

OPINION & FEATURES



Surviving the times

YES, we all know about it, have felt and will probably continue to see how drastic its effects has been. For many of us, 2008 was not particularly a good year.

The United States' recession and the crash of major financial markets around the world has taken its toll on the Philippines, that facing 2009 holds a huge question mark for many Filipinos.

However, some still believe that the Philippines still get through this crisis, by relying on its domestic market and the strength of micro, small and medium enterprises. These perilous times, as business experts say, offer a good time for small businesses to focus on local and nontraditional export markets.

This is no surprise, as most overseas Filipino workers and expatriates who have been laid off and decided to go home to the Philippines are now re-

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building their lives, starting with their own businesses.

We Filipinos are known for being able to adjust and adapt easily to a new situation and environment. Our people have survived tumultuous times in the past and yet, our nation has continued to flourish. It is, with no doubt, that we would be able to survive again these trying times, and come out of it as stronger and better citizens. (AJPress)

Old and new



PINOY KASI
Michael Tan

FUNNY how we celebrate the new with the old, best represented by the mad exodus of people back to one's hometown, or family home (called "lao jia," meaning old home in Chinese) to spend New Year's. I had to rush back too this year, battling crowds in airports. But once I landed back here on the night of the 30th, even if the trip away was only a few days, I had a greater sense of euphoria and of wanting to hug people tighter.

The new is always exciting, but we also need the old to anchor us. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote that nothing is constant except change, but I have a slightly different take on that: change would be unbearable, without some sense of constancy.

On New Year's morning I heard, and found comfort, in an old clock chiming at six. I bargained with myself for a few more minutes promising to get up soon and check on the young and the old people and pets, but more on the latter given the night's fireworks. Eventually though, one of the cats pre-empted me, calling out at my bedroom door and demanding to be let in for its morning routine drink and a bit of cat play. Soon after, assorted people and pets began streaming in and out of the room.

I thought, tongue-in-cheek: so many constant companions. I like that polite but gossipy term that journalists use to refer to someone who you're constantly seen with, but who society can't accept just yet. It's someone, for example, you can't marry for any number of reasons but who you've been with for years and years.

Nothing holds us, legally at least, to a constant companion, so such relationships are sustained by pure (or impure, as gossips would have it) commitment. "You're like an old dog," I told mine the other day. With constant companions, you know right away if comments like that are meant to be playful insults or an affectionate compliment, but to be reassuring, I rubbed him behind his ears like I used to do with Tiny.

Tiny was a constant companion of another sort. She went with me everywhere, even once accompanying me in the middle of the night to the University of the Philippines to look for a staff member who had gone missing. Climbing up the stairs of our dark Faculty Center with her, I suddenly had a crisis of confidence, wondering how helpful Tiny would be if I did run into trouble, but she pushed on with all the courage and stamina that she could muster, stopping only occasionally to give me that "Trust me, follow me" look. The staff member turned out to be home safe but Tiny was the heroine of the day.

Tiny got her name because she's a dachshund, and was the runt in her litter. Last year, she went off to doggie heaven, or wherever. She was 14, which is nearly a hundred human years. I found myself missing her this New Year's morning, as my son and I went out to the garden to feed the fish, and the birds, and the cats. My son's only 3 but had seen enough of Tiny to sometimes pine for her. Or, occasionally, to claim he saw her running in the garden.

Constancy doesn't mean clinging on to past glories and accomplishments. Rituals and routines are there to allow us to move to the more important matters. The more daunting the challenge — and 2009 will be a formidable one — the greater the need to gird ourselves with these little traditions. The United States will be getting a new president, who just might lead the world through a serious crisis into a new historical era. He rode into victory on the slogan, "Change we can believe in," a vision directed to the future; yet, he will be sworn into office on the same Bible Abraham Lincoln used more

than a hundred years ago. Old Bibles provides the constancy, the faith, to ride the waves of change.

Anniversaries I wanted that first part to be short, and to the point, and use the rest of my column space to run through some historic anniversaries for 2009. Consider this an appetizer since I will be writing about some of those events, and historical figures, during the year.

The sciences have some big anniversaries coming in. This year the world will look up to the skies in celebration of World Astronomy Year. It's a way of honoring Galileo, who improvised on the telescope and whose celestial discoveries, late in 1609 and into 1610, led him to declare his support for Copernicus, another astronomer who lived more than a hundred years earlier and had dared suggest that Earth revolved around the sun. That idea got Copernicus, and Galileo, into trouble with the Catholic Church, who had a rather anthropocentric view of the universe, insisting the universe revolved around our planet and its humans. Galileo was put on trial by papal authorities and was found "vehemently suspect of heresy." In 1992, after almost 400 years, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for that incident. Oh well, better late than never.

Also coming up is Charles Darwin's 200th birth anniversary, as well as the 150th anniversary of his book, "The Origin of Species," which describes his theory of natural selection and unleashed controversies about human evolution that continue to rage today, the opposition again coming from established religions.

The year 2009 will have several political anniversaries. Thursday, Jan. 1, was the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. The small island still captures the imagination of many people in the world because it has dared to defy its giant neighbor, the United States, and despite many obstacles, built one of the best health care systems in the world.

April 20 marks the 20th anniversary of the rallies in Beijing's Tiananmen, with its mostly young participants demonstrating for more political freedoms. The Chinese government sent in the tanks to crack down on the protesters and it's still unclear how many casualties there were.

That same year, on Nov. 9, the Berlin Wall came down and eventually led to the reunification of Germany. It also marked the end of the communist era in Eastern Europe.

All these anniversaries make it timely to discuss issues around capitalism, socialism, democracy.

Let's move to local anniversaries. Baguio City turns 100 in September but expect many activities earlier in the year, including, in March, when a conference sponsored by the University of the Philippines, Baguio, will be held. I've agreed to present a paper on the ghosts of that hauntingly beautiful city.

The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) will also celebrate its centennial in the Philippines. Their first priests arrived in Manila in August 1909 and went on straight to Bangued, Abra, to set up their first mission.

Toward the end of the year, on Dec. 10, we will be celebrating the sesquicentennial, 150 years, of the Jesuit institution Ateneo de Manila University. There's an important historical footnote here: in 1767, the Jesuits had been expelled from the Philippines but were able to return in 1859 and, since then, seem to have been making up for nearly a hundred lost years.

The year 2009 promises new ways of looking at the old, and old ways of inaugurating the new. (inquirer.net)

A beautiful reality

YOUNGBLOOD

Joy V. de los Reyes

THREE pairs of eyes light up every time there is news that I will be coming home soon, or even at the mere thought that I will be seeing them again. Those eyes belong to my best friends: Papa, 71; Mama, 62; and Grandma, 90.

I am an only child, a quarter of a century old, independent for 12 years, and I have lived in 13 different places since 1996 — alone, although not quite so. To give an idea of how physically detached I am from my family, the only time I spent my real birthday with them was in 1998. The same thing goes for their birthdays.

It took my parents 10 years of marriage to have me. I only get to visit them 88 cumulative days a year, maximum. That is if I don't engage in any income-generating activities during the summer break. Yes, I know, we have a weird family set-up.

Province for me means family and stability. And that is why until now I haven't invited any friends to my house, even my closest pals. I am not being selfish, it is just that a person will find my soul there, figuratively speaking.

Our place is like any other barrio. Not primitive but not too civilized either. Not far-flung but somewhat hidden. Every time I go home, it is as if I am going back to basics, so to speak. The nights are longer and colder. Fireflies appear as the counterpart of lamp posts in Manila. People still sleep eight hours a day. There are no graveyard shifts, except for the dogs running around and the bugs and crickets in the background. The last to go to sleep are people who play pool or come home after a dance in another village or a visit to a friend. But other than them, there is just the endless sky, the infinite stars and fireflies.

If I am very lucky, I get to watch the moon rise behind Mayon Volcano. It is an exquisite view, every detail of which I can remember without the help of a photograph. I don't even bother to take pictures; it spoils the beauty of the moment. It is just how it is. Beauty attains its summit when it is transitory. The time element does the trick.

Our ancestral home is half-museum, half-residence; half-museum because almost all the things stored in it can be considered historic. This was not deliberate. My family is not into collecting antiques. When I get bored, I would go on a treasure hunt at home and find anything, from old kitchen utensils to a collection of copies of Reader's Digest from the 1950s to the 1980s, with my pre-school scribbles on them. There are also books and novels, some paintings of my great-grandparents and black and white photographs of members of the clan lying around the place, including close-up pictures of dead people inside their coffins.

Now it is my best friends' turn. "Lola" [Grandma] is the de facto "mayordoma" of the house who keeps reminding everyone, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy and wealthy and wise." Well, who am I to argue? She is a 90-year-old lady with 20/20 eye sight, and she still can move furniture, including an old narra table, here and there. My father, on the other hand, normally wakes up at midnight to rummage through the refrigerator for anything he can chew. My parents and I usually talk about school, future plans and their favorite topic: my nonexistent future husband. Early in the morning, Mama wakes me up and my eyes, and later my stomach, will feast on my favorite dishes all

laid on the table. That's the way she shows her love for us. And she knows all the secrets that I cannot tell any other soul. She is the family's disciplinarian and the most practical of all practical mortals who inhabit this earth.

In one of our conversations, I asked Mama a simple question: "Was it hard letting me go?" With a playful laugh in her eyes, she answered, "What do you think? You don't have to be intelligent to know the answer." Then, in a serious tone, she added, "There are so many ways of loving, but there is a proper way of doing it. And choosing that proper way is the hardest thing one can ever do because it is what they usually call real love. It is either you're



stuck here with us and nothing good happens in your life, or we let you go and guide you so that you can live your life to the fullest. Remember that when you have a family of your own. Surely, you know that." She said those words while meaningfully eyeing the big belt she used whenever she felt that I needed a spanking during my childhood.

I was entering high school when my parents physically set me free for the first time. There were many misgivings from relatives and family friends. On one occasion, with the intention of letting me hear what she thought about giving me independence at an early age, Mama said matter-of-factly, "We already taught her all the things she needs to know. If she messes up her life, it is not us who will suffer. It will be her. We gave her the compass, now it is up to her what course to take."

Her words constantly play over and over in my mind.

I have been living on my own in Manila for a decade now. Here, I worry about my food, laundry, budget, studies, among other things. These are things I don't even think of when I am home. It is easy to get lost in all the hustle-bustle of the place. There are so many substitutes for happiness that one's mind would spin just picking which one is a perfect fit. I have met many people and found out it is not difficult to be swayed and to give up my own beliefs and principles. And there are events, both hurtful and fun, which tempt us to be someone we are not. The only thing that keeps me on track is a beautiful reality, a reality which no one can change. It's like the ace among my cards, the lucky charm in a gamble, the lost beginner's luck.

In our province, I find the stability of the wanderer in me, the reason behind my dreams, the beauty in simplicity, the answer to all the why's, the balm for a shattered soul, the solace in silence, and the three sets of eyes that see the real me as a daughter and as a friend. My parents have given me a unique kind of friendship that knows neither distance nor age.

I guess everyone needs a home — and real people in it.

Joy V. de los Reyes, 25, is a senior at the San Beda College of Law.



Main Office:
1150 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854
e-mail: info@asianjournalinc.com
http://www.asianjournal.com

Manila Office:
Suite 208, The Manila Bank Corp., Bldg.
6772 Ayala Ave., Makati City 1226
Tel.: (632) 893-1720 • Fax: (632) 813-8746

New York and New Jersey:
5 Penn Plaza, Ste. 1932, New York, NY 10119
Tel.: (212) 655-5426 • Fax: (212) 655-9241

2500 Plaza Five, Harborside Financial Center,
Jersey City, NJ 07311
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