

On May 27, 2016 9:53 PM, Karl Gaspar <[karlgaspar@gmail.com](mailto:karlgaspar@gmail.com)> wrote:

## DEMYSTIFYING DUTERTE

Entry from the Internet re Demystify:

[www.dictionary.com/browse/demystify](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/demystify)

verb (used with object), demystified, demystifying: to rid of mystery or obscurity; clarify

Cambridge English Dictionary

what is demystify: to make something easier to understand

[www.thefreedictionary.com/demystify](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/demystify)

To make less mysterious; clarify

Is there need to demystify Duterte, aka Rody, aka Digong, now the incoming President of the Republic of the Philippines?

If there is, who is in the best person who can get rid of the mystery surrounding his personhood so that he can be better understood? And what is it about him that needs to be clarified?

As his popularity was soaring and the poll surveys showed that he was the front-runner in the field of five presidential candidates, quite a number of Filipinos – especially those who want their views projected in mass and social media – scratched their heads and wondered who this guy was? When he got elected with almost one-half of the total votes cast, many more scratched their heads and tried to find ways of understanding what this mystique was all about. Many made attempts at unveiling both the obscurity of this candidate coming out from nowhere as well as coming up with theories why he won to make the phenomenon less mysterious.

Questions arose needing answers: If his whole persona attracted the hoi polloi and became his mass base, how come the middle class and intellectuals in Metro Manila also voted for him? If he cursed and talked dirty – which turned off the minority of the population who want their presidential speaking and acting like a lady or gentleman – how come this personality trait did not matter? If his human rights records in Davao is under a cloud of doubt, how come the fragmented left – known for their vociferous human rights campaigns – grudgingly supported him? If he exhibited a sexist and misogynist posture – which angered feminists across the ideological divide –

how come women flocked to Duterte's side for selfies everywhere? If he was only known in Mindanao, how come the vote-rich sections of most of the Visayas and Luzon rallied behind him? If those who voted for him constituted a protest vote as a repudiation of the Aquino administration, how come Leni Robredo won?

What is it about this guy who managed to collect under his political umbrella people of various mindsets, classes, ideological options, genders, political alliances, age groups, locations and other categories? Of course, there is the corollary question: what accounted for a winning formula for winning this election? The Jun Evasco strategy appropriated from the left's mobilize-organize down to the grassroots level? The power of social media mostly conceptualized by Nic Gabunada and his minions? But in the end, was the ultimate secret weapon - the force of his personality including cursing and talking dirty? If so, then the nickname DIGONG seemed appropriate. And that was indeed how he was referred to throughout this rambunctious and contentious election season.

But will the real Duterte stand up? Now that he has won, there are those who suggest that Digong be dropped in favor of Rody as the latter sounds more respectable. Perhaps there is indeed the duality of Duterte that needs to be demystified. Inday Santiago, Duterte's childhood friend, interviewed by Cheche Lazaro appearing in Rappler, refers to the public Duterte and the private one. Is Digong the public one and Rody the private one? But as President of the Republic, Duterte has no luxury of retreating to a private space for long periods of time. His life in the next six years will be mostly lived in the public sphere. So can there be a shift from Digong to Rody? Will the public allow it?

I must admit I have also scratched my head through these past few months trying to understand what this mystique is all about; thus the desire to demystify him. But first a disclaimer: I do not claim to have a direct access to Duterte then and now, we have never really worked together long enough for me to have a ringside understanding who he is as a person and leader. I did not campaign or vote for him in the last election and – by and large – I have kept a distance from him since knowing him in 1962.

Yes I have known him for 54 long years. I was one of around 200 boys enrolled at the Holy Cross Academy Boys' Department in the small town of Digos (now renamed high school department of the Cor Jesu College in Digos City). Sixty kilometers south of Davao City, Digos in the early 1960s was a sleepy town of less than 30,000 inhabitants. Most of the people's livelihood was linked to farming (mostly corn and coconut); and those by the coastal area, by fishing. The rest of the working class eke out their living through various occupations: as store keepers, vendors in the market and other odd jobs. Part of the small middle class were the medical personnel in one hospital, teachers, government employees, merchants and professionals.

In the poblacion were two high schools; the public one and the private one - the Holy Cross Academy (HCA). The former catered to the hoi polloi while the latter to the middle class; a few of the hoi polloi made it there through scholarships (including yours truly). In the schoolyear of 1959-1960, the Canadian Brothers of the Sacred Heart opened the Boys' Department of HCA; the nuns of the Religious of the Virgin Mary retained the Girls' Department. I belonged to the first year students who began our high school with the brothers. The following schoolyear, the Boys' Department moved to a new campus, a 10-minute walk from the previous school where the girls remained. There were just over 40 of us who constituted our class who lived not just in the Digos poblacion but also in the nearby barrios including those of the towns of Sta. Cruz, Bansalan and Hagonoy. Among the 40, majority were 13-14 years old when we began our first year while a few were past 15.

Since first year, I already had my own barkada of 3 others who became my best friends throughout high school - Willy, Joseph and Jesus (if Willy were Mario, it would have been a complete set of names honoring the sacred family!). We were the same age, of about the same body size; we tended to be the younger members of the class and neither short nor tall. We were also the ones drawn to participating in various religious (Altar Boys' Society, Student Catholic Action) and extra-curricular activities in the campus (Boys' choir, school paper, Elocution club and the like). Needless to say, we were the Brothers' favorite as we were the "good boys" (in fact, all of us thought of joining the Brothers after high school graduation).

In the 1961-1962 schoolyear (when our batch reached 3<sup>rd</sup> year), something unusual happened in the school. We had a transferee, no less than the son of the Governor of Davao (in the 60s, Davao was just one region, none of the current political divisions), Rody Duterte. Everyone in campus, naturally, wondered why he left the most prestigious high school in the whole of Davao, namely the Ateneo de Davao (was he kicked out? for what reasons?) and was curious how he looked and would behave (would he be able to adjust to the lower class?). This was such a big deal for us *promdis*; to have someone who used to study at Ateneo, already then known as the rich man's school but also the most demanding in terms of academic excellence.

During that schoolyear, he joined the 4<sup>th</sup> year batch (who also included Jesus Dureza), so we had little inter-action with him. Also because he was not active in any of the extra-curricular activities, there were few occasions to rub elbows with him. However, we had enough contacts in the classroom to consider ourselves as "classmates". (Years later, he would continue to refer to me not as Karl, but as "Classmate"). We had a wonderful class adviser that year, Bro. Clement Tranchemontagne, S.C. who did his best to be friends with all of us and was a wonderful guide in our decision-making regarding what path to take after graduation.

To our surprise, he remained at Holy Cross for the 1962-1963 schoolyear; apparently, he had back subjects and needed to finish these with our batch. He gravitated among the older and taller members of our class, who also tended to be the less interested in getting high grades. (I am not surprised with his claims during the election period that he barely passed his subjects in high school; those were very humble claims, but true indeed). Since we were only around 40 in our class and the schoolyear stretched for 10 months, naturally we knew of each other. But we had different barkadas, interests and engagements. So we barely remained acquaintances. Eventually we finished high school and if memory serves me right, he joined us in our graduation rites sometime in March 1963. That was the last time we would see each other and it would take a long while before our paths would cross again.

But now as I recall those days long gone, what still stands out in terms of memories most of which are now lost in the mist of time? Those years, we did not have a school uniform; we dressed according to what our parents could afford to buy at the local stores. Despite his attempts these days to dress simply and project himself as *masa*, compared to us the hoi polloi, he dressed well. That was to be expected as he was the son of the Governor; naturally his parents could afford to buy him nice clothes. One knew he was smart; growing up in the city, he had the urban sheen, so unlike us rural kids. We had the impression that he wanted to finish high school with the least effort; he accomplished the minimum expected of students of a Catholic school. Getting a passing grade of 75% was his only interest. But he didn't bully anyone, he didn't brag about his class origin; he mostly sat at the back and remained quiet, hardly participating actively in class discussion. He didn't show interest in being an athlete or a campus leader; he didn't join any of the student clubs.

But we all knew he was special. After all, he was the only Brothers' boarder of the more than 200 boys in that campus. Word was that this was the condition for the Brothers to take him in as a student; namely, that he would live in the Brothers' residence (in a corner room on the first floor, near the chapel and kitchen) and be watched over by the Brothers. Rody's parents may have fully accepted this condition. This meant he had a curfew; no going out of campus after 6 P.M. This to us was truly a special arrangement; imagine having your own room in the Brothers' house, eating the same food and being monitored regularly by a Brother-guardian.

But this arrangement made it possible for him to finish high school. While officially listed in the 1962 Batch of graduates, he still had back subjects to take up with our batch which was why he became our "classmate". Eventually he joined our graduation rites in March 1963. After this rite of passage, we didn't see each other anymore as I did my undergraduate course at ADDU and my graduate course at ASI. Meanwhile, he went to Lyceum University and later to San Beda College for his law studies.

Our paths crossed again only after twenty years later after high school graduation when he was already a lawyer, working as State Prosecutor under

the Marcos dictatorial regime and I was a political prisoner. The hearings of my subversion case took place at the Regional Trial Court where Rody served as Prosecutor. Jess Dureza, who was one of the first members of the Free Legal Aid Group (FLAG) in Davao City, was one of my lawyers. So here we were – classmates of Batch '63 – gathered under one roof inside a court, representing three roles: Prosecutor, Lawyer and Prisoner. Very interesting turn of events, indeed!

Half-way through my prison term of 22 months (sometime in early 1984), Bro. Clement who had returned to Canada came for a visit. When he heard about my court hearing, he rushed to attend the session. When the judge called for a recess, he gathered the three of us together and played the role of Class Adviser once more. He demanded that Rody find a way to have my case quashed so I could already be set free. If this could not be done ASAP, he challenged Jess to hasten the court hearings so the judge could come up with his verdict. He then asked me to take care of myself while in prison and not lose hope. As he was doing all these, the three of us just looked at one another, raised our eyebrows and felt that we were back in high school.

A year later, I was freed but only after Marcos himself signed my release papers. Then I joined the Redemptorists and went away from Davao to undergo formation and then do missions all over Mindanao. When 1986 EDSA erupted, the ensuing democratic space allowed for the return of the political institutions that Marcos suspended. Later, both Rody and Jess would eventually find themselves actively involved in the political processes of running for office and holding government positions, Rody as Mayor of Davao City and Jess for various positions.

As we have friends in various circles living in the city, we would bump into each other at social occasions. In early January 1990, Rody heard that my father died; he sent not just a word and flowers to express his Condolence, but on the day of the burial, he sent 5 dump trucks so there would be enough transport to bring people to the cemetery! It was an overkill, but the gesture was deeply appreciated. There were also attempts of our classmates of Batch '63 to hold reunions. In 1995 – 32 years after our graduation – we finally managed to come together and the reunion was hosted by another classmate,

the late Roger Llanos, Governor of Davao del Sur. Jess made it but not Rody; the 20 of us who gathered together had a great time and we did miss Rody. Two more attempts at a reunion got organized but I was the one not able to join.

As I was never assigned for long periods of time in our community in Davao City, I only heard snippets of what Rody was doing as Mayor. Family members, friends and former associates were mainly favorable in their opinion of Rody as Mayor; especially that the peace and order situation improved, investments were coming in and there was efficiency in government services. My younger sister, Helen, through her contacts at the City Hall would inform me of Digong's accomplishments. As the years went by, his popular name shifted to Digong and I, too, started to refer to him as Digong. Then the DDS controversy erupted and one of the confreres took a strong stance denouncing the killings, while implicating the Mayor as having a role in this human rights issue. I must admit that as I heard the stories and read about them in media, I felt powerless to do anything. That I was not living in Davao City only gave me a convenient reason not to be involved with this issue.

The DDS issue came and went away and the protest subsided for a while. There were again some occasions when our paths crossed. One time, along with my sister, Helen we had an audience with Digong to deal with a problem where we thought he could help intervene. I was very hesitant to do so – as I had never approached him for any favor since way back high school – but this issue needed urgent intervention. He quickly responded to Helen's request for an audience and he did not disappoint us. He went out of his way to do us the favor and seemed pleased that we did approach him for his assistance. (To satisfy the reader's curiosity: No, I did not ask for a Pajero, nor asked for funds to support a project; neither did I lobby for a job position. It is none of the above.)

Two more chance encounters are etched in my memory. Two years ago, we found each other attending the wedding of a young couple whose parents were our mutual friends. It was held at a plush hotel in the downtown area of Davao City. There had been all kinds of stories regarding his health; the rumors ranged from his undergoing dialysis owing to kidney problems to

having been diagnosed with cancer of the lungs. At this wedding event, we were assigned to be seated in adjacent tables. When we saw each other, we shook hands and briefly chatted. This was how the short conversation went:

Me: Hi Mayor, how are you?

Digong: I am not well, Classmate. Please pray for me that I get better.

Me: Yes, I heard you are sick. What is your illness?

Digong: I better not tell you. But I need prayers. So please pray for me.

Me: Yes I will. But do take good care of yourself.

Digong: *Sigue ha.* (A way to say...time to go).

Me: *Sigue.* Hope to bump into you again. *Ayo ayo.* (Take care).

At another plush hotel, there was an event organized by a local newspaper to which both of us were invited. It gathered the social elite of the city, well-dressed to the hilt. This was around the time when the rumors were circulating in the city that he would run for President in the coming elections. He barely made it to the schedule of his talk so I only waved at him as he approached the rostrum. Immediately after his talk, there was a rush of those who wanted a selfie with him and they were practically the entire crowd inside the ballroom. It was then that it dawned on me that he just might decide to run and, if he did, the city will be behind him! I must say I had mixed feelings at the sight of this adoring crowd!

Just before this event, I had gone to Bali to visit my friends, Billy and Mae dela Rosa. They brought me to the famed rice terraces of Bali where we met a shaman. To my surprise, he started predicting a future event in our country – that one day, a certain Duterte will become our President! Billy, Mae and I were fascinated by this, as the shaman had no idea who was this guy named Duterte while we did know him. However at that time, we were not even sure if he was going to run for the office. (However, it was in 2013 when I first heard the possibility of Digong running for this post; I met Jun Evasco in Maribojoc after the earthquake which devastated Bohol. He told me that there were people already pushing Digong to run and he seemed to respond favorably to this suggestion).



When finally Digong declared his candidacy (and I was not surprised that he eventually did after some suspenseful months), I did wonder will he make it. I intuitively sensed that he had a fair chance, given the line-up of the five presidential candidates and what I already perceived as a certain mood arising among some segments of the population. I did ask myself: will I campaign and vote for him? But owing to circumstances, I was not able to register myself again with COMELEC, so there went my vote. But if someone approaches me, would I endorse his candidacy? Some people did. I played it safe by this answer – On one hand, Digong will be able to do this (examples), but on the other hand, there are other considerations (examples). Thus, I was ambivalent. I must admit that – like his many fans and supporters - I was not disturbed by his cuss words, expletives, rape joke, and the *yaga-yaga* and *bugal-bugals* (sarcasm) but I also understood why there was such a brouhaha over all these.

When he won, part of me was delighted (also because Bongbong lost) but I must confess I could not shake off an anxiety that remains embedded deep in my psyche. And here lies the roots of my ambivalence: wondering if Rody and Digong will ever converge to evolve a President Duterte who will be as shrewd as a serpent but gentle as a dove.

At a Pakighinabi session at the Ateneo de Davao University last May 25, Fr. Joel Tabora SJ spoke of the promise of the Duterte Presidency that could bring about positive change in the country if only we could help bridge him to himself, thus his embracing of the goodness that is already in him but somehow overshadowed by those traits which if not suppressed could make him a “monster”. Rody and Digong fusing into a firm but gentle statesman in the person of President Duterte!

I have not stopped praying for my classmate, especially for good health, as per his request. But this time my prayer includes the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to the prophet Joel: “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. (Joel 2:28).

[Karl Gaspar, ex-classmate of Duterte, religious order]