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## From Zoom to Home: A Psychologist' Reflection

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In March 2021, I received an email from Professor Waka Aoyama about scholars from Mindanao, who would possibly become part of her project. I was still unclear about how it would proceed, and what would be its outcome, but the idea brought a different kind of scholarly excitement. About one year into the pandemic, any endeavor or plan has proved to be a good escape, and a good addition to the routine that I have mastered, by living a life with mostly online transactions. So, I thought to myself: **Why not?** Besides, in the orientation that took place a month later, she wrote and I quote, “Let us do something together we would not have done otherwise!”

In the months, sessions and timed conversations that followed, I have gotten to know four individuals who deepened and expanded my views, beliefs and feelings towards Mindanao, which has changed me.

### **Karlo the Brave**

In the first two sessions of this project, the scholars were asked about the names of their preferred group, or something that was just about them and us. It was Karlo who pitched the following idea:

出合い means encounter, but in the Bisaya language, ‘diay’ can have several meanings. It can mean ‘by the way,’ used in reference to giving information (‘diay, naa koy nabal-an karon lang’, which translates to - ‘by the way, I just discovered something.’). If used in a question, it is an expression of interested wonder (‘diay?’, which translates to - ‘is that so?’ or ‘そうですか?’). Combining the word ‘project’ with it, portrays the former more casually, as if the people involved are having so much fun, they forget they’re involved in a formal undertaking (‘project diay ni no?’, which means - ‘this is a project, after all?’). Hopefully, the project becomes a free and open 出合い, which makes us productively forget that it is a project.

Karlo inspired the group to be vocal, open and honest with their ideas. By his own example, he has shown the impact of following one's inner calling. He has visited places, seen their beauty, and appreciated their diversity, but never lost his desire to remain connected to his home in Kidapawan. His piece on *Reconnecting with my Roots through Local Research*, has encouraged me to take a different perspective on how one is transported hundreds of kilometers, only to feel the longing of writing about home and to be at home.

13 months later, Karlo said, writing about this narrative is therapeutic.

### **Kristin, the Transformed**

I have known Kristin as an Anthropology graduate student, who presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ateneo Graduate Research and Innovation Conference (AGRIC). It is an annual scientific gathering organized on March 2021, by the School of Arts and Sciences of Ateneo de Davao University. As part of the technical committee of AGRIC, my role was to review the papers submitted. One of them was her paper entitled *Building Lives: Post-Disaster Identity Formation Among Xavier Ecoville Settlers*. This was her attempt at scientifically exploring the impact of aid, on the identity formation of families living in Zone 7, Barangay Carmen, and resettled to Xavier Ecoville, Barangay Lumbia, after typhoon Washi hit Cagayan de Oro City in 2011. She concluded that the more control the recipients gain, the more settled they are.

There is something profound in her conclusion of control and power. In both group and individual sessions, Kristin has displayed a consistent stance of evolution, through a constant narrative of change. It is also worth noting that these changes ranged from personal to institutional, from small to big ones. Her personal journey was challenging, as she wrote about it in her autobiographical piece, *Behind the Scholar*. Kristin personified resilience amidst adversity.

She is what I call a beautiful surprise.

### **Christian, the Keen**

As a colleague in the Social Sciences Cluster, I have known Christian to be direct and hard-hitting with his scholarly opinions on various topics, especially those that concerns numbers and figures. He can be passionate about the littlest details, a

trait associated with economists. He may obsess over a sudden increase or decrease of a statistical trend. He may sometimes lose his sleep, finding out the probable reasons and establishing the differences. Indeed, Christian is keen.

Interestingly, this project has allowed him to look beyond statistics. I have heard and seen how a social issue like poverty, makes him more human. In his words, he wants to be closely connected to people, know their thoughts, and feel their emotions. What I see is a scholar, who opens himself to infinite possibilities and situations that cannot be fully captured by absolute measures. And the only way that this can be complemented is the scientific recognition, that there are events in this world that can be better explained by experience and context.

Christian may dwell into details, but he transcends that and has proven to be emotionally capable to look beyond, as he has moved from *Number to Words!*

## **Waka, the Trailblazer**

I just came back from an overseas leadership development program in early 2019, when Fr. Ulysses Cabayao, a Jesuit anthropologist located in Ateneo de Davao, conveyed that a Japanese scholar will be with us. Still left impressed and amazed after my quick visit to Nagoya Daigaku in 2014 for a conference, I was looking forward to meeting a Japanese academic. What ensued after our first meeting in May 2016, was a series of talks that I coined as, “Social Science Lecture Series 2019”. This person was not just an academic, she carried with her an impressive body of works. I have gotten to know Professor Waka’s wealth of academic achievement and scholarly outputs. But more than that, I have known her as a person who honors her commitment and love towards the Sama-Bajaus, with whom she has spent time since the beginning of 1997. She was not just a researcher to them, and she has remained their friend till the present. I distinctly remembered her whisper about why we should get *halo-halo* (a cold dessert consisting of sweetened beans, fruits, shaved ice drizzled with evaporated milk, and ice cream), for her Sama friends, when we went out for some refreshments. Sometimes, intimacy is expressed when one knows exactly what the other craves.

What is remarkably outstanding about Professor Waka is, her continuous pursuit in writing about the Bajaus, specifically from Davao City. **There is nothing to read when there is nothing written. There is nothing to remember, when is**

**it not articulated.** Professor Waka blazes the trail for younger scholars to consider a path she has taken. She writes and captures their stories, so the younger generation is better understood.

Professor Waka lights the way so others may see.

And what about me?

### **Ah, Nelly the Observer!**

When terms and conditions were drawn up for my participation in this project, I followed my instinct and decided, based on the initial project name: *Cultivating a Place Together*. It seemed direct, experiential and ethnographic. I only found out the identity of these young Mindanao scholars, when we had our introductory meeting through Zoom. After several months, Karlo, Kristin, Christian and Prof. Waka became my once-a-month (or sometimes twice a month) constants. They were a happy company, who laughed a lot, and shared from their hearts. Even though there existed personal disclosures along the way, there was trust, and the genuine expression of interest and care in each other's lives.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> month of this project, my mother passed away, which was as painful as all deaths are. There is always that indescribable void, when a loved-one is gone. But the home that I have cultivated with Karlo, Kristin, Christian and Professor Waka, has offered me a distinct kind of refuge, one that is geographically distant but personally reachable. While it was my primary role to provide the scholars a psychologically safe research environment, they have also taught me to be human first. They left me to be with myself, postponing some of our pre-arranged sessions. and gave me solitude. Isn't that what a home is? A place that allows you to be your original self, and when things seem uplifted, you get up and slowly face the world again. The challenge of being an observer is, experiencing what you have seen in others and the world. It takes some humility and courage, to just be in a situation and feel it and not fight it. Just let go. Be in the moment.

Within a writer, a development worker, an economist, a psychologist and an anthropologist, there is a human being that feels, hears, sees. The one that also feels frustrated and disappointed, gets hurt and broken. Primarily, there is also a human being that yearns to cultivate what is already present within, but only needs time and space.

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