

OPINION & FEATURES

THE new majority that ousted Senate President Manuel Villar on Tuesday delivered the Senate presidency to Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile with a *carte blanche*. Enrile claimed he didn't seek the presidency, but took the offer of the majority "seriously" if the group had the numbers (14) to replace Villar. It would then appear that the presidency was a ripe plum, ready to fall into his lap.

There had been persistent rumors since July about plots to oust Villar. So indifferent did Enrile appear to the move to topple Villar that he was quoted as saying at one time that the Senate "was no longer functioning as expected by the public because of politicking."

ANALYSIS

Amando Doronilla

Thus, following his election to the presidency, Enrile has become an enigma, leaving the public and even his backers in the Senate coup without a hint of the kind of leadership he would provide to make the chamber "functional" or above "politicking" (of which he is a shrewd practitioner). They have given him the freest hand in shaping the Senate agenda in the history of shake-ups that have made the chamber an unstable forum of legislative leadership.

Sen. Loren Legarda, who was in the core group of senators that were disgruntled with Villar's leadership, said, "We must have a Senate that is committed to fairness, statesmanship, and we must put national interest above political gain or expediency." She said the

Where is the Senate going?



plotters worked hard to get the numbers to oust Villar to "strengthen the institution."

Sen. Panfilo Lacson, another member of the core group, said, "Senator Enrile is the only one we saw to make the Senate an independent institution. He told us he will fight for the independence of the Senate."

Villar also spoke in terms of the independence of the Senate. In tendering his resignation after seeing that Enrile had the numbers, Villar congratulated Enrile and pledged his support "in seeing to it that this chamber continues to maintain its unquestionable independence and its solid reputation as a bulwark of democracy."

These statements reflect the primacy concern of the senators in effecting leadership change: preserving the independence of the Senate. When senators speak of independence, they have in mind the chamber's independence from the executive department, the historical source of threat to the tripartite separation of powers and the senators' right to conduct inquiries into scandals involving corruption in the executive department and their oversight into executive actions.

But of more concern to the public is whether the Enrile assumption of the Senate presidency would lead to the transformation of the Senate from an inquisitorial institution that has served as a forum for senators to act as tormentors of witnesses summoned to testify at their hearings. During such hearings, witnesses, including those testifying over public transactions or officials whose appointments are

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Black Pearls

DANIELLE'S expressive eyes resembled medium-sized black pearls inside oyster shells. They appear loaded with mysteries about to be discovered. Her eyes sparkled as if they had diamond studs inside them. Her hair draped down to her neck, with soft curls partially resting on her shoulders. She looked towards the mountains, with blue skies framed on its tops. The leaves of the palm trees sashayed from side to side, as if hula dancers energized by the cool winds of this morning.

I caught a whiff of carne asada and sausages being grilled. Opposite was the taco stand, where two or three cooks share a five feet by two feet grill, fueled by propane. Should I have the usual breakfast of flaco of diced chicken with diced zucchini, squash flowers and tomatoes with a mild-spiced chilaquiles prepared from tortilla chips, salsa, cilantro, onions, and grated Mexican cheese? Hmm, my senses are now awake, unconsciously being pulled by the flaco perhaps or the carne asada with grilled onions and spicy cilantro sausage on a French roll. Unable to choose, I fall back on "my usual," a default choice at times, and at other times, I truly choose it for my Sunday breakfast, and this morning is about consciously choosing my flaco breakfast.

Genius is Danielle's mother. She is petite and with salt and pepper hair color. She wears black velour hoodie over blue jeans, a smart casual look. With a cellphone in her hand, she waves and calls out: "Come, join us. "Carrying my flaco and chilaquiles breakfast, I consciously choose to accept her offer. Her tone felt hospitable, sweet, gentle, and sincere with embracing warmth of a long lost relative, now found. It felt good to be accepted this early Sunday morning. It reminded me of going to Sunday Mass, with churchgoers who becoming family as each Sunday goes. Unusual though for strangers that I meet at a farmer's market, I told myself. Again, a conscious choice—do I simply let go and trust my fate to these two strangers or should I stay guarded and distant?

I choose to trust, let go, and enjoy the adventure encounter with two Persian-Americans.

"I sense your heart and energy. That's why I wanted you to sit next to us", Genius shared.

"Thank you. That was really nice of you to offer the seat next to you. Is she your daughter?"

"Yes, meet Danielle." I hold out my right hand, some parts with wrinkled skin on what was once smooth not too long ago. My palm meets a palm-sized hand, half the size of mine. Two hands of hers would have fit one of mine, a feeling that I was much bigger than she is. Yet, I feel intimidated by the depth of mystery I am sensing from her small sized body and her dark expressive eyes.

Yes, it was her eyes, which grabbed my attention. What could she be hiding? Wounds from childhood, I muttered to myself? Could she be abused?

My mind quickly imagines the worst kind of scenarios; yet, I could have concocted something more positive. That perhaps she is a descendant of a royal family from Iran. Instead, I consciously choose this morning to receive Grace.

"You have such beautiful dark eyes." Danielle did not flinch. She stayed silent. Wanting to get her attention, prompting Danielle perhaps to share a few words with me, I shared my admiring remarks again.

"You really have expressive eyes." They feel like they want to share something with me. Her lips cracked a bit, a smile much more evident, not the big wide one, but just enough to acknowledge my wish or perhaps her intentions to share.

Danielle once again looked towards the horizon, observing the thin-capped, snow-covered mountains, but playfully caught three strands of her hair and coiled them around her forefinger and middle fingers. 'I wonder what can she be thinking at such a young age. Does she reflect on what she does? Unusual question I told myself, she is only 8. There you go again, being patronizing, how do you know?

I resolve the tug of war within me and decide to simply ask her questions when appropriate.

"What grade are you now in school?"

"Second Grade."



Seashells and black pearls from Davao.

Photo by Prosy Dela Cruz

I could not get her to share more by asking too many questions. So, I choose to be quiet.

"On days that I am in school, I am with my girlfriend. But, last Friday, she did not want to play with me."

"Oh, why not?"

"She was angry with me that day. I did not want to ask her, as it would make her sadder."

Gosh, how sensitive and thoughtful. I need to listen more. My first pearl of wisdom.

She fidgeted a bit, adjusted her butt on her mom's lap. Genius was all ears.

I wonder what her mother could be thinking.

"You mean you just give her space to be with her moods and feelings."

"Yes, I just let her decide when she wants to be my friend again."

"You are so considerate of your friend and her feelings. What about you?"

I wonder if at a young age of seven she has learned to have a martyr complex. There I go again with my judgmental observations.

"I went to the playground and I took out my sketchbook. I drew something, something I imagined that would make me happy. I drew the mountains, the blue skies, and the white clouds, palm trees. Just like what we are seeing this morning."

"Wow, that is neat to see what you drew is now what we are looking at."

"How do you do that?"

"It is not difficult. When I feel sad, on days after I visit my girlfriend, I turn on the music and I dance and I dance and soon, I am feeling happy again."

"You mean you do not share how sad you are with your mom or your dad or even your girlfriend?"

"No, I do not share my sad feelings with my girlfriend. She needs a lot of love from me. She comes from a family that is not healthy."

"What do you mean by a family that is not healthy?"

She readjusts her legs again to sit closer to her mother, Genius. She leans back to feel her heart. At this point, I observed her smile getting more fixed on her face, as if a feeling of wonder and awe, but mostly appreciating what she is hearing from Danielle.

"I am blessed. My mother and my father live in the same house and they love each other, and they just love me a lot. There is no fighting. In my girlfriend's house, her father is a big president of some company, they have a very big marble house, and her mother does not live there. When her mother comes, she fights with her father, and her father screams at her mother. My girlfriend becomes sadder. I have to be there to be her friend, to hold her hand, to give her love, because my mother loves me and father and I do not have to feel angry. I am sad when my girlfriend does not want to play with me."

Oh my, where did she get her wisdom at her young age? My second pearl of wisdom, a blessing unexpected!

"Were you always like this sensitive to your girlfriend, like giving her time to decide to become your friend again, without getting mad when she is angry?"

"No, I was very selfish before. When I was just thinking of myself, I was not happy. I was sad, I was angry. Then, my aunt talked to me. She told me to help out one person each day and see how that makes me feel."

"Was she right? Did you get happier?"

"Yes, everyday now, after school, I try to help out. Sometimes, it

is taking care of my aunt's dog, feeding him. Sometimes, it is playing with my girlfriend, giving her my love, holding her hand, while her father screams at her mother. Sometimes, it is taking out the trash for my father who might come home late sometimes because he works hard."

"And do you feel good doing those?"

"Yes, I used to feel like I lived at the bottom of the ladder. Now, I feel like I live on the top of the ladder. "It made me recall a story about Warren Buffett, how he likes the view at the 100th floor, and it does not compare to going down to the 98th floor, but he remembers how it is to go from the ground floor to the second floor, and what a struggle that is. I suppose that is what empathy is, just like what Danielle is sharing with me right now."

I cannot believe how wise she is at a very young age of 8. Is she an angel that I am just fortunate to have a chance of meeting this morning? A third pearl of wisdom perhaps?"

My reflections take me back to what I just read, sometimes, you meet the unexpected persons who become the conduit for divine messages from above.

What if Danielle is my conduit?

"Are you thinking of others all the time?"

"I do, and when I grow up, what is his name now, the mayor of Los Angeles?"

"You mean, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. He is a good mayor who looks after all of us."

"Yes, that is the mayor I was watching on TV. He talked about the homeless."

"And what do you want to do when you grow up, do you want to be the mayor?"

"I want to be part of the government. I want to build homes for the homeless. I want to do my art. I want to publish my book of stories."

Oh gosh, she just described four pillars of my life's pathway, these are the areas I want to spend my time now that I am retired. How can she read my mind and my heart?

"Why the homeless? Why do you want to build homes for them?"

"Who am I to shorten their lives? Are they not entitled to the same right to happiness like I do? My parents love me, I can play, I can draw, I can listen to music, and I can play with my aunt's dog. I am happy. Why can they not be happy too while on earth, like I do?"

This is the best articulation I have heard for why poverty should not be part of our social reality in the 21st century. Oprah is right, poverty is not simply about resources, we have become poor in our spirits, as we allow and tolerate poverty to be part of us. A political campaign flyer listed poverty ranges in all fifty states of America ranging from a low 10 percent to a high 30 percent in Mississippi. California is at 18 percent, at least 2 of every 10 Californians are poor. In my birthplace, Philippines, 6 out of 10 Filipinos are poor and 100 families own the resources of the economy.

We have not taken a stand that poverty must be extinct. Our LA City Mayor has.

What if all of us dreamt of no more poverty, and to intervene and help fill in the gaps of life, wherever we are? Will we all be as happy as Danielle? Thank you for my pearls I found on the road!

"Can I have your drawings as I want to send it to the Mayor, he loves children and he loves teaching students to write. He has a book of stories that he wrote with high school students. Would you like that?"

"Yes. Give me your address. I will send you my drawings."

I gave her my business card. She reads it and gives it to her mom, Genius. I am still waiting for Danielle's drawings and story. I wonder if she is the divine conduit I have been in search for? Is she?

While waiting for Danielle's drawings, I choose to write, I choose to fill in the gaps, I choose my bliss, and I choose to help. And when family and friends and relatives get mad at me, I choose to wait until they decide they want to be with me again.

Danielle, wherever you are, you are my long lost angel of wisdom and your day with me is BOUNTIFUL GRACE!

To this day, my friends and I meet at the Beverly Hills Farmers Market; we are waiting for Danielle to show up. I come at different times, and I long to see her one more time.

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