

Headline: Lessons

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The most obvious lesson is the importance of preparedness.

Project Noah director, Alfredo Mahar Lagmay, drives home the point. "I was in New York during Hurricane 'Irene' in August 2011," he tweeted. "It's impressive how they prepare for a storm, it's like they're preparing for a tsunami. There's an abundance of information. All the media in the different states are providing advisories. Everyone's working together. Even the president was there to check on what's happening."

As it is, despite that level of preparedness, "Frankenstorm Sandy" still claimed 97 lives in the United States as it ripped through its eastern seaboard. New York took the brunt of it, with 47 dead (39 in New York City alone), as it did the brunt of the devastation, its subway closing down from its worst flooding in history, and a great part of the city that never sleeps caught in the grip of a power outage.

I've read some comments in the social media and gotten all sorts of text messages that say we're lucky we're used to things like this we get to cope with them far more easily than Americans do. Not all of them are of the gallows-humor or scoffing type, which basically says we eat those things for breakfast, we've had worse, talo 'yan ng lolo ko. Some are perfectly sober, or somber, which say that sometimes being used to pain and devastation has its uses. We do get 20 or so typhoons a year, some of them "Frankenstorms" too, or "superstorms," as we call them, such as those that flattened Albay some years ago, or cut down the trees in Catanduanes with the fineness of a scythe slicing through them.

But I don't know if that doesn't also reflect callousness toward life. There's nothing particularly lucky about having hundreds of people dying from a disaster, or even thousands, as in the case of Cagayan de Oro after "Sendong," or Ormoc after a flash flood swept a village into the sea. And there's nothing particularly admirable about being able to move blithely on in the wake of a disaster, whether that disaster is natural or human. It doesn't always mean fortitude, it can also mean numbness. It doesn't always mean resilience, it can also mean resignation. It doesn't always mean a strong sense of spirituality, it can also mean a lack of appreciation for the preciousness of life, our people being as plentiful as storms we don't greatly mind losing a few hundreds of them every time.

I don't know that being unsettled and dazed and angry isn't more human. I don't know that finding the loss unacceptable and wanting to do everything in your power to prevent it from happening again isn't more sensible.

I don't know that one doesn't cope better by preparedness.

The other, and far more important, lesson that American leaders, if not their people, have yet to learn to this day is that there is one war no country on this planet, however powerful, can possibly win. That is the war against Nature.

If "Sandy" has rammed one thing home to America, something the world has already known for some time, it is that "the unprecedented is the new normal." "The storms are getting stronger, the stronger storms are getting more frequent," Al Gore said last week. Fortunately, the author of "An

Inconvenient Truth” is being heard by more and more Americans, aided by their increasingly inconvenient circumstances. Some seven in 10 Americans now believe in the science behind global warming. All it takes is for them to mount a campaign, not unlike the one that ended the Vietnam War, and not unlike the one that scuttled the Bush legacy (“Not In Our Name”), to make their leaders listen.

Fortunately too, some of their leaders at least have begun to listen, no small thanks to “Sandy.” A thing Pinoys will attribute to heaven taking a providential hand to save the planet, sending deliverance disguised as a cataclysm. “There has been a series of extreme weather incidents,” New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said. “That is not a political statement—that is a factual statement. Anyone who says there’s not a dramatic change in weather patterns, I think, is denying reality. There’s no such thing as a 100-year flood. We have a 100-year flood every two years now.”

A far more dramatic statement came from New York City’s mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who now endorses Barack Obama over Mitt Romney: “Our climate is changing. And while the increase in extreme weather we have experienced in New York City and around the world may or may not be the result of it, the risk that it might be—given this week’s devastation—should compel all elected leaders to take immediate action.... I want our president to place scientific evidence and risk management above electoral politics.”

Oliver Stone sounded almost biblical when he spoke of how the Frankenstorm altered the face of the election as totally as it altered the face of the American east: “Sandy is kind of a weird statement coming right after the debates. This is a punishment—Mother Nature cannot be ignored.”

Nothing like a devastation to cut down hubris. Elizabeth Kolbert put the life-and-death challenge that faces America—and the world today in this way: “It is, at this point, impossible to say what it will take for American politics to catch up to the reality of North American climate change. More superstorms, more heat waves, more multibillion-dollar ‘weather-related loss events’? The one thing that can be said is that, whether or not our elected officials choose to acknowledge the obvious, we can expect, ‘with a high degree of confidence,’ that all of these are coming.”

One thing we can expect too with a high degree of confidence, or dread. American politics doesn’t catch up to the reality of global climate change, heaven help them. Heaven help us. An impending storm you can prepare for.

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An impending apocalypse you cannot.