

Headline: Crying

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I nearly fell out of my seat when I read that Yeb Saño nearly got grounded for getting emotional at the United Nations conference on climate change in Poland. As everyone knows by now, Supertyphoon “Yolanda” howled at about the same time the conference began, and Saño at least sobbed, if not howled, along with it.

His voice broke as he called on fellow delegates to do something about climate change now, and his eyes grew moist. As images of utter devastation flashed on the screen, he cried: “What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness, the climate crisis is madness. We can stop this madness right here in Warsaw.” The other delegates rose to their feet and applauded.

Saño then announced he was going to fast until the end of the conference in solidarity, or empathy, with the Taclobanons. It sounded a note of urgency to the conference and set its tenor. No small thanks too to several other delegates who declared their intention to join Saño in his fast.

Now here’s the curious part. As the world toasted him for his speech, his boss, Climate Change Commission chair Lucille Sering, roasted him for it. “I hope you know what you are doing,” she e-mailed him. “I am, however, disappointed that you did not heed my request not to cry. I made this request a day before the opening. I believe you said yes. Kung hindi mo pala kayang ’di umiyak, sana hindi ka na nagsalita.”

She reprimanded him as well for going on a fast: “I don’t mean to be insensitive but declarations like that (have their) proper place. We do not blackmail people to give in to our demands (especially) when you are negotiating.... (Government) specifically gave instructions that anyone facing the media must show a picture of strength to calm fears.”

You don’t know where to begin to express your befuddlement. To begin with, though Saño grew up in Manila, his father is from Tacloban and he has relatives in Tacloban. Thankfully, he would say later on, his father’s immediate family was spared, though they were still unsure about their other relatives. He did not know that at the time. All he knew, from seeing the city in shambles, and hearing accounts from friends and relatives was that the Apocalypse had visited the place. How could he not recoil from the horror?

How could anyone not do so? I myself cried when I saw the images from Tacloban in CNN during the first few days after Yolanda. You can’t be a Filipino from any part of the country, or from any part of the world, and not do so. You can’t be the national of any country in this planet, from east to west, from north to south, and not do so—as witness the phenomenal outpouring of support for Tacloban from everywhere. Hell, you can’t be human and not do so.

Which makes the directive to not cry, which Saño presumably defied, the most mind-boggling thing in the world. How in God’s name can anyone even think to order something like that? That is bidding the waves hold still. That is also charging, on the assumption it is doable, that if one could not abide by such an agreement, one could only have cried with the sly intention to be contrary, with the premeditated plan to grab attention. That’s batty.

But far more than this, it's not just that Saño's tearful expostulation is perfectly excusable, it's that it is perfectly laudable. There is a time and place for crying, there is a time and place for going on a fast? Pray, when is that time? Pray, when is that place? What could be a better time to cry and fast than when the continued existence of the planet itself is at stake and when the gut, if not the heart, or one's country has been wrenched out to lend it urgency? What could be a better place to cry and fast than when the eyes of the world are turned on you and you have the moral authority of the aggrieved and grieving to press your cause?

Crying and fasting are not blackmail, they are time-honored ways of drawing attention to things that need attention. And nothing needs more attention today than the dying of the planet, or indeed the dying of some of its inhabitants faster than others. Which in fact isn't being given any, or given only frighteningly cursory thought, like a miscellaneous item. As witness the end of that conference which only produced—apart from the commitments to indemnify the ravaged countries, which were not backed up by additional financial contributions by the rich countries—resolutions to be more resolute.

Even if crying and fasting were blackmail, what of it? The biggest contributors to carbon emissions which are poisoning the atmosphere, America and China, have been blackmailing the world for a long time: You don't allow us to kill the planet, you won't get to eat. Or at least you won't get relief from the ravaging we are causing. I don't know if Saño is a natural attention-grabber, or kulang sa pansin as we put it. But if he's so, then at no time has a kulang sa pansin been more needed. Global warming is kulang sa pansin. The frequency and ferocity of earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, superstorms, are kulang sa pansin. The plenitude of death and dying that makes thousands of victims now commonplace is kulang sa pansin.

True, Filipino officials must be pillars of strength to calm fears. But how do you calm fears? You do so by distinguishing between panic and fear: Global warming is not a reason to panic, but it is a reason to fear. Not least because the scenes in Tacloban are not the end, they are just the beginning.

And how do you become a pillar of strength? You do so by demanding that something be done to stop the madness. By calling on the world to damn the folly of clinging to a lifestyle of living beyond one's means while destroying the means of life.

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And, yes, by crying.