

ARI RETREAT: A LIFE - TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

by: Rochelle S. Manuel

1st Year GSPA

I had gone to various retreats in my life, but the Asian Rural Institute (ARI) Retreat left an indelible mark in my memories. The ARI experience was a mixture of work, reflection, fun, camaraderie (with people of all walks of life and from different parts of the world) and other challenging and amazing activities.

Retreat literally means “to move back” (as a verb), and “refuge” (as a noun). I find these definitions very apt to the ARI retreat. It was an act of moving back from the busy life study or work to the fundamental aspects of life, that is, being close to nature and applying the essential principles of love, peace, unity, and stewardship of God’s creation. It is a refuge if one wants to feel a sense of home and belongingness.

The experience was totally self-transforming that gave me a sense of fulfilment, accomplishment, meaning, and purpose. The strength I obtained from the experience was not just physical strength but intellectual, emotional, and spiritual strength as well.

During the retreat, I discovered and learned important principles such as *appreciative inquiry*, *food life*, and *happy table*. Appreciative inquiry is an approach based on the premise that organisations change in the direction in which they inquire. So an organisation which inquires into problems will keep finding problems

but an organisation which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. It can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes more common.¹ Food life and happy table are intertwined concepts. Food life values natural and organic methods of farming that sustain life. Happy table is eating with the people we value producing happy memories of dining.

Taking part in the feeding, caring and cleaning of the animals' stables and houses and caring and growing vegetables made me realize their value as sources of our sustenance. Everything that God created are important resources and should never be wasted. Even the dried leaves should never be burned and be brought back to the soil to nourish new plants.

Indeed, people should not simply *live to eat but eat to live*. The ultimate meaning and purpose in life is to live a life of love for people, animals, environment, and nature in general. Living a life of purpose and sense of responsibility is an act of worship, gratitude, and obedience to God's will.

My utmost gratitude to Rev. Paul Johnson, Rev. Yoko Kitahara, Prof. Insang Hwang, the Division of Public Administration of ICU, ARI officers and staff namely Tomoko Arakawa San and Mitsuru Nakamura San and all the participants of ARI 2008 for giving me this distinct opportunity to take part

in this noble undertaking and for the warm company and fellowship. *Domo arigatou gozaimashita.*

