

The Social Pandemic

One time I was walking by myself at the center of Ortigas, the upscale business district. Even as my family encouraged it I rarely took walks, but that day I took a walk, and by coincidence I encountered a man who, like me, was also by himself, standing on a footbridge. He was wearing simple clothes and spoke to me in Tagalog. He interrupted my quiet stroll and pleaded I help him find *ayuda*, government aid, for his family. The man was a victim of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘new normal.’ He spoke about how he and his wife could hardly afford milk for their infant child, and how he complained in a fit of rage the corruption in his barangay, the moral bankruptcy of public officials, and the abject poverty he, his wife, and his children found themselves in. He asked if I could share his plight on Facebook, so that the popular media personality (and now senator) Raffy Tulfo would notice him. He made me record a video of him explaining the situation, which I supposedly was to post on Facebook. He even gave me his phone number, and I gave him mine, in the hope that I could help him further in the future.

It was a very bizarre experience.

I didn’t ask to meet him, and at first I thought I could only manage a short conversation before my patience would run out and I would get on with enjoying the breezy urban landscape as I had enjoyed doing. But seconds turned to minutes, and I must have stood there in that footbridge for about 30 minutes, not really knowing where the conversation would take us, but determined it would have a happy ending. Within those 30 minutes I grew to trust the man. I couldn’t say for sure what his intention was, but for my naive 15-year-old self this man – eyes in front of me with a voice of desperation – this man seemed believable enough.

Carrying this new responsibility – thrust upon me by circumstance – of getting the man his public attention, I hurried back to my aunt’s apartment where I stayed. My aunt was less enthusiastic. She told me to pray for him and leave it at that, because for a stranger to ask an insecure 15-year-old teenager to be a social media influencer for this cause is at least absurd, at most dangerous. She taught me the right thing to do.

But I did take home with me something positive from that strange encounter.

In the new normal, it’s easy to accept reality.

In witnessing the plight of others, I have always been instinctively aware of my comfortable and privileged life. We all live in a damaged, divided world. We all have the capacity to see and feel and notice it. We see informal settlers. We hear the pleading of beggars in the street. On the evening news they flash in big, bold letters: *Robbed! Raped! Trafficked! Binaril! Na-hit-and-run! Na-Tokhang!* We are, by living in a socially-distanced reality where we are glued to social and mass media, desensitized. We are exposed to the pain of others on a day to day basis, and put on an appropriate reaction, for when we are limited to watching and observing from our own point of view, our contribution is nothing but that: a reaction.

At the footbridge that day, a reaction would’ve been enough. But it didn’t *feel* enough.

He didn’t ask for money, he asked for a contact to help him. Even that I could not give. He was not entitled to my help, and even if he was, it was a monumental task no 15-year-old should have been asked to do. My conversation with him made no difference. Nothing would have changed if I had simply ignored him and continued walking.

What that stranger did give to me at that moment was a story about a family deprived of their basic needs in the new normal. But moreso, it was a testament to the lingering economic

inequality in our country that began long before any pandemic, but that had exacerbated the crisis COVID-19 generated.

Admittedly, there was a good chance he made it all up. In retrospect though, it mattered very little whether the words he muttered were true, or whether his tale was exaggerated or totally fabricated. If he did, he made it up for a reason. This man's actions spoke louder than his words, and I was there to hear them.

I, the middle-class *Inglesyero* student, had undoubtedly seen him, the downtrodden working man, before we even knew each other. I saw him when I took the MRT for the first time, he was forcefully elbowing the crowd while trying to squeeze through the train doors before they would close shut, hoping to make it to his family by dinnertime. I saw him when my mother had food delivered via *GrabFood*, he came with his motorcycle drenched in rain and handed me the paper bags making sure they wouldn't get wet, and I said a "*Salamat po.*" and, "*Ingat po kayo,*" and he thanked me back. I saw him when I was biking past the construction site in our neighborhood, he was hauling bags of concrete and I had to slow down my biking to avoid hitting him. I had seen the working man so many times.

In the new normal, it's easy to accept reality. It's harder to confront it.

How many times had I seen the working man? More than I can count. How many times had I stopped to think about his plight? None, before I climbed up that footbridge. In the footbridge there was no looking away to face the train window, there was no 'thank you' and 'stay safe,' there was no bike to speed away with.

In the footbridge there was only I and the working man who was betrayed by the barangay, the man who needed milk for his child, the man whose last hope was in Raffy Tulfo,

the man who walked all the way from Mandaluyong and then made me stop walking. Here he was in plain clothes and a tired face.

I had seen him, but at that moment I comforted him with words and an optimistic attitude, even if that was all I could give. I had nothing else to give. No matter how many poems or essays I could give, or grades, or textbooks, or medals, or diplomas, the working man and his family would suffer from hunger and plead for aid. Political speeches and tarpaulins and rallies could not liberate his wife from discrimination and harassment. Opinion surveys and analysts in suits and news broadcasters could not feed his child.

What the working man asks for when you are confronted with him is to stop walking and start a conversation, so that when you get on with your day, you might bring home a story you've never heard.

The story he will tell will be soul-crushing.

It will be sickening, unacceptable, and infuriating.

And worse yet, you will come home accepting that you cannot really do much to help him.

Your heart will be filled with a terrifying and insurmountable rage. Your mind will try to piece together contradictions in society, questions that once seemed superfluous but suddenly mean something to you: "Why are there aisles full of milk at the supermarket, yet this man's baby has none, for the simple fact that he and the mother work on minimum wage? Why must he walk for kilometers on dirty, polluted, and dangerous roads, to seek help? How on earth has he been led to believe his only hope is a media personality and the sympathy of Facebook?"

In the new normal, it's easy to accept reality. It's harder to confront it. It's even harder to change it.

In school we are taught that famous saying of Jose Rizal, that “*the youth is the hope of our future.*” Let me, dear reader, ponder on just one last question. Our country has had so many youths, generation after generation, taught in schools, yet why do the mammoth issues of poverty, corruption, inequality, and impunity remain in our country? The generation before me was taught the same curriculum, raised under the same culture, the same flag, but our problems remain. The working man still stands on the footbridge searching for aid. The story he tells is all the same.

I entered this pandemic thinking the day will come, sooner or later, where we will return to normalcy. Now we are vaccinating, re-opening borders, returning to our schools and workplaces. But now I am not resigned to observing the suffering of the working man from a distance. I refuse to call that normal!

That epiphany – that is the greatest impact the COVID-19 pandemic made in my young life. For more than the isolation, the pain, and the loss of three years, it is the isolation, the pain, and the loss of three centuries. It is the suffering of the Filipino people who are divided by wealth and helpless in crisis.

While the physical pandemic will wither away, this social pandemic will not.

The future is uncertain, but I can at least take some comfort in meeting the man on the footbridge. We are from different classes. He and I stand on opposite sides of an abyss that permeates society. But now that I have listened to his story, I can measure the distance between me and him. I can finally understand the scale and magnitude of that abyss. To turn rage and grief into ideas and actions – that is what makes all the difference. And now I am armed with the will to take every step in my life to work towards something truly new and normal:

Aid for the working man, comfort for his wife, and milk for his baby.