

Death as the Terrible Alternative

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Das Marinas, Philippines

A Time of Political and Social Transition



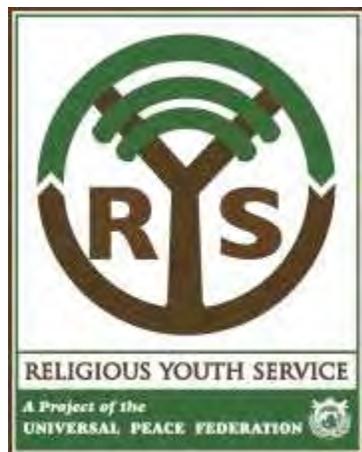
During the closing years of General Marcos's rule in the Philippines, in an act based on political calculation, many families living on squatted land in Manila were forcibly relocated in an effort to avoid civil strife. Das Marinas, a small coastal community in the province of Cavite outside of Metro-Manila was unprepared when an influx of new residents arrived. The local municipality and civic organizations lagged behind in creating adequate roads, schools and small bridges to handle the needs of new residents. The incoming residents faced great challenges in finding employment and adequate sources of income.

In 1986, the year after the relocation of families from Manila to Das Marinas, the nation of the Philippines underwent a pronounced political and social transformation. In June, when the international team of RYS volunteers arrived, the nation was riding high on a wave of optimism. A peaceful revolution, the People's Power Movement only a few months before had toppled the long rule of General Marcos. A popular, reform-minded new president, Mrs. Cory Aquino, was governing the nation and she set her sights on rooting out corruption and cronyism. Many who felt they lacked a voice in government were finding it a time of new hope.

The People's Power Movement caught the world's attention and imagination. Masses of people, many who were students, gathered daily in steadily growing numbers to protest the dictatorial rule of General Marcos. While tensions rose and the fear of violence grew, the Roman Catholic Prelate, Cardinal Sin, worked hard to keep the movement and the government from openly fighting. Many spiritually minded people among the faithful saw God's hands in the transformations. For those arriving in the Philippines the rediscovered sense of pride that the Filipino people were displaying was palatable.

On arrival, our large group of 120 RYS members sensed that drama and optimism of this transition period in Philippine history. After spending time together in Manila, our delegation split into three teams to offer service in different communities. The team of 40 arriving in Das Marinas came from 16 nations and had a religious diversity embracing seven religions. They were drawn to the program in part by its idealistic goal of modeling religious cooperation through service and also by their strong desire to contribute to the positive changes taking place.

How to Build a Bridge



The work we were doing—building a small bridge linking Christian and Muslim sections of the community—was aimed at improving transportation and improving community relations. Without the support of a team of engineer students and faculty members from the Technical University of the Philippines, the bridge would not have been constructed. While our RYS volunteers had more desire than professional skill, those from the University had both.

Our engineering partners from the University not only provided technical support but they eagerly shared insights into the culture and ways of those living in the community. Their friendship and laughter helped us move more smoothly through the hot and challenging work. Seeing their commitment towards finishing the bridge served as a reminder of the value of the work we were doing.

Discovering Our Community

The dusty streets of Das Marinas were far from the fancy shopping malls of Manila, a distance that for many of the residents was worlds away rather than miles away. The community had its own character, its own secrets, pace and rhythm. Much of what members of RYS learned during our month in the community was picked up by walking through village streets in the poorer quarters of town. As a

pedestrian, you could catch up on local news, exchange friendly conversation or partake in local commerce with residents and shop owners.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_poverty

Walking down the streets of Das Marinas revealed visible levels of poverty to the RYS volunteers. The faces of undernourished children were far too frequent and too emotionally close to ever forget. The elderly with nearly toothless smiles, raggedly clothed children and packs of terribly skinny dogs were part of the ambience on a pedestrian's journey.

In our first days in the community we discovered that our comings and goings were the subject of discussion for many of the neighbors. As a motley, ethnically mixed team, we visually stood out from our more homogeneous local neighbors. The overt curiosity exhibited was often as amusing to us as we were interesting to them. In order for us to better discover our community, some of us used our walks to and from work, or time during breaks, to explore different neighborhoods. Often we exchanged conversations with young and old alike and lingered when time permitted.

Within the first few days of settling into our work, people started making their way over to the worksite. Mothers stopped by to check on their children and at times brought something to drink. Some enjoyed talking and invited us to stop by their homes for refreshments. Friendly elementary school students had their teachers extend invitations for us to speak at their school and a community activist brought us to speak on his radio program. It did not take long before we became a familiar part of the community, an exciting presence.

At the worksite it was often a guitar that served as a call for togetherness. The local students taught us some of the popular Philippine songs but most often the Beatles or a popular Whitney Houston song drew just about everyone into the familiar chorus. We shared in simple joys, joys that naturally grew out of a cooperative effort to improve the community. Friendships grew—friendships that were planted deep in our hearts.

Mothers and Children

While it was true that laughter was a daily ingredient at our worksite, there were some experiences that wrenched on our hearts. During the day, many children came and went from the worksite as it was an exciting event for them to see all of the unusual looking friendly people. It was not uncommon for participants to share some part of their snacks with the young children who were hanging around.

Many of us did not realize what those little snacks meant to certain children. One set of siblings started spending almost the whole day with us on a regular basis. Their rather stoic mother on rare occasions would visit our site. We didn't pay extra attention to the mother or her children as they almost blended into the background.

The mother had a very small home near the path to the worksite. On occasion, some of us would pass and briefly exchange greetings and a few friendly words. We did not know much about her or her family's situation, in part because there seemed little need to. Unfortunately, it was only later that we learned about the daily reality she was facing. By that time it was, in a way, too late.

Weeks found a way to move quickly. No longer feeling like strangers, our neighbors felt free to share about their lives and the community. During one of those conversations, we heard that the stoic mother

whose children hung around the worksite was desperately struggling to feed her four young children and a very small infant.

Before we could communicate this news to other members of our team, a neighbor of the mother reported that the mother's infant had died. We hesitatingly asked how the baby had died. The answer hit us like ice water poured on our bare back. "Oh, the baby died of starvation!"

Desperate Hunger

We were stung by the stark reality of the death of the infant. In order to understand and make sense of the shocking news, we began to ask questions to those who could offer insights. Pieces of information began to fit into place and present a clearer picture of the harsh realities that faced the family. The more we learned, the more unsettling it was for us.

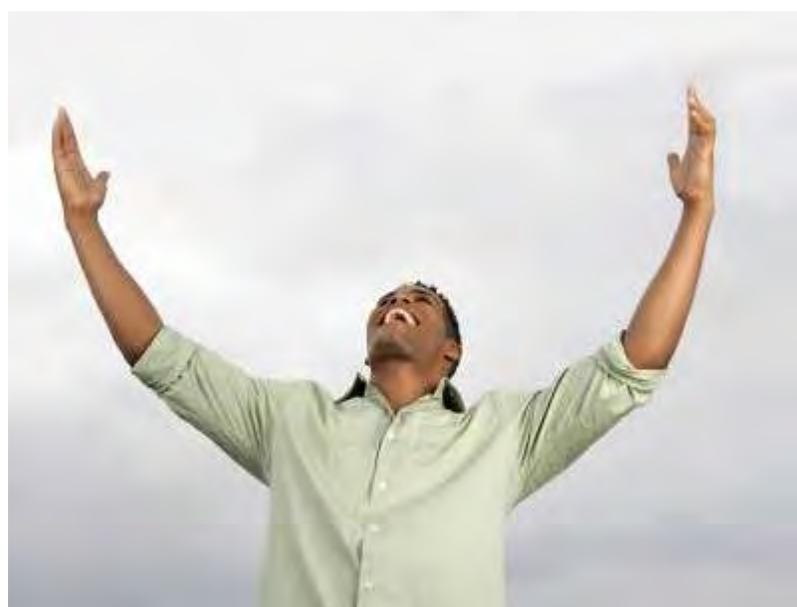
A strong Catholic culture exists in much of the Philippines, which in part accounts for its legal and cultural restrictions on divorce. The ban on divorce arguably has some merit but the underside of this prohibition is that many irresponsible fathers choose to escape difficult situations by abandoning their families. This failure of paternal responsibility can push the remaining family members to the margins because they are left little support to face desperate levels of poverty, hunger and insecurity. Our neighbors shared that some of the local children that frequented our worksite were in difficult situations and yearned for the extra attention and care that our volunteers offered.

From the talk on the streets, we learned that the infant's father had left the family after a turbulent period. He no longer came around and had refused to give financial or emotional support to his wife and children. The mother had spent most of her adult years raising her children and had not developed marketable skills. With no regular job or substantial way to generate income, there was not enough money to cover her family's necessities.

The family endured periods where they had almost no food. As the situation degenerated, the mother became so desperate when the emaciated baby cried from hunger that she fed the child moistened newspaper to dull the pain. Newspaper!

The events had shocked us and we felt drawn to offer our condolences at the wake being held at the child's home. Some among our team wanted to offer prayers, some came to offer modest financial gifts to the family. Hercule, a strong-spirited Christian from the African country of Burkina Faso, attended with the singular purpose of resurrecting the infant back to life. We each brought with us something that helped shape the experience we were about to share.

Faith Enough to Bring a Child Back to Life?



It was in the early evening that we crowded into a small, hot, simple room to offer our condolences to the grieving mother. As time passed, neighbors came in and out. We were beginning to think of leaving when Hercule asked and received permission from the mother to pray over her child. Jesus' direction to his disciples was that they could inherit his spiritual authority to heal the sick and raise the dead. Based on his faith in Jesus Christ, Hercule began his prayers in anticipation of a miracle.

With a voice full of spiritual authority, Hercule began to call out in prayer. The hot, crowded room seemed to fade into the background as a strong voice made supplications in French for this lifeless body to regain its life force. Minutes passed as he continued with undiminished intensity. The passion of his prayer flowed on with no initial thought of the passing of time.

In time, the growing heat, crowded room and the surreal scene of a young man praying to give life to the corpse of an emaciated infant hit most of us. Yet, brother Hercule was undaunted and continued to put his whole heart into resurrecting this child from the dead. But the child seemed unmoved, unable to respond to the faithful young man's pleas to heaven. We wondered if Hercule would continue.

This impassioned young man, kneeling next to the small, thin, lifeless body presented a picture none in the room would ever forget. Yet, each of us, at various points, began to wonder why we were still in that small, hot room. What was going to happen? Did we also need to believe for this miracle to happen? Many of us wanted to believe but could not. We wondered if Hercule would continue believing what seemed to be unbelievable.

The Unexpected Happened

Hercule looked up and, with pleading eyes and with a confident voice, asked the mother the painful question: "Should I continue to pray?" There was a long stinging silence before the mother of the child raised her head and in a calm voice tersely replied, "No."

Hercule looked more than a little surprised. Should I keep on praying he repeated? Without hesitation, the mother replied, "No, please stop." The room was empty of sound during the lingering pause. The mother spoke again, "Even if you bring my child back, what good would it do? There will still be no food to feed him." It was not long after the mother's response that we quietly filed out of the room. We were all deeply troubled.

What could be said about the scene we had just witnessed? We all knew that something profound had taken place but we individually experienced it from our own limited perspectives. An older man, one who had once served as a Methodist minister, exclaimed that it was outrageous for Hercule to believe he could bring this lifeless child back from the dead. In contrast, some of us looked within and wondered if our own faith could ever be bold enough to believe as Hercule believed.

I Will Make a Difference

In a dark cloud of emotion, we mulled over the meaning of the mother's fatalistic response. Was it a lapse in her faith or was it a realistic assessment that the child would only be returning to a life filled with suffering? It struck some as a supreme tragedy that a mother would choose death as the preferred alternative to holding onto hope for life. This especially stung those of us who, as parents, experienced the profound happiness of holding an infant and anticipating its bright future. A gross measure of failed human responsibility seemed to be weaved into this tragedy.

The impact that this frail infant's death left on us was immeasurable. We realized that on any given day children are dying from hunger. The events that transpired in the room drove us to question, to doubt, to reformulate our picture of life. When we left the scene of the drama, it was as if a curtain had been lifted and we could see life from a new and deeper perspective.

No longer content to simply be the audience, we wanted to rewrite the script, to be actors for change. This experience with life and death provided us with a compass that pointed to the truly meaningful and important things in this world. Unspoken pledges were made as a result of our visit. Some of us silently accepted a responsibility, a responsibility to lessen the suffering in this world and comfort the parental heart of our God.