

Adrift On A Promise

"Diyos ko, Ginoo ko, hindi ko kabalo mag-langoy!"

With those words, my mother flung open the door to our apartment and poked her head out, calling out our neighbors' names. Only distant cries for help -- the same ones that had woken us from our afternoon nap -- rode the winds back to her. We seemed stuck on an island, then, the three of us. Perhaps our neighbors had left the apartment complex and gone on to higher ground. This thought made my mother more anxious; once again, she cried out, *"Ma-ano nalang ta ni? Hindi ko kabalo mag-langoy!"*

A lone red shoe floated past her and out the door. She panicked and made a grab for it, and then seemed to realize that opening the door wasn't making the water go out. It was letting it get *in*, and for a while she struggled, trying to push the door closed.

While my mother was bemoaning her inability to swim, my brother and I had been steadily carrying our things upstairs. The water was murky, its color a dark brown that reminded me of mud and the piles of cow dung that peppered the road home. It lapped around my thighs as I salvaged photo albums, books, and my school bag. Twice I bumped my knee against what must have been a table leg.

Strangely, I wanted to laugh. The moment my mother opened the door and screamed out her fears to the heavens, the moment that that red shoe had sailed out, I felt the laughter bubbling deep within me. It was caught in my throat. I knew this was the worst possible time to let it out, when I could see the stricken expression on my mother's face as she stood in the corner. In her

case, the water was up to her waist. She was afraid, as I should be as well, even though I did know how to swim.

But something about that image -- of my mother in the corner with the hem of her shirt stained brown, her hands clutching the errant red shoe as if it were a talisman that could stop the flood -- amused me.

It was absurd. The entire situation was absurd. Just an hour or so ago, I'd refused to eat lunch and had instead gone upstairs to read. If I hadn't been so picky about the viand, if I'd read my book on the living room couch, things would have been different. I'd have been there when the alarm was raised. The flood would have happened, regardless, but at least we would have known it was coming.

After we'd saved everything still dry enough to be of use, the three of us retreated to the second floor. We tried not to think about what would happen if the water rose even more. There just seemed to be no room for it, for the possibilities -- we were already cornered, and we didn't want that space to be even smaller. Outside, some of the people living in one-storey houses had been forced out on their roofs or up the tallest trees. No one knew for how long this would go on.

We stayed in our rooms and waited. We had no idea what else we could do.

But we might have, if only we'd listened to the radio or watched the news on TV. If we'd been following the broadcasts, we would have had emergency supplies ready. We would have felt safer, more assured, if we'd been alert and well-prepared.

In high school, I remember how the administration used to cram the entire student body in an auditorium for lectures on safety procedures. The fact that we were being taught the very things

that would save our lives was lost on us. The phrase *stop, drop and roll* was a broken record that we kept playing in our heads, if only to reassure our teachers that we were listening. We fidgeted. We checked our phones every few seconds. Those who sat at the back fell asleep, their bodies angled in such a way that they wouldn't be accosted by the teachers making their rounds.

In that cramped space where the only cause for concern was boredom, it was all too easy to take these precautions for granted. We took the knowledge we were given, folded it up, and shoved it into the backs of our minds. We were conscious of the fact that we needed it. The only thing was, we could not yet grasp the importance of it -- that it meant the difference between living and dying.

When an earthquake happened later in the year, that was when we began to realize just how crucial those bits and pieces of information were. If the escape paths hadn't been outlined for us, and if we hadn't been briefed on the flow of exiting the building, we would have been a mess. We very nearly were.

It is important, then, that at the most basic level, the youth must be able to take note of proper procedures. Every situation is unique, but being prepared can go a long way, and it helps take the burden off the shoulders of authorities. It is much easier to get students out of classrooms if they are aware of what they need to do. Taking responsibility for oneself is equivalent to taking responsibility for part of the nation.

It doesn't just end there. Once the youth are well-informed, the next step is to take advantage of their dominance in the digital world. This is the wired generation, after all. Plugged in and charging, everyone's energy levels directly proportional to the amount of battery juice left in their gadgets. Considering how majority of the Filipino youth are subscribed to the internet, it

doesn't seem so far off the mark to suggest that they utilize various aspects of it in order to improve the preparedness of the nation as a whole.

The best way to do this is by treating social networking sites as a repository for information. It isn't enough to just know the procedures yourself. These must be shared so that everyone is aware of how the process goes. News updates also need to be tracked, as well as advisories and bulletins from government agencies and weather stations. There must be a continuous flow of knowledge all throughout so that every household is able to react appropriately to the situation. Keeping oneself informed and informing other people are two actions that come hand in hand. Neither is of much use without the other.

On the whole, doing these things eases the entire process of ensuring everyone's safety. Most especially, the fact that the youth are well-briefed on emergency procedures leads to a solid foundation for disaster preparedness in the country.

Another way that the youth can help is by becoming well-versed in disaster relief operations. They may donate goods or money, or they can take the time to join drives. It is more than just putting in the proverbial two cents one can spare. It is also about fostering unity, goodwill, teamwork and compassion amongst everyone.

These things were apparent in the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda, when various communities gathered and packed relief goods for the affected areas. All kinds of people from all walks of life turned up to help. I chose to volunteer during the graveyard shift -- from midnight to just a little after 6 in the morning -- and I was able to witness the human spirit's capacity to rise above one's own needs. It didn't matter who you were, or where you needed to be, or what the cat did to your

homework just hours before. What mattered was creating an efficient system for packing the relief goods, so we could put together enough sacks to send to the victims.

I saw a little girl weaving her way past various people in order to fetch empty boxes. I saw a woman in a tracksuit who never failed to smile even though she'd been there for a long time. I saw a soldier who carried his sack as if it were his own child, and he bowed his head in thanks when I passed him a pack of noodles.

Sometimes, what you do after the disaster is just as important as what you do before. Everyone knows that the first step is being prepared for the brunt of the event, for how long it might take and how bad it might be. Often the focus is only on weathering the disaster itself.

This is why it just as necessary for the youth to be involved in disaster relief operations.

Rehabilitation is an ongoing process that requires all hands on deck, and even at an early age, one must be ready to help. If the youth made it a point to help out during that crucial time when the country is only just getting back to its feet, it will be a true testament to how prepared the country is. Natural disaster preparedness isn't only about memorizing escape routes and hotlines and the nearest evacuation centers, after all. It is also about the response to the calamity itself, and the ways that one deals with the damages wrought.

Six years after Typhoon Frank, I am still afraid when the rain knocks on the windows and the wind sings too loudly. I dream of sitting inside a red shoe and watching helplessly as the water pours in, in, in, until all I can see is brown. But I have learned to accept that nature deals us with bad cards no matter who we are and where we go – and though we may never escape unscathed, we can still choose to pick ourselves up. Take our tattered souls in hand and, in the midst of the brewing storm, rise above to welcome the promise of another tomorrow.