

Headline: Toxic season is back

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The climate change issue has captured much of the world's attention, and it should. After all, changes in the climate have been noticeable, more hot, more wet, more ice melting, more oceans rising, and all else. I cannot get into a debate as to what causes climate change, whether it is man-made or simply cyclical changes in a universe still beyond our understanding, where even experts disagree.

But like any concerned human being, any concerned Filipino citizen, I am alarmed about the negative impact that certain changes in the climate have on our individual and societal lives. Whatever their causes, ordinary people without scientific expertise are nevertheless affected. For many, it is a matter of life and death, triggering hunger and diseases. In other words, survival is the key, our life spans as people, our future as the human race.

It seems that we cannot talk about the climate if we have no sense of time. Climate has seasons, and patterns. These are intimately connected with time. The longer the time that we can observe or review, the clearer are the patterns that we can see. Patterns hold, some so indefinitely long that we think they are forever. We must understand the patterns very well for our own sakes. Especially so since we know that nature does not need us anywhere as much as we need nature.

What should concern us most deeply are patterns that produce premature death and avoidable destruction. As people with very temporal lives, living for ninety years or dying at twenty makes a whole lot of difference, for ourselves and for all those we care for. Even nations, average life spans are monitored, measured. In fact, in the determination of the quality of life, its quantity is a critical factor. Happiness is now being measured, but more so first how long people live.

Time is so vast that we are counting billions of years—at the moment. Going back in time and relating all that had transpired may well be an impossibility. The relevance of climate change for us is mostly in its relationship with humanity, its contribution to the quantity and quality of our lives, the sustainability of the human race.

We are most afraid when we hear claims that specific changes threaten our lives, and in great numbers at that. We fear the rising of oceans when glaciers melt because coastal communities can disappear. We fear the temperatures rising because droughts can wreck the food chain and subject people to unbearable heat. We fear the more intense and longer wet seasons because of the typhoons and floods that kill and immobilize societies. We fear pollution less for its impact on the climate and more because of its immediate effect on our health, individual and collective.

In other words, we fear for our lives.

That fear for our lives is not really about the fear of dying, but the fear of dying before our time and the fear of dying in a particularly painful or messy manner. Because of this, I keep looking at climate change in a different manner. I keep imagining what kind of climate change would be most destructive, would be most painful. And as I do so, I am suddenly transported to the reality of the human climate. After all, that should be the most relevant to human beings.

It is when I consider the kind of climate that we build for ourselves that I realize we have less to fear from climate change because we have so much to fear from what we do to ourselves. It is not that changes in the climate cannot wipe out communities, towns or cities. I have seen Yolanda and its aftermath and know firsthand how climate or nature can kill.

But I know, too, that humans kill other humans far worse, even if it seems typhoons did it. In retrospect, the poor in coastal communities, the poor who could not be anywhere else safer, they were the ones who died in clusters, in bunches, by the sitio, by the barrio. And their inability to find safe grounds is utterly a man-made climate.

Going through Google, I came across a site entitled the Greatest Killers of Man. It seemed most relevant because it deals with untimely death and avoidable destruction. What I found in that website is very interesting, though not all that new to those who have a sense of time and human history. However, it reminds powerfully, and grounds us to reality.

In gist, going down the list of the greatest killers of man, I saw two that really stood out. One was disease, including the now neutralized small pox which killed hundreds of millions at its prime. The other is man himself, by far the most deadly. Man killing man has been the most destructive pattern of all, whatever causes man to do so. Religion was especially mentioned, but I would like to say that politics, the need to control, must be the worst driver of war and violence.

And today is political season. The march of partisanship will color the Philippine landscape, its attendant divisiveness will lay the grounds for future violence and death. Bigotry will dominate the environment, this inability to extend respect for the opinions of others, stemming from an even deeper malaise – the presumption that one is better than the other.

The season of toxicity has arrived to dampen whatever upbeat spirit may have been sparked by economic gains, trillions of taxes collected especially aided by the e-VAT, the remarkable sustainability of foreign remittances from OFWs and migrants, the steady growth of IT/BPO industry, the lure of the beauty of our islands and people. The greatest killer is astir again, smelling blood from the anger, the hate and the lies being spewed. We have to live through this again, and we can only pray that this, too, shall quickly pass away.

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Unable to rise above our patterns of self-destruction, I wonder why we believe we can intervene with climate change.