

# AND THAT'S A WRAP, FOR THE DECADE THAT WAS

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We should realize that we're not only saying goodbye (with a gasp of relief but not without continuing concern) to an *annus horribilis*, but to an entire decade, the second of this millennium.

As with cycles of existence, parts of it were rewarding, while some were downright revolting. We could simplify the span into a division of almost equal halves, in terms of continued duration.

Personally, I found the first half generally gratifying, with much pleasantness and satisfaction with intimate relations and regular engagement with welcome company, many opportunities for travel and recreation, creative accomplishments, financial gains, and inordinate enjoyment of single malt whisky varieties.

Over that first half, our country was also led quite capably and decently—with those features resulting in a steady rise in local and international business trust and approval.

Then 2016 came cannonballing an age of disruption, with Brexit, the election of Duterte, Trump, Bolsonaro, the march of autocrats, Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China raising the stakes for global gamesmanship, bullying, and gradations of malevolence well beyond mischief and malfeasance.

An objective study of Xi Jinping's misdirection of a populous state that had been expected to assume global rule for a century—featuring economic blackmail of needy countries to spurious claims over borders and an entire sea, disdain for fishing rights in distant continental waters to a brutish clampdown on Hong Kong—might sufficiently define the boundaries of arrogance, indecency and disruptiveness displayed in the past decade.

Never mind Kim Jong-un, Supreme Leader of Pyongyang. Despite his nuclear arsenal and shaky hold on reality, he remains privileged only with friendship with Dennis Rodman and enforced cult worship—as propped up by, naturally, expectedly, the PROC.

But thank goodness for South Korea, its rationality, films, telenovelas, K-pop and *samgyupsal*, as the far better half of a peninsula. And thank Japan for its continued excellence in improving ramen varieties and whisky treats. (Let's forgive Hawaii for sushi bake and the poke bowl.)

Indeed, 2011-2020 will also be remembered for the shining heroes of cultural achievement, entertainment, and sports. All the art, music and films championed by the decade. Bob Dylan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Leo Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Anthony Bourdain ... Banksy? Well ...

Unfortunately, that mini-list already includes a couple of dearly departed. And that's how we'll remember the decade too: the loss of beloved ones.

Again, personally, it was a grievous decade marked by the departure of a former partner, a granddaughter, a sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, my last aunt, closest first cousin, and many cherished friends, colleagues, and idols, among them Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, David Cortez Medalla, Domini Torrevillas, Gilda Cordero Fernando, Iskho Lopez, Peque Gallaga, and Salvador "Dodong" Arellano, who all departed in 2020, and in recent years, Cirilo F. Bautista, Manny Busing, Mario and Cesar Hernando, Fr. Nick Cruz, Tony Mabesa, Pepe Smith, Mike Marasigan, Leoncio Deriada, Victor Jose Peñaranda, Lally Lacaba, Francis Macansantos, Mario Taguiwalo, Ed Maranan, Edd Aragon, Jolicco Cuadra, Carlos "Chuckie" Arellano ...

In the last ten years, I managed to author six books, edited 14 others, and co-wrote and co-edited two more. That's a total of 22 publications.

But I'd rather have kept enjoying the inspiration, guidance and company of the dearly departed ones.

I know. It's a give-and-take affair, this business of moving on, through zigzag pegs of survival. Win some, lose some.

And that's how the past decade has been, albeit more extremely contrapuntal than previous others.

At least our kin and friends in the USA are ridding themselves soon of an awful man who never tasted sushi and sashimi his entire life. We here continue to be deplorably cursed by another type of malevolent and incompetent leadership—one that does not quite portend of any immediate turnaround in the next decade of survival.

Still, we can only move on with hope.

If we were to demarcate milestones for this past decade, the individual years would telescope random cycles of ups and downs, albeit it would seem to be skewed in favor of the latter.

2011 saw a deadly quake and tsunami in Japan, the slayings of Bin Ladin and Qaddafi, the fairy-tale royal marriage of William and Kate, and the demise of Steve Jobs.

2012 was pockmarked by an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, the U.S. death toll in the Afghan war hitting 2,000 on its 11<sup>th</sup> year, and China's ruling Communist Party electing Xi Jinping as president for the next ten years. On a good note, the London Olympics were largely successful, while Obama became the first U.S. President to visit Myanmar.

2013 had Obama starting his second term, while the world's 1.2 billion Catholics were shocked by 85-year-old Pope Benedict XVI's resignation for health reasons—the first such abdication in 600 years. Pope Francis took over, while Buckingham Palace welcomed a new royal baby. The Boston Marathon bombing was seen as retribution for U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. The new words “twerk” and “selfie” were added to the dictionary. And Super Typhoon Haiyan, here named Yolanda, wreaked havoc in Eastern Visayas, killing over 6,000 people.

2014 saw unrest in Ukraine and Israel, more threats from ISIS, and the spread of the Ebola virus. But it was Malaysia Airlines that suffered a double whammy, with a 747 plane vanishing after take-off from Kuala Lumpur. Four months later, another flight was inadvertently shot down over the Ukrainian border.

In 2015, China scrapped its 36-year-old one-child policy, while millennials surpassed boomers as the biggest generation in the U.S., where same-sex marriage was declared a constitutional right, thanks to a historic 5-4 Supreme Court decision.

2016 saw North Korea conducting nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and Britain narrowly voting to leave the European Union. Alas, too, even more foolishness took the upper hand, with Duterte thence Trump getting elected as presidents, the latter helped along by Russian interference via hacking. Colin Kaepernick started “taking a knee” to avoid standing for the national anthem before the start of a football game. Controversial at the time, it would gain traction in subsequent years among many more athletes, including those in Europe, to highlight #Black Lives Matter and the

expanded cause of racial equality. Oh, and the Zika virus emerged as a major global health threat.

2017 had the Rohingya crisis, Mosul's liberation from ISIS, the ascendency of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and the election of Emmanuel Macron as France's youngest president.

2018 saw humanitarian crises in Venezuela and Yemen, while the #MeTooMovement went global, after it took off in the United States the previous year in the wake of the sexual abuse allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Dire warnings on climate change mounted. The FIFA World Cup hosted by Russia had France emerge as champion. Apple became the first public company to achieve a market capitalization of \$1 trillion.

2019 started off badly, with Jair Bolsonaro getting elected as Brazil president on the very first day. It was the year of protests worldwide, with those in Hong Kong gaining the most attention. The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris went up in flames. Emperor Akihito abdicated, and his son Naruhito took over the Chrysanthemum Throne. Trump got impeached. Filipinos were entranced by the K-drama

And then we all know what happened in 2020, after it went off on a bad start with the shocking loss of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna in a helicopter crash. With Wuhan becoming a terrible byword as Ground Zero, millions fell victim to the Covid-19 pandemic. A singularly memorable loss was that of Sir Sean Connery. Healthcare frontliners gained acknowledgement and gratitude. Work-at-home was supplemented by home cooking and gardening, while Shopee and Lazada led the surge in online shopping. Restaurants, cafes, bars and other recreational venues took a hit, as did aviation. Food pick-ups and deliveries became commonplace. The year apparently ended on bright notes: Trump's electoral comeuppance and the advent of vaccines against the coronavirus.

For most people, only a few of these significant developments would glue themselves as memories of the past decade. Locally, Filipino males would attach themselves to the trivia that at some point in time, Maria Ozawa actually spent some months in Manila, veritably leaping closer to home from porn screens. The exact year will not be remembered, just as the memory of *Game of Thrones* would flow through much of the decade. Same with the devastating wildfires in California and Australia, and the untrammelled popularity of social media, warts, trolls, fake news, TikTok and all.

But everyone will be happy about the saving grace of 2020 that was *The Queen's Gambit*, most welcomed among Netflix's and other streaming programs' offerings.

Unfortunately, the decade hasn't exactly ended on a high note. Despite Trump's unraveling as a sore loser, he still threatens mischief for January 2021—while the rest of the world worries about second waves and virus variants and the relative efficacy of competing vaccines. It looks like PPEs, face masks and shields, social distancing and hand cleansing will have to remain customary for much longer.

Who knows? 2021 could just cement the fact that there will never be any return to the old normal. That is, if the year escapes Nostradamus' supposedly dire prophecy for the world: starvation and bombardment of our planet by galactic refuse.

Meanwhile, new concepts of time have challenged our traditional reading of it in terms of epochs, minutes and moments.

Dr. Bradford Shaw, philosophy professor at MIT, argues that the idea that time flows like a river is not necessarily correct. He claims instead that space-time is a "block universe" where the past, present and future all exist together. Given this theory, time does not move forward, since everything is ever-present. If we were to "look down" upon the block universe, we would see time spread out in all directions, just as we see space at the moment.

Oh well. But us humans weaned away from deep philosophy should still favor metaphors of our own, thus the "flow of time." Just as our sentient need for demarcations is a cry for order and structure. Thus were calendars devised.

So with breaking up a professional basketball game into four quarters of 12 live minutes of playing time each, with ball possession limiting each team to a mandatory shot before 24 seconds expire. Football has its own time-based halves, tennis and volleyball its curious sets, golf its 18 holes, polo its chukkers, chess its time clocks and variants from "classical" games to rapid and blitz.

That's how we demarcate playing time. That's how we play with time. Else the chaos of a spreadsheet of simultaneous occurrences.

As 2020 drew to a finite close, the late-breaking departure of playwright Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, artist David Cortez Medalla and

journalist Domini Torrevillas drew grief. The idea of time as a cryptogram that has to be decoded falls by the wayside. All I know is that dear friends left ahead in the final week of the year that passed.

On the other hand, those engagements with hearty company I had mentioned earlier would remain embedded as warm recollections of the decade.

From 2011 to 2016, I was privileged to serve among the 30 board directors of the MTCRB, a group that proved to be a convivial, mutually supportive and enlightened family that enjoyed one another's smarts and good vibes so much that when the change in political dispensation eventually broke us up, we still remained in loving communication via a Viber group.

And we all retain happy memories of our socials beyond our official function of classifying local films and television programs. Most of these were conducted at Iago's resto in the Q.C. Scout area, with which we shared in the pride of having the best *kare-kare* in town. Other dining and drinking sessions were held at Delgado 112, another resto run by a fellow board member, and also near enough to our office building on Timog Avenue. Oh, for me and a few others at least, it helped that both venues had smoking areas.

For the entire decade until our versions of lockdowns and self-quarantine came down hard on everyone, another regular company I enjoyed was that with fellow Bedans who graduated from elementary and high school way back in 1956 and 1960, respectively. Leading up to our Golden Jubilee held at our San Beda campus on Mendiola in 2010, we had started getting together at the Greenside salon of Villamor Golf Course. As defiant seniors, we feasted on *lechon* and other "*putok-batok*" delights, washed down with beer, whisky, and much reinvigorating laughter.

Past 2010, we kept this up, what we called our "Barkadahan"—some 25 to 30 of us on the average meeting monthly to celebrate the birthdays for that month. *Balikbayan* Bedans from the USA, Canada, Spain and Australia joined us often, learning to prepare themselves for the homecoming by bringing recommended single malt whisky labels, along with Viagra and Cialis for raucous distribution among those fortunately present. Special sessions at yearend had wives present to enjoy the raffles, live band music and dancing.

Each year for the past decade, one to three of us on the average went on ahead, and we attended the wakes. We figure that of our SBC 1956 Elementary School and 1960 High School batches, there are still around a hundred of us in this world. Some have vanished, or can't be contacted, or continue to defer attendance in our reunions. But for our Golden Jubilee Mass at the most beautiful chapel in the world, around 50 of us came in khaki pants, white shirts and red ties. And we all came away with souvenir coffee mugs bearing the Lion Rampant icon introduced by the Venerable St. Bede, below which was what became our intriguing class slogan: "*Hanggang Sa Huling Patak.*"

On the eve of the pandemic, about 35 of us celebrated our 60th anniversary in February 2020. But since then, how we have pined to enjoy our next *Barkadahan* soon enough. We've missed all that *lechon* for almost a year now.

As the next decade unfolds, for better or worse, we can only suppose that hope flows upriver for all time.