

Claiming Our Inheritance

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On July 28, 2014, a military van bearing forty civilians on the way to a masjid in Jolo to celebrate the end of Ramadan was ambushed by Abu Sayyaf terrorists. Twenty-three civilians were killed. To this day, reports are uncertain about the reason behind the ambush: were the Abu Sayyaf only after the ten militia officers in the van? were they punishing the villagers for cooperating with government forces in the peace process? was this a rido attack? was it inherited from Sulu's history of violence? Whatever the reason, the massacre was deplorable and senseless. How do we make sense of events like this? The news left me stunned.

Yet in the light of this massacre, I continued to obsess about my own struggle to give up my marriage once again, and once and for all. It seemed trivial really. But there are lives at stake here too. And I wondered if I am committing a terrorist act on my family in the name of a-Jihad-of-a-kind. Are my children going to be collateral damage—a sacrifice—for what I perceive as a greater cause? Am I ambushing innocent civilians for the sake of my happiness? But I am in the van too, and we are traveling together. We are all vulnerable to this attack—an attack made by pure Grace. So what must die in order for the journey of faith to go on?

Rainer Maria Rilke urges us to “Believe in a love being stored up for you like an inheritance.” And I have believed it ever since I heard it, at least twenty years ago. Each time I entered into a relationship, I had hoped this was the one, especially my marriage. Yet each one failed to give me what I

really wanted. I finally figured that the only time we can receive an inheritance is when there is a death. What had to die? What was holding me back from receiving my promised inheritance?

Illusions must die. Illusions about the self, about love, about family.

I came out unceremoniously to my children when my daughter Sachi was 11, and my son Raz was 8, on board a *Maligaya* taxi on the way home. Sachi had chanced upon a (bad) review online of my book of lesbian-themed stories, *Women Loving* (2010) and asked, “Nanay, are you really a lesbian?”

“Umm, I guess, in practice, I am more of a bisexual.”

“What’s a bisexual?”

“Someone who can love either a man or a woman.”

“Ah, so that’s what Lady Gaga means!”

And that was the end of it. They had never seen me in a relationship with a woman since I broke up with their father, so maybe the declaration was enough.

Later, Sachi would randomly ask, “Is Tita F. a lesbian?” Yes. “Is Tita T. a lesbian?” Yes. But she would never ask if I had had romantic relationships with them, who seemed only to be passing through in our lives. The truth is, both “Titas” had wanted more serious relationships with me but I chickened out. On different occasions, and years apart, I wrote both of them similar letters saying I did not see myself raising my children in a “rainbow family.” That I did not have the heart. I knew it was my own internalized homophobia telling me it would ruin my kids, or worse, it would turn them gay. So instead, I stayed in an abusive relationship with a man (not my husband) for six years, on and off, harboring the illusion that this was better for the kids than a loving lesbian relationship.

In the meantime, my daughter turned thirteen and decided she was a lesbian.

As usual, the mother is the last to be told. But I *knew*. I just didn’t realize the extent and the seriousness of their relationship. I mean, she was only thirteen, and her girlfriend, fifteen. I thought it was just a girl-crush. The way I had my first girl-crush, when I was fifteen, on a beautiful classmate named Bettina. But I caught Sachi in her first big lie when she went to this girl’s Junior-Senior prom in a hotel downtown even though I had told

her not to. I guessed this girl was more important to her than her mother's trust. So I knew. Like my own mother used to intone, "*Papunta ka pa lang, pabalik na ako.*" Sachi wasn't doing anything I hadn't already done myself.

When she finally came out to me on August 23, 2014, they were on their tenth month together. She said, "*Nay, uyab nako si Bettina.*"

I asked her why she didn't tell me sooner. And she said, as expected, "I was afraid you might get mad." Of all mothers in the Philippines, she would be afraid to tell ME she had a girlfriend? But then again, I figured a little fear-of-mother's-wrath never hurt anyone growing up. But how would we tell her father? (We posted it on *Facebook*.)

So I was forced to disabuse myself of the idea that I could turn my children gay in a rainbow family. Perhaps my daughter was—gasp!—born this way?

In Cebuano, the word "ginikanan" is used to mean parents. When I first moved to Davao and learned it, I marveled at how different it was from my own native language, Filipino. In Filipino, the word is "magulang," which suggests that a parent is one who has "gulang," or age; one who has the wisdom of age. On the other hand, "ginikanan" comes from the root word "gikan," which means "from." Thus, one's parents are literally "where one came from." It makes me uncomfortable, the same way the saying that intones that "the fruit does not fall far from the tree," makes me uncomfortable. Am I really their "ginikanan"? Are my children my fruits? Should I be congratulated for their achievements? Or blamed for their failings?

I have always believed that my children came through me, not from me, as Gibran puts it. Yet, if we believe the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that our first language determines the way we think, I must believe deep inside that as a parent, I am "magulang," wiser than my children because I am older. But I don't. Most of the time, I know I am just guessing, not any wiser just because I'm older. Except in Math. Some of the time, my children have known better than I did, perhaps because they see more clearly in their "radical innocence," as Yeats puts it.

When I asked my children what they thought about my getting back with their father, Sachi replied, "It doesn't matter, as long as you two get along." Which could mean indifference to her parents, who have both failed her, but also assured me that my daughter knew that families come in different forms. Raz, on the other hand, was positively excited about it,

“as long as Daddy lives with us,” which showed me how important it is that both parents are present to each other and to the family. If Daddy were not going to be there anyway (which he wasn’t, because he is a seafarer), what is the point of getting back together? Romantic happy endings aside, what does it really mean for two people to stay together in a marriage?

Then, at the height of my desperation at growing old alone, on my 40th birthday, I loudly lamented that I was single. Sachi immediately replied, “Nanay, you’re not single. You have us!”

Touché.

In the meantime, in the midst of my illusion that the only way to have my “happy ending” was to get back with my husband, who offered me a love that was true and had history, a love that I thought would make my children happy, I started dating a woman who shook me out of my despair-induced stupor. Mags Z. Maglana seemed to me everything I had been waiting for: intellectual, tender, attentive, generous, beautiful. She terrified me. I thought, here, at last, is the love “stored up for me like an inheritance.” But was I equal to it?

Two years before, I had entered every open door even though I knew they would lead nowhere—just because there might be something to find in there—something I wanted—a little joy, a little insight into what I really wanted. I was exhausted by the search and the hoping. In 2014, it seemed as if my reconciliation with my husband was a *fait accompli*, but when I met Mags, I was compelled to find out how far we could go with our ardor. My heart was inflamed and enflamed. I wanted to risk it; to have a chance to dance again with what I do not know. I wanted to find out what it was like to lose control and thus, fall in joy. Here was the woman I could raise my rainbow family with.

When I introduced her to the kids and we started spending time together, my daughter had only one thing to say to me: “Ayaw’g bulag ha?” These words were the sweetest assurance that she accepted my choice, that she trusted me. “Don’t break up, ok?” I recognized it as a plea too; for she had seen one too many person walk away from our lives, no matter how sweet their promises had once been.

My son Raz, on the other hand, was open heart central from the beginning. He was both playful and affectionate with Tita Mags, who loved him back in equal measure. One morning, when Mags had started sleeping

over, Raz came to our room as usual to say goodbye. We were still asleep, cuddling. He came over and hugged us, then he whispered, “I love you. Both.” He even paused before saying “both.” I was half-asleep but I heard it distinctly. I replied, “I love you, too.” And then he left for school. When I asked Mags if she had heard it, she said she hadn’t. I felt sorry. It was a precious moment. We knew he loved Tita Mags—but it was important even for him—to articulate it.

I knew he had been feeling sad about how his dad would feel if he “found out.” He even had a dream about it, from which he had woken up crying. Maybe part of him somehow felt guilty about loving Tita Mags (like me)—but with his heart always open, how could he help it? And what’s not to love?

Maybe they would be happier if their father and I got back together, but I can see they are happy now in the life we have created for ourselves. In this life I have chosen, Daddy has become a visitor, an idea, a wish.

I need to realize that despite my failings, I am enough. That my family isn’t broken—that I didn’t break it—it is whole in itself as we struggle with each day’s challenges, particularly in how to be present to each other and to attend to each other’s needs. This is not a massacre. This is the end of the fast; this is the feast celebrating the resurrection of hope. My children’s wounds will not be healed by my getting back with their father; they will be healed by forgiveness. Knowing that we fail each other in myriad ways every day, and that we are given myriad chances to make it up to each other. The grand design is formed by the many bits of loving we can show each other as we create our version of a whole family. Like a rainbow mosaic, our broken pieces come together through our shared life. And it is growing every day in texture and hue.

Unlike the Sulu massacre, which runs the risk of disappearing in the statistics of unsolved incidents of terrorist acts of violence, it has become clear to me that my decision to raise my children with a lesbian partner is not a massacre of the family. What my children have inherited from me is the freedom to be who they are and to love whom they love without shame. That was my rough plan when I first learned I was to have a child, and every day we are all learning how to honor this freedom.

On their 11th “monthsary,” we all decided it was time to meet Bettina. So Mags and I hosted lunch for them at a quaint restaurant that served

organic food. The two girls barely ate anything. Ok, they ate only the ice cream. I tried to make light of the monumental situation by talking too much. I thought they were cute together. But I worried too about what would happen to their love when Bettina leaves for college in Manila the following year. I worried about my daughter's first heartbreak, which I knew was forthcoming.

When Sachi got home, she told me that Bettina said, "Your mom is cool."

And that's good enough for us for now.