

THE NEED FOR HARMONY

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It has been exactly half a century since I joined the Palanca family. While tonight we celebrate the 68th edition of this traditional rite of passage that Filipino creative writers look forward to, it was in 1968, or 50 years ago, that I happened to be initiated into the rolls of Palanca winners.

It was memorable in more ways than one. A short story of mine, the first that ever gained publication, won Third Prize that year. It was quite a surprise for me, too. I still distinctly recall how the telegram, through RCPI, was somehow relayed to me in Cebu, where I was then enjoying a weekend rendezvous with Dr. Edith L. Tiempo and her daughter Rowena.

It was such a surprise because I hadn't even known that the story that got published earlier that year in the *Philippines Free Press* had been entered in the contest. At that time, publishers and editors could submit stories published in their magazines. Unbeknownst to me (aye, there's a word!), the *Free Press*' literary editor, Nick Joaquin, had sent my story to the Palanca contest.

Talk about luck. The great writer's faith in my first story turned out to be justified, as it placed Third in the contest, for my first Palanca award. FYI and BTW, towards the end of the year, the same story won First Prize in the *Philippines Free Press*' own contest. TMI *na ba yun?*

What also made it memorable was that the Palanca Awards Night in 1968, held at the Coral Ballroom of the Manila Hilton Hotel on United Nations Avenue (see, I have all the RAM data down pat) had for its special guest the First Lady at the time — none other than the relatively young and beautiful Imelda Romualdez Marcos.

Yes, she was in a terno with butterfly sleeves, and she remained onstage to hand over the rolled parchment paper, plus the check, to the

winners. I vividly recall that when I strode up to shake hands with Don Carlos Palanca Jr. and the Guest of Honor, she had remarked: “Oh, how young!”

Well, that’s what a Beatle mop could do at the time. I was actually already 23, that mystical number, which also probably had something to do with my stroke of fortune that year. (These days, we know that 15-year-olds can actually start winning their first Palanca awards.)

In any case, I’m not too sure if I can or should say tonight that it’s nice to know that Madame Imelda and I are both still very much around. BTW, I also distinctly remember that a certain *Manong* Johnny wasn’t there that night, way back in 1968. He must have been lying somewhere else, likely in his bedroom.

But the most memorable detail was that unbeknownst to me (aye, there’s that word again) on that fated evening, it turned out that my father was there. He never showed himself to me. He must have gatecrashed the proceedings, with his large camera, as he had just become a photography bug, to make sure he would take photos of me in my moment of glory.

It wasn’t until a few days later that he let on that he had been there, when he presented me a framed black-and-white photo of his first-born receiving the award. Only then did I realize that the forwarded RCPI to Cebu, ostensibly sent by my *Lola*, my dad’s mom-in-law, had alerted him, and that its relay had actually been engineered by him.

He had known all along that I would be picking up a prize. But he never spoke to me about it. He didn’t ask if he could come along. He just sneaked in and did his thing, like a papa-razzo of the first order, to record for posterity the historic moment when I shook hands with Imelda.

So I’m one up on most of you, who will probably not compile such a wealth of curious details about your first Palanca win. Unlike mine, when I became the unwitting recipient of two acts of fondness that stamped me with the unbeknownst tag — from the first of my literary fathers, Nick Joaquin, and my genetic father, Armando Yuson.

It wasn’t until seven years later — yes, that number that used to be associated with another Marcos — that I managed to win my next Palanca award. So take heart, those of you who are taking home an award tonight. It might not happen again next year, but it could still happen after some good old time.

For my part, of course it had to be seven years. So that like No. 23, Michael Jordan, I would know how it felt to miss all those shots throughout all those years before I made another winning one.

Other Palanca Nights also remain embedded in my memory.

There was one awards night that took place at a smaller hall in the old Palanca Building off Quiapo during a stormy night. There was another one, when Jaime Cardinal Sin was the guest of honor. That was in 1985, several months before EDSA People Power 1. And it took place in this very ballroom. And at some point we all rose and made the Laban sign, while almost in unison, we started to sing *Bayan Ko*.

Then there were years when presidents spoke before us: *Tita Cory*, FVR, GMA. And other notables in government service. I believe the last one was the honorable Tourism Secretary Mon Jimenez, several years back.

Since then, the choice of Guest Speaker has been confined to fellow writers. So I come after an illustrious roster that includes our National Artists for Literature, and several other prominent ladies and gentlemen of letters.

Allow me now to just stress a few insights on being a writer that I've gleaned from experience as I've mellowed in age.

Yes, we should all continue to celebrate the value of such an institution as the Palanca Awards. The Palancas don't really have to keep doing this, but they do, they continue as they have for nearly seven decades now.

Writers need confirmation, especially from their peers. And this can be done in harmony with one another.

Of late, we've all become aware that the entire planet has entered a disturbing period of disunity and contentiousness that doesn't bode well for anyone.

Truth is under seige, armed conflict is prevalent, women continue to cry out — rightfully so — against abuse, gender fluidity remains wanting, racism is rife, immigrants are subjected to horrid conditions, and many lives are lost not only to natural disasters, but owing to the greater catastrophe that is human insensitivity.

We writers have a role to play, as everyone does, to help everyone reach some quota for harmony. I know that I may sound like a beauty

contestant standing here appealing for world peace and harmony. But those are exactly what are needed now.

When we produce poems, stories, essays, memoirs, screenplays, drama — think about it: every reader we somehow keep captive with our works becomes one less miscreant on the streets — at least during the act of enjoyment of the pages held in their hands. We may not keep one of those hands away from a nearby cookie jar, but that's as far as our readers can get away with in terms of additional indulgence.

As a community of writers, we should also be kind to one another. For the most part, in my experience, this has been so. In fact, it has been the experience appreciated by most writers of my generation, and those that directly followed us. We have gained from the mentorship, friendship and care of older writers.

We didn't set out to revile those who preceded us, rather found strength in what they left behind. We never scorned them as geriatrics, or spoke bitterly about them as unnecessary gatekeepers. We honored their legacy by continuing the benign tradition of building upon their accomplishments.

But I realize that as part of the climate of divisiveness that unfortunately characterizes the current hour, there have also come about fringe associations whose sorry claim to literature appears to be founded on having to sport a chip on one's shoulder, while directing malice towards all sorts of bogeys — such as a so-called Manila Mafia that dictates entry into the supposed mainstream or for canonical inclusion, or alleged padrinos that help advance the careers of younger writers.

Entry into whatever imagined canon is actually facilitated by the increasing acceptance of one's literary labors, by way of gaining distinctions or managing to author popular titles, as well as the selection process exercised by members of the academe who recommend the list of local reading materials for their students.

The false scenario of becoming a Palanca winner through a judging circle's favors is painted with awfully wrong colors. So much more often than not, a literary judge remains unaware of manuscript authorship until the choices have been made, upon careful, impartial deliberation.

Literary cliques are fine. Camaraderie goes on. The next generation of writers will also gravitate towards one another, not on the fuel of backslapping

or the quid pro quo, but because they like one another and appreciate each other's works — at least enough to discuss them dispassionately, or passionately. Both modes are okay.

Yes, there's much value in participation in literary workshops. Again, it's not a matter of getting into the good graces of mentors who are potential padrinos, but more of joining up with a circle of other like-minded, serious practitioners of the craft. Again, the camaraderie and harmony will do you good.

There should be no dilemma over the Filipino writer's choice of language. We should consider ourselves blessed with the plethora of choices. Write in the language you are most comfortable with. And you will be as good as that language — whether the choice has been dictated by circumstances of time and place of birth, education, and environment.

As writers, we can be individualistic in responding to the challenges of our imagination and vision, but in the long run, whatever we say, whatever we write, whatever we express signifies a connectedness with the community of readers we reach out to.

Indeed, no poet is an island. All craftsmen of the word are part of an archipelago of shared dreams, and of continents where the borders between diverse cultural backgrounds represent the divides we must help bridge, to best commit to a symphony of destinies — with or without the benefit of translation, or even while getting lost in the traitorous exchanges.

When we join the woke, we realize the ephemerality of initial betrayals. And perhaps when beings of other worlds come to introduce the novelty of other languages, we can welcome them with the strength of our unity, and come to discover together, that the story of harmony wherever it is written always starts with the whimsy of *Once upon a time*, and ends with the resolute hope that we will all *Live happily ever after*.

It is the only way that literature begins and keeps completing the cycle. Through all mishaps and misunderstandings that often result in unnecessary acts of unkindness, even cruelty, in the end, the universal story always begins again with redemption.

So keep saving and adding to your files, young writers, whether they're digital or in hardcopy, even scribbled on assorted sheets of paper. You'll

never know when you'll be called upon to become the heroes of memory, and
valorous continuity — best of all, in helpful harmony with everyone.

Thank you and good night.