

OPINION & FEATURES

A moment to exhale

WHILE pundits are busy pummeling President Obama with criticisms and shaking their heads in dismay over his actions on Guantanamo, General Motors, the health care industry and Iran's civil unrest, the President makes himself even more vulnerable to flagellation by admitting a nasty habit—smoking.

Pres. Obama ruefully admitted his fight with the big C (cigarettes, that is) but re-deemed himself by signing one of the toughest laws ever formulated in American history—the anti-smoking law that seeks to keep teenagers off the habit.

After all, the President did

promise his wife, Michelle that he would quit “huffing and puffing” if she allowed him to run the presidential race. A smoking candidate would just simply run out of breath in a neck-and-neck battle for the finish line.

She proudly tells 60 Minutes how she has outed him from the habit cause there was simply no room in the White House for a president with a constant cloud of smoke.

However, the President has vaguely acknowledged moments when he “fell off the wagon.”

“Almost 90 percent of people who smoke began at 18 or younger,” he said. And in his

youth, he was just one of many who fell prey to the vultures of the tobacco industry. “I know I was one of these teenagers. And so I know how difficult it can be break this habit when it's been with you for a long time.”

But whether Pres.

Obama sneaks a smoke now and then is not the issue at this point. It is a weakness that he sheepishly admits for a good cause. And perhaps, his bold confession of an achilles heel would be his key motivation towards his own personal change. (AJ-Press)

EDITORIAL



In every crisis there is opportunity



CTALK

Cito Beltran

CURRENT attempts to control the spread of the AH1N1 flu virus is equivalent to bailing water with a vegetable strainer. The enemy is invisible, often late when detected and highly transmittable. To complicate matters, the very cause of transmission, humans, are ignorant about the virus and have no appreciation of the real threat it poses on us.

After killing several scores of people in Mexico and the United States, you would think that everyone would appreciate the double time duty of people in the Department of Health particularly Secretary Francisco Duque.

Instead of “thanks”, some malicious or socially irresponsible people have actually made comments that are simply uncalled for. To even insinuate that Duque is taking advantage of the health crisis in order to increase his public recognition is petty and immature. In the face of AH1N1, such comments are criminal.

We have a public health crisis along with several nations around the globe. We are fortunate enough that our department of health has been on the ball concerning various threats. Since Day 1, when we were faced with the SARS virus. Given our physical and social conditions, the DOH has risen to the task of preventing a major disaster involving Dengue. When the Avian flu or “Bird flu” became a regional concern, the DOH was at the “Top of the Class” around Asia in educating the public.

The same team has been all out dealing with the AH1N1 virus. At the very least “if you're not part of the solution, don't be part of the problem”.

Unfortunately, AH1N1 is popping up in all the wrong places such as schools, universities and private offices where human traffic is the equivalent of a mass transit for plagues.

When I started this article I wondered what sort of immunity politicians have since there has been no reported cases of the flu

in Congress.

Unfortunately the first case in the Lower House resulted in “the first death from complications” of a staff of the Congressional Committee on Education which led to the “voluntary quarantine” of 3,000 employees of the House of Representatives.

If Representatives or Senators come down with the flu, we would all be listening to half hour newscasts instead of one hour and all the newspapers will be several pages thinner.

Anyway, back to the “human” factor.

Ignorance is dangerous enough but we often disregard the risks we face as long as we get to do our regular routine. The situation is further aggravated by selfish companies who shamelessly add to the fear and the paranoia just to sell “health products” — hand sanitizer, thermometers, surgical masks, or “flu relief medicine” which are nothing more than muscle relaxants, vitamins or paracetamol.

Even the much talked about “flu vaccines” did not protect a member of the Philippine football delegation to Singapore. As the saying goes “in every crisis there is opportunity”.

In line with Congressman Ruffy Biazon's legislation creating a “Medical Crisis Authority”, the crisis could be an agent of change.

Since many schools are going dizzy suspending classes every time they have an AH1N1 case, why don't we push back the academic calendar to buy time for de-bugging?

This way, we would have ample time to educate everybody on how to “de-bug” themselves, stay flu-free and ultimately reduce the risks of mass exposure. This solves the problem of having to suspend classes while putting us in sync with International schools.

While we push back the academic calendar, everybody can be enlisted especially the KBP to order mandatory broadcast of educational materials regarding how to avoid the spread of AH1N1 virus, and not commercials that scare us to buy questionable

health products.

Instead of political ads, politicians should launch campaigns about cleanliness such as handwashing, not spitting or urinating anywhere (like dogs), carrying handkerchiefs and about not being boors in public.

The DILG and DTI can require malls, arenas, fun parks etc, to add thermal scans to the current system of frisking and using metal detectors, or sniffer dogs and to KEEP OUT STUDENTS!

Our kids stay healthy and our wallet and credit cards won't be subject to commercial abuse.

While on the topic, shouldn't we review the existing policies on absences of employees as well as the “mandated” number of school days a student “must have” for every school year? As a graduate of the University of the Philippines, I recall several courses or subjects that were not dependent on your attendance but on your ability or discipline to self-study and pass the required quizzes or exams.

Our obsession with attendance or absences, borders on stupidity if not lethal inflexibility. Many employees as well as students have spread “Sore eyes or conjunctivitis”, other forms of the flu, or chicken pox because they were afraid of running out of the allowed number of absences, or medical leaves.

Attendance requirements have precluded sanity and safety. We need to realize that our employment and academic policies are doing more harm than good.

Even before we have solved the problem of AH1N1, DepEd and school officials are already talking about Saturday and Sunday classes. These people obviously never heard of “Home Schooling”. Apparently they are also atheists who do not share our beliefs that Sundays (or if you're Jewish, Saturdays) are days of worship.

Such people either don't have a life or have only half a brain. They could be legally brain dead for lack of imaginative solutions or a certifiable hazard to public health.

And IF the “Health Crisis Authority” comes to life, their motto should be the Singaporean policy: Our job is to implement solutions, not to explain them”. ■

‘Balik Baguio’

“LOOK *Lolo*, look *Lolo*,” my son dashed into my father's room, excited to boast about his new T-shirt. He pointed to the words emblazoned on the top part and “read” out “Ba-guio, Ci- Ty.”

For a moment, my father was fooled, “Wow, you can read now?” but quickly realized that my son, all of three years old, was pulling his leg and was more excited about telling his Baguio stories. As he gave his animated accounts about strawberries and pony rides, I thought of how Baguio has become so much a part of many Filipino families' life cycles.

The paternal side of my family is Davao-based, much too far from Baguio, but my mother's side, being Manila-based, had closer ties with that city. During World War II, the Japanese put up a military camp right across my mother's home, much too close for comfort, so their entire family fled to Baguio and lived there for the rest of the war. One of my mother's siblings stayed on, married and raised a family there.

After the war, my maternal stepgrandmother would pack up all her daughters and the grandchildren and have us spend the entire summer there with her in a rented house. You can imagine it was quite a matriarchal activity, with our fathers left behind in Manila and driving up weekends to visit.

In college, the trips to Baguio became more frequent with student volunteer work in the Cordillera. Baguio was often a transit stop, almost a place for

rejuvenation before, or after, taking on the rigors of Halsema Highway (which everyone called “Abortion Road” because of its rough conditions). There were more *balik*-Baguio trips after I graduated and was working with the Catholic Church's social action programs in health.

Late in the 1980s (or was it the early 1990s—my memory becomes a bit like Baguio's fog), I had to go to Baguio almost monthly, working on a Unicef survey of maternal and child health in the Cordillera.

After that survey, visits to Baguio became quite infrequent. Travel seemed to take too long, and the visits were less pleasant. But this year, I've rediscovered Baguio with three visits so far. It's not so much the city's centennial than the new generation in the family that has made me more willing to make the trip, and always, I've not been disappointed.

Progressive

It's become almost fashionable for people to whine about Baguio's congestion and pollution and the loss of the scent of pine. But if you look hard, you'll find Baguio has had many changes as well for the better, and I want the next generation of my family to become part of that progressive side.

Once accessible only for American colonialists and the Filipino elite, Baguio has become democratized. It's an educational hub that includes UP Baguio, attracting students not just from the Cordillera but from all over the country. It's brought in many migrants too—from Muslims from Mindanao to South Koreans. Baguio has become a melting pot, and an incubator for new ideas and activism of every kind, from the rights of indigenous communities to environmental protection and even campaigns against dog-eating.

As a vacation destination, Baguio now has lodgings to fit every budget and, because there are migrants from all over the country, I think we're getting to the point where many Filipinos can now boast of having a relative in Baguio with whom they can stay for free when they visit.

If you're bringing up the entire clan, you might want to consider renting a house. Do an Internet search, and you'll find many possibilities. I found a three-bedroom, completely furnished house tucked away in a rather secluded part of the city where you can actually smell the pine. I also like bed-and-breakfast places like PNKY on Leonard Wood, actually a house with several rooms, each available separately.

The last two trips I've stayed at the Hotel Elizabeth. (By coincidence, during this most recent trip, I was checking out of the hotel just as an Inquirer Northern Luzon dealers' meeting was about to start, so I'm sending them greetings in my column, with regrets I couldn't stay for dinner.)

Hotel Elizabeth is part of the Fersal chain, which has shown you can have hotels built with good taste, but without charging guests an arm and a leg. Hotel Elizabeth reflects Baguio's boldness with innovating, built like an Italian villa without ending up garish. And, in the Fersal tradition, they have rooms for every budget, from 6-bed rooms ideal for young barkadas to luxury penthouse 3-bedroom suites.

Hotel Elizabeth also has a vegetarian restaurant, Bliss Café, reflecting the way Baguio has become a haven for people with alternative lifestyles. Kidlat Tahimik, the nationalist filmmaker, has his “pent-house” art gallery/theater/restaurant, Oh My Gulay, on Session Road in the Azotea building.

Near City Hall, on Chunteg Road, there's Café by the Ruins with its famously diverse menu, as well as all kinds of possible pasalubongs (gifts for home),

from their own tapuy (rice wine) to various types of coffee from the Cordillera. Lately they've also been carrying civet coffee.

Café also sells organic vegetables on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, part of a project initiated by Benguet State University. (I understand they also have organic outlets in Trinidad, but have not been able to visit.)

Across the Café, on Otek Street, there's O'Mai Khan, known mainly for their Mongolian grill but I go there mainly for their unique kalamansi cheesecake.

Narda's, famous for ikat fabrics, also sells organic vegetables Wednesdays and Saturdays and has a restaurant with an excellent menu and yes, they still produce carrot cake.

I did want to plug Good Shepherd Convent, which still has the best strawberry jam (and ube and chutneys, and peanut brittle...), all produced by the Mountain Maid Training Center, which helps put students through college. The sisters have kept with the times, now offering low-sugar products. And their sales are now very well organized, with someone taking orders and then passing the products on to cashiers who use bar code readers to record prices.

Arts-wise, there's still much to explore. There are a lot of tourist traps and cheesy souvenirs (man in the barrel), but give Baguio more time and you'll probably find better quality local crafts around the tradition of the Easter weaving school. Do visit the new Bencab museum on Km. 7, Naguilian Road.

Baguio isn't just for the summer. In fact, you should take advantage of their low season, with hotels slashing rates by as much as 50 percent. Just make sure you check the weather forecasts; you can get stranded if a huge typhoon strikes, but even if that happens, it could mean more fond Baguio memories of a cozier kind. (Inquirer.net)



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