

The Class Reunion: Remembering the Salmon Run

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Aside from the two who lived in Toronto, the women who showed up for our class reunion in Toronto travelled from the Philippines, US, UK, and even Switzerland — twenty-four women, college classmates, friends from Maryknoll days. I hadn't seen many of them in decades and had lost the threads of their life stories. In many ways, they were strangers to me, but there were a few commonalities that we shared. Most of us were transplants from the Philippines. Many had left Manila in the years following our 1968 graduation.

Toronto was glorious that October; the leaves were changing and there was enough chill to make it a novelty for most of us. We enjoyed walking to Chinatown and finding a good dim sum place (Dragon City was a favorite). We poked around the shops and bought kitschy little things for gifts. Some of us took a hop-on-hop-off tour to get an overview of the City. We bought gourmet cheeses at St. Lawrence Market, then crossed the street for bottles of wine from LCBO. We had some wonderful wine-and-cheese parties, some of which stretched on until four in the morning.

And we talked — revealed little secrets: our bunions, thinning hair, cataracts, weight gain, arthritis, high blood pressure, wobbly ankles and knees. A few revealed their battles with cancer. Hesitantly we wondered about what we would do when we got older and frailer. This was new territory for us who now live in a culture different from the Filipino culture that we grew up in. We hoped we would remain as strong and independent

for a long time. We hoped not to burden our children.

The post-graduation stories that emerged fascinated me.

Some of the stories were somewhat humdrum, like the classmate who went to the East Coast in search of her independence and who ended up marrying a professor. They've led lives as academics for decades now. Another classmate spoke of how she and her husband left Manila during Martial Law. They went to Guam where her husband's parents lived. They were warmly welcomed in Guam. She and her husband found work easily. Even with five children (she had the help of a nanny), she worked in the private and government sectors. They fit into Guam's diverse population and were active members of the community. The only downside she could come up with was being isolated from her friends in the Philippines.

Another friend talked of moving to the East Coast with her husband where she decided to go back to school to get training in the health field. At Maryknoll, she had been famous for being a "Lanai Girl," one of a group of girls who hung out in the lanai or patio area to watch the cars and world coming and going — not academically inclined in other words. The Lanai Girls were the first to know of any gossip in school. We had a good laugh when she confessed to studying hard to keep up with her young classmates. She was surprised and proud to pull "As" in her classes. She went on to describe her work with the elderly and sick in nursing homes, how physically difficult that work was — she had to lift patients on to beds; she had tend to their sores — but the work was deeply rewarding, she swore.

Another classmate whom I'll call Luisa, shared a more extensive report of her life. The daughter of Chinese immigrants to the Philippines, she had been a Manila resident without the rights of Filipino citizens until President Ferdinand Marcos issued a presidential decree in 1974 that allowed the conversion of Chinese residents and immigrants with appropriate documentation to become citizens. Luisa had been a Filipino citizen for five years before she and her husband and children migrated to the US. She had no relatives in California where they settled, and while they knew some people, those friends were busy with their own families and lives, leaving Luisa and her husband without a support system. As time went on however, she felt at home in America because of the kindness of

neighbors. Once she had been locked out of her house and her neighbor was very helpful. Working at her first job in California also helped make her feel part of the “melting pot” as she called it.

But life as a working mother was hectic. She had to think through her priorities; she had to be organized and focused. In the beginning, she said, life in the US was a matter of survival, of achieving stability, of making sure her children got the best education possible. What kept her going was the thought that there was a “light at the end of the tunnel.”

As one who had experienced discrimination by Filipinos in the Philippines, she revealed similar experiences in the US. Once, Luisa was in line in the Post Office, when a young woman claimed she took her place in line. Calmly, Luisa reminded her of the US Constitution, which silenced the woman.

In another incident, a Black student mimicked her accent. She ignored him but called him for a private meeting where she talked to him about discrimination. That ended the student’s pranks. But she confessed that her greatest pain came from another Filipino who often made derogatory comments about the Chinese in the Philippines and who manipulated office politics to get promoted at Luisa’s expense. “I did feel hurt, but it was mainly because he did not accept me as a Filipino,” Luisa said.

Despite these negative experiences, Luisa recalled meeting a woman in church who welcomed her as if they were long-time friends. This woman, who worked with the deaf and hard-of-hearing at the public school system, impressed Luisa with her humility and work ethic. In fact Luisa was then inspired to transfer teaching from a private school to a public school. Before this encounter, Luisa had only heard of how bad the public schools in Los Angeles are, but she realized this was not true, that this was discrimination at its worse.

When I asked if she considers herself a Filipino American? Luisa said, “Yes, I’m an American, regardless of whether others want to see me as a Filipino American or a Chinese American, or an American of Chinese descent. This is where I have spent most of my life. This is the home of my children, of my partner. America is the melting-pot, not just a salad bowl. I’ve been integrated, assimilated; I believe in its value of democracy, equality even though not quite, due process even if it doesn’t happen all the time. America is not a perfect world, but it’s very livable.”

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It came as some kind of surprise to me that my story was no different from those of my classmates. I had always thought I was unique and special, that there was only one ME in the entire universe. But after listening to how my friends had to adjust to their new lives away from the Philippines; how they missed their families and friends; how, in America, they had to go back to school or get training to find a profession; how they juggled family and work; how they achieved the “American Dream” of ownership (the house, the cars, etcetera); how relationships with their husbands sometimes failed; how they raised their children; and how they were now looking at the next chapter of their lives (their last years) and praying they could do so independently and gracefully — well, that is also my story.

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My own story is this:

After graduating from Maryknoll, I migrated to California in 1969 as a UCLA Film student. Soon after, I married the former Peace Corps Volunteer whom I had met in the Philippines. He was in law school, and I worked at an executive secretary at McCormick-Schilling in San Francisco. Even though we didn’t have a lot, we never felt hopeless. We were certain that our small apartment across the Levi Strauss Factory in the Mission District was temporary. In fact we found San Francisco invigorating and interesting with its Flower Children, Hippies, and anti-Vietnam War protests.

After my husband earned his law degree and passed the bar, we moved to Santa Monica in Southern California. My husband worked in downtown LA and I returned to graduate school to complete my studies in film. While working on my movie projects I realized that film is a highly collaborative and expensive medium. It confounded me that I would have an idea in my head in the beginning but the end product would be so different.

During this time I had to respond to my growing family’s demands, and finally I decided to abandon the idea of becoming the “great film maker.” I chose to take care of my family. When the children were older, I worked part time in fund raising.

One Christmas, my husband gifted me with an IBM electric typewriter (this was pre-computer times). He used to see me at night, writing in my journal. His gift inspired me to make arrangements to have a column in *Philippine American News*. I also took writing classes at UCLA Extension's Writers Program. These classes opened another door for me. I discovered that the writing field offered me the opportunity to express myself artistically. Writing suited my temperament perfectly.

I took more writing classes and learned the craft and business of writing. Bit by bit I started to get my short stories published. At some point I gained the courage to call myself a "writer" because my teacher said, "a writer writes."

How simple yet profound that statement is.

I have been writing ever since, and that activity has grown to include editing and publishing. I've enjoyed some successes, but I've also had my share of rejections. I've had to work hard to get my works published, to make a name in the literary field. Sometimes, the situation is discouraging, but I plow ahead. This is my work. This is what I do. If it's important to me (and to my community), I'll find a way.

And while this professional struggle has been going on, I also dealt with family matters, just like my friends who raised their children, ushered them to their independence, and now hope that their golden years will be filled with God's tender mercies.

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In Toronto, we were supposed to go to a salmon run but the weather was bad and this didn't pan out. But the salmon run plan was enough to nudge a memory to the surface of my mind.

One summer back in the '80s my family and I had visited Alaska. My husband and I and our three boys drove our Volvo north to Bellingham, Washington, where we left the car in a long-term parking lot. We took the Alaska Marine Highway, the ferry system ran by the State of Alaska. Because of its popularity, it hadn't been easy to get cabin reservations. It was worth the effort because it was a great way to see Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, Sitka and other places. We'd get off the boat spend one or two nights in a place and do our sightseeing. My husband wanted to see

Northern Lights, glaciers and historic sites. My agenda was different. I had read about Filipino Old Timers working in Alaskan salmon fisheries and I wanted to see them or at least find evidence that they had been there. I wanted to learn more about Filipinos in America.

I didn't come across Old Timers but did see young Filipinos working in supermarkets and restaurants. And we had a taxi driver regale us with his story of being married to a Filipina and how her entire family from the Philippines now lived with them. What happened? he said in a droll way.

In Juneau we stumbled upon Manila Square, a small little park with the statue of our own National Hero, Jose Rizal, the sight of which made me proud. It make me feel, that, yes, Filipinos did have a history in Alaska and in America.

One night the boat's captain woke all of us with an announcement that the Northern Lights were in the sky, and we trudged out and gasped at the undulating waves of colorful lights that filled the sky. During the trip we saw glaciers and had our fill of Gold Rush information and sites. The photograph of the long line of men struggling up Chilkoot Pass remains vivid in my head.

Once we picnicked in a park with a small creek, and that ribbon of water teemed with salmon, salmon so thick, it looked like you could walk on them. A boy, around nine-years-old, put his hand in the water and pull out a fish, "Look, Ma," he yelled, holding up a large squirming salmon.

Every river and creek shimmered silver, pink, and red with salmon that swam fiercely upstream. Some struggled up steep rivers, then slid down, and they'd go right back and fight to go upstream. There was no stopping them. I learned that the salmon wanted to return to the gravel beds where they had been born, and there they would spawn, after which they would die. As it was some of the fish were already battered, with parts of their skin in tatters from their arduous journey, four thousand miles long in some cases.

It was the first and only salmon run I had ever seen and I would never forget the sight of those fish. It was their spirit most of all that stayed with me.

In Toronto, after hearing my friends' stories, I thought: *we are like the salmon doing the run*. If you pull yourself away and look at all of us from afar, we are salmon journeying upstream, shimmering silver, pink, and red, looking enough alike, swimming upstream, bravely, ferociously. The only difference between us and the salmon is that the salmon will return to the gravelly beds from where they were born, and there they will spawn, then die.

Many of my friends and I, on the other hand, will not return to our original gravelly beds. We will have to improvise as we face this next hurdle in our lives.