

## Green at Heart

As a little kid, I was pretty reclusive. The caste system of the young, which classified its hierarchy by how high you can climb a tree and how far you're willing to go in order *not* to be class nerd, did me no justice at all. That's why whenever my cousins and playmates came over to our place, I sought refuge in my grandfather's verdant backyard.

Gradually, I treated his backyard like it was my own secret world, and every seed I planted made me feel like I was contributing to something special. Not before long, I started my own little garden – it wasn't as pretty as my grandfather's, but it was just as cozy. Each afternoon would find me wielding a hose, deluging every pot with what I believed was natural superpowers.

As my garden expanded, so did my concerns for the environment. I grew up with reveries of rescuing the maltreated dolphins I saw on TV and championing the causes of Greenpeace which I read about in books. That was years ago. Fast forward to now: Walking on a street on a casual day here in Manila can say so much about our environmental problems. There's horrid smoke up in your nostrils, bridges littered with plastic bags and soda bottles, under those bridges you have rivers that carry toxic materials that eventually kill their aquatic inhabitants. Instead of towering trees, we have towering buildings. Rapid urbanization and modernization do not exacerbate the situation too.

In spite of these, the government doesn't seem to focus on our environment, tarnishing walls, posts, and bridges with campaign posters instead. I guess, in the end,

we Filipino people have only ourselves to wield the water hose that can nurture our big garden - Earth.

From a young age - up until now - I believe that environmental protection starts at home - in our own "backyards". Likewise, I know that what I can protect in the environment lies in my backyard too. By starting small and thinking big, we can do so much. Imagine: We can stunt the possibilities of having raging tsunamis leaving millions dead and homeless, heat waves that happen in December, and our favourite animals on Animal Planet becoming extinct. It sounds idealistic enough to border on impossible or unattainable, but when dog-piled, each small thing can contribute a lot. After all, we Filipinos have the perfect *Bayanihan* spirit that goes with this.

With that said, I would like to share what I believe are the things in the environment that I can protect.

First, I can protect the trees, the plants, and the foliage. Here's how: By taking my sense of responsibility to a higher level.

In my grade school, whenever the classroom went anywhere far from pristine, our teachers would tell us to pick up the pieces of paper that littered the floor and throw them on the proper trash cans and everyone would comply. But as we grow older, this elementary principle of responsibility becomes hard to sustain. It's rare to see any teenager picking up the junk on the streets (with fecal matter and other unsanitary microcosms on the streets, who could blame us?) The seemingly 0.99% of humanity who does that comprise of stoic sanitary workers who are paid to do so. Evidently, we no longer have the so-called "adults" to reprimand us when our environment becomes

polluted; no more teachers who would assign “cleaners for the day” under threats of giving low conduct grades. Perhaps it’s time for us to act like real grown-ups by bringing that kind of responsibility back to our lines of thought. Improper disposal alone can clog our sewage systems and lead to another catastrophe (I’m sure Ondoy still rings a bell in our auditory orifices), which not only do damage to our homes, but also to our environment.

Also, more paper means less trees. Using less paper in school doesn’t have to mean cutting back on exams. The sheets of paper used in note-passing in class alone, if totalled within a school year, can amount to at least one rim of intermediate pad paper. At least once in our lives, we’ve done this (most notable in Math or Science class). It’s funny to think that stifling a day’s worth of gossip can save a tree from being killed.

An even better weapon would be our own green thumbs. I know that most of the kids my age would rather hang out in the mall and watch movies – even I am guilty of this – and that a handful of us live in buildings instead of houses with real backyards, but during our spare minutes, especially in summer when school’s out, planting is definitely worth a try.

Second, in my own little ways, I can protect land, water, and animals. I can do this by starting small, which can also mean gradually changing preferences – from what to buy, eat, and throw away. Most people are always hell-bent on getting the flashiest phones and MP3s for the purpose of “coolness”. Sadly, the few people who are marching to the beat of their own drums by rejecting this kind of conformity are as endangered as the next Polar Bear. In a way, this can be blamed to that lifestyle of excess where, at the behest

of television ads, billboards, and commercials, we rush out to buy the latest products that “guarantee” glowing skin, long-lasting durability, speed and better mileage. *Where's the free will in that?* There's nothing wrong with patronizing these things, of course; and these “in” things are somehow essential in modern-day living. But most of the time, we upgrade just because we want to. Rather than acting like rash consumers, it's better to keep in mind that an extra pair of pants is not recyclable (except if the current fashion remains trendy for the next decade – which is highly unlikely) and that the phone you just replaced can cause animals to mutate because gadgets contain parts that are indispensable and unsustainable, plus their exposure to a certain atmosphere can cause chemical poisoning. To anyone who avoids Science journals, these general facts may be hard to believe, but the proof exists – we have documentaries that expose these phenomena. And I'd like to believe that my fellow youth would start paying attention to them rather than just raving about the newest Vampire instalment released in theatres.

Last, I can protect the lifeblood of our environment. We often forget that the fuel that keeps our refrigerators running and our cars powered – energy – is part of the environment that is slowly deteriorating. It's a good thing that the decade is at the apex of conference talks that propose new scientific invention that would aid us in making Mother Earth's recuperation faster, which reminds us of the need to contribute something to the band-wagon. Soybean-powered vehicles, solar panels, hybrid cars and other breakthroughs – these are the things that have been introduced to Earth for the past years. They're definitely convenient, and we have skilled men of science who can make using them possible. But the problem lies in accessibility and accommodation. These

inventions are too expensive. We're still a Third World country, our economy isn't that stable, and we still have problems in overpopulation. Even if we produce soybean-powered buses or hybrid cars, perhaps only the upper middle class could patronize them. In trying times like this, people are already too busy trying to make ends meet.

Needless to say, we don't need these inventions to protect our environment. In a resourceful (and resilient, if I may say so) country like ours, something as simple as riding a bike (or a pedicab, in our case) or walking, can reduce the amount of both petrol, a commodity in short supply because it can be renewed, and carbon, culpable in penetrating the ozone layer, we use and emit.

Protecting the environment is basically like riding a seesaw. There has to be balance. If not, definitely, one side will be stuck at the muddy bottom, and the other will be at the top temporarily. In that case, there will be no victors. I say we begin our campaign towards what I call environmental equilibrium – where what we use is tantamount to the good things we produce.

As for me, even though we've moved away from the place that housed my little garden, I'm still green at heart. No longer a reclusive young girl, I'm heading towards college in just a few months to study how chemicals in our industry affect the changing world. And in a few years, I hope that the whole world would serve as my own big backyard.