

CHAPTER-13

COVID-19: CHRONICLES OF SOCIAL DISHEVELMENT AND REDEMPTION



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Diamond is the hardest of gems, and Cebuanos may be the hardest-headed race the world over!!! Quote and quote, I am not the one who originally coined this term, so please do not crucify me with your criticisms. Disclaimer: the statement was inspired by the President Duterte himself, who reproved us on national television broadcast as quoted: “*Kamong mga Cebuano, ayaw mo kainsulto. Prangka lang tayo...Yong mga Bisaya talaga, ang titigas ng ulo.*”(You Cebuanos, **may not be insulted. Let us be frank...You Visayans are hard-headed**”). Others may grumble of the moniker directed to us, but it may have been warranted, experience-wise. Let me tell you this straight: others may have different perspective but allow me the luxury to iterate the instances I have lived, and this may be the proof that you yourself need, to judge whether the name-calling has a germ of truth in it.

It started with a mere suspicion. A PUM, person under monitoring due to exposure with confirmed cases, has escaped from a local hospital

where he was quarantined. He went back to the densely populated slum area of his residence and challenged his neighbors for a drinking spree to celebrate his arrival from Manila, our capital city. Despite the common awareness of his status by himself and even his neighbors, it did not deter them to continue the social gathering, as though the novel coronavirus is a mere fantasy concocted on the mind of a delusional scientist. As if to challenge the virus, one glass was shared among them, rotated from one man to another, quaffing their thirst for intoxication. A week later, the man was confirmed positive through the swab test, and his drinking buddies, after a rushed testing was later affirmed: COVID-19 positive.

This devastating news has stirred the entire “sitio” to a frenzy of panic, not unlike a colony of ant when its nest was stirred. Family members and neighbors of the original drinking squad were also tested, knowing that they have sustained contact with the “positives” devoid of carefulness. Although the suspects did not exhibit the overt virus symptoms:

cough, runny nose, shortness of breath and the usual disease-stricken look, they were already infected. The Department of Health declared the entire community infested and total lockdown in the area was effectuated.

This proclamation drove flocks of people to flee, as if the virus cannot go after them in their hasty flight. They scaled the walls at night to escape from the watchful eyes of military men posted at the entrance and exit. They had sought refuge from their relatives, appalled by the idea of being incarcerated and caged in a place considered as “zombie zone”. Despite being captured and later returned to the sitio, these escapees continue to burden the police of their constant slips, like they were eels capable of squeezing their way out from authorities’ grip. These rule breakers disappointingly, were not punished, but were just brought back again to their place. It incited precedents for the whole population. Incidents of breakaways escalated; the residents secured with the knowledge that stiffer penalties were not enforced to

keep them in place. These runaways unwittingly brought the virus with them, inflicting harm to their relatives who were oblivious to the malevolent nature of the disease, which insidiously wreak havoc inside the body in silence, until all was late and one more life was plucked from this garden of human bodies.

As if this situation was not grave enough, the Easter Sunday came to be celebrated. People flock to the 'Carbon Market' to buy ingredients for 'binignit'- a much loved creamy-sweet dish swimming in coconut milk and sugar thrown in a medley of root crops boiled hodgepodge style—a Filipino favorite repast during Holy week. It made headlines for no good reason and that is: photos were circulating of a horde of bodies crowding on a congested street like a can of sardines. Social distancing was not observed, as people bumped against each other shoulder-to-shoulder on the labyrinthine nooks and alleys to haggle for the coveted ingredients. On the seashore, kids and grown-ups alike were like schools of fish as they swim in and out of the sea with so much gusto, seeming to drown the virus to

the rhythm of the waves kissing to and from the seashore. Even the barangay gyms were not spared, as battalion of youngsters were seen playing basketball in teams- the sweat in their bodies mingled against each opponent as they grappled the ball away from each other's reach, each intent on winning the match but not the pandemic. And for the finale, a certain sitio of a 'barangay' in the city staged a forbidden celebration of fiesta in honor of Señor Sto. Niño, the city's patron saint.

It was forbidden in a sense that an assemblage of devotees paraded the venerated icon of the most holy child Jesus around the town heralded by pageantry and pomposity reminiscent of 'Sinulog' gaiety. Hundreds of spectators converged on the street without wearing face masks like swarm of locusts voraciously devouring the spectacular display of religion and faith in the middle of the lockdown. The procession proceeded in a carnival-like atmosphere as hundreds of Sinulog dancers and devotees undulated in synch to the rhythm of the drums in its usual energetic

pace, mimicking the current of the river from where the dance of adoration was inspired. They appeared to dance their heart out, pleading for divine deliverance and miraculous intervention of Sto. Niño from the misery brought about by the pandemic which was viciously ravaging the country with terror and butchery. Only after the evidence of these gross violations of quarantine norms did authorities thought on planting police on public places---a day too late for the virus to proliferate and spread to the different barangays that comprised the city.

The confirmed number of cases skyrocketed. The General Community Quarantine (GCQ) has progressed to Enhanced Community Quarantine(ECQ), a stricter kind of quarantine. Prior to its imposition, masses again congregated in supermarkets, their disposition inflamed in a kind of “essential” shopping craze. I myself went to buy one, fearing that postponing acquisition at a later time might result in the closure of the stores on the succeeding days. Knowing that the ECQ, an alien concept to us

was looming, uncertainties and fright occluded my judgment. I met my best buddy at the supermarket. While we were falling in line, the longest line that I have ever experienced, I came to realize how grave our situation was because of this viral threat.

Humans were now like strange creatures and scary specimens that we need to avoid, because everyone can be suspect: friends and love ones included. I surveyed other people with dread, the very air I breathe scared me to death that the contagious disease will catch me unprepared. We talked a meter apart, face partly concealed by face mask, while we cannot even hug or touch. It was all too strange, like a scene you can only dream from a sci-fi flick.

The succeeding days was the implementation of the lockdown. Living alone in my rented room, prohibited from going outside was a torture like a bacterium slowly eating my sanity. My feeling of desolation was amplified by the confusion of unverified rumors making rounds that this malady was a byproduct of a bioweapon, intent on eradicating the

human race to an innumerable proportion. There were also theories of conspiracies surrounding the origin of the virus and its malicious and suspicious nature. It was all so confusing and terrifying!!! While the rest squabbled with the distribution of the quarantine passes (Q Pass), of which the number is not enough for the lot of us, I was trapped on my own in a room, like a fugitive hiding from humanities.

We need to present the Q pass to the soldiers controlling the borders so that we will not be arrested when we go out to buy our necessities. We complaint of not having received a quarantine pass from the local officials but it seemed that it fell on dead ears. We were forced to share only 4 passes for about 400 inhabitants of the compound where I live. So how do we keep our sanity and ourselves alive when deep down we know that borrowing the pass is a certain chance of contracting the virus? What with 400 persons, taking turns of using only 4 sheets of paper for a pass, isn't it foreordained that one of these days, an infected person got hold of the parchment, leave a

trace of the virus, and it will be the end for the rest of us! Remember, some carriers were asymptomatic and the virus is pestilential at its worst-best.

Days changed to weeks and weeks progressed to months, but still the tally of COVID-19 confirmed seemed to climb higher than Mt. Everest. The number of cases doubled, tripled, quadrupled...it was so frightening to keep tab of the numbers. While the disease devastated the city, another crisis loomed to the inhabitants held captives in their homes: the lack of income because of the freezing of business operations. It was bad enough that we fear death, and death was an unseen enemy, but it was worst when death slowly strangle the life out from you by starvation. How will I survive? My savings have been agonizingly depleting since the start of the quarantine. It has been months since I have had a real wage.

Outside, the outcry for the government to intervene was slowly picking pace. It was announced that an 'ayuda' is forthcoming. But how do I avail of it? The question was actually a rhetorical kind because later I

found out that I am not qualified to receive the help. Why? Because I am a professional teacher! So much for justice!!! Only the poorest was eligible to the social aid. Perhaps I was destined to die in famishment!!!

During the distribution of the 'ayuda', people did not heed safety distancing—the new normal was a concept yet to be ruminated. Everybody wanted to be the first to receive the coveted package. Apart from that, some of the social workers assigned to enlist recipients only jotted down their immediate relatives and friends, even someone long dead were found to be eligible beneficiaries!

The distribution was a catastrophe as people were concerned only after themselves, even hoarding the claim stubs so that they can sell the surplus from the government to enrich themselves, albeit temporarily. Even the hospitals did not also come out untainted as they were hounded by rumors passed from one ear to another that they declared all patients as COVID-19 positives so that they can claim reimbursements of inflated bills from the government

owned insurance agencies. It was a conspiracy of siphoning the pandemic funds to their personal coffers, so it was said.

Government leaders were also adjudged to have no teeth as discerned by the critical eyes of the disgruntled citizens. The city mayor was mocked for infirm leadership as throngs of people were still observed defying the quarantine protocol. They were still seen huddling together in a session of ‘chismis’, while kids seemed to play hide-and-seek game with the police—that is, they hide when the patrol was roving and resumed their antics after the police retreated, no face mask and all.

And who were to blame then, even the Chief of Police himself perpetrated a breach of social distancing etiquette rules by conducting a birthday bash celebration, complete with party, drinks and crowd of ‘Kumpadres’ wishing him a happy natal day. It was all captured in the camera and shared on social media. But were they apprehended? You guessed it, no way! They seemed to be above the common people like us.

They were the ones responsible for the arrest of ordinary citizen violators. They deserve for an exemption, so they thought. Apparently, the public did not agree and they were lambasted for being unfair and selective in the imposition of justice. It was all an orderly chaos and conflicting moralities, enough to shatter one's nerves when you were alone, isolating yourself.

Despite all these, I am still alive and of good health. I am thankful that it was not enough to drive me lunatic, but more than enough to drive me to the depths of despair. Aside from I do not have money, I also do not have someone's ears and lips to ease my fears. I am far from friends and family. I also grieved the decision of my best friend to go back to his home province for good because he cannot find a suitable job fit for his taste. And then my lonely life became just unbearable. To whom would I run to whenever I have stress and problems? When I want an outlet to my nightmares? 2020 is a cursed year indeed. It changed my life drastically, from recreation down to

socialization. The streets which were once teeming with life now appeared deserted, making the whole city a ghost town stalked by the specter of death.

However, this lockdown has also taught me to become adaptable to change. It made me discern the essential from the mundane. It made me realize the value of the present especially in creating good memories with your friends and love ones while you still have time, because good times will always never last. It's a simple logic: we crave of things which are beyond our reach. Moreover, this pandemic forced me to self-isolate, which made me appreciate the value of socialization as a way of enriching one's self. I long for companies.

Also, I learn to value time and the importance of affirmative perspectives. There are indeed things that we cannot control, pandemic included, but we are in control on how we respond to it. In my case, I kept myself busy by improving myself. I attended international webinars, wrote short stories and poetries for publication, even submit manuscript for

research journals to drown my loneliness. Were I not forced to distance myself from others, I might not have accomplished all these things, because I might be too preoccupied of doing things that are not important: e.g., binge drinking, shopping, gossiping all preoccupations which do not only waste money, but also time and energy.

With all these being said, I firmly believe that I am ready to face another pandemic in this lifetime. With all the hardships I underwent, I would claim that I am now a changed man: more resilient, more adaptive. It made me realize that life is how we make it. That this pandemic can also be tamed through self-discipline and changing one's mindset. Discipline by following the rules stipulated by the experts to avoid transmission; and changing the mindset of being grateful of the positive things happening rather than stuck in the negativities of things. Because what the mind can conceive, the mind can actualize.

Speaking of mind, the hard-headed 'Cebuanos' were now malleable to the clamor for "safety first".

We realized that the battle was more than the sum of its parts. That defeating this terrible disease starts in one's self. We now faithfully follow social distancing and wear mask, because our stubbornness has backfired on us: the prolongation of the lockdown of our beloved Cebu City to almost 6 months, a record holder for the world's longest lockdown which started from March 27, 2020 until August 15, 2020. Social gathering and loitering were now strictly condemned by the authorities and 'citizen police'. Presently, as of this writing, the active cases are attenuating. Indeed, together we make things happen. We heal, as ONE and we are one of the many who were aptly called as "the One who lives".



A Day Before the Lockdown. The author (center in pink and stripes) together with his students in a photo prior to the lockdown. Some are wearing masks while others are not because the local transmission of COVID-19 has just started in the city and they have not yet taken the novel coronavirus seriously by following the “New Normal”.

Glossary:

1. **Sitio.** A territorial enclave as part of the barangay.
2. **Barangay.** The smallest administrative division in the Philippines
3. **Binignit.** A Visayan dessert soup from the central Philippines traditionally made with glutinous rice cooked in coconut milk with various slices of sabá bananas, taro, and sweet potato, among other ingredients.
4. **Chismis.** Gossip
5. **Ayuda.** An aid such as cash or food package distributed by the government to the citizens.
6. **Cebuano.** Residents of Cebu Province in the Philippines.
7. **Citizen Police.** Ordinary citizens who serve as informal social watchdog to ensure adherence to the community rules or norms.
8. **General Community Quarantine (GCQ).** Relaxed quarantine measures in areas identified

as low and moderate-risk in the spread of COVID-19.

9. **Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ).** Stringent quarantine measures in areas identified as high-risk in the spread of COVID-19.
10. **Kumpadre.** A close or bosom friend
11. **Person Under Monitoring (PUM).** A person suspected with Covid-19 due to manifestation of symptoms and history of exposure to the disease.
12. **Quarantine Pass (Q Pass).** A document or paper issued by the local government unit which serves as passes/permit for an individual resident to go outside to buy for basic needs.
13. **Sinulog.** A traditional festival celebrated in Cebu City held every third Sunday of January to honor the Santo Niño (Child Jesus).