

A Paean for Toto

AUGUSTO "TOTO" ESCOBAR OROSA
January 12, 1919 – September 17, 2002

He was my elder brother but there is an almost twenty-one year difference between our ages (born 1/1919 vs. 11/1939,) more generational than fraternal. So there was no brod stuff, going out for a beer, maybe making "*ligaw*" (courting) together, etc. But like our father before him, he was a model by sterling example.

Like the Orosas of his age and the preceding generation, he was a man of unshakable integrity. They were all models of forthrightness and decorum. In all these years, I never even heard him take the name of the Lord in vain or utter that most common favorite expletive of Filipino men, "*anak -- ---a*" (better left untranslated). If you wanted a source of *tsismis* (gossip), Toto was not the one. He never spoke ill of anyone. As a family, we Orosas are not immune to bickering. Sometimes some of us are cool toward each other for some obscure and oftentimes forgotten slight. But Toto is respected by and a friend to all, no exceptions. He was a favorite cousin and designated troubleshooter. Some of the troubleshooting won't be written about here or ever to protect the guilty, and that includes myself. He could have been a professional arbitrator.

Toto and the elder Orosas were never for sale. No deals with Mephistopheles. If Augusto E. Orosa had been willing to look the other way, he would have been a millionaire many times over. He wasn't popular with politicians and their scalawags that regularly raided the Philippine coffers. I heard stories from him, confirmed by other sources, that treasury officials during a certain administration ran the currency printing presses for their own benefit. As a bank executive in charge of loans, he would never, ever approve a questionable loan. With a wink and a nod, billions have been lent to politician's cohorts and cronies, never to be repaid. Augusto has never been a party to this and has been vocal in his opinion against it. That he still made it to the highest management level is a tribute to his ability and his courage. Others have had threats on their lives for not kowtowing to the political masters. Toto always stood firm and regularly received such threats. He was threatened from all sides - elected officials, bank higher ups and unions. (Read his account of life at PNB and the hostility of the labor unions to him.) If he had been willing to sacrifice his principles and kiss the right political butt, he would undoubtedly have become chairman of the Philippine National Bank, a very prestigious, and potentially lucrative position.

He inculcated in me the love of learning, saying that our brain needs constant nourishment and challenge. When I was a teenager, he passed his books on to me. Hemingway, Steinbeck, Michener. How many kids are so lucky? Ok, ok, dead white men but guess what – they all won Nobel prizes in literature. How about the Greek classics? I received those too. Those Greeks laid the foundation for democracy. I was able to read the Iliad and the Odyssey. Another book he liked was the Confessions of St. Augustine. Later on, we reversed the roles somewhat because I had quicker access to newly published books in the U.S., at reasonable cost. Those were the days of the Book of the Month Club. When it came to music, we had a little divergence when I was a teenager. He preferred this guy from Salzburg, Austria and another from Bonn, Germany but I

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liked the wailings of a couple of emerging greasy haired American icons. I still do, but now like the Austrian and German as well. Plus the Italians.

After I left for the U.S. in 1962, we carried on a regular correspondence throughout the years. He alternated between using a typewriter that probably should have been donated to a museum for archaic technology long ago, and handwriting. His penmanship was rather atrocious. He would've made a good physician writing those indecipherable prescriptions. I bought my first computer almost 30 years ago and tried to get Toto to purchase one. He said he didn't like computers and never did buy one. He was prescient, saying that it will be used to defraud. But I finally got him to sit down long enough before a monitor and view www.orosa.org during my trip in early 2002. He was 83, with less than a year to live, before he even looked at the Internet. I'm not sure if I impressed him with my web site work. He was sometimes very hard to please.

Augusto not only loved to read, but to write as well. Among the Orosas, some have this genetic predisposition in spades, some won't even write a line. Our father Vicente was no writer but his brother Sixto was and so are Sixto's children. Toto is in between and his writings regularly appeared in the Philippine National Bank magazine and after his retirement, the Quezon City Sports Club periodical. In one article, he mentioned Ephesus, Rip van Winkle, and the Greek origin of the word panacea. Electic. That's why I included the word paean above. No doubt he would have dissected the word – it comes from the Greek too.

An inveterate tinkerer, he always looked forward to my sending him Popular Mechanics since the magazine is not available in Manila's newsstands. In his 70's, he still liked to change spark plugs and tune up his vehicles, although he could easily afford to hire a mechanic. He finally gave up with the arrival of fuel injection. But his colleagues and friends often had him evaluate used cars before making a purchase. He took pride in being able to drive and navigate Metro Manila's streets after the age of 80. This was a constant cause of consternation in his immediate family. (It is now January, 2014 as I update this essay and Toto's record has been broken - we now have an 87 year old cousin who still drives a stick shift car in Manila traffic.)

He never lost his feistiness but at times could be pedantic. My last phone calls to him in 2002 usually started out with him berating me on you Americans being corrupt (Enron, MCI, etc. and the Savings & Loan fiasco). If he had lived long enough to witness the financial meltdown of 2008, his banking blood would have boiled over. I can just hear him say, "remember what I told you about computers?" Another lecture would be about how terrible we Americans were at guerrilla wars and counter-terrorism. Why can't you find that guy with all the high tech gizmos at your possession? He was of course referring to Osama. Toto always referred to me as an American when it came to being critical (and Filipino when I demonstrated admirable qualities.) After listening from anywhere from five to ten minutes, I would then ask about his health and berate him for not listening to his doctor and family. Take those damn pills! But they make me pee! But that's the idea! Then we would both laugh heartily.

It was hard to have a conversation with Toto without having to laugh at his comments. Nothing

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escaped his commentary, sometimes acerbic but never mean spirited. He would have made a great satirist. If you spent half an hour with him without smiling or laughing, you must be humorless or very ill. He never lost his thirst for adventure. Up to his late seventies, he would still drive me to our ancestral home in Taal & Bauan in Batangas, to Tagaytay and to former homes in Bulacan where our father had served as an engineer in the 1930's. He wanted me to maintain a connection to our roots, even though I was living in places like Jackson (Tennessee,) Crystal Lake (Illinois) and Cincinnati, Ohio. It worked, there will always be that connection, the Orosa web site will be forever. We now have a Facebook page too.

He did his share of international traveling. Traveling must be in the Orosa genes, we should have our own travel agency. My favorite story was the tour he joined in Turkey. During a free afternoon he decided to take a walk, all by himself. Pretty soon he had ventured a few kilometers and realized he was lost and it was getting dark. He could neither read the street signs or speak Turkish (or whatever they speak) and had a panic attack. Ask for directions? Come on, guys are guys, I know they don't speak English. Somehow he eventually found himself back at their hotel without asking for directions. If I suggested a GPS, he wouldn't have accepted that. Too gimmicky, he preferred the basics in a lot of things, like a typewriter. When it came time for me to travel I made sure that I sent him a postcard from my destinations, a sort of one upmanship. Bassano del Grappa & Castelfranco (Italy), Peterborough (England), Quepos (Costa Rica), Rothenburg (Germany). I always looked for exotic names to surprise him and once sent a card from Intercourse (that's in Pennsylvania.) He enjoyed and kept that stack of postcards. But in total locations, he still has me beat by a large margin.

The year 2001 wasn't kind to Toto & his wife Lourdes. He and the family lost grandson Marc, the son of first-born Mike. Marc battled acute lymphoblastic leukemia for years and years. Every known treatment was attempted, including a last ditch stem cell transplant at Bethesda in Maryland, with Marc's younger brother Martin as the donor. Toto, Lourdes, Mike and the rest of the family were willing to commit every resource at their command, without hesitation. But Marc didn't make it to his twenty-first birthday. Toto questioned why such a young life would be taken, while he kept going, already 82 at the time and suffering from a weak heart. Toto said he would have gladly traded places with Marc. Toto believed he had a guardian angel and he kept imploring that he be taken instead. He had had a full and rewarding life. Take me instead! Why couldn't that not have happened? Of course we cannot answer. Lives aren't traded like basketball players at our whim. I told Toto, you do not bargain with God, like Jacob tried to do in Genesis (chapter 28:20).

Never particularly religious, he very seldom quoted the scriptures. He seemed more comfortable quoting secular philosophers. But there is one phrase from Matthew that I think would be appropriate for Toto, "blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." As the country slid further into dire economic straits, he commented about "*dito sa atin, luging-lugi ang mga talagang Kristiyano.*" (Here in our land, the true Christian is at a disadvantage.) But he never entertained the thought of leaving the Philippines, even when some of his best first cousin friends like Ting L. Orosa and Dado Orosa Ilagan chose Vancouver,

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Canada over Manila in their later years. His life mirrored what some self-righteous proclaim but never practiced. Thou shalt not covet, do unto others, what shall it profit a man if he gained the world, were the principles he lived by. He never compromised on what was right. His has been a long and fruitful life, upright and just. That is Augusto Escobar Orosa.

Toto did not marry until age 35 and he leaves behind Lourdes Cristobal, their three sons - Mike, Morris & Mel; daughters-in-law Grace and Tess; grandchildren Michelle, Martin, Kenneth, Sandra and Lauro. His grandson Marc (son of Mike) preceded him in death. Marc's mother Mayette passed away several years ago. Michelle has since gotten married, to Carlo Ople.

Mario E. Orosa
January 16, 2014

N.B. this was originally written shortly after his passing in 2002. I updated it slightly and included in my library of essays.

Here is what our first cousin, the writer Rosalinda L. Orosa, wrote after Toto passed away:

"Toto served as Executive Vice-President of the Philippine National Bank and as President of Filipinas Bank. His work was so exemplary that long after he had retired, his opinions were still being sought. To the end, he was director-treasurer of the Quezon City Sports Club."

"Toto dabbled in writing, contributing pieces, even theater reviews, to the gazettes and newsletters of both banks. Friends enjoyed his quick wit (I certainly did). A letter he wrote to me after his first visit to New York City was, of all things, why New Yorkers keep winking. Besides being a writer, he was a walking dictionary and a thesaurus of sorts."

"Toto was our clan's peacemaker and self-appointed arbitrator who kept urging his cousins to forget deep seated grudges and rise above offended egos. In this regard, Toto reminded those present at his funeral of this line from the Beatitudes: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

"Those who have gone to their rest prove, to my mind, that more important than being brilliant, is being good."