

Headline: 'Lucky' in the face of climate change

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AN AMERICAN, a long-time resident of the Philippines, once wrote that homeless Filipinos were "lucky" to be living in a tropical country like the Philippines. Unlike their counterparts in temperate climes, he said, who aside from having to cope with homelessness and poverty, must also struggle with the bitter winter cold.

The thought occurred to me while reading news of how New Yorkers and other residents on the Eastern seaboard of the United States were coping in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane "Sandy." I scoffed at news reports of fights breaking out in gasoline stations where folks lined up for fuel in short supply. I wondered what people were complaining about when their apartment buildings remained standing, even if power had yet to be restored.

Then I remembered the cold.

Having weathered catastrophic floods, lashing rains, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, Filipinos are familiar with the onslaught of nature, and know how to survive and prevail. As one friend commented, "We may be standing in chest-deep water, but when a camera faces us, we can still smile and wave cheerily."

But try doing that in late fall and early winter, as it is now in New York and environs. Indeed, we are "lucky" to be living in a land where it is warm, even if muggy, all year round. If we choose to do so, we can sleep outdoors with little harm befalling us. If you do that in the dead of winter, you could end up literally dead by morning.

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STILL, one point brought home to the consciousness of everyone—American or Filipino—is that climate change is not only real, it is everywhere. Now we have seen how the "city that never sleeps" could be brought down by a confluence of weather patterns and an altered landscape. It must have been terrifying for the residents of one of the wealthiest, most powerful, most influential cities in the world to see their streets grow dark, leaving them helpless and shivering and wondering when help would come and things return to normal.

Living in an archipelago, in the crossroads of winds and tides and volcanic forces that make the Philippines the "third most disaster-prone country in the world," we had more or less resigned ourselves to living with rising tides, fiercer storms and a restless earth. But I bet New Yorkers never imagined their own Gotham would ever be inundated to this extent, their streets and subways, their hospitals and police paralyzed to such a degree days after the superstorm, even if they lived in the world's most powerful nation.

As I write this, Sandy is moving further inland, and weather folk say it is expected to weaken and dissipate in a few days. But people, I'm sure, will not forget the lessons of Sandy anytime soon. And like Holocaust deniers, "climate change" scoffers and skeptics should realize that they can no longer turn away from the evidence that came washing up their beaches and turned their streets to sludge. Sandy was a wake-up call just like "Katrina" was. Has anybody learned anything?

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WEDDINGS are very much on the minds of my extended family these days, what with three weddings in our calendars, including the first one in my own nuclear family.

That's why I was rather interested in the news item about how two sponsors at the wedding of Mariliza Villarosa and Teodoro Kalaw IV—two scions of political families—were being pressured to drop out of the lineup of wedding sponsors out of “delicadeza.”

The wedding took place yesterday, but as I write this, there is still no news about whether the two controversial ninongs (godfathers)—former Supreme Court Justice and Solicitor General Antonio Nachura and sitting Associate Justice Arturo Brion—marched down the aisle as part of the entourage.

If they did choose to brazen it out, then it means both of them chose to value social connections and obligations over propriety and ethical considerations.

The controversy arose because both Nachura and Brion are somehow linked to the court case involving the murder of brothers Michael and Paul Quintos. Mariliza's father, Jose, was one of the accused along with six others, but the charges against them were dismissed by the Court of Appeals. The Quintoses have since sought to have the Supreme Court reverse the ruling.

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AND that's where things have become rather “sticky.” Brion sits on the division that is hearing the Quintoses' appeal, while Nachura, as solicitor general in 2006, recommended the acquittal of Villarosa and his coaccused.

The interlocking relationships and circumstances seem too uncanny to be dismissed as mere coincidence, and it strikes me as distinctly odd that neither the bride's family nor the two invited ninongs saw anything awry in the arrangements.

After all, in Filipino society, especially among prominent families, social ties like being a sponsor at one's wedding are no small matter. In fact, becoming a ninong and ninang is a lifetime commitment, tying up families in convenient and mutually beneficial ways.

I'm willing to give the elder Villarasas the benefit of the doubt, even if, as a politically savvy couple, they surely were aware of the number of eyebrows their list of sponsors would have raised. But judging from my own experience, the bride's parents may have had nothing to do with the lineup. I had to bite my lip and stifle my comments when my son announced his choices for principal sponsors, not wanting to rain on his and his bride's parade. The elder Villarasas may have felt the same—even if they probably also felt relief at discharging a social obligation.

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Quid pro quo.