

A Letter from the Philippines - A country of beautiful souls

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Well, today is the first anniversary of my arrival in the Philippines. It's hard to believe the year went so fast! I feel somewhat obligated to give a pithy and significant assessment of that time, but, in the end, what I am left with is a sense of profound gratitude. I don't know exactly why, but examining my life has left me with the sense that I have been quite stingy with expressing my gratitude and appreciation to those around me.

Maybe that is why I ended up here. I have been struck, almost on a daily basis, with the profound humility and absence of expectation or any kind of entitlement by the beautiful souls who inhabit this country. Buddha emphasizes that unfulfilled expectations lead to the suffering of humanity. Remove those expectations and you'll find a life of happiness, freedom and peace of mind. Well, I don't think I have met any Buddhists here in the Philippines, but most have truly found the key to happiness. There are always exceptions, but most people are happy and smiling and singing and having a great time, no matter what they're doing, no matter how tedious or how difficult, or even how little money they may be paid for their efforts.

It is not about money, it's about a simple, humble obligation to fulfill their duty or responsibility. In the end, only God knows everything, and he will take care of all of us.

Although not Buddhist, they do have a unique relationship with their Catholic faith. Jesus is the Santo Nino or child Saint, and Mary, while being the mother of God, is simply, mama Mary. What a warm, nurturing spirit that evokes. The priests I have met are very warm and loving souls, and seek to make the church a vital part of the community. There is no separation between church and state here. Every private and public act seeks the approval and blessings of God.

On a more personal note, my relationship with my new bride is filled with surprises every day. I cannot honestly say, that all of the surprises have been comfortable. But they have, in the end, all been very good. Jenny is the most amazing, unique woman I have ever met. To know her life history makes it even more incredible that she is the humble, loving and gracious person she is today. Being orphan, unable to finish her school, forced to work at a very early age, abandoned by the father of her two children, and finally finding the way to raise her two children and put them through school, has polished this diamond in the rough. Why she has chosen to love an old coot like me, still escapes me, but I can say she invests her whole heart in loving me every single day, then still worries that she has not done enough. I am so humbled and challenged to return such deep and dedicated love. And I am the luckiest man alive to have found such love at this point in my life, and to find her two children to be such intelligent, happy, and beautiful people as well. I am so grateful and proud that they have invited me into their family.

On the larger scale, I have concluded that it is unrealistic and impossible to anticipate the challenges one faces in settling in a totally new cultural environment. That is a topic way too large for this update. Perhaps the greatest unanticipated challenges have been recognizing and adapting to so many hidden expectations about simple things in life. You know, like cars and traffic should stay on their own side of the road; people, dogs, and farm animals should stay off of the national highway; tricycle taxis should at least look, if not signal, before pulling a U-turn in front of you; information should be readily available, especially if it is affecting the whole population, or the whole town or the whole school; telephones should work, and not be divided into 3 different networks which essentially do not communicate with each other (I carry 2 cell phones); Internet connections should be better than pre-21st-century standards; posted ferry and bus schedules should have some correlation with reality; and people living in a tropical paradise should be interested in swimming in the ocean. Occasionally these things do happen.

No regrets. But the heat, in the noonday sun is brutal! But don't tell the guys mixing cement to pave the roads by hand, or the laborers loading and unloading 100-pound sacks of grain all day long, as they laugh and sing. To them, it's just another day and another \$5 to take home to their families. Life is good!