 20 years one of the most important figures in my life.

In 1988 I strolled into Tony's life on a road paved with, I swear, the most innocent intentions. On that visit, Tony guided me on a perfect trek through these mountains, part of the hulking Cordillera range, and 13 years later I invited him to the United States and drove him coast-to-coast—a soaring, life-changing experience for both of us.

Now, in April 2009, I stare at this rubble and don't know whether to bawl or howl. In the States, Tony had cracked open a fortune cookie and found a message we both loved, predicting, "You will become the richest man in your community." But the dream did not materialize. Tony has a houseful of kids and no steady income, and he owes his increasingly attentive moneylenders $1,500. He's standing a few yards away, studying me as I study the detritus of his shop. I imagine his thoughts: "Maybe Brad will fix it."

I have indeed sent large chunks of money that have "fixed" a few things in Tony's life. But I'm not looking to tinker any more—nor can

Since a chance encounter in 1988, Brad Newsham, left, and Tony Tocdaan, right, have known the intimacy and stress of intertwined lives.

No good deed goes unpunished—CLARE BOOTHE LUCE

I afford to. I've come here, I tell myself, just to visit, and perhaps to assess whether I'm partly, wholly, or not at all responsible for the scorched disaster at my feet. Or, I wonder, have I returned just to formally close down the money pipeline and run like hell?

IN 1972, AFTER COMPLETING COLLEGE, I went in search of a higher education. Visits to Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, and India led me to understand my privileged birthright. Had I been born an average guy in any one of these places, I could never have afforded to casually backpack the world. I began to develop the notion that if we in the richer countries would simply move around the planet a bit more and share small slices of our wealth, we'd heal the world.

In 1988, by then a seasoned San Francisco cabdriver and 37 years old, I began my "money-where-your-mouth-is" tour: I would circle the globe and invite one member of the "other half" to visit America for one month—my treat.

One afternoon that November, I was the lone visitor at a scenic viewpoint in a Philippine town called Banaue (Bah-NAH-way). "Nice view," said a casual voice behind me. "Like vegetarian wedding cake." Tony was 28 and a member of the Ifugao tribe. He and his wife, Rita, had three children. For more than 2,000 years, Tony said, his ancestors had occupied this same twist of valley, living as rice farmers, wood-carvers, and, until the 1950s, enthusiastic headhunters. He pointed toward two terraces he'd inherited. "These will feed my family for maybe three months every year," he said. "And there, in the clearing, see the hut? That one is mine."

At 12 years old, Tony told me, he'd found a lucrative job carrying wood

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND

on his shoulders for the carvers: "Up and down mountains—yes, barefoot. Early morning until dark. Sleep in jungle, eat food from jungle—bird, fruit. Three years I do this, and then I understand: 'If I don't quit, this my life forever—AH-nee-mal!' "

Tony went back to school. "I was 17," he said. "Big. Everyone else very small." He learned history, geography, and basic English. In the early 1980s, after government efforts to promote tourism, and after the release of *The Year of Living Dangerously* with scenes filmed in Banaue, a trickle of travelers started arriving. Seeing the opportunity, Tony opened his handicrafts shop in 1987. "And," he told me, "sometimes I guide tourists up into mountains."

For the next three days of that 1988 visit, Tony led me, often by the hand, along the lips of towering rice terraces, up and down 45-degree mountainsides. We swam in thundering waterfalls and slept on the floors of his relatives' huts, in tiny villages reachable only by footpath. We became pals. When I asked about his dreams, he replied, "For me, dream only to feed my family."

IT TOOK ME 12 YEARS of cab driving and freelance writing to save up for Tony's month in America. What had put me over the top was the sale, in 2000 for $8,000, of my travel memoir, *Take Me With You: A Round-the-World Journey to Invite a Stranger Home*, in which I boasted, "Travel is the best thing that could ever happen to anyone." After I appeared on national radio, promoting my book and talking about Tony's impending visit, listeners from across the country phoned in to offer everything from airplane flights and lodging to baseball box seats, river-rafting trips, and medical and dental care. It seemed that all of America was eager to show Tony its good side.

In June 2001, when I met Tony at the San Francisco airport, he told me, "On the airplane, I realize my life will never be the same again." After 150 people gathered in my backyard for a "Welcome Tony" party, Tony asked me, "What is *overwhelm*? Everyone ask me, 'Are you overwhelm?' " But to me, Tony seemed pretty comfortable. He was shocked to see homeless people sleeping on the streets—"At home, no one believe this . . . in America!"—but he was entranced by the urping sea lions at Fisherman's Wharf, the cable cars, and hiking in the redwoods.

A cab company owner volunteered a plush taxi to use for our trip, and Tony and I cruised in style from the Golden Gate Bridge over the mountains and the prairies all the way to the White House. Our feel-good story caught the edge of the media jet stream: CBS televised our departure from San Francisco, and often we switched on the radio to catch interviews we'd just recorded with the BBC, NPR, and other outlets. One morning the Philippine ambassador read about us, tracked down my cell phone number, and summoned us to an embassy reception in Washington, D.C.

MAP BY DAMIEN SCOGIN

It was impossible for me not to fantasize that this high-flying month might turn my book—Tony and I called it "our" book—into a best seller. During our epic taxi ride I asked Tony what sort of life he might imagine if I, his new "brother," suddenly had money to share? He had a ready answer. "Rita and I, many times we talk about having a guesthouse," he said. "Our home site is perfect. You have seen! And Rita, she is great cook."

With Brad's financial help, Tony built a two-story guesthouse next to the family's traditional hut. "This your house," Tony's daughter Lynn, right, told Brad in 2004. Economic security was short-lived. Below, outside the hut, Tony butchers a duck that his wife, Rita, cooked for lunch during Brad's 2009 visit.

The instant Tony's homeward flight lifted off the runway, my cell phone quit ringing. Sales of my book turned out to be a bust, and some eye-popping credit card bills sent me scuttling back to cab driving. But Tony's 15 minutes continued. The Philippines' biggest newspaper splashed his wild story across its front page. A popular television newsmagazine visited Banaue to trek with him and aired the segment archipelago-wide. Weeks later, over the phone, a giddy Tony told me, "Every day people still come to my house. Everybody says I am very famous man. Is like dream."

I HAD KNOWN IN ADVANCE that bringing Tony to America would dramatically expand his sense of "possibility." It would have been irresponsible of me, even cruel, I thought, to return him to his old life—with Rita and their, by then, five children—without any resources to facilitate the chasing of his dream. I sent $2,000 home with him, and over the next few months I scraped together and sent $5,000 more. In 2002, Tony's tidy four-room guesthouse, situated inside a living postcard, opened for visitors. But 9/11, and then the Bali bombings, had devastated tourism. "In one week, in all Banaue, I see just three tourists," Tony reported. "The truth, my friend, we are sitting here with no food to eat. People laugh: 'You are "celebrity"—but no money.'

"I don't want to be famous," he continued. "All I want is to feed my family." He had a sixth child now: Bradley, my namesake! I wired Tony $100 to $200 every month, and fretted. I, too, was a family man, 50 years old with a precious 5-year-old daughter, and anyone who imagines that my philanthropy wasn't causing stress at home has never been married.

And yet what are we here for, if not to help each other? Over the phone I asked Tony, "What if you had more land?" A few phone calls later he said, "I found a farm in the lowlands. Eight thousand dollars."

For several months I mulled this sobering number. The most money I've ever made in one year is $35,000. But I had pried open Tony's life, and now I owed him something, didn't I? Did I actually believe in my own share-the-wealth, heal-the-world theories, or was that all just hot air?

Then, in 2003, I received a modest inheritance. I sent Tony $10,000 and thought: "Well, that's that." Tony bought a share of the lowland farm, and soon his family's rice yield had tripled. There was never a surplus, but for several sweet months there seemed, finally, to be . . . enough.

In 2004 I made the 16-hour flight to Manila and the 10-hour bus ride up through the mountains to Banaue. Tony and his family, now four sons and three daughters, led me down the 195 oversize concrete steps

I believed that if we in the richer countries shared small slices of our wealth, we'd heal the world.

descending from the cluster of small businesses at Banaue's viewpoint to their spectacularly situated home. They now lived comfortably in the undervisited guesthouse that stood beside—and dwarfed—the old traditional hut, and they appeared to be almost thriving. "Thanks to you!" Tony's daughter Lynn told me. "This your house!"

I know just two words of the Philippine language Tagalog—the two words that Tony taught me in America. At the end of my visit, he and I hugged, special brothers for life, and said them again: *"Mabuhay, kaibigan!"* Live long, my friend.

But back in California, the updates I began to receive from Banaue threatened me with "overwhelm": fertilizers for the lowland farm; college tuition for Tony's two eldest daughters; hospitalizations and prescriptions for Tony after an electrolyte imbalance and a snakebite. I came to dread Tony's calls. "Two hundred . . . five hundred . . . two thousand, please, Brad." I tried to think of something that could help him become self-sufficient. During a cash crunch in 1991, Tony had been forced to sell the handicrafts shop he had owned when I first met him. In early 2006 I asked, "Can you get another shop like your old one?" I sent him $5,000, and within weeks he was back in business. Sales were strong, life was good,

We sat in the quiet trance of the rice terraces, pondering the wallop that reality delivers to nearly every dream.

A Tocdaan family lunch in Banaue, left, comes with a "living postcard" view. Below, the Tocdaan's hillside home faces the terraced paddies walked by brothers Bradley and Scott. This page: Brad and Tony discuss their commingled fortunes.

and the vigor in Tony's voice was remarkable.

It was not to last. One day a neighbor approached Tony: "You know that land where your shop is? That land belonged to my grandfather." An emotional brouhaha ensued, with neighbors in the small village taking sides against neighbors. Tony quickly extricated himself by selling the shop back to the person from whom he'd bought it, but the pot had been irrevocably stirred. After several contentious months Tony phoned with some truly disturbing news: an unseen arsonist, some accelerant, and *phwoomp*! "Shop all gone," he reported.

In the fire's aftermath I came to understand that ancient passions and jealousies do not disappear with the arrival of a few missionaries and one backpacking do-gooder. Governments and NGOs often look back on failed multibillion-dollar development projects and wonder, "What happened? Where'd we go wrong?" I had hoped that working alone I might be more effective than they, that my involvement and my money might bring prosperity to Tony, and also to Banaue. Instead, while I may not have struck the match, I'd certainly played a key role in igniting this red-hot, village-dividing fiasco. Since his trip to America, I'd sent Tony more than $35,000, but I couldn't claim that I'd really done any good. All I knew for sure was that I was completely wrung out, financially and emotionally.

APRIL 2009

Eight years have passed since Tony's trip to the States, and five since my last visit to Banaue. I am 57 years old, cognizant of time's passage, and aware that few relationships survive on phone calls and e-mail.

I board a plane to Manila and ride the bus up into the mountains to Banaue. I worry about our meeting, but Tony greets me at the bus station with a smile and a warm, satisfying hug.

"Kaibigan," he says. "Oh, it is good to see you." After 20 years, our link feels intact. I linger a while at the viewpoint, studying the remains of his old shop, and then Tony carries my luggage down the steep steps to the guesthouse. Tony's adult children have gathered from their homes in neighboring provinces. Several sleep out in the hut; the best room inside the guesthouse is reserved for me. The doorstep is littered with a dozen pairs of sandals, flip-flops, and hiking boots, all being sniffed over by a dog and half a dozen chickens.

The poultry is not long for this world. Tony slaughters them one by one, and during my weeklong stay Rita keeps farm-fresh chicken, rice, and vegetable dishes flowing from their small kitchen. I spend much of my time sitting on the front-porch bench, eating, soaking in the view down the long green valley, catching up with everyone, and filling my notebook. Lorie, 26, runs a small bakery in Baguio City; Lynn, 24, studies for her nursing exam and tends her 3-year-old; Franz, 21, is studying criminology to become a policeman; Gladys, a quiet 13-year-old when I last saw her in 2004, is now raising an infant, Tony and Rita's second grandchild. Rowel, 15, has two more years of high school. Bradley, 8, and Scott, 5, watch for me to put down my notebook so they can scribble their names inside; when we sneak off for walks in the terraces, just the three of us, I notice they both collect litter. "I teach them this," Tony tells me later. "Last time you are here, you talk about trash. Now path is always clean."

Tony, 48, still climbs the hillside steps with a youngster on his back, but an achy knee rules out long treks. We settle for day trips in the extended family's Nissan minivan and short walks near home. One rainy morning he and I sit under a shelter in the middle of the rice terraces. Across the valley we can see his guesthouse, filled with family and choking on potential. The question of money hangs in the air like toxic mist.

"I thought people in America, they read our book, they come visit," Tony says.

"I was hoping for more, too."

"What is that word," he asks, "when plans don't work out?"

"Disappointment?"

"Yes. Disappointment."

Tony tells me he sold off two-thirds of his rice fields to pay for chemotherapy for Rita's aunt. After she died, the rest of the money went to school tuitions. "Then, all gone." Unsaid: The moneylenders are eyeing what's left of the farm. He has some new entrepreneurial ideas—a farm supply business, guesthouse improvements.

"America is falling apart," I say, and look him in the eye. "I'm all out of money for you, Tony."

He says nothing for a while, and then, "I think life is not fair."

We gaze out at farmers bent double in the distant paddies. They might be the same silent stick figures I saw here five years ago—and 20. In that time I've visited a dozen countries on several continents. None of these people has left this valley. "No," I say, "it certainly isn't."

We segue into a lengthy discussion of all the hurtful things the other has said or done. Each of us lands a few jabs, and afterwards, sated, we sit for a long while in the quiet trance of the terraces, both of us pondering, I'm sure, the harsh wallop that reality delivers to just about every dream.

Finally Tony says, "Well, this is how it goes in a friendship."

On my last evening the entire family climbs to the viewpoint and crowds into a karaoke bar. I drink a couple of beers and sing loudly and dance so hard that my right foot, my cab-driving foot, will ache for weeks.

Afterwards, in a dark, dense fog, wishing we'd remembered flashlights, we begin picking our way down the 195 steps. Suddenly, deliverance: Fireflies appear all around. Tiny, blinking yellow bulbs. Lemon meringue fog. Magic.

The next morning I hand Tony a check too large to justify. He glances at the amount and turns away. His shoulders quake, and he has to wipe his eyes. "Thank you, Brad." For a while, he'll be debt free. I've climbed past $45,000.

On the drive to the bus station, the family clears the van's middle row for Tony and me. We sit holding hands, and when I break the silence with a song—"I'm leaving . . ."—he comes right in with me: "On a jet plane. . . ."

Don't know when I'll be back again. **A**

BRAD NEWSHAM lives in Oakland, California, and drives a taxi cab in San Francisco. English photojournalist ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND is based in Lon-