

OPINION & FEATURES

World population day

THE World Bank has joined the International Monetary Fund and rating agencies in projecting an economic contraction this year for the Philippines. Already, developing countries are seeing hard-won gains in the fight against poverty being reversed or threatened by the recession. As the global economic crisis deepens, the United Nations is expecting women and children in developing countries to bear the brunt of the impact.

The crisis gives more urgency to the implementation of measures that will promote education and health care for women and children. This is the message of the United Nations Population Fund as the 20th World Population Day is marked today. The UNFPA points out that investments in education and health of women and girls have been linked to higher national productivity, agricultural yield and income, all of which contribute to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals.

The UNFPA, in a statement released for World Population Day, called on governments to promote women's reproductive health and prevent maternal and child deaths through family planning programs and the use of contraceptives. Even the person in charge of direct aid for the poor in the Philippines, Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral, is pushing for the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill as resources shrink in the recession and the population continues to boom.

EDITORIAL

The UNFPA points out that an investment in contraceptive services could be recouped four times over in terms of savings in public education, health care and other social services. The

UN agency also says that family planning alone can reduce maternal deaths by up to 40 percent.

If Congress passes the Reproductive Health Bill and President Arroyo, who continues to woo the Catholic Church for her personal political agenda, sits on the measure indefinitely, local governments can promote their own family planning programs. Simply giving women sufficient information about their own reproductive health could go a long way in saving the lives of women and children. In this country, women with sufficient income and education are aware of the choices available to them in spacing childbirths. Millions of less privileged women have no access to those choices. Policy-makers should see women's reproductive health as a right for all, not a luxury for the few. (Philstar.com)



Philstar.com Photo

A woman's rights

BEING a celebrity attracts probing if not malicious newshounds. You can imagine the pain and embarrassment national and international figures go through when their private decisions regarding their bodies are publicly disclosed. That, they say, is the price that popularity exacts. In the case of President Macapagal-Arroyo's choice to have a breast implant in the 1980s, it was a personal decision, and she should not be blamed for it. Why raise so much brouhaha over that? Of course if she underwent the procedure when she became president, it would be a different matter; the nation needs to know what's happening to her health-wise. Any major development affecting her health – a tonsilectomy, a mastectomy, a polypectomy, an appendectomy, a sprained ankle, a headache that does not disappear – these the Filipino people have the right to know. They want to know her frailties, as well as her physical and of course mental and emotional wellbeing to make sure that she is capable of running the affairs of the nation. And heavens, what happens if she is incapable of doing so – will her successor be fit to run the country? Tsk. Tsk.

But a breast implant – performed 20 years ago which does not affect her capacity to rule should not be something to make fun of or to shatter her reputation. It is a woman's prerogative to have a bust lift or a nose lift or a liposuction – if that will



FROM THE STANDS
Domini M. Torrevillas

make her feel good about herself.

Sen. Loren Legarda have the same thoughts about the matter. She has issued a press statement saying that “the rights of women, and of all people for that matter, over their health concerns must be respected even if the concerned are public officials like President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.”

“We should be aware that there are things that are private and personal even when it comes to public figures,” said Loren, author of a number of landmark laws on women's rights and empowerment.

“The confidential relationship between a doctor and a patient must always be respected, unless a medical condition as in the case of the President is already interfering with her performance as a public official,” she said.

The senator explained that “whether people are talking about breast implants or a woman's concern about breast cancer, that is a matter whose public disclosure rests solely on the concerned party.”

“Breast cancer, as one of the leading killers of women worldwide, is a life and death concern of every woman, who must be given by society the very basic respect of being allowed to deal with it privately, if she so desires, or publicly, if her intention is to raise public awareness on the killer

disease.”

Loren has established the Bessie Legarda Foundation precisely to help Filipino women fight the menace of breast cancer, a disease which her mother Bessie Legarda bravely fought to the very end. Early detection of breast cancer is a must if the chances for recovery are to be increased, the senator said.

A sad day for mourning came with the passing away last week of activist singer Susan Fernandez. Susan was known for her socially-oriented songs, the most remembered of which is *Babae Ka*.

According to her brother Edgardo, 15 people were with Susan during her last moments at Medical City. She breathed her last while her guitarist-singer-friend Lester Demetillo was in the middle of playing her favorite song, *Both Sides Now*. In the middle of the song, said Edgardo, “*Bumaba ang pulse rate niya hanggang mag-flat line*,” he told abs-cbnnews.com in a phone interview.

Susan had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer in March 2008. She had a remission and continued singing and playing the guitar at small concerts and gatherings. A few weeks ago, when the disease returned, fund-raising events were held by friends. But she succumbed to the Big C. Her remains were cremated last Sunday.

Susan was married to political analyst and *Philippine Star* columnist Alex Magno. They have

two sons, Inno and Kalayaan. She was the second child in a brood of seven.

Edgardo recalls that his sister brought him along to cause-oriented activities to play the guitar for him in her singing engagements. This influenced him into engaging in cause-oriented activities. She was, says the brother, “very nice, very pleasant and very warm, and when she was diagnosed with cancer, she faced the illness head on.”

One of Susan Fernandez's colleagues, Susan Tagle, said the singer was “a gentle yet strong person who was loved by her children very much.” The two friends met in 1976 at the University of the Philippines during the activist movement. “*Lagi kaming nagkakasama sa rally, kumakanta . . . nag-gi-guitar*,” Susan Tagle recalls.

According to Celeste Ann Castillo Llaneta of the UP Office of Alumni Relations, Susan Fernandez was known as “The Nightingale of the Philippine Progressive Political Movement,” and became famous when she recorded the Metro Pop award-singing song, *Babae Ka*, which is a tribute to women power and feminism.

Writes Celeste: “She was an educator and performing artist who used her songs to raise public awareness on the plight of Filipino women as well as their vital role in society.”

Susan also hosted the longest running cultural shows on television, “Concert at the Park.” (Philstar.com)

Love, life & truths

WHEN I am in a quandary and I don't know what to write about, I tend to meander on the general landscape of something everyone – from a sixth grade student writing a school essay to an old man ruminating about his years on earth – may have wondered about. I am talking about life's meaning and relevance.

As in every generation, many people today are searching for answers to questions about their purpose in life, the quest for happiness, how to love, and the all-encompassing “meaning of life” itself.

Poets, philosophers, sages and religious people have attempted to answer these questions through the ages. Throw in not only the best and the brightest but also the stupid and the shallow who have given us their take on these perennial questions. We know that the search for answers must have began at the dawn of man and it continues today and will do so forever.

I have sometimes wondered if there is one true answer that applies to everyone's situation. Christians believe that Jesus is the answer and their answer is the best and the only true one. The problem with this is, other religions claim the same thing about their gods. Some cultures believe that



Humming in My Universe
Jim Paredes

theirs is the superior one and if only everyone could belong and adhere to the same culture, then the world would be right and peaceful. According to Joseph Campbell, every race claims to be the chosen race – probably more out of conceit than fact. But we know by now the folly of such thinking and the grief that it has brought to mankind.

I would like to throw in some observations I have on this grandest of topics: the meaning of life. I know this is such a wide subject. Allow me the sweeping view with its equally general conclusions. I don't know if what I am about to say will qualify as brilliant or idiotic. But here goes:

1) The man who searches for answers often finds himself at odds with the values and ideals the world and his society uphold.

It has happened many times. Jesus, Gautama Buddha, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, even Jose Rizal, have encountered this. They literally bumped heads with authorities as they pursued their beliefs, which went against the grain of what their milieu subscribed to. Jesus turned his back on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and even the scriptures of his time. Gautama left his palatial surroundings, which were designed to

protect him from life's vicissitudes, to understand reality and pain. Gandhi and Mandela resisted the temptation of revenge and violence and chose the more difficult but more enlightened path of peaceful resistance.

It is quite scary to face the world and stand against it. It takes a lot of courage to feel one is “going it alone.” “When you know the truth, the truth makes you a soldier.” Gandhi himself expressed this. George Orwell also wrote, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” That's exactly what these people did. 2) Everything that is supposed to be “good” for us according to the world, is bad for us according to “the search.”

It is not uncommon to come to a point in the search where the values of a materialistic society that espouses wealth, fame, status, power, the certainty of being right and all that, become meaningless. In place of all these is a revulsion against the trappings of success, perhaps brought about by the realization that one has spent too much time chasing them and not finding happiness.

Albert Schweitzer turned his back on a flourishing musical career to build a hospital for Africa's poorest. Mother Teresa was an English teacher in an international school when she decided to change her life's direction and became the comforter of the poor

and the sick in India. In the midst of hardship, poverty and deprivation, these people found that something which defined the meaning of life for them and for others.

3) The truth is hard to handle.

Truth demands purity of intention before it is given to the seeker to own. The truth can stare everyone in the face but those who actually go for it are few. Embracing the truth and radiating it to others demands a cleansing of intentions in both their hearts and minds. The truth, as they say, will set you free but it will probably upset you and make you angry, scared and bewildered before it begins to feel good.

Albert Einstein once said, “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods.” He knew that to tell the truth was to disturb the status quo. It also means to get out of one's comfort zone, which may include even facing ridicule and being misunderstood.

4) To pursue truth is an “elite” experience.

Truth is only given to those who want more of life's meaning and are bold enough to handle it. You will find that, many times, you may be alone with no one but your conscience and it is so much easier to reject the call and just stay wherever you are and never

embark on the journey. But the call is made to those who have the courage to fulfill the mission that truth wants to be undertaken.

Recall that Sir Thomas More, an English lawyer in the 1500s, who refused to sign the document that would legitimize the anomalous marriage of King Henry VIII, was beheaded for standing for the truth. He held his ground even when everyone else had consented to the King's demand.

5) Great truths are always paradoxical.

“You must lose your life in order to gain it.”

“The mind that does not understand is the Buddha. There is no other.”

The savior of mankind is a carpenter's son.

The beauty of paradox is that it seems conflicted on one level, but is filled with deep truth when understood on all other levels. In it lies a balance that defies the selective, judgmental mind and recognizes the place of everything and its own contradictions. Thus, it is true that one man's curse is another man's blessing. The wounded can be healers themselves. And the only permanent thing is impermanence. As a Japanese proverb put it so succinctly, “The reverse side also has a reverse side.”

So, what is the meaning of life? You tell me. (Philstar.com)

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