

OPINION & FEATURES

WE are part of the diaspora, trying to achieve a better life not only for ourselves, but also for our families and country. There are more than 11 million overseas Filipino worldwide, which is equivalent to about 11 percent of the total population of the Philippines, in spite of all the sad stories, the adjustments and sacrifices—and yet every year, more than a million Filipinos go through hell and high water just to get a piece of their dream.

However, with these dreams come challenges—homesickness, leaving families behind, underemployment (in cases of doctors being retrained as nurses) and a multitude of difficulties that are associated to

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assimilating to a new environment and culture.

Still, the impact of this diaspora cannot be questioned. Money sent by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) back to the Philippines is a major factor in the country's economy, making it the fourth largest recipient of foreign remittances

So what is our worth as Filipinos? There is no doubt that we are worth more than the current foreign exchange rate, or the numerous imported goods in balikbayan boxes we sent to our loved ones in the Philippines. Filipinos are educated, skilled and hardworking, with compassion and dedication to do any job given to them.

Above all, the Filipinos, wherever they are in the world, are our pride and heroes. ■

Our worth as Filipinos



Not Filipinos?

OH, NOT A FILIPINO anymore," our Dutch trainer exclaimed when she learned that my Dad had been an expatriate for more than two decades.

Last summer, my Dad moved to another country for work. And in preparation for this, he had to attend a cultural awareness seminar in Amsterdam. Since my Mom and I would join him for a month, we were also required to attend it.

The two-day seminar began with introductions. Our Dutch trainer had thought it was the first time my Dad was working overseas and was stunned when my Dad said he had been working abroad for more than 20 years. That prompted her to remark, "Oh, not a Filipino anymore."

We all laughed at that. However, I couldn't help but ponder over what she said. I thought of all the Filipinos working or living abroad.

Does long absence from his homeland make one less of a citizen of that country? I was not born in the Philippines but that does not make me consider myself less of a Filipino.

I lived with my parents abroad for seven years until my Mom decided to go home. But while we have been living here, we still travel at least twice a year to visit my Dad. Living abroad and frequent travel did not make me or my family think that we are not Filipinos anymore. I know how to use chopsticks but I still use my hand when eating talbos ng kamote with bagoong. I may understand some Bahasa Melayu words but I can communicate in Filipino very well.

Some of my relatives who have been living in California for almost three decades still speak Tagalog. No matter how long they've been away, they have not forgotten their native language and they have not forgotten that they are Filipinos.

Being exposed to different cultures has opened my mind. For example, I see Muslims as peace loving people. I know now that

the Dutch are not really hard to get along with. They just do not sugarcoat what they say.

Sadly though some Filipinos who go abroad very quickly embrace other cultures and deliberately forget their own country. They would never be caught speaking Filipino even if they are talking to their own countrymen. They would even have their hair dyed blonde to hide their Filipino identity. But the most depressing part is when they proudly announce that they don't go to the Philippines anymore and would rather go somewhere else.

But living in another country for whatever reason doesn't make one a foreigner in his own land. No matter how many times I go out of the country, no matter how many foreigners I mingle with, no matter how knowledgeable I may be about others cultures, the Filipino values instilled in me by my parents will remain and stay strong. (*Inquirer.net*)

ECP Mariano, 22, is a copywriter at RAKA Advertising.

YOUNGBLOOD

ECP Mariano

Warriors of hope

LEADERS are not born. They are grown by faith and patience. Through the years, since I was six years old, I was in search for a good leader, a leader who embodied the best ideals of my people: generosity of spirit, compassion, teamwork, intellectual rigor, stellar accomplishments, but also good moral character and a sterling example of love for one's self and family. To this day, I continue my search and I find wisdom in ordinary folks, like Mackie, a leader in the making.

Mackie the baker. I was having a conversation one day with Mackie, a 25 year old Filipino-American breadmaker. Mackie is developmentally challenged, as he likes to tell me. But, I believe he is a quiet leader, with profound wisdom.

I like conversing with Mackie, though he tells me he understands little English and mostly Tagalog, yet, he is wise beyond his age with profound observations. He likes playing with my cellphone. He actually teaches me what options I have in using it: how to take pictures, how to change the tones and how to save images. I am no techie, so Mackie's help to get me to the 21st century of technology is welcome, if not needed. After he played with my phone, we had this exchange.

We got to talking about marriage. To some, this is perhaps a taboo topic, but not for Mackie. We got to talk about who, what are the traits of his ideal

mate and baking bread.

"Mackie, you like to get married?"

"Hmm, yah, I like to get married someday. " And a smile exudes from his face.

"Why, Mackie? Why do you want to get married?"

Mackie sports a baseball cap worn backwards and has the best looking sneakers. He likes drinking coke and his mom limits him to two a day. And his favorite are chocolate truffles, and one night, he secretly gives me three more than I ordered.

And, he likes to show me the latest photo taken with his cellphone. These are simple images: family photos, his Mom, Josephine who is relaxing after a full day of long hours of mixing dough and himself having fun with Alfonso. Simple, yet meaningful!

He works alongside Alfonso making bread. And bread takes awhile to make he tells me.

Dough takes a lot to form. Not just in terms of water, flour and yeast, but the right formulation to make it rise. It also requires meticulous attention, as if nurturing children to reach their full potential. It cannot be neglected, for if proofed beyond its capacity, the dough collapses and there is no bread to bake. If rushed, if one is impatient, if one pushes time over quality, the bread is dense and heavy, with an intolerable texture like hard stone.

The same goes for finding a mate, according to Mackie. He is patient, he is not rushing to find her or to get married. He wants to meet the right person, the right combination of yeast, flour and water, the right combination of maturity and only time that brings out the best self in her.

"I want to get married to someone who loves herself and therefore, she too can love me more. For when she loves herself, she is caring, and sharing."

I reflected on his statement and scanned for folks who exhibit



Cymbidiums that bloom after being cared for sometime outdoor, then, enjoyed indoor for awhile, a natural balance of light and shadow, a range of temperatures from hot mornings to cold evenings for the blooms to come out. Photo by Prosy Delacruz

"The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy or too impatient. To dig for treasures shows not only impatience and greed but lack of faith. Patience, patience, patience is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea." Anne Morrow Lindbergh

ed self-love, caring and sharing characteristics in our community. Hmm, how wise he is, to really focus on what is essential in life: caring and sharing...the letters c and sh...and the difference these behaviors make in anyone's life.

Who are these folks? These are the caring and sharing folks I want to write about in my column: the silent, centered, rooted, unsung rhizomes. They are hardly noticed, yet, their impact to our community is profound. If they had not stepped up to fill in the gaps, our community would not have progressed to where we are now. I call them rhizomic leaders.

These rhizomic leaders are warriors of hope who planted their vision one day: we will reach our perfect union, our community's level of teamwork and unity that we can be most proud of, a unity that supports the higher public common good, and incidentally, not the special interests of some that are pursued to the detriment of the majority. Their vision takes root but it takes patience, it takes nurturing by allies, it takes awhile for the blooms to be noticed, it takes a pause, some reflections to notice them. Just like cymbidium yellow green orchids, my favorite rhizomes.

Cymbidium Photo by Prosy Delacruz. Cymbidiums that bloom after being cared for sometime outdoor, then, enjoyed indoor for awhile, a natural balance of light and shadow, a range of temperatures from hot mornings to cold evenings for the blooms to come out. (Caption)

Rhizomes are botanical plants that grow underground, they spread their roots into the soil, then sprout new nodes and new

shoots, just like orchids. Notice the orchids' roots grow downward, rooted to the bark, or rooted to its base, but also reaches upward, open to receive sunlight, to accept the moisture of the rain, patient like the waves of the sea, revealing its blooms over a period of time. They sprout new shoots and in time to brighten our surroundings, but not while we expect them. They take their time, when least expected, as one pauses to observe, new shoots appear. With more care, with more sunlight, with enough balance of moisture and gaps of dryness, the blooms become flowers. And if you are lucky, these orchids exude a fragrance that greet you early in the morning and late at night.

Orchids are like slow-rising bread who over time, if proofed, rise, ready to be baked. Bread, when proofed just right, allowed to rise to its perfection, and then baked to reveal their flavors of either sourdough, wheat or cheese, with crusty exteriors and soft textures inside. Just like bread and orchids, rhizomic leaders reach their full potential of influencing others in the community, but only with time, with patience, after their vision has taken root, attracting others to join them in actualizing it.

Rhizomic leaders

I am in search of these folks and I will be featuring them in my column. They are rooted leaders, rooted in their practice of instilling hope, leaders who build their persuasive influence creating teamwork, leaders who pursue com-UNITY and not their selfish agenda. Many consider themselves as quiet heroes, unsung leaders, shy, not looking for recognition, but are our true leaders who always believed in the goodness of our community, the generosity of the Filipino Americans, and the compassion of the American people.

And I humbly dedicate this column to my mentor, NVM Gonzalez who believed I had the capacity to write, who trusted in my ability to share through writing, even when I had failed to see that within myself. It was 9 years ago when he shared his vision that we are all artists, we are capable of writing our own stories, and in so doing, we will realize our own capacity as a people and be a source of light and luminosity to others, just like the purple iris.

And I profoundly say thanks to Cora Oriol, who believes in my capacity to carry on this feature column, even when I have self-doubts about keeping up with twice a week submission. And of course, who can pursue their human potential, if not with the unconditional support of a loving spouse, Enrique one who believes I can do whatever I turn my focus on, even when I do not quite believe that yet of myself? I wish for this purple iris to be a symbol of this column, where only the good in others and the community are showcased.

And to you, my readers, I invite you to email me with your ideas, with your own rhizomic stories, with your own rhizomic leaders who influenced your lives. Please dialogue with me through this column, and my email is prosy@asianjournalinc.com. I thank you for giving me this opportunity to be with you through written words.

Prosy Abarquez-Delacruz, J.D. is a features writer of LA Asian Journal. Her essays have appeared in Los Angeles Times, Philippine News, UCLA's Amerasia Journal, Balita, Taliba, including Quality Press' publication of Food, Drug, Cosmetic Division, American Society for Quality. She completed a manuscript entitled "Even the Rainbow Has a Body", which awaits publication. For two years, she became one of the 3,000,000 volunteers nationally who self-organized to get President-Elect Barack Obama into the White House. She looks forward being with a quarter of a million folks during the January 2009 inauguration.

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