

DESPERATELY SEEKING CLARITY IN THE TIME OF COVID

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“You’re patient 2828!” I occasionally hear this outburst of recognition when strangers can’t quite remember my name. But they do recall the digits that have defined my new identity for much of 2020.

For much of my adult life, I was perfectly happy with “journalist,” and sometimes in the latter half of my career, “mentor.” Then very early in the pandemic back in March, when hysteria was spreading much faster than facts, I became a “Covid survivor,” or Patient 2828, still a low enough number to make the digits matter. Patients these days are already indistinguishable data points among hundreds of thousands.

When I was in the hospital with Covid, barely able to move, I collaborated with one of my nurses to produce a documentary, “Ako si Patient 2828,” which became the most widely viewed work I ever made. There are apparently people who know of me only from that one piece, despite a journalism career that has spanned 32 years.

So that’s what this year has given me, a new identity I did not at all seek. But I decided to embrace it, a misfortune that can be turned into a blessing if used to educate, inspire, dispel myths, and fight stigmas.

But first I had to overcome a period of anxiety, self-pity, guilt, and even shame. Despite the care I had taken as early as January, I still got infected, and blamed myself for somehow letting my guard down and endangering friends and loved ones around me. I worried about the long-term effects of the disease, both physically and mentally, and what kind of life I would have after Covid.

Eleven days in the hospital plus five weeks of home isolation gave me ample time to read and reflect about the possibilities for recovery and renewal, not just of the body but of my spirit and morale.

I realized the disease only compounded doubts that were already hounding me about my purpose long before the pandemic.

Even before the trauma of Covid, there was the trauma of horrendous events made ordinary. I was one of the journalists who were deeply bothered by the drug war. I was convinced that even after the first dozen killings, the sheer brazenness of it was unsustainable. But it continued.

In a span of the first two years of the Duterte administration, I produced four documentaries tackling various aspects of the drug war, including an investigation of a young woman I saw slumped dead on her chair as she kneeled on the ground at an outdoor eatery in QC. She was killed by masked assailants exiting with trained precision from a white van, a common modus in those months. She appeared to be begging for her life in her last moments.

I wrote reports and posted photos online about what I learned, such as the story of Raymart Siapo, the teen-age disabled boy who was taunted and urged to run by his masked killers even though he could barely walk with his disability. I was just one of dozens of Filipino and foreign journalists who prowled fearsome streets at night to expose what was happening. But instead of stopping, the killings seemed to gain momentum even as the methods of murder changed with every international condemnation. Journalists were threatened. Many netizens approved of the killings, with some even cheering. There seemed more outrage directed at journalists than at the ruthless butchery.

Something had gone haywire in our moral universe. Thousands of killings were occurring that were encouraged by a popular president and widely accepted by his followers. Those who opposed the drug war were seen as the real enemies of justice.

Many journalists I know joined the profession with the earnest belief that we were part of the self-correcting dynamic of democracy. By exposing wrongdoing and problems, we could trust that other democratic institutions would at least make an effort to correct them.

The logic of those expectations seems to have been buried with all the lifeless bodies we've seen.

If our work cannot stop the most naked of injustices, what can it do? I've shared this sentiment at various forums as a lament, sometimes rising to the volume of a rant, not expecting sympathy or solutions but perhaps only understanding of the doubts and other emotions we were going through. Journalists who covered the drug war and cheekily called themselves "night

crawlers” were traumatized not just by what we witnessed but the feeling of futility, that it was all just for naught.

Thus, at the beginning of 2020 I began to contemplate retirement from journalism, even if I didn’t know what else I could do.

That plan and the feelings that spawned it became trivial when I got sick with Covid. Notions of a career transition were replaced by thoughts of mortality.

That was nine months or nearly two million global Covid deaths ago. But I’m still around to yearn for a kinder future with the rest of living humanity.

Meanwhile, after I was declared fit to return to work last May, with a newly minted identity as Covid survivor, I felt lost. Some still didn’t understand that as a recovered patient I was no longer infectious; I even donated plasma twice, meaning I had an immune system in fighting shape and enough antibodies to share with gravely ill patients. I could overhear people whispering behind my back wondering if they could catch the virus from me.

I decided to speak out even more about the disease and allow my plasma donations to be aired on TV to encourage other survivors to donate. I spoke to online audiences of thousands, including many doctors to whom my main message was this: improvements in treating the body are accelerating while the mental health of patients is being neglected. The loneliness and anxiety were taking a toll on all of us, especially those in isolation rooms in hospitals all over the world. I highlighted the potential of the Internet to enable us to explore new forms of connection and penetrate the walls the virus created.

In my own backyard, the large TV network where I work, Covid cases began to surge in July. We suffered the death of an assistant cameraman in August, as the virus spread in our facilities. I was among the first to call his widow to ask how his colleagues and I could help, one of the hardest conversations I’ve ever had.

As our organization reeled from fear and uncertainty, I was assigned to head a new task force to stop the spread of the virus in our workplace, using whatever knowledge I had gained from surviving the disease as well as the moral authority that came from speaking out on behalf of other survivors.

I chatted with dozens of experts both in the Philippines and overseas, read the latest research, and proposed new safety protocols to reduce workplace contacts. I worked with a team to produce illustrated educational materials in both English and Filipino that reminded colleagues how to guard against infection in various situations. I reached out to those confined in hospitals or quarantine centers to let them know they weren't alone.

Like many frontliners, I was thrown into an emergency and there was no choice but to step up. Nearly all my waking hours were consumed by this mission; I went to sleep and woke up thinking about it.

The self-pity, guilt, and shame that had hounded me seemed to be erased, and in their place was now a single-minded and stoic determination. My colleagues and I were in a race against time to prevent more deaths.

In September, our Covid cases dropped by nearly half, and by October we could count them on one hand. The Quezon City Health Office pronounced that we had stopped the spread of Covid in our workplace. As the year ends, we have not had a single hospitalization in four months.

It's been a year of trauma but also confounding uncertainty on so many levels, from the global question of how long to the granular one of why me.

When I got sick with Covid, I was uncertain I would survive. Four people I knew got sick around the same time; none of them made it, but I did and wondered why. Then there was the uncertainty about what I could physically do with all the lingering effects of the disease. After I recovered, I found myself with a new identity with an uncertain purpose.

I woke up on Christmas Day to a message posted by a friend that his wife just died, with a quote from the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "Life must go on; I forget just why."

After so many deaths this year to a disease that I survived, one has to wonder why.

All kinds of uncertainty persist, but when I began to focus on the safety of others, a certain clarity for me emerged. Survival and the new identity that came with it finally meant something.