

Three Goodbyes

At this time of the year, it has become common to send friends and family a Christmas or Holiday newsletter. Some are brief and to the point, focusing on highlights. Some are rather lengthy, with lots of trivia, with attempts at poetry and rhyme. I'd like to deviate a little, taking this opportunity to say goodbye to three people who left us this year. Each touched my life in a different but now treasured way.

I had scheduled a trip to the Philippines for the month of June, specifically because June was the birthday month of both a cousin, Milagros "Milagrang" Orosa Aliling, and my sister Angelina "Tita" Orosa Velez. Milagrang was going to be 94 at the end of June. I already had my ticket booked, but Milagrang passed away early in May, after a brief illness.

Milagring was a third cousin, our great grandfathers being brothers from the town of Taal in Batangas. She occupied a unique niche in the Orosa family. From the two brothers, Basilio and Guillermo, there are now around 800 direct descendants, literally scattered throughout the globe. But Milagrang was the only one who could write poetry in Tagalog. (If there are others, it is time to step up to the plate.) Her specialty was called *luwa*, which in Batangas is a religious poem written and recited during the celebration of the Taal town fiesta in December. After we discovered a letter to my father, written by my grandfather in 1908, my sister Charito and I had difficulty in translating it. We were rescued by Milagrang, who recognized all the archaic Tagalog words. She was also the family historian of her branch of the Orosas, writing an essay about her grandfather Agaton, the former Mayor of Taal. He was easily the most colorful Orosa of any generation.

My trips to the Philippines was never complete without a get together with Milagrang. Her children were all grown and successful. Her husband had passed away decades ago. Whenever anyone visited, whether it was her brother Dan from San Diego, or me, she would put on a big feast. An assortment of cousins would be invited. The cuisine was strictly Batangas, a province which even has its own version of *adobo*. My favorite gathering place was her Aliling family "*Bahay Pahingahan*" or House of Rest, on the shore of Lake Taal. The house was wooden, with a thatched roof, capiz shell windows, rattan and bamboo furnishings. It would have made a perfect backdrop for an Amorsolo painting. With the cool breeze coming in from the lake, no air conditioning is needed.

Filipinos have maintained, even embellished, some religious traditions. Forty days after someone's passing, there is another gathering, starting with a Mass, followed by a memorial, ending with a sumptuous repast. Milagrang's younger sister Eden asked me to say a few words. I thought, how better to remember Milagrang than having a talk in "pure" Tagalog. Somehow, I managed, with the help of my sister Charito plus a high school teacher of the Filipino language, to get the words right. I hope Milagrang approved.

My sister Tita was born in 1921, and I was lucky to have been part of her day long 93rd birthday celebration during the middle of June. There was food, of course, no less than a dozen courses. Two of her daughters, Bessy and Ellen, accomplished singers both, provided

Three Goodbyes

the entertainment. My nephew Mel even composed a Tagalog song dedicated to Tita, to the tune of "What a Wonderful World." The karaoke went on and on.

Tita had married during the middle of World War II and moved away, so I never really got to know her during my formative years. She and her husband raised six children, but the task was mainly on Tita's shoulders since Manolo worked on an ocean going ship. He was a precursor to the now millions of Filipino working as expatriates, coming home once or twice a year. Tita was a full time school teacher, full time mother and head of household.

Her retirement years were idyllic. At age 65, she and Manolo moved to Australia, where their youngest son Edwin had migrated. They were beneficiaries of Australia's universal health care, a lifeline for some later health problems. Tita was able to travel, visiting us when we lived in Crystal Lake, IL. Val and I then visited them in Sydney some years later. She also made it to Europe and the Holy Land. She went to California twice, the last time when she was already 85, making it to Disneyland. Later on she told me that she never imagined, during her often difficult working years, that she would be able to see all these places. One highlight of her travels was being in Jerusalem during the visit of Pope John Paul II. Tita was then nearing 80, but she made the hike to where the Pope celebrated Mass.

A few months after her 93rd birthday, her health suddenly deteriorated. The doctors were suggesting extraordinary measures, which Tita refused. Her mind never lost the acuity she possessed all her life. From her Australia days on, we corresponded regularly, the best part being her hand made Christmas cards. She was an early adopter of the cell phone, which she used mostly for texting, from Australia and after she moved back to Quezon City a few years ago. We texted regularly, her last text to me was three weeks before she died. "Pray for me," she asked. Now that you're in a better place, please pray for us.

Uncle Joseph "Joe" Bulanda was married to Bernice, a sister of Val's father. He was a self made man, having started a trucking business in the city of Chicago. Born in the U.S. over 90 year ago, he lived in the Polish neighborhoods of Chicago, speaking Polish fluently. He was part of the Greatest Generation, serving in WWII, fought during the Battle of the Bulge, earning a Purple Heart. Chicago has undergone a huge demographic shift, the former European ethnic neighborhoods transitioning to either African American or Latino. Uncle Joe's neighborhood became almost all Latino, but they stayed put. They did not try to escape to the suburbs, like many others. Uncle Joe had a Polish band, The Tone Aires, playing two instruments, a clarinet and a saxophone, plus doing vocals. Frank Sinatra, swing, Elvis, rock and roll? Don't even think about asking Joe to play them, his band's repertoire was strictly Polish. I heard him play at family gatherings a couple of times, he could have been in the big bands of his era. His chain smoking never bothered his singing voice either.

When ever Uncle Joe saw me at family parties, he would always bellow, "Mario, what would you like to drink?" I would reply "brandy," at which point he would lead me to the bar and pour a generous portion. Remember that at Polish parties, libation always flowed freely.

Three Goodbyes

Uncle Joe and Bernice had a son named Kenny, who we would refer to today as a special child. But before the term even entered the lexicon, Kenny was special to Bernice and Joe. They were utterly devoted to Kenny, during all of Kenny's 65 years. Now they are all together, Bernice, Kenny and Joe. Na zdrowie Uncle Joe!

Rest well Milagring, Tita and Uncle Joe. You made the world a better place and we will try to carry on. God Bless you all!

Mario E. Orosa
December 23, 2014