

Headline: Now, we dare

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My Asian sensibilities made me cringe listening to the 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg as she addressed world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit earlier this week. One paragraph in particular had her saying “how dare you” twice:

“ ... you all come to me for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy-tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

The internet is full of the videos of her speech, as well as photographs of a “death stare” she gave to US President Donald Trump. A few days earlier, when asked what advice she had for Trump, she said: “Listen to science,” a jab at his routine denial that there is such a thing as a climate change crisis brought about by humans.

Serving a university with many Gretas, I’m used to the fiery emotions of our young, but Greta’s speech was something else.

The Kikuyu of Kenya have an often-quoted proverb: “You must treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It is loaned to you by your children.” That’s what fires up Greta and her companions with their Fridays for Future climate change strikes, with a sense of urgency about time running out.

Greta has also drawn international attention because she doesn’t limit herself to loud protests and rhetoric. She is known to have pressured her own parents to reduce their household’s carbon footprint, to the extent of not taking planes.

To get to the UN summit, Greta refused to fly and instead accepted an offer to make the trip across the Atlantic, from England to New York, on a small yacht that depended on sails and hydroelectric power. The trip took 15 days.

Greta reminds us of the dilemmas around social change, captured by the adage “the personal is political.” When I was a young and impatient (but still polite) student activist, my mother would argue: “Charity begins at home,” hoping to temper my activities outside the home. I was able to turn the tables around by “lobbying” at home about better wages and living conditions for our employees, including the family driver and helpers.

Now with 25,000 students in the University of the Philippines (UP), and my own children, I get nervous with Greta’s “how dare you” challenges. So many of the needed changes are simple but not yet built into our culture: turning down the straws and plastic utensils in fast-food joints ... and making sure you did bring your own. Or not even going to fast-food places, because eating less meat can help to save the planet, too.

I wasn’t surprised with Greta’s zeal. My Canadian nephew, whenever he visits, won’t use the car, arguing that the place he’s going to is “close by,” defined as less than 5 kilometers, which he can reach by walking. Back in Canada, he and his sister do not own cars, even if they can afford to, and

insist on public transportation.

Greta does remind us that the big picture needs to be tackled, too, which is why she started out, a year ago, by demonstrating alone in front of the Swedish Parliament, then began to attract more young people. Today she has followers throughout the world, and gets to address the United Nations.

I thought about Greta the other day as we did groundbreaking for a new UP Resilience Institute, which will tackle disaster management and preparedness, environmental sustainability and climate change. It's a massive mandate for the institute.

Rep. Joey Salceda, who, together with then Sen. Loren Legarda, secured funding for the new building, shared some thoughts at the groundbreaking, relating how Albay, so very disaster-prone (typhoons, earthquakes), had reached zero-casualty rates. It was by working with UP's Noah (Nationwide Operational Assessment of Hazards) project, directed by Prof. Mahar Lagmay, that convinced him about the importance of disaster preparedness programs and a Resilience Institute, but he was empathic, too, about how other inputs are crucial in reducing the losses from disasters: better social services and poverty alleviation.

I thought of lumad (indigenous people in Mindanao) kids we in UP have been helping. They're called bakwit, from the word evacuee —refugees twice over, fleeing militarization as well as the deteriorating environment in their home villages, ravaged by climate change, as well as by mining and agribusiness operations.

To the scolding “how dare you,” we answer, “now, we dare.”

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