

Before Electronic Devices

We have attended a number of family functions during the past year, all of which Val and I enjoyed tremendously. There have been christenings, a wedding, a graduation, a family reunion, numerous dinners with family and friends. This includes our own 35th anniversary celebration. In almost every one of these events, there are children ranging in age from kindergarten to teenagers. Each one seem engrossed in their own little world, oblivious to others. Old guys like me should welcome this respite from the noise and commotion these children are capable of creating. But somehow I believe that these young people should engage in more personal interaction. These skills would be an advantage later on in their lives.

Growing up in post WW II Manila was a lot different. We didn't carry around our private electronic devices. They didn't exist. I emphasize that it was not necessarily better, but the contrast is startling. It was not until the early 1950s that the Orosa family had a television set. It was 19 inches, black and white, grainy and Manila had only one station. The TV was a gift from one of my parent's godchildren. The antenna was a monstrosity, a 3 meter tower of criss crossed metal tubing on the roof, supported by guy wires. The man credited with introducing commercial television to the Philippines was an American expatriate named James Lindenberg. It is difficult to believe, but there were people opposed to an American introducing this new fangled technology. Then as now, there are plenty of Filipino Luddites. But Lindenberg prevailed and is now recognized as the pioneer.

Before television, we listened to the radio. The Orosa household was a Philippine version of the Norman Rockwell painting of a family clustered around a radio. Our radio was huge, the size of a small refrigerator. My sister Charito recalls the radio as being a GE. I liked to peer in the back to see wires and vacuum tubes, even tinkering with the tubes on occasion. Since Philippine household electricity is at 240 volts, touching a live wire could have potentially been fatal. I guess I'm lucky. I wish we had kept the radio, we could probably sell it for a tidy sum on eBay. It was made out of wood, stained, lacquered and polished. Before the war, our radio was capable of receiving short wave broadcasts. Under the Japanese occupation, listening to such broadcasts was banned, so my family voluntarily submitted the radio to have the short wave capability disabled. An uncle who lived nearby hid his radio and was able to listen to Allied broadcasts from Australia. My eldest brother Augusto visited regularly to listen and pass the news to the rest of the Orosas. If they had been caught, that would have been the end of my uncle and brother.

Our family's favorite radio program was called "*Kwentong Cochero*" or Coachman's Tales, broadcast every Sunday. Back then, a horse drawn carriage called "*calesa*" or "*caretela*" was still a popular mode of transportation. The *calesa* was pulled by one horse and could accommodate three in the cab. Old newsreels of pre-war Manila showed coaches pulled by two horses but they disappeared after the war. Like today's motorized tricycles, Filipino families easily pack 6 or 7 people plus the day's purchases into the cabs. Don't tell a Filipino the maximum capacity of anything, for surely he will try to exceed it. The man who operated the *calesa* was called the *cochero*. Calling a story *kwentong cochero* meant that it was either an exaggeration, embellished or outright fabrication. The hero was a *cochero* named *Mang Teban*. (*Mang* is a respectful title for an older man.) Some neighborhood characters with colorful names

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gathered around the *cochero's* household to swap stories. The characters were played by the most popular actors of the era.

My favorite was a serial called "*Kapitan Kidlat*" or Captain Lightning. He was a sort of superhero who would right the wrongs and unleash thunderbolts from his fists. A quiet Filipino office worker could transform himself into Captain Lightning simply by uttering "*kidlat ngayon*" or lightning now. I am reminded of Clark Kent but our *Kapitan* didn't need a phone booth. There were other programs of the same genre such as *Prinsipe Amante*. It was always the battle of good vs. evil. I always wondered how they created the sound effects which sounded realistic. There were sounds of horses hooves, swords and shields clashing, musketry, thunder and rain. Charito's favorite was Camay's Theatre on the Air where excerpts from a current movie was read by the actual actors over the radio. There were soap operas then but to my recollection no one in my family ever listened or followed them.

With the advent of television we still gathered around to watch our favorites. There was "*Tawag ng Tanghalan*" or Call of the Stage, an amateur talent program. Every week had a winner and the weekly winners competed for the grand prize. Some of the winners went on to have lucrative recording and movie careers. And you thought the "Idol" program genre is new. Instead of a trio of verbose condescending critics, there were judges in the back who sounded a gong to indicate his or her displeasure. When you are gonged, that means you are eliminated. The contestant had to leave the stage before even finishing. I thought it was cruel. One of the *Tawag* winners was a young man named Diomedes Maturan. You can buy his songs from iTunes today. The program was sponsored by Procter & Gamble and since I worked for P & G before leaving for the U.S. in 1962, it was a favorite. I never missed a segment.

Aside from the live amateur and variety programs, there wasn't much else on TV except reruns and castoffs from the U.S. My nephews got their fill of Hopalong Cassidy, Lone Ranger and cartoons. One would think that after more than 50 years, local programming would be developed to fill the entire time slots. Unfortunately that hasn't happened. It is one thing to feature CNN (Asian version) but Filipino stations import soap operas! Korean made soap operas are popular. Before that Mexican telenovelas were the rage. I consider it hilarious to listen to Korean actors speak Tagalog although the producers do an excellent job of dubbing. No wonder an American comedian referred to television as a medium, it is neither rare nor well done.

But I really shouldn't complain about the children and their electronic devices. Adults do the same thing. Before every Mass at our parish, the first announcement is "please turn off your cellphones and pagers." I haven't seen it yet in the U.S. but Filipinos sneak a look at their text during church services. While island hopping in Palawan, my fellow travelers had to check their iPhones regularly. Yes, there is cell phone service even in the remote islands.

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